



M. JEAN PIKE

Out of Tragedy,
Can Love be Born?

King
of
Hearts

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Dedication

For John Brasley, my other brother.

The most stand-up guy I know.

I would like to thank...My Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for giving me the gift of words, and the gift of life. My amazing editor, Jamie West, for making this manuscript shine. Nicola Martinez, for the beautiful cover art. It's exactly what I envisioned. Jack B, for answering my many "lawyer" questions. Marge McCoy, for loving the early pages (even the awful ones) and for helping me get unstuck. Brenda Hill, for helping me regain my focus. Your suggestions were invaluable. And finally, my readers. Thank you for investing your time and money in this book. I hope you will be blessed!

What People are Saying

Praise for *The Little Things*:

I loved reading Ro and Sandy's story! They live in a small town, giving the story that fun small-town charm, while keeping me glued to the pages with plenty of surprises...Long and Short Reviews

M. Jean Pike has truly come into her own, not only as a master storyteller but as a veteran agent of grace, unflinchingly piercing the darkness of this fallen world with the blinding light of God's infinite love and mercy. ~ Stephen A. Balga, Author

An amazing and absorbing read. ~ Clare Revell, Author

I couldn't help wishing to spend time in this quaint small town, complete with a single dad with an adorable son who will steal your heart. ~ Karen Malley, Author

M. Jean Pike's characters and stories are gentle and yet she doesn't shy away from the dark side of human nature so that the shadows make the picture come to life. ~ Loretta Proctor, Author

1

The carousel sat at the far edge of the park, where the row of shady maple trees ended and the grass gave way to hard-packed clay. The Southern Ohio sun beat down on Dalton Kingston's neck and shoulders as he pushed the button that brought the ride to a groaning halt. When all the passengers had safely exited, he returned to the entry gate to begin the process again. He could have done his job blindfolded. It was a routine that never stopped and never varied. Except for when it did.

He shot a hard glance at the old woman who hovered near the end of the line, the hem of a pink nightgown peeking out from beneath her red raincoat. She was not the strangest customer he'd ever had, but definitely not his usual. He kept her in his periphery as he collected tickets from over-stimulated children and their frazzled parents, as he checked the neon-green wristbands of a flock of teenaged love birds. These were the regulars. The old woman was an oddity, from her disheveled white hair to the ratty pink house slippers on her feet. Maybe she'd wandered away from an old folks' home. Maybe he should try and help her find her way back. Or maybe he should just mind his own business.

She reached the front of the line, her dusty blue eyes fixed intently on the carousel. "Oh," she whispered. "She's magnificent."

"She?"

"The carousel." She reluctantly tore her gaze away. "I so adore them. My father took me to Cincinnati every year for my birthday. I rode the carousel all day long, and I always chose the purple pony. I was just a little girl with sausage curls and yellow ribbons in my hair," she said, adding wistfully, "but that was a long time ago."

"Uh-huh. Would you like to ride today?"

"Oh, yes." She patted her pockets, and then her pale blue eyes returned to him, the space between her white eyebrows puckered with worry. "I don't seem to have my billfold. How much does it cost?"

Giving out free rides wasn't allowed. Dalton knew that very well, but he couldn't bring himself to turn the old woman away. "It won't cost a thing today. You can ride as my guest."

She brightened. "May I?"

He took her arm and guided her onto the platform. Bypassing the rainbow-colored ponies and the striped tigers, he steered her instead to the safer golden swan chariot and buckled her in. After checking that the riders were equally balanced on all sides and that the operating area was clear, he pushed the button and the music started again. As the carousel began to turn, the old woman closed her eyes as if she had disappeared into the past, where Dalton imagined she was a little girl with sausage curls and yellow ribbons again. He

set the timer for an extra minute and a half, because why not, and leaned against the railing to wait.

The ear-splitting wail of a siren rose abruptly above the carousel music, slicing through his nerves. After six weeks with the carnival company, he should have been used to the commotion; the children's happy shouts, the balloons popping like gunfire, the wailing siren from the High Stakes game. But the siren took him to a dark place every time. Growing up in Cleveland, sirens had been nothing more than background noise, a part of the deafening soundtrack of life that he never even noticed. They had nothing to do with him. Until the day they did.

He got stuck for a moment, mired in the quicksand of images of police tape and strobing lights, until Mercedes, who operated the Flying Chairs, appeared to relieve him for his lunch break, breaking their hold.

"I'm sorry I'm late, hon. I got hung up." She sauntered close to him, much closer than was necessary. Her musky perfume was as pungent as her sultry smile.

He shrugged. "No problem."

"Slow morning?"

"They always are. But at least no one throws up on this one."

She laughed and ran her tongue across her full, red lips. "So...I was thinking we could meet here later tonight, just you and me. Tomorrow is our last day in this town, and it would give us a chance to be alone. I'm so mad that you're not moving on with us. You know that, right?"

"Ahh, I have other plans tonight."

She turned away with a pout and a toss of her long, pink hair. Mercedes had made it clear from day one that she was available. She was pretty enough, but Dalton wasn't interested in being Mercedes's summertime fling. She'd tried for weeks to win him over. To persuade him to feel what she felt. Whether it was merely lust or genuine attraction, he couldn't be sure. Whatever it was, he didn't want to feel it. He didn't want to feel anything at all.

He lingered a few moments more, his gaze moving across the ride.

"You can go, Dalton."

"Yeah, in a minute."

When the timer sounded its soft staccato warning, he pushed the button. The carousel slowed, and then stopped. All the passengers disembarked, except for one. Mercedes nudged him with her elbow. "What's up with the old lady?"

"I'm not sure."

The woman sat in the chariot, eyes closed, until the brush of his hand on hers brought her back to the present and she smiled. "Is it over already?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"That was lovely. Thank you."

He steadied her as she exited the ride. With her feet safely on the ground he led her to the exit gate. When he closed it behind her, she hesitated, her uncertain glance fluttering across the park.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. Dalton had his doubts. "I'm

meeting someone for lunch. At least I think I am.”

“Where are you supposed to meet them?”

She thought for a moment and finally smiled. “At the food truck. It’s called Blessings.”

Blessings. He’d visited that food truck yesterday and had no plans to return. The pulled pork nachos he’d bought were some of the best he’d ever tasted. And in six weeks of making the carnival circuit he’d become a connoisseur of food truck cuisine. The food wasn’t the problem. The problem was the moment when the pretty blonde turned from the grill and locked eyes with him. The strange stirring in his gut felt like a chink in what he’d thought was an impenetrable armor. He’d not planned to return there but he was concerned about the old woman. “I’m headed that way myself,” he said. “I’ll walk with you, if you’d like.”

“That would be lovely.”

Tucking her hand in the crook of his arm, he escorted her across the park, past the rides and the games and the endless crowds to where the food vendors were set up, ignoring the curious stares they garnered as they passed. He slowed when he saw the white truck with the pink-striped awning, the word *Blessings* a hot pink scroll along the sides.

He couldn’t keep from looking past the girl working at the counter to the one who manned the grill. The pretty blonde from yesterday. Early twenties. A little older than the teenager at the counter, but a little younger than him. Her blonde ponytail tumbled messily down her back, a few escaped tendrils clinging

to her face as she arranged fried onions and peppers onto waiting sausage links, plating her creations as artfully as though this were a five-star restaurant and not a carnival food truck. Yesterday her eyes, her pale green eyes shot with gold, met his and caused an infuriating tremor to shoot through him. She radiated a curious mixture of strength and softness, an air of innocence that was belied by the baby bump beneath her apron. Yesterday, noticing her condition had caused an inexplicable wave of tenderness to wash over him. He felt it again now. He was not sure what it all meant and did not want to think about it. He was only here to help an old woman.

Finally, the girl at the counter noticed them and her eyelids flew wide.

“Umm, Harper?”

The cook turned, spatula in hand. Her glance skimmed over him, causing the tremor again. Then she noticed his companion. Setting down the spatula she hurried out the side door of the truck. Seconds later she stood before them. “Aunt Clara?” Her voice was gentle, musical. “Sweetheart, what are you doing here?”

The old woman smiled. “I’ve come to meet you for lunch.”

The girl’s glance took in her aunt’s slippers, her uncombed hair. “Where’s Nicky?”

“He was sleeping like an angel. I couldn’t bear to wake him, so I came on my own.”

“Oh, dear. Here, let’s get you out of the sun.” She steered her aunt to one of the tables and seated her

beneath a pink-and-white-striped table umbrella.

"This is my great niece, Harper," Clara told Dalton. "My home girl."

Despite her obvious agitation, Harper smiled. "Now where did you hear that?"

"Nicholas taught it to me."

"Aunt Clara," she said gently, "I thought we agreed you were to wait for Nicky to come with you to the festival today."

"But he's sleeping. And I had this nice young man to help me." She beamed at Dalton. "He operates the carousel. I don't know his name."

"Dalton King." His gaze dropped from her eyes to the bulge beneath her apron. She saw him notice and her face flushed a pretty pink.

"Harper Blessings. Thank you for helping my aunt. She gets a little mixed up sometimes."

"I'm not mixed up, dear."

"I know, sweetheart." She patted her aunt's hand. "I can't take a lunch break right now but let me bring you a cold drink."

"Don't trouble yourself, dear."

"It's no trouble. Wait right here, OK?"

Pulling her cell phone from her apron pocket, she disappeared around the side of the food truck. Several moments later she returned with two bottles of water. She handed one to her aunt, and the other to Dalton. "Nicky's on his way to walk you home. Can you wait right here until he arrives?"

"I can walk home alone, dear. It's only a few blocks, and it's such a pretty day out."

“Aunt Clara, we have talked about this.”

Dalton ran a hand through his hair, letting it linger on the back of his neck. His work was clearly done here. This was a family matter. And though Harper Blessings was clearly in a quandary, the world’s wrongs were not his to right anymore. Even so, he heard himself say, “I’ll wait with her.”

“Oh, I couldn’t ask you to do—”

“Harper?” the girl at the counter called. “We’re almost out of onions.”

She shot a glance at the growing line of customers, clearly torn, unable to leave the grill unattended, and unwilling to leave her elderly aunt in the hands of a stranger. She must have decided he was the lesser of two evils, because she finally said, “Thank you. My brother will be here in just a few minutes.”

He shrugged. “It’s no problem.”

But it was. The way her gaze turned him inside out, like the subtle turn of a key in a door he’d thought locked up tight. The sudden vertigo he felt when his gaze met hers that made him feel as though the ground was tilting beneath his feet. These were definite problems for Dalton Kingston.

2

Harper closed the food truck and went home. Clara was in bed, and Nicky was on his way out the door, anxious for a night out with his friends. Harper was bone weary and went to her own bed without protest. She didn't have the strength for the conversation she needed to have with Nicky.

But she would certainly do that this morning. She'd barely dried off from her shower when a thin sheen of sweat immediately formed between her shoulder blades. It would be another scorcher. She toweled her hair dry, alert to the sounds of running water and the rattling of the tea kettle as Aunt Clara moved around in the kitchen downstairs. Harper twisted her hair into a knot and clipped it to the top of her head, then selected a pair of lightweight drawstring pants from her closet and tugged them on. They wouldn't budge past her hips. Sighing, she took them off and put on a pair of leggings instead. She'd put off shopping for maternity clothes, but she would have to do that soon.

The shrill whistle of the tea kettle sounded, and then the rise and fall of Clara's voice. When no one answered, Harper made her way up the attic stairs to the chaos of her brother's bedroom and peeked in. He

was sound asleep. Exasperated, she shook him. "Nicky, you've got to get up."

He groaned and rolled over, burying his face in his pillows.

"Nicky!"

"I know, I know. I'll be up in a minute."

"That's what you said yesterday, and Aunt Clara ended up walking around town in her nightgown. You know I need to be able to count on you this summer."

He sat up and ran a hand through his messy blond curls. "I know. I'm sorry. What time is it?"

"It's almost eight thirty."

Groaning again, he flopped back onto the bed.

"Look, I know it's your summer vacation. I get it. And when I get home tonight you can have the whole evening to do whatever you want. But right now, I have to go and prep the food truck. I need you to keep an eye on Aunt Clara."

The doorbell chimed, followed by the raucous barking of Clara's Yorkshire Terrier, Toby.

"What now?" Harper sighed, moving to the hallway.

"It's probably the guy," Nicky mumbled.

She turned back. "What guy?"

Downstairs, Clara's cheerful greeting rose above the clamor of Toby's barking.

"What guy, Nicky?"

"The guy from yesterday. Didn't Aunt Clara tell you?"

"Aunt Clara didn't tell me anything. She was in bed when I got home." She hurried downstairs and

was stunned to discover her aunt chatting with the carousel operator, Dalton King. He stood in the hallway, hands jammed in the pockets of his threadbare jeans, his dark, messy hair gleaming in the morning sunlight that spilled through the windows. The sight of him was at the same time thrilling and unsettling. How did he know where they lived?

“Good morning, Harper,” he said.

Ignoring the strange tickling sensation in her tummy, she raised an eyebrow. “Good morning.”

“Isn’t this a lovely surprise?” Clara asked, beaming.

“It certainly is a surprise.” She cleared her throat and struggled for composure. “What brings you here this morning, Dalton?”

“I don’t have to report to work until later. I thought I’d stop by and give Clara the estimate she asked for.”

The tickle in her tummy escalated to an insistent fluttering. “Estimate for what?”

“I’m hiring him to paint the gazebo,” Clara chirped. “Won’t that be grand?”

Her heart sank. Aunt Clara’s lapses in judgment were getting dangerous. Giving out their address to a perfect stranger? They didn’t even know this man. No way could she have some drifter hanging around all day while she was at work. She forced a polite smile.

“I’m sorry but we’ve already got someone in mind for the job. Aunt Clara must have forgotten.” She turned to Clara. “We asked Sandy Fairbrother, remember?”

"Yes, I did ask him, dear. Sandy is not available until September. This might be my last summer to enjoy the garden, and I don't want to put off sprucing up the gazebo, not for another day."

Harper rubbed the base of her neck, where a tension headache threatened. "I'm sure Dalton will be too busy with the carnival to paint our gazebo, Aunt Clara."

"Actually, I'm not moving on with the carnival company," he said. "And since I don't have any definite plans, I thought I'd come by and look at the job. I can start tomorrow."

"So, you see, the Good Lord worked it all out beautifully," Clara said serenely.

Harper had her doubts that it was the Lord's doing, but she didn't have time to discuss it just then. It would take a full two hours to prep the food truck for the lunch crowd, which typically began arriving at ten thirty. As it was, she was already late. She pulled in a calming breath. "I'll discuss this with Aunt Clara after work tonight. We'll get back to you."

Ignoring Harper's firm dismissal, Clara linked arms with Dalton and led him to the back door. "Come and have a look, dear, it's right this way." The pair strolled across the yard.

Harper hurried back upstairs, where Nicky was still in bed. "Up. Now!"

"OK, OK."

"Get yourself dressed and get out to the back yard. And wear old clothes."

"Why?"

“Because you’re painting the gazebo today.”

~*~

When she unlocked the door to the food truck fifteen minutes later, Harper was still seething. Nicky had obviously known about the arrangements Aunt Clara made with Dalton King. Her brother was a typical, reckless teenaged boy, but even so, how could he have been OK with this? They couldn’t have some drifter hanging around all summer, sweet talking Aunt Clara out of her pension and who knew what else. He could rob them blind. He could be a serial killer for all they knew.

She blew out her breath. *OK. Calm down.*

She pushed open the door and grabbed an apron from the row of hooks that hung beside it. She’d figure it out later. Right now, she had a business to run. Tying on her apron, she pulled the day’s batch of pulled pork out of the cooler, mixed in some barbeque sauce, and set it on low heat before putting the sausage links on the burner to par boil. With that finished, she set about slicing onions and peppers, a few more than usual. Being the last day of the festival, it was bound to be busy. It had shaped up to be a good week and for that Harper was thankful.

Redford’s Crossing’s annual Flower Festival was the highlight of the year, second only to the Christmas Jubilee. Every summer in the second week of June thousands of people poured into their little town, bringing their money with them. The local vendors