

Ponder This...



CHRISTINE SCHIMPF



*Whatever is
Lovely*

*A
Perfect
Fit*

A Perfect Fit

Christine Schimpf

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A Perfect Fit
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1

Buffalo, New York, September

Hannah Lockhart stood barefoot in her kitchen. She pushed the skillet of Alfredo sauce off the burner and openly stared at the man she intended to marry. She'd expected to be wearing an engagement ring by now. She placed her hands on the cool marble counter and steadied her trembling hands.

She'd picked up the nervous thread in Tim's voice when he'd called earlier to tell her there was something he wanted to talk to her about. She suspected what he was up to, and it didn't take her long to begin preparations for the night she'd remember forever. She'd cleaned her apartment, bought flowers at the farmer's market, and stopped at the grocery store in order to make Tim's favorite dinner. After a couple of rocky months, they'd come to a good place in their relationship and reconciled. Tim couldn't help that he was attractive and women's eyes followed him. His job as a district sales associate for easy reader books placed him in constant contact with women of all ages in schools across the state. On most occasions when they went out, he always seemed to bump into an attractive woman he'd met on the job. In the end, Hannah

convinced herself that she was too sensitive. She would learn to ignore the attention that he was often the recipient of and consider herself lucky to be the woman on his arm.

When the doorbell rang, she checked her image in the mirror one last time and smoothed the flyaway ends of her auburn hair with the flat of her hands. Finally, her prayers would be answered with a husband all her own to love and cherish from this night forward. She swung open the door to find him empty-handed, dressed in jeans and a plain red shirt she'd recognized. So much for dressing for the occasion. She shrugged the negative vibe from her mind. This night was special regardless of what Tim wore.

He gave her a quick peck on the cheek, walked into the living room, and seated himself on the couch. A wave of cologne followed his steps. Uncertain of his mood, Hannah assumed he had a bad case of nerves. She'd listened to the stories about the big moment enough from her sister, Andrea, a literary agent in Manhattan to understand the signs before a man proposed. There were enough reasons for him to be out of sorts, as her mother would call it.

She entered the kitchen and opened her refrigerator. "Would you like something to drink?" she asked hoping to break the ice between them.

"No. Come in here a minute, I'd like to talk with you."

Hannah's hands slowed in response to the flat tone in Tim's voice. That was a bad sign. He was either angry again over something his father said or an incident that happened at work. He'd admitted to her on several occasions how difficult it was for him

bonding with the other men at the district office. He much preferred the company of women he encountered on the road. Over the years, Hannah developed a sixth sense to Tim's moods. She closed the refrigerator door and joined him in the living room willing herself not to be disappointed.

He was staring at the woolen rug beneath his feet. "I'm not sure how to start."

A voice inside of her cautioned her to be patient.

He got to his feet, but instead of walking toward Hannah, he turned for the patio door.

Hannah ached to make this easier for him. Didn't he understand that?

"I'm not sure I love you." He said it as easily as if he was repeating the weather forecast.

Hannah's breath caught in her throat. *Breathe!* His words echoed in her head, rattling around like a trapped bird in a cage. If only she were a bird. She'd fly away from this apartment right now. That's what she usually did in moments of panic. Run. Before responding, she took a few deep breaths, slowing down her thumping heart. "What are you talking about?" They'd come so far, tackled so many hurdles together to make their relationship work. Even though he'd never said the words, she assumed he loved her. He'd surprised her with flowers and presented them in a hammered copper vase on the anniversary of their first date. Surely that meant he loved her.

He began pacing the room like an exotic tiger on display.

Hannah recognized his anxiousness in the balled fists and flexed muscles in his forearms.

"I'm not sure about *us* anymore. We should take a break." He spat out the words with a tone of

resignation, as if he'd lost a bet with a friend.

"You said you didn't need any more breaks, remember?" The undercurrent of desperation in her voice sounded like a different person not the confident high school English teacher she'd become. It came from that pathetic, weak place inside of her. The part that waited for him to love her. Why did he make everything so hard? Hannah walked toward him breathing in the scent of a pumpkin spiced candle, hoping it would relax her. She placed a hand on his thick shoulder and caressed it desperately wanting to wrap her arms around him.

He shifted his shoulders away forming a cavern between them.

Her cheeks filled with the heat of humiliation. She slipped the top button of her blouse beneath her thumbnail and waited.

He turned to face her with that boyish grin she'd grown to love. Yes, she loved Tim, but the blank slate in his eyes spoke a truth she wanted to deny. He didn't love her back. She understood that now as well as she understood where a comma belonged in a sentence.

"What about our plans?" She hoped the question would convince him to admit what he felt for her, to persuade him to stay.

His full lips drew pencil-line straight. "I'm not sure. Let's consider them on hold."

The pain from his words hit her with such a force, that she almost stumbled. All the conversations about getting married in Hawaii were nothing more than fluff. She released her hold on the button and the fairy tale she'd conjured up all on her own—a husband, a home, children. A future with Tim she was foolish enough to let herself dream about. Her eyes stung with

unshed tears, as her dreams drifted out an open window like a pesky scent.

His gaze flew to his wristwatch as if he were pressed for time. "Come on, Hannah, you get me. Everything's going to be OK, if you let go, and give me some breathing room."

Hannah walked to the island that separated the living room from the kitchen. She needed something solid to grab onto. *Some breathing room?* He'd pulled this once before right after the holidays. She was all too familiar with what would happen next. He'd disappear from her life, possibly take up with someone new. When it was over with the new girl, he'd show up at her doorstep with flowers or jewelry or a trip to the Caribbean. She'd bought it the last time and had taken him back. Did he imagine she'd do it again?

Stay calm.

Fueled with an unfamiliar energy, she uttered the words she never thought she'd say to him for lack of courage. "I'll tell you what, Tim. You want a break? OK, let's do it for real this time. I don't want things from you. I want a relationship and the future we talked about. The one you promised me. If you walk out that door, don't bother coming back." Her stomach clenched hoping she'd pushed him far enough to change his mind.

Tim cocked his blond ruffled head, a habit she'd believed she'd never tire of. Today, it drew the opposite effect. He strutted to the door.

She swallowed down the tears that wanted to flood over her like a torrential rainstorm.

Lord, help me be strong.

He reached for the doorknob but stopped midstride.

Hannah's spirits soared. *He changed his mind.*

"Give me a little time, hon, that's all I'm asking."

His words shattered Hannah's respect for him right along with her hopes and dreams for the future she believed they both wanted. The door closed behind him without a second glance in her direction.

The silence was deafening.

As if on remote, she followed his footsteps to the door and wrapped her fingers around the knob. It was still warm from his touch. *Oh, Tim, come back.*

The second hand ticked on the clock.

Let go.

Hannah released her hold on the handle. "Goodbye, Tim," she whispered, allowing the tears to fall down her face while her world faded away around her.

2

One year later

Hannah ignored the storm clouds overhead and the rain splattering on her windshield. Instead, she sang along with the song playing on the radio as she drove through the streets of Buffalo to Riverwalk Academy. For the last several years, she'd enjoyed teaching English at North Shore High, but when her old college roommate told her about an emergency job posting at the Christian high school she worked for, Hannah decided to apply.

It was almost a year since her breakup with Tim, and although she'd dated on occasion, she was ready for a big change in her life. She hoped landing a new job in a brand-new school was a start in a new direction. Her intuition usually steered her in the right path, and she prayed her instincts were right, especially today, her first day on the job at the new school. She pulled into the school parking lot, with thirty minutes to spare. Her sister Andrea would be proud, usually commenting on Hannah's tardiness.

She eased her sedan into one of the last spots available and switched off the engine. She exhaled and listened to the music of the rain pounding on the roof.

Hannah found first days on the job a bit tough. She'd meet her new colleagues and be introduced to a new set of responsibilities. Despite the additional expectations, Hannah couldn't wait to teach freshman English. She was ready for it all. This was her chance to restart life, and the butterflies in her stomach were proof of that. She peered out of the window eyeing the distance to the staff entrance of the school. If she guessed right, she estimated a sixty-foot run, maybe less. She'd make that in less than a minute. She grabbed her red polka-dot umbrella, her black leather tote, and her purse from the back seat and opened the door. Her feet flew across the pavement, up the concrete steps, and into the building. She opened the door and flew into the building, aware that a wide smile was splattered across her face. *I made it!*

Once inside, the newly polished floors gleamed a warm welcome. But what she neglected to consider was how slick they were as well. Now, it was too late. "Oh-no-oh-no-oh-no!" she shrieked. Her belongings fell from her hands and slid onto the floor like dominoes as she fought to regain her balance. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment as she landed into two strong arms behind her. This was not how she planned to start her day.

"I've got you." His voice was as smooth as bath water implying he saved women in peril every day. As if he'd turned on a switch, his firm grip stilled the chaos inside of her.

Turning her head to peer over her shoulder, she found a lopsided smile planted on a handsome face. Cobalt blue eyes, behind a pair of black-framed glasses, gazed back at her. Using brute strength, he easily lifted her back to her feet. She busied her hands smoothing

her skirt in place until her eyes caught his nametag *Matthew Winters, History*.

Wearing a comfortable smile, he bent slightly at the waist, reminding her of a knight in Camelot's court. "I hope you don't mind the help, but I wasn't about to let a pretty lady fall." He offered his hand in her direction. "Matt Winters. I teach history."

Hannah drew in her tummy with an inhale, hoping to hide the five extra pounds she'd been carrying around all summer. Comfort food was her nemesis and, of course, the recovery period from the breakup with Tim played a huge factor as well. She accepted his handshake, revisiting the security of his embrace she experienced a moment ago. "Hannah Lockhart. I'm the new English teacher."

He did the adorable thing and pushed his glasses up the flat bridge of his nose.

"Well, in that case, welcome, Miss Lockhart."

Hannah returned his smile. "Please, call me Hannah, and thank you for your help. I'm not quite sure how that happened. It's pretty embarrassing to say the least." She reached down for her purse and black bag and noticed he was already holding her umbrella.

He handed it to her free hand. "It wasn't entirely your fault. The floors tend to get slippery when it rains. I'm not sure where the rubber mats ended up, but on rainy days like this one, they should be out here."

Hannah wanted to continue the conversation with the handsome man in front of her, but she wasn't sure where the principal's office was located. Her eyes flew across cocoa and cream tiled walls, the lettering above the gymnasium doors that read *Home of the Cougars*, and an enormous wooden cross hanging above the

doors on the wall. A sense a comfort filled her, as if she'd arrived at a final destination.

As if he'd read her mind, he said, "I'd be happy to show you where the principal's office is. I have a few minutes." He picked up his briefcase and started walking down the hall as if she'd already said yes.

She couldn't imagine having free time the first day of school. Unless, of course, he was one of the super-organized types. Examining him from a fresh perspective, she suspected he might fit in that category—neatly pressed khaki pants, a blue cotton shirt and dark tie, and slick brown leather loafers that bore an uncanny resemblance to his briefcase. "If you point me in the right direction, I'm sure I can find it by myself."

He slapped his briefcase with a strong hand. "I'm pretty much ready for the day, so, it's not a problem."

"In that case, I'd appreciate it. I don't want to be late my first day."

He led her down a wide hallway passing the gymnasium. "Where did you teach before coming to Riverwalk?"

"North Shore High."

He whistled, after greeting a few students passing by. "Big school. If you don't mind me asking; why the change?"

Hannah hesitated as they rounded a corner. The principal's office was now in view. Should she tell him the truth—that something deep inside had encouraged her in a new direction? She studied him for a moment. He was a tall man, nearly six feet with thick shoulders, a broad chest, and a strong back. He wore his jet-black hair, a shade similar to that of her sister Andrea's, with a subtle flip in the front. He was nice enough to escort

her to the principal's office, and he did prevent her from taking a nasty fall. In the end, she decided to trust her instincts.

"It was time," she answered him. "I loved it at North, and I'd like to say my students enjoyed my teaching, but there comes a time when you realize you need a fresh start."

He nodded. "I made a similar choice almost five years ago now moving from primary to secondary education. How did you find out about the job opening here at Riverwalk?"

"Julie Orchard, my old college roommate."

"Ah, Julie, she teaches social studies. Nice gal. I don't think I've ever seen her without a smile on her face."

Hannah agreed. "Very true. She encouraged me to apply and said the smaller the student body the stronger the bond with students."

"That's probably the first big change you'll notice. Students are more apt to seek you out for help. They don't get lost in the shuffle."

His openness impressed her and encouraged her to continue the conversation with him. "After I completed the online application for this job, I closed my eyes and thought about what it would mean if I was hired. When I opened them, the answer was clear. I hit the *Submit* button."

"Impressive and bold, if I might add."

She was surprised to find they were standing in front of the principal's office. He was not only considerate but their easy conversation told her he had the makings of a good friend. In the few minutes it took to walk down the hall, they shared a part of their personal histories with each other.

He gave a tilt of his head, "There you are, Miss Lockhart."

"Hannah," they said together. A chuckle escaped them both at almost the same time.

Hannah assumed Riverwalk organized classrooms according to discipline similar to that of North. It was too bad, she thought, she wouldn't run into him in staff meetings. "I don't suppose we'll cross paths much since we're in different departments."

"That's the beauty of working in a small school; the building isn't divided into wings. I'll be around." He eyed the door leading to the principal's office, "Good luck."

She wrapped her fingers around the door handle, "Thanks again, Mr. Winters."

~*~

Matt strolled into his classroom, flipped on the lights, and caught the grin on his face in his reflection in the windows. He'd noticed the young woman, running across the parking lot in heels and holding a polka-dot umbrella, and he'd grown concerned when she flew up the flight of stairs to the entrance. By the time he'd placed his briefcase on the floor, her fate was set. With a surge of adrenaline, he bolted in her direction. It didn't take much for him to get her back on her feet. She was as light as the American flag flapping in the wind outside. What impressed him the most, after talking with her, was her determination to follow an inner voice, despite the fact that she was happy at her former school. Making a dramatic shift in her career took a rare form of trust and faith. Hannah

Lockhart was an impressive woman, and his attention was piqued.

He placed his briefcase on the wooden desk, nudged his glasses up the bridge of his nose, and removed his lesson plans for the day. He was good at coming up with new ideas to keep his students engaged and the first day back after summer break posed the greatest challenge of all. He'd been guilty of some pretty untraditional tactics in the past, but today he planned on introducing his syllabus and class introductions.

The first-period bell rang, and students entered his classroom. They drifted into the room taking the seats they'd keep for the entire semester. Over the years, he'd noticed teenagers were fickle that way finding comfort in the jungle of high school.

Matt picked up a piece of chalk and wrote his name on the board under the class title. His thoughts drifted back to Ms. Lockhart. A new job in an unfamiliar school could be intimidating. He wished her a good day and hoped she'd be surprised to find her classroom directly across from his, especially since she assumed they wouldn't run into each other much. He closed his eyes for a moment and whisked a quick prayer off for her before the intention escaped him. A moment later, he turned from the blackboard toward his students and rolled up his shirtsleeves. It was time to start the day. "Good morning, my name is Mr. Winters, welcome to History 101."

3

Hannah followed the principal's secretary into a small office. A slender brass plaque above the door read *Principal Jack Noble*. After propping up her umbrella in a corner, she took a seat in one of the faux leather-backed chairs and placed her tote beside her bag on the floor. She slipped one leg over the other and eased her right foot forward and backward in a rhythmic motion, putting good use of the adrenaline surging through her veins. This small movement often reminded her of lazy summer days and the wooden swing her dad hung from the big oak tree in their backyard. That thought alone soothed her.

The office walls were covered in a robin's egg blue wallpaper reminding Hannah of her mother's favorite linen skirt she wore to church in the summer. Wooden blinds framed a pair of rectangular windows giving view to the football field lying in wait for Friday night's big game. A lamp, an overstuffed black vertical file, and a phone lined his desk. Pens, lead pencils with worn cap erasers, and a bag of candied chocolates decorated the desk's blotter.

His voice boomeranged off the walls of his office the moment he walked into the room. A tall man with robust shoulders and strong hands walked swiftly

passed her and took a seat behind the gun-grey metal desk.

“Well, Ms. Lockhart, your presence is a welcome sight. Welcome to Riverwalk Academy.” His handshake was warm yet firm reminding her of the first time they met during the interview process. Her best guess placed him in his early sixties. He wore the school colors in his choice of a blue cotton button-down shirt and gold tie behind a deep navy suit, but his most striking feature was his exuberant smile.

“Likewise, Mr. Noble. I’m happy to be here.” She hoped her response didn’t sound like a canned answer but matched the enthusiasm she held for her new job. Hannah wanted to make a good second impression despite the success of her first interview.

His smile was genuine and erased the question in her mind. “It’s a real blessing to add you on our staff, Miss Lockhart. You came to us with a glowing recommendation and the credentials we were hoping to find. May I assume you’ve completed all the paperwork in HR?”

Hannah nodded. *It’s going well.* “Yes, I came in last week and met with Mr. Davies.” Hannah folded her hands and rested them in her lap. There was a level of comfort between them, and she wished for more time to chat about whatever came to mind. As he tended to the paperwork on his desk, Hannah’s gaze drifted around the office stopping at a silver framed photograph on his credenza. An attractive older woman wearing an easy smile stared back at her. Hannah assumed it was Mrs. Noble. She hoped that one day she’d be captured wearing that same carefree smile.

“Excellent.” Principal Noble said, bringing

Hannah's attention back to topic. He leaned forward on his elbows closing the space between them. "I'd like to reiterate what we discussed during your interview. Teaching here at a small parochial school is quite different compared to that of a large public environment. I've been blessed with a seasoned career in a variety of schools and what saddens me the most is when I notice teachers bolt for their cars when the last bell of the school day rings."

Hannah swallowed a hefty dose of guilt realizing she'd committed that crime at North. She began her job search in an effort to change things up in her life after Tim left. A fresh start, she told herself. She was ready to walk toward a path of new experiences and challenges. But there were other signs she ignored that prompted the change—such as problems connecting with her students, the large class sizes, and the monotony yet ease of repetition.

"I don't want to sound authoritative," he said, "but that doesn't happen here. The extra time and interest we take with our students has proven its value with each graduating class. We'd like our ranking to remain in the top five percent and believe in strong relationships with our student body. What I'm trying to say is the educators consider themselves not only teachers but mentors and counselors all rolled into one." He used his hands to create a wheel injecting a little humor to his point.

Although Hannah smiled along with him, she understood that this was the attitude that was missing at North—the bond with her students. She couldn't wait to get started, to walk into her classroom, and settle in. She had new ideas for the school year in a spiral notebook. This truly would be the fresh start she

was praying for. "I'm ready to get started. I plan to draw from my experience, but foster a more personal connection with my students."

He rose from his chair and strode to the door leaving her to follow in his footsteps. "That's exactly what any principal loves to hear. Walk with me, and I'll take you down to your new classroom."

She gathered up her things and they walked in-step down the wide hall as he pointed out the trophy display case and teacher alumni pictures hanging on the walls. It filled Hannah with appreciation to be part of a nurturing environment for students. He led her to the north side of the building and gestured to a door the color of vanilla ice cream. She read the plaque, above her door, *Hannah Lockhart, Freshman English* and smiled.

She found him wearing an expression that matched her own. "I remember my teaching days and walking into my classroom at a new school for the first time. Pretty exciting, isn't it?" He slipped the key into the lock and turned the knob.

Hannah's heart skipped a beat. "Actually, it is."

"Well, this is it." He walked inside the room toward a bank of light switches and flipped them on. The standard class-sized room was arranged with blue and orange vinyl-topped tables and matching chairs. A large wooden desk sat kitty-corner on the far side of the room. A wall of chalkboards flanked one wall, windows on the other. Instead of laser pointers or computer-generated lessons, white chalk lay in the tray. *I'll be happy here.*

"What about the extra-curricular list? Find anything that interests you?" The principal's bushy eyebrows rose with his question reminding her he was