

A romantic couple embracing outdoors. The woman is smiling and looking up at the man, who has his eyes closed and is leaning his head against hers. They are surrounded by soft-focus greenery and a large white flower in the foreground. The overall mood is tender and intimate.

M. JEAN PIKE

He's everything she
never knew she wanted.

The
Little
Things

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The Little Things
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Dedication

For Sue S, my sister in Christ, who helped me find my way. And for Doreen J, whose door was always open and the coffee, always on. The little things meant so much!

What People are Saying about M. Jean Pike

“M. Jean Pike is an amazing author. Her stories are magical, emotional and romantic. I could read them over and over. ...I highly recommend. It is a rare thing to find an author who knows how to reach out to her readers and draw them into the story. ...”

Simply Romance Reviews

“Don’t you just love it when a story pulls you in right from the beginning? That’s definitely this one. Stories like Heatherfield are rare gems and I loved it from beginning to end. The plot is wonderfully interesting and the pacing of it is really well done. Absolutely a must read!”

Manic Readers.

1

Rochelle could've cried over the condition of Bessie's flower beds. By mid-April, the daffodils and the Rembrandt tulips should have been in peak bloom, a dazzling display of red and gold that made people drive around the block for a second look. Now they were suffocating under years' worth of decaying leaves and crab grass.

The house hadn't fared any better. Crumbling bricks flanked the wide front steps and came to rest on tottering porch spindles, leaning against each other like drunken soldiers. Nine years had taken its toll, in more ways than one.

"The HVAC is acting up," Austin said, coaxing a key into the lock. "But if the weather holds, you should be fine here for a couple of weeks."

"A couple of weeks?"

"You didn't mention your plans, but I'm sure you won't want to stay longer than that. Glamorous California obviously has a greater pull than Ohio and your family."

She hadn't planned anything beyond today and the sanctuary of her beloved Bessie's home.

"Actually, I can't imagine why you'd choose to return now."

She glanced at her brother and saw a hundred unspoken words in his expression. Saw what had seethed just beneath the surface of their awkward hug at the bus station and filled the uncomfortable silence ever since.

After a few moments of persuasion, the key turned, the door groaned open, and she followed him inside. The air smelled like mildew and sickness, accentuated by the murky darkness. An aged bulldog sat in the kitchen doorway. His cloudy eyes looked past them expectantly. Seeing no one else, he turned and slunk back to the kitchen.

"That's Gus," Austin said. "He'll need some taking care of."

"Is he wearing a diaper?"

"He has bladder issues. There's a bag of pads on the table. You'll need to change him every few hours."

Great. "I didn't know Bessie had a dog."

He shot her a furious glance. Her baby brother would never forgive her for going away.

"We got him for her when she first got diagnosed. Kat read an article about how dogs promote health and wellness, or some such thing." He shrugged. "It was worth a try."

Rochelle flipped the switch beside the door. Dim light pooled into the room, accompanied by the clatter of the ceiling fan. A dark stain spread from its center. She moved past her brother and tugged on the window until it grudgingly opened and filled her lungs with cool, fresh air. The back garden was unkempt, the gutter on Bessie's garden shed flapped in the breeze. A

pair of black rubber boots waited patiently in the weeds beside the door.

I had an appointment last week. They tell me the cancer's back, but don't you worry about it, darling girl. One way or another I'll be just fine. God will be by my side, just as He's always been...

The sadness was more than Rochelle could bear, and tears clogged her throat. She turned to face her brother. "Thanks for picking me up."

"No problem. Do you need anything before I go?"

"Does the dog have plenty of food?"

"There should be a bag on the table. Kat was here this morning, so he's all set for today. He hasn't been eating much lately."

She moved to the kitchen, picked up the bag of dog food, and shook it. Almost half full. Gus looked at her hopefully, so she refilled his dish. Retrieving his water bowl, she carried it to the sink. When she turned on the tap, the faucet escaped its fitting and crashed into the sink. An icy blast of water shot out, spraying her face and sopping the front of her shirt.

"Good grief!" She turned off the tap and groped for the red-checkered dish towel beside the sink. As she swiped at her hair and face, the emotions she could no longer suppress came pouring out. The sadness, the fear, and the overwhelming stress of the past six days. "This place is falling apart, Austin. How did it get like this?"

"Do you really want to go there with me, Rochelle?"

His tone caused her to look up. He was deadly

calm on the outside, but clearly furious within.

No, no, no! This wasn't the way she meant for it to go, all of this anger and bitterness. Not when so much time had already been lost.

When he'd picked her up at the bus station, she'd barely recognized him. She'd left home at twenty-one, when he was just a boy of sixteen. Today he stood before her, a man of twenty-five. So handsome in his suit and tie, so capable, her baby brother, a police detective, a husband, and soon to be a father. He was angry with her for going away, but it wasn't a crime to want more than a life of potluck suppers and Friday night football games. More than what the small town of Redford's Crossing had to offer. She'd meant to sit down with him over a cup of coffee and explain it to him. She hadn't meant for it to go like this at all. "Look, I didn't mean—"

"Who do you think pumped out the cellar the last time it rained? Who do you think patched the roof and cut the lawn and took the dog to the vet? Who do you think took Bessie to the grocery store, the doctor's appointments, and the beauty shop for the past two years when she wasn't able to drive anymore? All that on top of keeping up my own house while putting in almost sixty hours a week at the station. So you'll have to excuse me if this place isn't quite up to your standards."

"Austin, I'm sorry."

But he wasn't finished. He'd barely begun.

"And when she got too sick to stay here alone," he roared, "it was my wife, my *pregnant* wife, who came

over every single day and took care of *your* foster mother while you were living it up out there in la-la land!"

His words crashed against her like a slap across the face. They were excruciating. They stole her breath. "It wasn't like that. It wasn't some glamorous life. It was...a hard life."

"If it was so hard then why didn't you come home?"

"It..." Her voice broke. "It wasn't that easy."

"Yeah, it never is with you, is it?"

Gus growled low in his throat.

A quiet cough from behind made them both turn.

A man stood in the kitchen doorway, a very large man, his broad shoulders filling the entire space. He wore a faded, blue denim shirt, and a pair of well-worn jeans, a working man's clothes. His hair was close cropped and blond, tidy except for an unruly cowlick in the front and even in the dim light Rochelle could see that his eyes were a startling shade of blue.

"I saw the car in the driveway," he said. "Is this a bad time?"

Austin recovered quickly. "Oh, hey, Sandy. No, not at all. I'm on my way back to the station, but my sister will be here. Go ahead and look around. I'll give you a call later."

Look around?

He moved aside.

Austin slid past him and disappeared. When the front door thudded closed behind him, Ro turned her gaze back to the man. "I'm sorry you had to witness

that.”

He lifted his shoulder in a shrug. “I know how it is. I have a brother.”

He stood there, staring at her, as if he were waiting for something. Finally, he said, “You’re Rochelle, right?”

She searched his face, clearly at a disadvantage. “Yes.”

“Sandy Fairbrother. Maybe you don’t remember me.”

She vaguely remembered the name. Her gaze moved over him, her mind trying to reconcile this big, handsome man with the thin, quiet boy she barely remembered from high school. Nice enough looking, but not gorgeous. Athletic enough to be on the sports teams, football, she thought, but not first string. Just an average boy. “Of course,” she said.

“So, you’re back.”

“The prodigal daughter returns.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. Bess was a wonderful woman.”

“Thank you.” An awkward moment of silence passed. “May I ask what you’re doing here?”

“Austin mentioned that he assumed Bess left the house to the two of you in her will. He said he was hoping to unload it quickly and wondered if I’d be interested in buying it.”

The shock of his words was like second slap. No, more like a throat punch. “Why would you be?”

“I own a few rental properties around town, as well as a small construction company. I do

renovations, buy and flip homes, that sort of thing. I told Austin I'd be happy to take a look at the place."

His words spun around inside her head, making her dizzy. The one place in the world where she felt safe was in danger of being sold? Torn away from her? Fear slithered inside her stomach and rose up the back of her throat as her last hope of security slipped away. *Oh, Lord. Don't let me be sick.* Pulling in a breath to calm herself, she tossed the checkered dishcloth into the sink. "Austin really should have discussed this with me first, before talking to you. We haven't made any definite plans for the house yet."

"Right. Well, I just thought—"

"You thought what?" She fixed him with an angry stare. "My foster mother is barely laid to rest, and you come swooping in here to take advantage of us for the opportunity to feather your own nest?"

He seemed momentarily taken aback. Then he grinned, infuriating her farther. "I wouldn't exactly say I swooped. I walked in through the front door. *After* your brother invited me."

"Well I'm sorry you've wasted your time. Until further notice, this house is not for sale. Understood?"

He watched her for a long moment, something unreadable in his expression. Amusement, definitely, but something else as well.

"Understood."

#

It took all the self-control Sandy had not to stalk back to his truck. In case she was watching from the window, he attempted a swagger. He slid behind the

wheel, turned the key, and drove away, hoping he appeared calmer than he felt. What on earth was her problem? And for that matter, what was his?

She was tiny, maybe a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet, which at the moment she was, but she still had the power to make him feel small.

No, not small. Insignificant.

Then why didn't you come home?

It wasn't that easy...

Maybe she was annoyed that he'd overheard. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop on her conversation with Austin. He should have called ahead and set up an appointment to look at the house, but word traveled pretty fast around town that Rochelle Delany was coming back to Redford's Crossing to help settle Bess' house and estate. If he were honest, he'd admit he'd stopped by unannounced hoping to catch a glimpse of her.

Which had worked out just fabulously.

Still, Austin's question was one that had been on the lips of half the town. Why hadn't Rochelle come home before now? Nearly a decade of Christmases, homecomings, and other special occasions had come and gone with no sign of her. When Bess' cancer returned, people thought surely Rochelle would come home, take care of her, as she had before.

Sandy frowned. She hadn't even been there for the funeral. Bess didn't deserve that, after all she'd done for Rochelle and Austin. Was her life in California that all-fired important and glamorous that she couldn't tear herself away a few days earlier to say goodbye to

the woman who'd raised her?

Rochelle was still beautiful—as lovely a woman as she'd been a girl. Still every bit as exotic, with her long black hair, her dark eyes, and those full, red lips. She still stole his breath away, just as she had in high school. But somehow, the sparkle was gone from those beautiful brown eyes. She seemed weary, as if life had used her up.

Still full of fight, though, obviously.

Two short honks shattered his thoughts, and he moved through the green light with an apologetic wave to Mary Maxwell in the burgundy sedan behind him.

Rochelle Delany, after all these years.

What was her reason for wanting to hold onto the house? He would have loved to buy the solid little craftsman on Orchard Drive. With some work, it could be renovated and flipped and he could make a nice profit. Austin had made it sound as if Sandy would be doing them a favor to take it, so what was the problem? Why had Rochelle marched him out the door like that? Surely, she wasn't planning to keep it, to move back to Redford's Crossing permanently, and live in it. His heartbeat quickened at the thought. She'd been gone for such a long time. He'd missed her more than he had any reason to, except...

He was sure she didn't even remember the kiss. It was an insane, impulsive moment that meant nothing to a popular cheerleader. But to a lonely boy, it meant everything. It was his first kiss, and he'd never forgotten it.

~*~

Later that evening, Rochelle was ashamed of the way she'd acted. She'd been humiliated to discover someone had overheard Austin's accusations and had reacted in anger. Sandy Fairbrother seemed like a decent man, and he'd seemed genuinely happy to see her. It wasn't his fault her foolish choices had left her in this precarious position. Nor was it Austin's. Her brother had probably assumed she would be glad he'd taken the initiative in selling the house, assumed she'd be anxious to head back to California. He had no way of knowing how wrong he was.

She sighed. "What will become of us, Gus?"

The dog lifted his head and regarded her for a long moment, then plodded to the back door and scratched at it.

"Do you need to go out?"

He frowned at her, as if to say, "*Obviously.*"

She removed his diaper, dumped it in the trash bin, and led him out to the backyard. There was a chill in the evening air, and she clutched her sweater close as she stood looking at the only house she'd ever considered home. She was ten, and Austin, only five, when their parents drove away from their broken-down trailer on the outskirts of town and never came back. Ravaged by a recent battle with cancer, Bessie agreed to take them in for a week or two until Social Services could sort it all out.

They never left.

In Bessie's home and in her incredible heart

Rochelle had found comfort, a place where she belonged, but being abandoned left its scars. She became a perfectionist, pushing herself to excel at everything she did. Second place was not an option. You were the best, or you were nothing at all. She decided early on that she would be the queen of the homecoming dance. The queen of the prom. She would be the queen of everything. And she would never feel unwanted again. She had the drive to succeed and the need to feel important. Those things led to her desperate situation in California. And now she was probably on Menzo's hit list. Was two thousand miles far enough away to be safe?

A quiet snort came from the door. Gus was finished with his business and waited to go back inside. In the kitchen, she retrieved a doggie diaper from the bag and studied it from every angle until it made sense.

"OK, boy. Let's do this."

Her first attempt at diapering Gus was a disaster. The second was only slightly better, baggy and lopsided, but at least everything important was covered. When she'd fastened the tabs, she patted his head. "Thanks for being patient with me. That looks pretty good, don't you think?"

He chuffed his agreement and wandered back to his ratty, red-plaid pillow in the corner. As she bent and patted him, a wave of lightheadedness nearly knocked her over. She'd barely eaten in a week, and not at all today. Standing, she drew a breath to steady herself and then moved to the cupboard to investigate.

Maybe she could find some crackers, or a can of soup.

It was then that she noticed the paper sack beside the toaster, a note propped against it.

Rochelle,

Welcome home! I didn't figure you'd want to go to the store after being on the road all day, so I picked up a few things to get you started. I can't wait to finally meet you! Let's get together soon! Call us if you need anything.

Kat

The bag contained a can of coffee, a package of bagels, a jar of peanut butter, and one of strawberry jelly. Though she was grateful, Kat's thoughtfulness filled Rochelle with guilt. She'd missed her brother's wedding, had never even met his wife.

Kat's the sweetest little thing you can imagine, Bessie had written her. But just as fiery as her red hair when she gets a notion in her head. I just know you'll love her. Please say you're able to come for the wedding...

She blinked back the tears that never seemed to stop any more. When Rochelle left for California, Bessie had been well, tending her gardens, singing in the church choir, volunteering in the literacy program at the library. Over the years, her letters had been filled with tidbits of Redford's Crossing gossip and news of her flower beds and what was currently in bloom. And always, always, a request for Rochelle to come home.

Can you come for your birthday next month, darling? I can help out with your plane ticket, if it's that. I'll make sausage lasagna for your homecoming, and your favorite German Chocolate cake...

The tears spilled over and slid, unchecked, down

her face as she imagined how hurt Bessie must have been when she didn't come home. She must have thought Rochelle didn't care about her, didn't love her anymore. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

"I'm so sorry, Bessie," she whispered. "I'd have given anything to be here with you. To be even half the woman you were..."

In her teenage arrogance, Rochelle had thought she had it all figured out. Her plan was to go to college, and then get a fabulous career and make piles of money. With Bessie's careful spending, and her God-will-provide faith, they'd made it through many hard times. But sometimes just barely.

Ask and you shall receive, Bessie liked to say. And she had asked. When the car needed repairs or the roof began to leak. God always provided what Bessie asked for. But in Rochelle's estimation, Bessie hadn't asked for enough.

A sudden, sharp knocking at the front door exploded in the quiet like a gunshot.

Rochelle froze.

Who could that be? No one except her brother and Sandy Fairbrother knew she was in town. Menzo couldn't possibly have tracked her down already, could he?

"Rochelle! Are you in there?" a man's voice boomed. It didn't sound like Sandy, and it definitely wasn't Austin. One of Menzo's thugs?

She sat rooted to the chair, her pulse roaring in her ears and her stomach clenched in terror.

2

Gus growled, a low, menacing rumble deep in his throat.

"Shhh, it's OK, boy," Rochelle whispered. But she wasn't at all sure that it was.

The knock came again.

Gus barked and plodded to the foyer to investigate. As he sniffed at the crack beneath the front door, Rochelle stood on shaking legs and crept toward the window. She was considering whether to chance a peek outside.

"Rochelle, it's Jan and Russ Swanson from next door. Remember us?" a woman said.

Ro blew out a breath. *Thank you, God.* Composing herself, she pasted on a smile and opened the door. "Mr. and Mrs. Swanson, hello! How nice to see you both again."

Jan Swanson's face was older than Ro remembered and deeply creased with wrinkles, but at that moment, it seemed like the most beautiful face she had ever seen.

"We saw you earlier with Austin, so I made up a pot pie for your dinner. I'm sure you've had a long day, so we won't stay but a minute." She extended a steaming dish. "Welcome home."

"Thank you very much." Ro took the dish from Jan's hands, nearly swooning from the savory aromas of chicken and vegetables. "That's really sweet of you."

"We were mighty sorry to hear about Bessie's passing," Russ said. "She was a wonderful neighbor, and she'll be greatly missed."

"Thank you."

"It's nice to have you home, Rochelle," Jan said. "I look back so fondly on those years of watching you and Austin growing up. I just don't know where the years have gotten to. Will you be staying in Redford's Crossing for a while?"

"I don't really have any definite plans."

"We'd like to have you over for dinner one of these nights. Get caught up, as they say. You just let us know when it's convenient."

"I'd like that."

"I'm sure you have plenty of work ahead of you, sorting through Bessie's things and all." Russ' gaze moved past her and into the house.

"Yes, that's for sure."

"I'd love to have a little something to remember her by," Jan said wistfully. "If you should come across a pretty tea cup, while you're sorting, or a little figurine. Anything at all, really."

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind, Mrs. Swanson."

"Well, you just let us know if you need anything, honey. We're always home."

When they left, Ro carried the pot pie to the kitchen and cut a thick slice. The chicken and vegetables melted in her mouth, as she'd known they