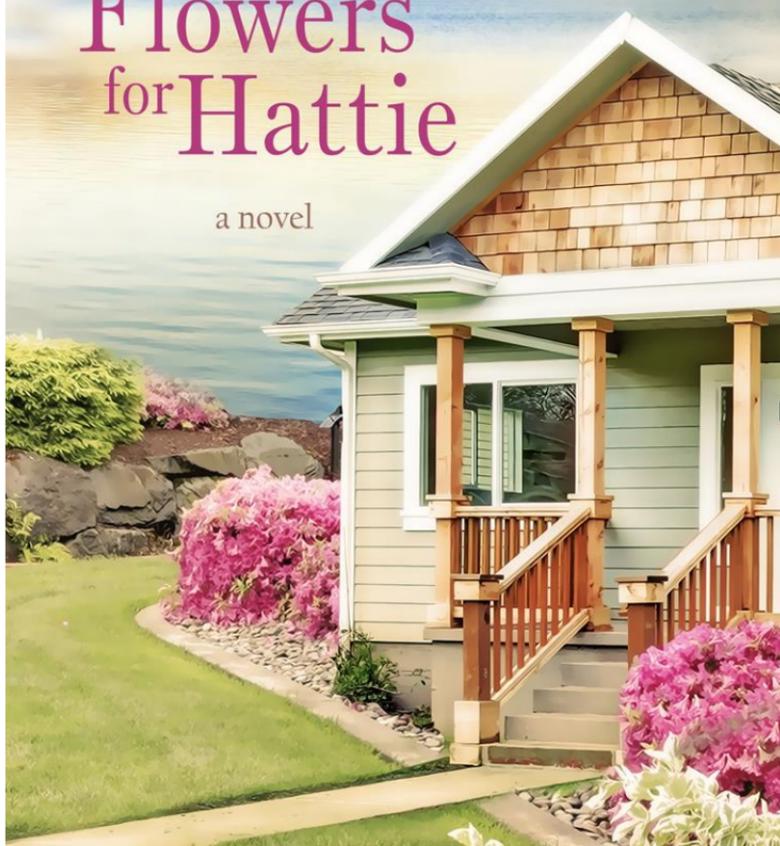


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Flowers
for Hattie

a novel



Flowers for Hattie

Kimberly M. Miller

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Flowers for Hattie
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Dedication

For my mom.

1

“BE MERCIFUL TO ME, MY GOD, FOR MY
ENEMIES ARE IN HOT PURSUIT: ALL DAY LONG
THEY PRESS THEIR ATTACK.”
PSALM 56:1

Hattie Campanelli stared at the computer screen, shaking her head as she squinted and tried to make sense of her cousins' sloppy record-keeping. They'd be in serious trouble if she didn't work for them. No other office manager would put up with the garbage they dished out daily.

“Job security,” she muttered as she dug into reorganizing the impending estimates, receipts, and job updates for the construction company bearing their family name.

“Talking to yourself again, Hattie-Cat?” Mickey glided into the room wearing his typical lopsided grin—the one that made every woman who walked into Campanelli Construction melt. His broad shoulders, deep soulful eyes, and confident swagger probably didn't hurt either.

Hattie groaned as she looked him over. Sawdust splattered his dark hair, and his T-shirt was worn and dirty, as usual. He winked and leaned against Hattie's desk, reaching for a lollipop that he proceeded to

unwrap and pop into his mouth in a swift gesture.

"Where's your entourage?" Hattie asked.

Before Mickey could answer, Paul and Anthony entered in clothes as worn and worked as their older brother's. Anthony stared at Hattie for a long moment. "I'm not into the blue hair."

Hattie shrugged as Anthony grunted and flopped onto the couch across from her desk. She forgot that her cousins hadn't witnessed her latest mistake. She glanced at her computer screen, aware of bigger problems—specifically how much time she'd spend untangling the mess the men made of her carefully-organized billing system.

"I'm not into how you guys try to do my job. You need to stick to fixing and building things," Hattie muttered. "I've told you—all of you—a million times that if I'm not here—"

"You can leave it in my box, and I'll take care of it," they chorused in a sing-song fashion that grated on Hattie's nerves.

She bristled. "You memorized it. But you don't do it." Hattie snapped her gum, figuring that if she ignored them, it would suit a number of purposes, the most important being that she could lock up for the night and get to the church where Pastor Michaels waited, she hoped, with good news for her.

She was desperate for good news.

"So, what's with the hair?" Paul made himself comfortable on the couch in the waiting room beyond their office manager's desk. "You look like a crayon."

Hattie tried to focus on putting the invoices in the

appropriate files. "I promised the kids they could pick my hair color if they helped me clean the house." She shrugged, not bothering to glance at her cousins' amused faces but expecting they were there nonetheless. "They picked blue, and I learned to never offer that suggestion again to anyone under five years old."

She peered up at the men, shrugging. "They're obsessed with blueberries right now, so I should have anticipated it. Whatever. It's just hair."

The guys roared as she tried to cover her own amusement. If her hair stayed blue for a few weeks, what did she care? Hattie shoved some papers back into the folder she'd been working on and stood to put it in the cabinet behind her.

Mickey wiped his eyes as he continued snickering. "Spike's going to love it."

Hattie gagged, not wanting to discuss her recent break-up. She'd not lost any sleep over the decision to dump the man, but currently had too much else on her mind to give him any thought anyway. Spike Stevens wore his name well—complete with full sleeves of tattoos, facial piercings, thick beard, and a loud motorcycle. But none of that ended the relationship.

"He cheated on me, so I dumped him." Hattie closed the file drawer and yanked her purse from under the desk.

Paul whistled. "We saw him earlier. You might want to set him straight. Sounded like he made plans for you two this weekend."

Mickey groaned while Anthony scowled. "I'll bust

his head in if he gets near you." He flexed his biceps. "You can do better, Hat. I nearly flattened him when he told his motorcycle buddies that he couldn't wait to get to first base with you."

Hattie snorted. "He did not even get a ticket to the park, let alone get to bat. He never got to first base. Stop worrying about me. I can take care of myself. I have for years."

Anthony frowned, folding his arms over his chest as if he needed to remind her that he meant exactly what he said. "You're worth more than dating a guy that expects things like that from you."

Hattie ginned, comforted by her cousins' love and support. "I appreciate it. I do. But trust me, please." She needed to change the subject before things got even more out of hand. "Don't you guys need to be someplace? Like not here so I can close the office?"

"No way we'd let you know," Anthony muttered. "You'd tell your mom and she'd tell ours."

Hattie didn't fight the amusement she found in them being so openly terrified of their five-foot-nothing Italian mother. "Such tough guys..." She looked at Mickey. "Stopping by the house?"

He smirked, the unspoken question being whether he intended to keep flirting with Hattie's best friend, Stephanie, or if he'd finally find the courage to take her on a proper date.

"I'm not sure yet," he said. "Steph working?"

Hattie clenched her jaw. "Ask her yourself." She grabbed him by the front of his shirt. "And if you do anything to be your usual idiot self, you better realize

I'm watching."

Mickey tossed his head back as he roared. "Yeah, I'll keep that in mind, champ."

Paul and Anthony went into the break room, while Mickey stayed put, leaning on Hattie's desk. "How'd the meetings go this morning?"

Hattie appreciated his concern. She might be the guys' secretary by day, but the rest of her life was dedicated to a women's home called Life House. In recent months, the place lost a good deal of its funding for reasons Hattie struggled to wrap her mind around. Although none of the problems had anything to do with the home itself or anyone who lived or worked there, the outcome remained the same and put them in a terrifying position that meant Hattie hardly ate, and often struggled to focus on her work at the office.

If she didn't figure out a solution soon and drum up some money, Life House's successful forty-year run might come to a screeching halt. The weight of it already burdened her. Every woman who relied on them for support and help in what could be the worst time of their lives would be forced to go elsewhere.

Hattie shook her head. "Nothing yet. Met with three pastors this morning before I came in today," she muttered. "But I'm meeting with Pastor Michaels in twenty minutes." She forced herself to smile. "Maybe he'll shock me into believing in humanity again."

Mickey toyed with a paperweight, tossing it from one hand to the other. "We can help you through this month. No sweat."

Hattie swallowed the lump that grew in her

throat. Her cousin meant it, but the guys bailed Life House out two months in a row already, in addition to fixing every last thing that broke at no cost. It might be time to deal with the situation head-on, though what that actually meant, Hattie still wasn't entirely sure.

She reached out a hand to squeeze Mickey's arm, but remained silent as she shook her head.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," he muttered, dropping the paperweight back on her desk. He pulled his arm out of her grasp, every bit the tough guy he wished himself to be.

Hattie knew better when he put his arm around her and squeezed so he could whisper, "Don't you dare cry or I'll never hear the end of it." He jerked his head toward the break room where Paul and Anthony were launching into another argument.

Hattie nodded, sniffing as she turned away from him. "I'll figure it out."

Mickey grinned. "You're amazing, kid. Stop selling yourself short." He paused, thinking. "We're here if you need us. Don't be too proud to ask."

Hattie nodded again. "Right. I won't."

"Go on and talk to the good pastor," Mickey said. "We'll lock up."

Hattie tossed her purse over her shoulder. She gave Mickey a firm hug and patted his arm for good measure before heading to the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

~*~

Minutes later, Hattie slipped inside the church, not surprised to find the lobby empty and most of the lights off. After all, late on a weekday afternoon who would be hanging around? But the distinct sound of a piano caught her attention. Although she only had a minute to spare, Hattie peeked into the large sanctuary, her curiosity pulling her to witness the beautiful music for herself.

In the darkness, she couldn't make out much beyond the silhouette of a man on the stage banging away on a song that didn't sound like the reserved worship music Hattie experienced most Sundays. She squinted as she studied the man playing. It sure didn't resemble Jacob Barton, the music minister.

"He's impressive. Always wished I could play like that."

The voice startled Hattie. She jumped and spun around to face Pastor Richard Michaels.

He smiled. "Sorry. I couldn't help but enjoy it too."

Hattie turned her back on the musician, her need for help overpowering all else. "Yeah. Uh, should we go to your office?"

"Sure thing." He gestured in that direction, and they began to walk together as Hattie tried to ignore the music.

"I don't remember the worship pastor playing like that," she muttered as they went through the doors and into the main office.

Richard shook his head. "Oh, that's not Jacob. He's, uh, a friend of the church." The pastor went

behind his desk and sat.

Hattie studied him for a sign, a warning, anything that would prepare her for what would come next. She breathed slowly, reminding herself he'd always been fair and honest, and as a man of God would do his best to help if he could.

She wouldn't consider any other answer. She couldn't because it would mean...

Pastor Michaels shuffled some papers and moved them aside to a bin on the edge of his desk. He folded his hands together and leaned toward Hattie.

"I appreciate the chance to go through all of the information about Life House. It gave me background I never understood before. You're doing important work." His voice softened as he glanced away. "But I'm afraid the board is reluctant to take on supporting any additional charity organizations. Things are simply too tight with our current commitments."

Hattie clutched her purse as she sank back in her seat. "Wow. No sugar-coating that, is there?"

"Hattie."

Reluctantly, she raised her eyes and met his. He didn't flinch or frown, but instead offered an expression of compassion, a man who'd delivered worse news. She tried to collect herself by taking a slow breath.

"I'm sorry. I could really stand to hear something positive. I think I've been told 'no' by everyone in this town already. Hard not to be defeated."

The pastor reached to the desk behind him to tug a large envelope free. "My secretary pulled together

some information on resources that are a little off the beaten path. Maybe there's something here you haven't considered yet that could be helpful."

Hattie doubted it but she accepted the envelope. "I appreciate it." Already she'd shaken every available tree only to end up covered in dirt and twigs but not even a nickel or dollar to help the cause. There couldn't possibly be any resource she'd missed.

Richard nodded. "I'm sorry the news hasn't been better," he continued. "Sometimes God wants us to wait—even for the good things. The answer isn't no, it's simply not now."

Hattie laughed wryly. "Well, if that's what He's trying to communicate I've gotten the answer loud and clear. He's free to send the actual, real answer any time He likes, the sooner the better. As in, before we end up telling the women they need to leave the house because we can't help them anymore. Or we start turning them away." She blinked back the tears she'd been hiding from for weeks, the ones she shed alone in her room, away from the world's prying eyes. Everyone relied on her. This wouldn't be pretty.

She hiccupped. "There are so many bills we're behind on with more piling up every day. I feel like I'm drowning."

Hattie hated this but she couldn't stop. "I can't figure out why God wouldn't want us to keep doing what we're doing. We're helping! We're giving all we have and it's like there is this stupid anchor that won't let up." She exhaled, still blinking as a lone tear escaped. She swiped at it as she turned her face away.

“Why would we lose so much support at once when things are going so well otherwise?”

Pastor Michaels nudged a box of tissues in her direction.

Hattie pursed her lips as she yanked one out and dabbed at her eyes.

He waited a moment before answering her. “I can’t pretend to have those answers. But I will tell you that sometimes—and we all do this—we look at the here and now, the immediate same places we always searched for answers. And what we really need to do is listen to what God’s trying to tell us. Maybe there’s something we’re to learn. It could be patience, it could be to let the control go.”

Hattie blew her nose. She’d never been this empty in her life, her entire body heavy with a weight she no longer wanted to carry. What was the point?

“Maybe you need to slow down and really listen to Him, Hattie. What is God saying? Be open to any options that present themselves, maybe think outside the box.”

Hattie nodded, though she wasn’t entirely sure what he meant. “Yeah. Well, I’ll try that. In between working my tail off to keep up with a mortgage I can’t foresee any hope of paying, and changing diapers and teaching classes and running women to and from doctor’s appointments and....”

“Hattie. You can’t save the world alone.” Richard’s forehead wrinkled with concern. “Does your mom realize how bad things are?”

Hattie shook her head as she bit her lip. While her

mom, Catherine, helped make Life House so successful, Hattie never shared the gravity of the situation with her. Because Hattie kept the finances in check, she viewed it as her responsibility to find a way out of the mess they'd gotten into when they'd lost multiple sources of funding.

In the past, it always worked itself out. For some reason, this time it was taking a lot longer and Hattie couldn't figure out why it kept getting worse.

"I think you should talk to her," the pastor said gently. "And in the meantime, I do hope you understand that our saying no right now doesn't mean no forever. It only means we can't in this moment. OK? We very much support what you're doing and will certainly be praying for you and this situation. You aren't forgotten."

Hattie stood, desperate for escape. "Thanks for trying," she muttered. "I'll keep you posted."

The pastor stood. "I hope you do."

Tears again spilled down Hattie's cheeks before she managed to get to the front of the building. This church, her church, was the last one on her list. She didn't come here first because she thought to try something different. She now had no options save for an envelope full of ideas that were likely ones she'd already tried and would do no good.

Hattie's vision blurred by her tears as she choked and coughed in a struggle for breath. She paused in the foyer to stuff the envelope in her purse, shocked when the sanctuary doors flew open and a man hustled out, nearly knocking her over.

“Hey!” Hattie shrieked, back-stepping as she tried not to fall down. She swiped at her cheeks, embarrassed to be caught publicly in a moment of personal weakness.

Although she could hardly see the man through the blur of tears, Hattie couldn’t ignore the strong hand he extended to stop her from falling. She recoiled, shrugged him off.

“I’m fine! Watch where you’re going.”

He gazed at her from beneath the bill of a worn baseball hat, his eyes barely visible, his long, dark hair spilling almost to his shoulders. His face was all but hidden from stubble that bordered on a full-out, unkempt beard. He nodded but didn’t speak.

Hattie charged out of the building, intent on being alone in her misery.

~*~

Finn Weslow stood rooted to the floor outside the church sanctuary, wondering what he’d done. As if it wasn’t bad enough of him to blow off his band immediately following their tour, now he nearly mowed down a stunning woman with deep, blue-black hair who appeared to be caving under the world’s weight. Of course, he added to her problems by being a tongue-tied jerk. Lately Finn couldn’t remember if he did anything else.

He yanked off his ball-cap and shoved his hand through his tangled hair. What he wouldn’t give to do something right for a change.

“All done?” Pastor Michaels’ voice jerked Finn back to the moment. He turned, tugging his hat back down to his ears.

“What? Oh, yeah. My piano doesn’t show up until tomorrow and I started getting antsy after three days not playing.”

The pastor smiled kindly. “No trouble at all. You might even think about playing for us on a Sunday while you’re in town.”

Finn hated to refuse, but alerting the world to his whereabouts was the last thing he wanted to do at the moment. “I really can’t.” He didn’t know this man well enough to elaborate.

“Of course,” Richard agreed. “But if anything changes, give me a call.” He met Finn’s eyes. “Or if I can do anything else for you...? Judging by the banging in there near the end of your performance, I’d say you’re glad the tour’s over?”

Finn imagined his warm cheeks gave him away. “Yeah. Something like that.” He shook his head, his mind still stuck on the woman he’d nearly run into. He hoped she was OK and no worse off for her interaction with him. “I better go.”

Pastor Michaels patted him on the shoulder.

Finn stepped outside, his gaze roving across the parking lot as he searched for the woman. Even if it meant he might be recognized, he should apologize for nearly tackling her.

Finn ignored his own luxury ride and focused instead on the middle of the parking lot where he could see the woman sitting inside a rusty compact car.

Even from the distance he noted her shoulders shaking as she cried. Her world appeared to be breaking apart. He certainly hadn't helped with being in a hurry to get away from his own stupid problems, which were probably nothing compared to hers. Finn closed his eyes briefly, offering a silent but sincere prayer for wisdom for his own situation, and comfort and peace for whatever that poor woman might be facing.

The woman started the car and drove off, leaving a wake of gravel behind her.

"Funny answer," he muttered, raising his gaze to heaven. "Real funny."

2

CREATE IN ME A PURE HEART, O GOD, AND
RENEW A STEADFAST SPIRIT WITHIN ME.
PSALM 51:10

Hattie woke early the next morning, still numb. Despite Pastor Michaels' encouragement, she couldn't yet bring herself to talk to her mother or Stephanie about the situation. But she could go for a run and hope it cleared her mind, because eventually these conversations would happen whether she was ready or not.

With a heavy sigh, Hattie yanked out her running shoes, glad they, unlike so much else in her wardrobe, were still in good enough shape she could wear them without worrying over blisters. She slipped on her favorite running pants, one of her famous, snarky statement T-shirts, and finally the shoes, praying her pastor was right and that maybe in some moment of quiet she'd find a creative solution to her problem.

~*~

Finn stretched and yawned, frustrated that getting away from his life's chaos hadn't yet given him the peace he sought. The band's tour only ended a few

days earlier and now, at his brother's house in the small ocean-side town of Unity Beach, the quiet started to set in. Perhaps the peace would follow shortly.

He shook his head, saying a quick prayer yet again for the woman who kept invading his thoughts since their run-in at church the day before. Then he prayed God would actually answer that prayer because he'd been so disappointingly silent on all of Finn's other recent requests.

It wasn't her blue hair that made her the star of Finn's dreams, that might be another issue to work over later, but rather it struck him that for a long time he'd been searching for some kind of inspiration, perhaps a sort of muse to encourage him to write something that didn't sound like repackaged instrumental rock. While Finn didn't intend to put the woman on a pedestal or worship her, already his fingers buzzed with the anticipation of playing something their fateful meeting drew out of him, a song he'd been chasing for too long already.

Perhaps she would be the push he needed to strike out with a solo career. Maybe. In theory it sounded perfect, but actually doing it would be a whole other challenge, one Finn wasn't sure he was ready for just yet.

"Hey, man."

Finn glanced toward the door where his brother, Tate, now stood. "The piano guys got you all set up." He shook his head in mock annoyance. "I oughta whip you for having a freaking piano delivered to my house at seven-thirty in the morning."

Finn lifted himself from the bed. "I'd apologize but..."

"Yeah, save it." Tate waved one hand. He squinted. "Are we cutting that hair when I get home? You look ridiculous."

Tate would think that. But he'd always been the polished one, obsessed by things like clothes and name-brands, while Finn, the free-spirit, quiet, creative, forgot about things like personal grooming and appearance. If their mother hadn't been a stickler for such things, he might never bother.

Finn's hand went into the tangled locks covering his head. "Sure."

"Shave too, for heaven's sake," Tate muttered, feigning irritation. "You look like a vagrant. I'm surprised Richard even let you into the church."

Finn snorted. Such would be the life of a rock star, or at least a man pretending to be one. Despite growing up obsessed with classical music, followed by tireless training and practice, Finn was recruited into a rock band that managed to slide right into major success on their first effort and had been riding the wave ever since. Unfortunately, the last ten years only got harder as they wore on for Finn, who now wanted out but remained lost in how to take the first step. Or even if he could. "I'll shave later," he muttered. "After I stare at the ocean for a few hours."

Concern passed over Tate's sharp features. As the older brother, he never shied away from taking charge. "I can call off," he offered. "If you want company."

He came to his brother for peace and quiet, not