



*Table for One*

*Georgiana Daniels*

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by

Georgiana Daniels

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either 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.

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## Dedication

To Jesus, my hero. Thank you for all you do, each and every day.

To Troy, my honey. Thanks for giving me the opportunity to follow my dreams, and for the mornings at Starbucks. You are the world's greatest husband. I love and appreciate you!

To Mallory, Chloe, and Tori—God must love me a bunch to bless me with you girls! Thanks for being my personal cheering section. Love you!

To Dad, Mom, and Lindsey, for the love and support, and for always being there. I wouldn't be me without you.

To Grams, who gave me my first office and made me believe I was a real author.

To Betsy St. Amant, for being the best crit bud a girl could want. You are butter!

To all my friends at ACFW—you guys rock!



## Chapter 1

It's a well-known fact that single women outnumber single men in the Church by a ratio of 3:1, probably 7:1 in my small town. Don't get me wrong, I still would have become a Christian, even if someone had warned me. But I can count the number of dates I've had in the last four years on one hand. Okay, so I don't really need a hand to count to zero, but that's beside the point.

The point is that today is the most dreaded day of the year for single women everywhere—including me—on the brink of turning thirty: Valentine's Day. I'm not a curmudgeon. I just happen to believe that retail-sponsored holidays, especially ones that exclude me, are dumb. Be my Valentine, blah, blah, blah.

For the last three years my parents—namely Mom—have sent flowers to me at the office. Pity flowers. They do it because they know, and expect, I won't be getting a special delivery from anyone else. Then when I thank them, they pretend not to know what I'm referring to and tell me I must have a secret admirer.

As if.

Which brings me back to no single men in the Church. Guys who have been Christians their whole lives seem to marry young. Then there are the men who come to Christ later in life after they've had their fill of worldly fun. (The "Recyclables," as my mother calls them.) In our church there is only one single man of marrying age: Carter Lovelace, the new youth pastor.

His spirituality and laid-back personality draw people to him, or maybe it's his dark green eyes and tousled hair. The dude's a chick magnet. A stampede of high heels and skirts greeted Carter the day he entered

the sanctuary, and in the few short months he's been with us, the population of single women has tripled in size.

Like we needed more.

But that's not important right now. What's important is that I'm at work, and across from me sits Mr. Jacob Afton, the biggest developer and real-estate tycoon in town. He owns restaurants, hotels, and office complexes, including the one that houses the company I work for, Weldon & Son's Financial Inc.

My leather chair squeaks, breaking the unnerving silence. I refuse to speak first, because he (or she) who speaks first, loses.

Let the showdown begin.

The loose skin on Mr. Afton's cheeks jiggles as he clears his throat. "How long did you say you've been in the business, Lucy?"

"I've been in the business long enough to know that a smart man like you knows a good investment when he sees one, and today is the day to buy." I fold my hands on my desk and wait.

Mr. Afton clears his throat again, and then wipes the phlegm from his mouth. His chair groans as he shifts. "Fine, I'll take one hundred shares."

That is not enough. I don't want his chump change. He has millions stashed away with one of our competitors—it's time to go for the jugular. "That's a good start. But let's have a look at your total assets in order to create a balanced portfolio and start making you more money. What else do you own?"

"That's a very presumptuous question." Mr. Afton coughs again, and then wipes his hand on his trousers. He pulls a handkerchief—do people still use those?—from his breast pocket, and blows.

"With all due respect, Mr. Afton, you wouldn't be here today if you didn't think I could help you make more money. And that's what I plan to do."

The other brokers in the office—including my nemesis, Steve Larsen—watch my exchange with Mr.

Afton through the glass door of my office. Everyone knows this account will go down in history as The Big One. They're seething with jealousy, but a quick glance is all it takes for them to scatter like billiard balls on felt.

After another twenty minutes of bantering and listening to Mr. Afton's death rattle, I have the paperwork in hand to transfer more of his money away from my competition. It isn't everything he has—it probably isn't even his Christmas money—but \$400,000 is a great start.

"You'd better be all that you've promised." Mr. Afton thrusts his phlegmy hand toward me, which I reluctantly accept.

*Need Purell, ASAP.*

I escort him to the lobby and wave goodbye. Only then do I realize I've been holding my breath all morning. His account will secure my status and send me into first place here at the firm. I'm a junior Investment Specialist, but don't let the "junior" fool you. I'm a tiger in pumps when it comes to investing other people's money, and I'm good at what I do. That still doesn't keep my heart from racing during a big appointment.

"Whew!" I lean against the reception counter and take a minute to catch my breath.

Steve Larsen, the senior broker in the office, swaggers into the lobby with a giant yellow coffee mug in hand. He'd be handsome if he didn't bear a striking resemblance to a used car salesman on the last day of the month. "So..." He props himself against the counter and crosses his ankles. "How'd your appointment with Mr. Afton go?"

"Fantastic. I think he liked what I had to offer." I hand the paperwork over the counter to Janeen, our bottle-blond receptionist, who quickly closes out her game of Solitaire on the computer. "Would you please put together a client file for this account? Also, add him to my regular call list."

"Hey guys, what's going on?" Joe, the only non-cutthroat person in the office, joins us at the reception

desk. It must be close to 10:00, because he never comes to chat before he's done reading *The Wall Street Journal*.

"We were just discussing Lucy's appointment with Mr. Afton." Steve wiggles his eyebrows at me.

"It must've gone great." Janeen glances over the new account information. "It looks like he's transferring four-hundred thousand dollars."

Blabber mouth.

Steve tosses his head back and sniggers. "But Lucy, he's got millions. You know that, right? Where's the rest of it?"

My face burns, and my heart pounds harder than the closing bell on Wall Street. How dare he mock my efforts, as if he could have gotten all the goods during the first appointment. In fact, I'm the only one who's even come close to snagging the Afton fortune.

*Forgive, forgive, seventy times seven.* I chant this over and over again until I resolve to be nice, certain that God does not, in fact, want me to thump Steve on the head in broad daylight.

"It will be safely under my management soon enough." As I turn to retreat to my office, my heel catches on a snag in the carpet, and I lurch forward, landing in Steve's arms. So much for a powerful exit.

"Lucy, you've got to quit throwing yourself at me in public." He steadies me with one hand, and holds his mug away with the other. Our boss looks out from his office and shakes his head.

"Excuse me?" I untangle myself from his arms.

"Take it easy, you seem a little edgy today. Could it be we have the Valentine's blues?"

Sickness and dread bowl me over like a tidal wave. In my moment of triumph, I'd completely forgotten about the Holiday-I-Don't-Celebrate. I smirk at Steve and pretend not to be unglued by his remark. "Why on earth would I have the blues?"

A delivery guy carrying a bushy bouquet of red and white roses pushes through the front door. I cringe. Those

flowers better be for Janeen from one of her many admirers, instead of for me, from Mom. *Don't be for me, don't be for me, don't be for me.*

"Delivery for Lucy Brockle...Brock-le-hurst." The delivery boy takes great pains to pronounce my unfortunate last name.

"That's me." I raise my hand in a half-salute. Mother's intentions are good and come from a heart full of love, but that's not the kind of love I want today, especially in public. On the other hand, my coworkers don't need to know who the roses are from, especially after Steve's rude remark insinuating I have no love life. Never mind that it's true.

I accept my bouquet like I'm Miss America, without the tears and phony wave, of course, and a little spark of hope inside me wants to believe they might actually be from someone who admires me from afar. Yet, with astonishing predictability I already know what the card will say. It'll say the same thing it's said the last three years.

"Thanks." I smile for all I'm worth as I wave goodbye to the delivery boy.

"Well open the card already." Joe switches the *Wall Street Journal* from one armpit to the other, and peeks over my shoulder.

My pulse picks up a little speed, hoping that maybe, just maybe, someone besides my parents thinks I'm special. With trepidation, I open the card, just out of Joe's line of sight. My spirit drops at the all-too-familiar words, penned in willow script:

*TO A WONDERFUL GIRL, YOU ARE SO AMAZING! HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY!*

"Who's it from?" Steve goads me as he tries to look over my other shoulder.

I bury the card beneath the flowers, which are already making my allergic eyes swell, and attempt to smile and look mysterious. "It's not signed. Must be a

secret admirer. Probably someone from church. There are a few different people it could be from, actually.”

Well, it could.

Turning toward my office with my prize bouquet in hand, I overhear Janeen giggle and whisper to the guys, “Give her a break. It looks like the same arrangement her parents sent her last year on Valentine’s Day. It’s not like she can help it if she’s *single*.”

Oh, fightin’ words.

I start to turn around so I can let her have it, until I glance at the card with my mother’s handwriting.

Janeen speaketh the truth.

Sigh. I’ll save the group discussion about my singleness for another day.

## Chapter 2

I barely survived the crushing loneliness of Valentine's Day. For the rest of the day I had to fend off comments from the peanut gallery about my recent lack of dating activity. (There was no point in admitting I haven't had a date in years. Yes, years.)

But tonight is a brand new story, beginning with a volunteer's meeting for our congregation. Here at the church I'll be in good company, where the single, dateless population of women exceeds the national average, and no one questions why. At least with Pastor Carter in attendance we know that "single Christian man" is not an oxymoron.

Speaking of which, I heard Carter needs volunteers for the youth group. Teens started flocking to our church in record numbers after he took over when old Pastor Floyd retired. How better to serve the Lord than to minister to the next generation? I think Carter and I will work well together.

Not wanting to become one of his groupies, I hung back the first few Sundays, but then met him one day in the maze of church offices while looking for the senior pastor. It must have been a divine appointment. We hit it off...sort of. Okay, he directed me to the pastor's office in a very friendly manner. But we do have a lot in common. He looks to be about my age, and he's passionate about working with young people. The teens click with him, and they would with me too, if I knew any. I imagine the two of us one day, toiling side by side, reaching out to the youth of our church, then our city, and then America—

"Lucy." Dinah, my housemate and best friend, shakes me out of my thoughts. "Are we going to go inside, or do

you prefer to volunteer from the parking lot, in the cold?" She moves toward the front door of the church as the outside lights flicker on, and everyone else files inside.

I crane my neck to catch a glimpse of Carter. I know he's here because his black Toyota Tacoma stands proudly on a pile of rocks around the side of the church. A man's vehicle says a lot about him, which makes Carter strong and rugged with a side of cool.

"You're looking for him, aren't you?" Dinah cocks her head to the side, smirking.

"Shh!" Like I want the flourishing church grapevine to overhear. "Him, who?"

She slings her organic tote over the bulk of her coat. "You are so not good at lying."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Don't change the subject. You're scoping out Carter, just like everyone else. Excluding yours truly."

"Shh!" I glance around for people with big ears. "And I am not like everyone else, thank you very little."

We head inside, amongst the crowd of familiar faces. The mix of people in our church is a lot like the mix of people in our small town, Fairview, Arizona. Springs of the Living Water is an eclectic blend of socialites, tree huggers, and people of every ethnicity. And it looks like we've all turned out to volunteer as needed.

A blast of warm air rushes over Dinah and me as we step inside the crowded foyer. Cozy chatter fills the room as people shrug off their coats and scarves and make their way to the snack table before the meeting starts. Coffee and doughnuts here I come. I make a beeline for the goodies before the Bavarian crèmes disappear into the clutches of old Mrs. Flowers, who circles the table like a shark. Like me, she can sniff out a Krispy Kreme at fifty paces.

As I grab a napkin and scope out the selection, a sonorous, yet unfamiliar voice greets me from behind. "Hey, Lucy."

For one split second, my heart ties itself in knots, wondering if it could possibly be... When I turn around to return the greeting, behind me stands the 1970's version of Clark Kent, including the massive black-framed eyeglasses and button-up sweater. Okay, so there are two single men in our church. I'd forgotten about Edgar Flowers.

I guess that makes the ratio 7:2, still not in my favor.

"Oh, hi Edgar." I glance over his shoulder, hoping to spot Carter, but Edgar is too tall. "What's new?" I ask as I turn back to my doughnut dilemma.

He picks up a napkin and moves along the table next to me. "Not a whole lot. How are you tonight?"

"Great, if there are any Bavarian crèmes left." Oh, there's one, so thick the crème oozes out the side. I snatch it before Edgar's mother has a chance. I smile at her and hope she didn't really want it, because now I feel sort of guilty. But I've already touched it, and it would be so rude to put it back on the plate. She smiles less-than-sweetly, and now I feel sheepish.

"Hi, Edgar, Mrs. Flowers." Dinah nudges in between us, and picks out one plain doughnut, no filling, sugar, or glaze.

"Mom, can you save me a seat?" Edgar pushes his industrial-sized glasses up the bridge of his nose as Mrs. Flowers walks away with a long john.

Dinah engages Edgar in conversation while I make my way back through the crowded foyer toward the adult Bible study room for the meeting. I exchange greetings with several people as I pass.

A loud ruckus at the front door causes everyone to look up. It's him. Carter Lovelace. He comes in carrying a basketball, with a few teens in tow. His pearly teeth shine against tan skin, as if he's the star of a milk commercial or a toothpaste advertisement.

All the women in the foyer gawk along with me, only my mouth is closed, which is not the case with everyone else. So we might overdo it a little. But is admiring God's

creation such a bad thing? No one would think twice about ooh-ing and ah-ing over, say, the Grand Canyon.

Carter carries on his conversation with the boys, oblivious to the attention he draws with his casual stride. Somehow his man-sandals and baggy shorts look comfy and sporty, even in the dead of winter. His entourage moves down the hall toward the youth room, just ahead of me. He disappears into the sea of people, a few strands of spiky blond hair poking above the crowd.

The rest of us also meld into the flow and head to the adult study room, where Dinah and I sit in the back next to Edgar and his mother.

Pastor Nathan Sparks stands at his podium, notes in hand. Everyone loves Pastor Nathan, who always has a Jesus-loves-you-and-so-do-I twinkle in his eyes. If I wasn't already saved, that would be enough to draw me into the fold.

His wife, Sharla, is also a vision of pastoral care and godliness, with a good dose of hospitality and mercy flowing through her. Every time I'm near her, I feel the love, literally. You can't make it into this church without being welcomed, hugged, and cared for by this precious woman. I want to be just like her when I grow up, even though she's only a few years older than I am. She's everything I picture a pastor's wife to be, genuinely full of the fruit of the Spirit. I could be like that too.

At least I could if I wasn't under so much pressure from work all the time, with my fruit being squeezed day after miserable day by the Steve Larsen gang. But that's not the point. The point is that I could be kind, warm, and loving, especially if I were a pastor's wife. For example, say I married Carter, and we were ministering side by side, reaching out to lost souls, and—

"How's everyone doing tonight?" Pastor Nathan's voice booms over the chatter in the room as we settle ourselves. He holds his arms skyward as he opens in prayer. His enthusiasm catches on with the thirty or so people gathered, rousing a chorus of "amen's."

Sandwiched between Dinah and Edgar, I get antsy, and the moment the prayer ends, I'm chowing down my first doughnut. Hey, I didn't have time to eat dinner.

"I'm so glad to see everyone here tonight, excited to serve the Lord." Pastor Nathan rubs his hands together. "Our membership has almost doubled in size since this time last year. That opens up many, many opportunities to get involved."

While he continues on with a few facts about our recent growth spurt (especially in the youth group, and the singles group—surprise, surprise) Sharla walks down the center aisle, stopping at each row, and counts out enough agendas for every person. She smiles at us when she hands Dinah four pages for our row, and then looks at me and wipes the side of her mouth.

Oh, crème from the doughnut.

"Thanks," I say.

Edgar chuckles as I transfer my sprinkle doughnut from my napkin to the top of what's left of my Bavarian crème, and wipe my mouth. Like he doesn't have a thing or two I could be laughing at, as well. Starting with those glasses.

Pastor Nathan goes down the agenda, one item at a time, from membership to the upcoming baptism, to the giving report from last year. He then opens his Bible and preaches for a few minutes on the value of each member of the Body of Christ, reiterating the fact we are all called to serve and none are more important than the next. Finally, he comes to the part we've all been waiting for.

"What we're going to do next is break into smaller groups, according to which area you feel led to serve. The elders are stationed in the Sunday school rooms up and down the hall, and they'll hand out their packets of information, and maybe conduct a brief meeting. If you want to serve in more than one area, keep going from room to room. Remember, we're looking for quality volunteer time, so don't spread yourself too thin. You might want to limit your service to one or two ministries,

especially since we have so many people stepping up this year. Any questions?"

Everyone looks at each other, shaking their heads. Thankfully, most of my single compatriots are not here, eliminating the likelihood of a mad dash for Pastor Carter—I mean the youth group.

"By the way, I know you have each prayerfully considered what God is calling you to do in this season of your life, but I'd like to especially mention our need for nursery workers. I believe God has a special blessing for those who would give their time for the smallest members of our congregation." His smile widens underneath his moustache, as though kindness will motivate more people to change stinky diapers and comfort screaming babies.

Briefly, it occurs to me that the nursery might be the place God wants me to serve. But...nah.

I am so glad God has called me to work with the youth.

### Chapter 3

Having never been in the youth room before, I'm surprised by how fun it looks with an air hockey table, two video game machines, and basketball hoops on opposite walls. There's even a small refrigerator with boxes of snacks stacked on top.

Snacks. I should have volunteered a long time ago.

"Hello, anyone here?" I call out. Either I misunderstood and the youth group doesn't need leaders, or I dashed in here ahead of the others.

"I'll be right there." My heart flips over like a pancake on a hot griddle when Carter pops out from a door at the side of the room. He's hip and hot, with a rich voice like caramel on ice cream. It so matches his hair. "Hi, Lucy. Go ahead and take a seat, and we'll get started after a few more people show up." He disappears back through the door.

Carter remembered my name. He is perfect, just as I have suspected all along.

Dinah shows up a few seconds later, and we take a seat on an old green couch by the wall. She strains a critical eye at my outfit. "Don't you think you overdid it just a little?"

While my first inclination is to be offended, I pause to remember that Dinah is more at home in grungy, natural fibers purchased second-hand. I, on the other hand, want to be noticed, without looking like I'm trying to be noticed.

But now I'm self-conscious. Maybe I did overdo it by choosing a charmeuse wrap-around top with chiffon sleeves. I should have stuck with Ann Taylor.

"I don't think I look so bad. Why didn't you say something earlier?" I whisper.

“We haven’t been alone since you took your coat off, and I didn’t want to say anything in front of Edgar.”

Before I have a chance to further defend my fashion choices, a perky voice rings out from the doorway. “Where’s Carter?” In bounces our church’s own raven-haired tart, Marci Sheldon.

“Pastor Carter is in the other room.” I smile kindly, hoping to make a good first impression with the youth. “Are you kids volunteering too?”

Dinah elbows me with a quick punch to the ribs. Not sure why.

Marci huffs and rolls her eyes. “I’m here to volunteer as a youth leader.”

Oops, my bad. “Sorry.” I shrug with my hands, feeling stupid. Mental note: pick up prescription for foot-in-mouth disease.

“Why don’t you have a seat with us?” Dinah scoots closer to me, but Marci declines and sits next to what looks like Papa Bear’s chair, where I’m sure Carter will be sitting. Marci must also be a card-carrying member of the Carter Fan Club.

“It’s good to see you, Dinah.” Marci smiles with perfect dimples. Then she turns to me. “And you must be new here.”

“Actually, no, but it’s nice to meet you. I’m Lucy.” I smile at her, sans dimples, hoping she’ll overlook my faux pas.

“Oh. I’m Marci.” Her enthusiasm underwhelms me.

“Hey, Marce.” Carter reappears, clipboard in hand. “Hi Dinah. I think we’re about ready. Does anyone need a soda or anything before we get started?”

Marce. Since when did he get to know her so well?

Dinah and I shake our heads, while Marci sidles up to Carter by the fridge, and giggles while he grabs her a drink. She sits back down before he does, and despite her best effort to situate herself next to him, Carter grabs a metal chair and straddles it.