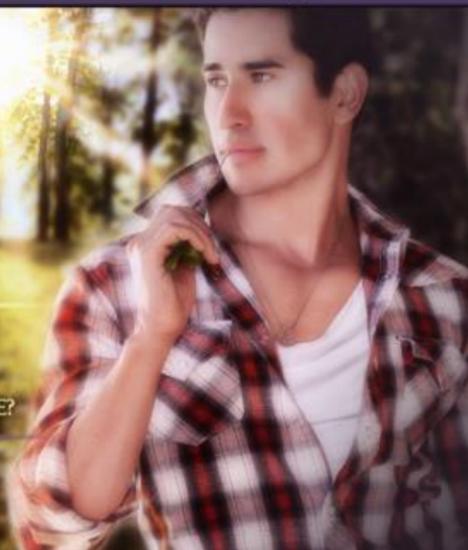


Easter Lilies

JULIA M.
TOTO

Wait for Morning

CAN LILY AND BEN
BURY THE PAST
AND RESURRECT
THEIR UNSPOKEN LOVE?



WAIT FOR
MORNING

Julia M. Toto

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

WAIT FOR MORNING

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Dedication

To the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Praise

City Sidewalks

“A Supernovella lights up the Christmas Skies with the Advent of a New Star in the Romance Filament!” ~ Vince, Philosophy of Romance

Like a lily among the thorns, so is my darling among the maidens. - Solomon 2:2

1

“Number seventy-four. Next!”

Ben Carter glanced again at the crumpled ticket in his hand and sighed. Eighty-one. How much longer would he have to wait? Shuffling closer to the front of the line, he stole another glance at the dusty clock on the wall. The hands moved in slow motion as if part of a bad dream, only this time he couldn't rouse himself awake. This time it was for real.

“Cute kid.” The woman behind him snapped her gum. “My kid was cute once, too. Then he hit the terrible twos. Enjoy him while you can.” She cackled.

Ben didn't laugh. He faced the front again, not wanting to make small talk.

In his arms, nine-month-old Zach rubbed his eyes and whined, thrusting his curly head against Ben's chest. “Not much longer now, little man.” For a moment, he regretted having given his seat away to the expectant mother earlier.

He jingled the keys to his pickup truck, smirked when Zach snatched them up in his chubby fingers, and then sighed when they went straight to his mouth. The keys hit the floor, and Zach protested again. Ben picked them up and stuffed them in his pocket.

Behind him, the gum snapper barked a hacking

cough into the stale air, and Ben shielded Zach's face. Maybe he should have tried to find a sitter. On second thought, maybe he shouldn't have come at all.

Under his arm, he clutched a manila folder; evidence of his faltering income. The idea of asking for public assistance made his stomach twist, but he'd run out of options. Diapers alone were killing him. In the past six months, he'd spent less time in his shop, and more time cleaning up the kitchen. Unfortunately, the latter didn't pay well, and his woodworking business had taken a real hit. Even scrounging a few side jobs hadn't allowed him to make ends meet.

His cell phone vibrated against his leg in the pocket of his jeans. While digging to retrieve it, he crushed a cellophane pouch and wondered if Zach could handle a piece of saltine cracker yet. "Ben Carter speaking." He turned his head, dodging the fussy child's grasp. The phone was silent. He shifted his weight, stepping out of line and closer to a window. "Hello? Can you hear me now?"

"Mr. Carter, this is the nurse from North Street Elementary. I'm afraid I have your daughter in the office with me. She started complaining of a stomachache after lunch and is running a temp. How soon can you be here?"

Ben filled his cheeks, and then blew out a slow breath. He'd hoped his daughter had simply been out of sorts this morning. Should have known something was wrong; Tazia had barely touched her Mickey Mouse pancakes. But then, was it any wonder? He hadn't had much of an appetite, either. If he left now, he could be at the school in thirty minutes. If he waited his turn in line...

"I'm on my way." Ben shoved the phone into his

pocket, scanning the crowd as he pushed toward the exit. Surely, someone could benefit from his place in line.

An elderly woman wrestled with the front door, leaning on her cane as she entered the dismal building.

Ben pressed his ticket into her paper-white hand. "I believe this will shorten your wait, ma'am." Then he pushed through the heavy glass doors and into the cool April breeze.

Tossing the hood of Zach's jacket over his son's head, Ben gulped deep breaths of fresh air. "Glad to be out of that place, aren't we, buddy?" He didn't plan to go back, either. There's gotta be a better way, Lord. Lean times had come and gone before, yet he'd managed to ride them out. He'd used his savings when he had to, but always provided for his family. He'd do it again, somehow. But how? Ben sighed. He hadn't counted on a funeral depleting his nest egg.

Rosa was dead, and for a split second, he was envious. How long could he go on simply surviving? Maybe he'd have to sell off some of his land, after all. Last offer he'd had was an insult. His lower fifteen acres once produced some of the finest grapes in Ozark wine country. He leased it out for hay now, but planned to pass it on to his kids some day.

Sunlight bounced off a line of parked cars that stretched a city block, waiting in front of ticking meters. He donned his sunglasses and Zach reached for them, head butting the bridge of Ben's nose. Pain shot through his face, filling his eyes with water. Zach wailed and Ben rubbed the child's forehead, where a red bump already swelled.

"Shhhh, it'll be OK, little man. That hurts, huh? I guess we're just a couple of hard heads." A vague idea

for a project seeded in Ben's mind and he hoped he'd remember it later. Wrestling the cranky child into his car seat, he worked up a sweat, in spite of the balmy April weather. Darting in front of the truck and around to the driver's side, Ben peeled an official-looking slip of paper from beneath his mud-spattered windshield wiper. A ticket? Great. Just what he needed. He glanced around and his jaw tightened. How had he missed seeing the fire hydrant? Ben groaned. His day could only get better.

By the time they'd reached North Street Elementary, Zach slept peacefully in his car seat. Dare he leave the little guy alone just long enough to run in to get Tazia? Ben rubbed his chin, unclipped the seatbelt and lifted the car seat from his truck, sleeping tot and all. He hurried through the parking lot, mentally estimating the diminishing balance in his checking account. Maybe he shouldn't have topped off the pickup. What if Tazia needed to see a doctor today?

Entering the wide double doors, he inhaled. Pine cleaner and fish sticks. Just like when he was a student here at North Street Elementary. He'd bet his last nickel they still served that soggy coleslaw and greasy fries on Friday, too. No wonder his daughter had a stomachache. Maybe he ought to start packing her a lunch and keeping a food diary. He'd sure like to get to the bottom of her tummy troubles.

Ben registered at the school office without waking Zach, and then followed directions down the long beige hallway to the nurse's station in a brand new wing of the ancient brick building.

"Daddy!" Tazia burst into tears and ran toward him as he pushed through the sickbay doors. His daughter was more petite than other girls her age, but

right now, she looked especially frail.

"Hi, honey." Ben nearly tripped when she flung herself at his knees, wrapping her arms around him. "Shhhh. Zach's asleep. Ready to go home?"

Zach squirmed and let out a whimper before his thumb found his mouth again.

"Daddy I told you my tummy hurt this morning." Tazia's words spilled between sobs.

"Yes you did. I'm sorry, honey." Had he let her down again? "Where's your coat?"

"Anastasia favors her mother." The woman's voice was soft, familiar.

Ben turned, his gaze falling over the raven-haired beauty who stood holding the ends of a stethoscope, which hung from around her neck. His mouth went dry. "Lil?"

"Hello, Ben." She lifted a small, hooded fleece from a hook on the wall and moved to his side. Helping Tazia with the zipper of her jacket, she glanced up at him. "It's the school's policy not to accept children who are running a fever. Fortunately, this is Friday; otherwise, she'd have to stay out of the classroom twenty-four hours. In the future, I suggest—"

"Yes, I know. She didn't feel warm this morning. I just thought—" Ben sighed. It was too painful to explain. "I'll take care of her. Thank you," he said above Zach's rousing protests. Ben shook his head. Was Lil Giordano really standing here telling him how to take care of his daughter, as if they were strangers? "Lil, what are you doing here?"

"It's my job."

"The school nurse?" Ben shifted his weight. "What happened to Mrs. Adsit?"

“Temporary sabbatical. I’m just filling in.”

Lil was the last woman he’d expected to run into again, but the one woman he’d always hoped he would. A million questions raced through his mind. “When did you—”

“Daddy, let’s go. I wanna go home. Now,” Tazia whined, tugging at his sleeve. Her cheeks glowed red beneath beads of perspiration.

“Yeah, OK. Let’s get you home, sweetie.” Ben balanced the car seat on his leg while brushing bangs from his daughter’s misty eyes. “Can you tell Nurse Lil thank you?”

“Thank you.” Tazia complied, not making eye contact.

“You’re welcome. You get better, OK?” She stroked Tazia’s hair before turning to Ben. “It’s a low grade temp, give her something to reduce the fever. Lots of fluids. If it gets any higher, call your pediatrician.” She placed a clipboard in front of him. “And I’ll need you to sign her out.”

“Right.” He stole a glance at Lil’s slender hands, relieved to see the ring finger on her left hand was bare. This wasn’t at all how he’d imagined their reunion. “How long will you be in New Hope?” he asked while scrawling his name at the bottom of the page.

“Not long. I’ve interviewed for a position in Kansas City. Hoping to hear any day, now.”

“Kansas City?” He shot her a look. “That’s a long way from home, isn’t it?”

“I’m a traveling nurse.” She crossed her arms. “Home is wherever I unpack my suitcase. Sometimes I get lucky; Florida in the winter, the mountains in summer.”

"I hadn't even heard you were in town. I don't see many classmates from the old gang anymore." But he had to see her again. Had to try to make things right. It was probably too late to apologize; should've done it years ago, but she'd left town before he had a chance to even say goodbye, much less explain.

"Welcome back to New Hope, Lil." He winced. What a stupid thing to say. Especially since rumor had it she'd left because of him. How could he have been so clueless back then?

"Thank you." She crossed the room and pushed open the door, holding it for him. Even wearing purple scrubs and fat rubber shoes, she was more beautiful than he'd remembered. Her olive skin was flawless, like the soft young does he watched from his kitchen window. "Lil—"

Her gaze met his, and her smile faded. "Goodbye, Ben."

He brushed past her, the scent of cherry blossoms like a time machine, hurling him backwards. He paused in the doorway, so close he was uncomfortable. "Lil, please, I—"

She held up a palm. "Let the past go, Ben. I have." Stealing a glance at the sleeping toddler in his arms, her eyes glistened and she looked away. "Tell Rosa I said hello."

Ben heaved a deep sigh, allowing Tazia to get a few feet in front of him before turning to Lil. "Rosa? I assumed you knew, Lil," he said in hushed tones. His gut knotted. "Rosa's gone."

2

Escorting Tazia to his pick up, Ben was haunted by Lil's elusive gaze. Her eyes reminded him of the smooth, black flint which they used to gather from the creek bed and skip across the water on sunny afternoons just like this one, often while playing hooky.

Lil, a nurse? He wasn't surprised. She'd always done well in school, seemingly with little effort. Not like him; he'd had to work hard just to earn a passing grade. If not for Lil's tutoring and perseverance, he'd have dropped out all together.

She'd sure been right about a lot of things. Especially about Rosa. Why hadn't he listened when she'd tried to warn him about Rosa? Not that it'd make any difference now. Pressing the button on his key fob, he unlocked his truck and sighed. He'd never seen Lil so frosty. But then, who could blame her for not wanting to give him the time of day?

Ben secured Zach before making sure his daughter had buckled her seatbelt. Lately she'd tested him more than usual. A small plastic bag hung from his glove compartment, and Ben dumped the trash onto the floor. "Tazia, take this. If you have to throw up—"

"Benny Carter!" The high-pitched voice was like a siren behind him, halting him. Then on impulse, he hopped behind the wheel of his pick up and slammed the door. The woman kept coming. "Benny! Wait up! I

can't believe I've run into you here." She thumped on the glass.

He waved, lowering his window. "Nice to see you, Hilda, but Tazia's not feeling well. Gotta get her home. Sorry."

Hilda's white curls were already in the window of the truck, and she reached for his daughter's hand. "Oh, poor baby. What's wrong, honey?"

"My tummy hurts." Tazia's voice whined.

"Well, I'm sure you'll be fine, sweetie." She pulled her hand away and wagged a finger at Ben. Give her some of that stomach medicine. It works every time on those little tummies."

"I'll do that, thanks." He grimaced at the very thought of the chalky liquid.

"You're just the guy I've been waiting to talk to, Benny. This must be a God thing! I need your help."

He groaned under his breath.

Hilda Brandt didn't ask, but rather suggested in such a way that the answer was never a simple no. Last time he'd heard those words from the old gal, she'd recruited him for an exorcism, which she'd also called a God thing. He shuddered, recalling the family of skunks that had inhabited the crawl space beneath her house. It hadn't ended well.

"Can we talk another time, Hilda? I really should get Tazia home now.

"I'll make this quick." Hilda raised the palms of her hands as if surrendering. "I heard through the prayer chain that your business is a little slow right now. Is this true?"

Ben sighed. Sometimes lines blurred between the prayer chain and the grapevine. He wasn't proud of his recent reputation as a "struggling" single dad, but he

did covet the prayers of his small congregation. He hadn't thought life could get any more difficult after Rosa left him alone to care for their two small children. However, now the thought of not being able to provide for them was killing him. He swallowed hard, looking away. "Things are slower than I'd like."

"Well, I've got a proposition for you. Part time, no weekends. You can be home for Tazia and Zach after school and still tend to your business. How does \$40 an hour sound?"

"Sounds like an answer to prayer, Hilda." Ben leaned forward on the steering wheel. "Who would I be working for?"

"Me and Delbert!"

Ben laughed. "Hilda, I'm a cabinet maker, not a landscaper."

"Minor difference." She waved her hand. "We plant trees, you turn them into furniture. We both like the feel of wood and tools in our hands. Delbert is...getting...old. He fired our foreman and another guy quit yesterday. Only got a few small jobs on the schedule this season and I need someone he won't have to babysit."

"You're serious," he said, starting his engine.

"Would I kid you? We'll teach you everything you don't already know."

"Hilda, I don't know anything about—"

"About taking care of tender, living things?" She cut him off, nodding toward his children in the back seat. "You're a natural. And a hard worker. We need a big strong guy, and you need the income. Am I right? Of course I'm right." She backed away from the truck. "We start a new job Monday morning." She handed him a business card. "Here's our phone number."

He slid it beneath the visor and chuckled. How could he turn the offer down? She and Delbert had been like surrogate grandparents to half the kids in New Hope, Ben included. Now that the couple was aging, he wasn't sure who was looking out for whom. "Thanks, I appreciate your vote of confidence. I'll think about it, and call you over the weekend. Where do I report for duty?"

"Here, at North Street Elementary School. We'll be doing all the landscaping for their new addition." Hilda blew Tazia a kiss. "You get better, sweetheart. I'll be praying for you. See you, Benny."

3

Ben snapped the flimsy plastic lid onto the foam cup, and shuffled through the line in the elementary school cafeteria. Monday morning hadn't come soon enough. The constant drizzle, which had held him captive inside with two kids over the weekend, finally cleared, as had Tazia's fever. Must've been a bug this time, poor kid.

His daughter often complained of tummy aches that seemed to come and go at random, and Ben wondered if some of them stemmed from suppressed emotions. Yesterday had been the four month anniversary of Rosa's death. Tazia hadn't even cried over losing her mother, but her behavior had changed, and not for the better. Little Zach had barely gotten to know the woman.

"Just keep working on that wall," Ben said under his breath. As was his habit, he'd awakened well before dawn while the house was quiet. This morning's verse from Nehemiah resonated with him, and he chewed on it as he waited his turn in line. Like the prophet of old, he, too, worked with a sword in one hand to fight discouragement, and a trowel in the other to build a decent life for his kids. Today was no different.

"Two-fifty, please." The woman behind the counter held out her palm.

Ben grinned. Same old cafeteria lady. "Good

morning, Miss Betty."

"Benny Carter! Hilda Brandt told me you'd be working here. It'll sure be nice to get some grass and trees planted over in that new part of the grounds. What a mess, huh?"

"Yes ma'am." Ben reached for his wallet in his back pocket, flinching when he didn't find it. He patted the breast pocket of his denim work shirt. His jaw tightened. Must've left it on the kitchen counter after he'd given Tazia her lunch money, and before Zach had managed to remove the lid from his sippy-cup. "This is a little embarrassing, but I'm afraid I've left my wallet—"

"Ahem." A voice interrupted them, tossing a five-dollar bill at the cashier. "Take it out of this along with mine, Betty."

Ben turned around and couldn't help but smile. "Thanks, Lil. I'll pay you back."

"Forget it. What are you doing here? How's Tazia?" Lil tucked the change back into her purse before peeling the wrapper from a granola bar.

"Much better." He stuffed a candy bar into his shirt pocket. "She seemed good as new by supertime Friday. Thanks for asking." He poked a straw into his lid, and then took a long draw of sweet tea. "As for me, I'm working. Landscaping."

"Oh. I didn't know you were a landscaper." She turned the corner, stepping up her pace as she started down the long hallway.

He followed. "I didn't know you were a nurse."

She grinned. "Fair enough."

He threw her a sideways glance, hoping to catch her eye. He couldn't just let go of their past, even if she had. She'd been too important to him. Too many years