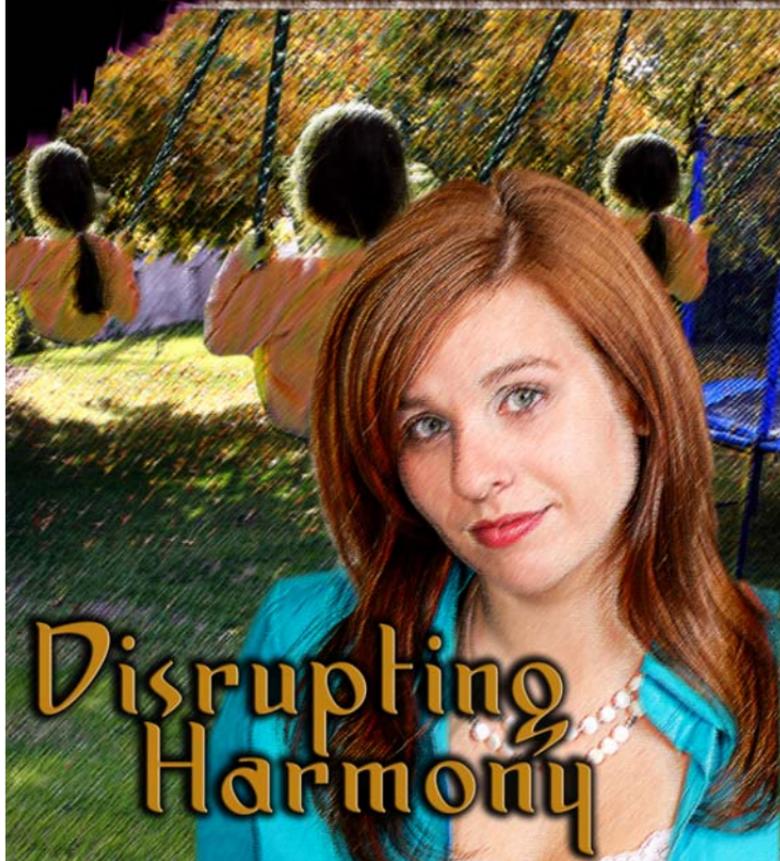




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Disrupting
Harmony

Disrupting Harmony

by

Kara Lynn Russell

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Disrupting Harmony

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Dedication

To my children, who are my treasures and my
greatest blessings.

Prologue

“Hello Pansy.”

Pansy’s stiffened her back and sat up straighter before swiveling her chair around to face Misty Green. “Hello, Misty. What brings you by the church office today? There’s no choir practice on the schedule.”

“Actually, I’m here to see you.”

“What do you mean?” What did this feather brain have on her mind now, Pansy wondered.

“I think it’s time we buried the hatchet.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think we should forget the matchmaking contest. I’d like to declare a truce now that we’re going to be...” She swallowed and then choked out with obvious difficulty, “family.”

Pansy smiled. Misty must be worried. “Isn’t that an interesting idea?”

“It would be the perfect time to stop. We’re tied with three matches each. Four, if we count our own engagements.”

“Of course we can stop,” said Pansy, not bothering to disguise the smugness she could hear in her own voice. “I understand that you don’t want to be beaten by your future mother-in-law.”

That hit home. Misty narrowed her eyes and put her hands on her hips. “That’s not why I’m doing this. I thought for the sake of the two men we both love, that we might make an effort to get along.”

“And you didn’t think of this before you matched up Sarah and David?”

“I didn’t know you were engaged to my father

then.”

Pansy abandoned her sweet tones and snarled out “No, you were too busy sneaking around with my son to notice what your father was doing.”

“He was sneaking around with you,” Misty shot back. She met Pansy’s glare with one of her own. “I don’t care what you do, but I’m quitting. The whole idea was silly to begin with.”

Pansy delighted in reminding her “It was your idea.”

Misty’s face darkened. My, she was in a state today.

“It doesn’t matter whose idea it was. I intend to make my marriage work even if it means stepping back and letting you pretend you’ve won this contest.”

Pansy arched her eyebrows. “So who’s pretending?”

Without another word Misty whirled around and snatched at the door knob. “All right, I did my best. I can’t help it if you’re determined to act so childishly.”

Pansy felt the vibration from the slamming door with satisfaction. She knew that no matter what Misty might say, she’d never be able to quit. No real matchmaker would.

It was time to start working on her next “project.”

God sets the lonely in families.

~Psalm 68:6

*Even the sparrow has found a home and the swallow
a nest for herself, where she may have her young - a
place near your altar.*

~Psalm 84:3

Chapter 1

She was standing on his doorstep when he got home. Joseph recognized her at once, but couldn't imagine why Harmony Solberg would be at his house. He'd seen her television show once or twice, but it was hardly something he'd be a fan of, even if he did have time to watch TV. He'd also seen her at church since she moved to Orchard Hill, but they'd never been introduced. Unless you counted the little mishap at the Apple Festival. Joseph hoped she wasn't counting that.

"Are you Joseph Velasquez?" she asked. Her tone was not friendly.

"Yes, I am." He shifted the boxes of pizza he was holding and extended a hand to her. "You're Harmony Solberg, aren't you?"

She nodded, shaking his hand briefly and then dropping it. "Yes, and apparently, we're now neighbors. I live next door." She indicated the beautifully restored Victorian across the lawn. Joseph hoped his house would look that good one day.

"I'm guessing you aren't here to bring us a

casserole and extend a welcome to the neighborhood.”

Color flooded her cheeks. “I’m sorry, but no. This is about your daughters, the triplets.”

“They’re my nieces.” His heart sank. If this was about the triplets, it couldn’t be good. He remembered the scene at this year’s apple festival, the triplets knocking into the ladder he was standing on, the basket of apples he’d picked raining down on this woman’s head.

She must have been thinking along the same line as she said “I believe I’ve met both you and your nieces before, at the orchard, perhaps.”

“Yes, I’m very sorry for that mishap. I take it my nieces have added to your list of grievances against them.”

“You assume correctly.”

Joseph wanted to laugh at her prim attitude, but that would hardly improve the situation.

“I’ve just come back from a trip and found them in my garden, picking all the flowers. They ran away when they saw me. I believe you’ll have quite a bouquet to enjoy. My garden is practically bare.” She spoke the words lightly, but Joseph could tell Harmony was more than a little bit angry over the incident. “I was just about to ring the bell when you pulled up.”

“Would you care to come in and speak to the culprits yourself?”

“That won’t be necessary. In the future, please make sure they stay out of my yard. That’s all I ask.” The polite tone of her voice became strained, as if it was all she could do to keep her temper under control.

“Of course. Today things were a little hectic, with moving and all. Perhaps they weren’t as well supervised as they normally are. Would you care to join us for pizza?” What was he thinking? Asking the

star of “Harmony at Home” to eat take-out pizza? He wasn’t surprised when she refused.

“I have some unpacking of my own to take care of, but thank you for the offer.”

Joseph stood and watched her for a few moments as she walked away. As far as he was concerned, she added quite a bit to what his realtor, Jeff Bradley had called the beauty and appeal of the neighborhood. Too bad she seemed so uptight. He should probably expect that in a woman who had hosted a show on the art of proper housekeeping. She was a perfectionist, no doubt. Definitely not his type.

It seemed strange to him that he would even be considering that. A few months ago, he didn’t think he’d ever be interested in dating again. Then, his sister, Hope, had talked him into taking out her friend Faith Fielding. He’d agonized about the date for days, even though he was just taking Faith to the Spring Fling that the youth group put on every year. But, he’d actually enjoyed himself.

Mostly it was because of Faith. A widow herself, she had assured him that she had no romantic illusions about the two of them. She’d really understood his reluctance to begin dating again, and told him that it was all right to wait until he was ready. After all, he was her first date since her husband had passed away ten years ago.

It didn’t take her long to get the hang of it again, Joseph thought. She was already engaged to her boss, elementary school principal, Andrew Thomas.

Strangely her understanding had him thinking about dating again rather than shrinking away from it, hiding deeper in the fortress he’d built around his heart since his wife’s death.

Joseph’s stomach growled, reminding him he was on a mission. He stepped into his new home—

chaos central for the moment—and called out, “Pizza’s here.”

The sound of feet running from all parts of the house rumbled like thunder, and he was relieved of his burden seconds later. His sister, Hope, had gotten out paper cups and was pouring soda into them and handing them off to the kids, who carried everything into the living room so they could eat in front of the television.

“Don’t we have any milk?” he asked.

“They worked hard today,” she countered. “Let them have a treat. Besides, milk and pizza—yuck, Joseph.”

He let that go because he had bigger issues to deal with. “How were the kids while I was gone?” he asked. “Did they give you any trouble?”

Hope shook her head. “Nope. I think they’re too tired to cause any problems. Even the triplets were quiet.”

He gave her a look. Hope gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. “What did they do?”

Joseph told her about the confrontation with their new neighbor.

Hope’s mouth dropped. “Harmony Solberg is your next door neighbor! You’re really moving up in the world, Joseph.”

“Yeah, right. We’re going to get along great with her. I’m sure she’s the sort of person who’ll be delighted to live next door to a family like mine.”

Hope frowned at him. “There’s nothing wrong with your family.”

“Wrong, no. But we’re a crowd—a noisy, messy, extremely active crowd.”

Before they could take the argument any further, Shaun Thiesen, one of the employees from Joseph’s construction business and Oliver Laurence, Hope’s fiancé, clattered down the back stairs and into the kitchen.

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“All the beds are put together. Everyone should have a place to sleep tonight,” Oliver announced.

“Is there any pizza left?” asked Shaun. Shaun’s wife had left him a couple of months ago, and he wasn’t dealing with it well, resorting to drinking to ease his pain. Joseph had coerced the young man into helping, thinking he’d be less likely to get into trouble if he was busy.

“The feeding frenzy is in the living room.” Hope handed them each a cup full of soda and sent them off. “The pizza won’t last long in that crowd.”

Joseph watched the two men thoughtfully. Shaun seemed to be doing better since Joseph had introduced him to Pastor Isaac. Isaac had gone above and beyond the call of duty, allowing Shaun to live with him after being kicked out of his apartment, but Joseph still wanted to keep an eye on Shaun.

And then there was Oliver, the man who’d breezed into town, humiliated Hope, made her an object of gossip, did everything he could to push her away, and then proposed to her. Yes, Oliver would take some watching.

“Stop brooding and let’s go eat,” Hope scolded him. “You’re just tired. It will all look better tomorrow.”

Joseph sighed. “You’re right, I am tired. Thanks for coming over and helping out, Hope.”

“Any time, big brother, any time.”

Harmony eyed the waiting suitcase with distaste. She wanted to sit down and put her feet up, but her mother had always made her unpack immediately after a trip. Now that she was a full grown woman in her late—no make that *mid*-thirties, she couldn’t break the habit.

It hadn’t been a long trip, but still she was exhausted. Dealing with her parents was

exhausting. And they'd wondered why she'd moved so far away from them. Coming home to a ruined garden had just been the icing on the cake. But, she should have waited until she'd cooled down a bit to talk to Joseph.

Harmony unzipped the suitcase and mechanically began taking things out and sorting them into piles. A place for everything and everything in its place could have been her motto. She was great at cooking, decorating, cleaning, organizing, gardening, everything...except relationships.

Depression weighed on her, and Harmony couldn't shake it. She'd moved too often to have many good friends, and none of those lived anywhere nearby. She'd thought her life was going to turn around when she started dating Blake, but that had been the biggest mistake she'd ever made.

And now to top it all off, she'd just made a bad impression on her new neighbor. It was just too much. Defiantly, Harmony decided she was going to leave her suitcase, still half full, right there on the bed while she took a long, soothing bath.

She grabbed her robe from the closet and headed to the bathroom, refusing to look at the suitcase as she passed the bed.

In the bathroom, Harmony turned on the taps and added a scoop of bath salts to the stream of running water. It wasn't going to bother her a bit. She was going to soak in the tub and the suitcase would still be there when she got done.

Yes, it would still be there...sitting on her bed...half packed...waiting to be taken care of...

With a groan, Harmony turned off the water and stomped back into the bedroom to finish unpacking. Habit was a hard thing to break.

The next morning, Harmony sat at her kitchen

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table with a pen, paper and a cup of tea. She needed to work on her book. Having the cookbook offer to fall back on had been a godsend. It had allowed her to end the “Harmony at Home” show and leave with some dignity. Not that she needed to work for the money. Financially, she was quite well off. But she wasn’t a person who could be idle. She needed to be busy.

She’d wanted to move to the country and had heard from a co-worker that this was a nice area. The name of the town had appealed to her, and when she visited, Harmony found she liked Orchard Hill and decided to stay.

She’d chosen this house because of the kitchen. The house had formerly belonged to a caterer, the real estate agent Jeff Bradley, had told her. But unlike most professional kitchens, this one was not all cold steel. It had a warm, comfortable feel to it. The perfect place to work on a cookbook, she’d thought.

But even a looming deadline had failed to motivate her—and Harmony had never missed a deadline in her life. What was wrong with her?

The sound of voices and laughter drew her to the window. It was the Velasquez children, probably going to school, Harmony thought. When they’d gone, she should have sat back down, but instead she stayed where she was, enjoying the feel of the morning sunlight on her face.

Joseph came out of the house a minute or so later. He was talking to someone on his cell phone as he climbed into his truck and drove away. Was he going to work? They couldn’t possibly have everything unpacked yet. This meant more long hours for him when he got home, she thought.

Harmony looked at her ruined garden again. Even though it was late in the year, the flowers would come back. It was silly of her to have gotten so

mad.

What had Joseph said to her last night? Something about bringing a casserole and a welcome to the neighborhood. Maybe it wasn't too late to make a good impression. Eager to get to work now, she sat back down at the table and began to plan.

By the time she saw the kids come home again after school, Harmony was ready. She'd created an entire dinner—salad, chicken casserole, twice baked potatoes, and cherry crisp for desert. Harmony felt good. It was the first time she'd felt enthused about her work in weeks. She packed everything into a picnic hamper, wrote down a few notes about the recipes to use later for her book, and then walked across the yard to the Velasquezes' back door.

Her knock was answered by a teenage girl. "Hello," she began, holding out the picnic hamper, "I'm Harmony from next door. I wanted to give you..."

Harmony stopped when she noticed the girl's tear-stained face and red eyes. "What's wrong?"

The girl sniffled. "Nothing. You're the one the triplets stole the flowers from, aren't you?"

"Well, yes...but that's all right. I'm sure they won't do it again."

"Ha," the teenager responded. "Don't bet on that."

Harmony was at a loss for what to say next. She settled on asking the girl her name.

"I'm Abby," she replied. "What's in the basket?"

"I made you supper," Harmony finally succeeded in passing off the hamper, "to welcome you to the neighborhood."

It had been a long, hard day at work, but then all his days were like that. Joseph pulled into the driveway of their new house, noting that the morning's sunshine had given way to clouds. Now,

the sky looked dark and threatening in the west. A storm was coming.

As he climbed out of his house, he looked over his new home. He'd hated to leave the old house that he and Cheryl had bought as newlyweds. It was the house that he'd brought all of his children home to after they were born. It was the house that Cheryl had died in, after her struggle with breast cancer.

But that was a long time ago. He swallowed the lump that rose in his throat. The family had outgrown the old house and they needed to move on. He needed to move on. He'd been looking for a bigger house for months when Pansy Parker insisted he look at this one. That was one persistent woman. Why did she care what house he bought?

At first he'd been skeptical. The house needed a lot of work. But then again, building and renovating houses was what he did for a living.

Joseph wasn't looking forward to a night of unpacking, though, and he hoped his sister had put the kids to work after school—and kept an eye on the triplets. It was too soon to be antagonizing their neighbors. They didn't need a reputation as the neighborhood troublemakers.

When had his life gotten so complicated, Joseph wondered as he got out of his truck. Just when he'd finally gotten used to being a single parent, his oldest sister, Theresa, had gone to a rehabilitation center to deal with the drinking problem he didn't know she had—which is why he had taken the triplets, even though Hope had almost begged to have them. But he was the head of the family, and it was his job to take care of his nieces.

Joseph opened the door to the kitchen and inhaled a wonderful aroma—definitely better than take-out pizza. Who had found the time to cook today?

Hope was putting dishes in a cupboard, her face

hidden by the scarred wooden door. Probably she hadn't heard him come in. Joseph slid onto one of the stools that lined this side of the counter. "How did you make something that smells that good in all this mess? I didn't even think we'd unpacked the pots yet."

She turned and closed the cupboard door, and it was then that Joseph realized he hadn't been talking to his sister at all. It was his new neighbor, Harmony Solberg, who was putting dishes away.

"You haven't—unpacked the pots, that is. I—I made dinner. At my house and brought it over. It's in the oven, keeping warm."

Joseph was stunned. He didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry. I thought you were my sister."

"I wanted to apologize about last night."

"*You* wanted to apologize?"

She fiddled with the hem of her shirt, avoiding his eyes. "I didn't mean to lose my temper. It's just that I'd been traveling, and I was tired and..."

Joseph cut off her apology. "If that's losing your temper, you can argue with me anytime. You didn't even raise your voice."

Harmony frowned. "Well, no. But I wasn't very welcoming to you."

"The fault was entirely on our side. The girls shouldn't have been in your garden."

"It was silly to get upset over flowers. They'll grow back."

Her earnestness touched Joseph. "You have nothing to apologize for. Thank you for making dinner. It will be a welcome change from the take out we've been eating for the last few days."

"I'm happy to help. I'll just head home now, so you and your family can eat."

"Will you stay for supper? After all, you made it. It wouldn't be very gracious of us not to share."

"I don't want to intrude."

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She was poised for flight, ready to bound away like a deer. What made her so nervous? “You aren’t intruding. We’d be pleased to have you.”

Just then, Abby came down the back steps. “I’m sorry Ms. Solberg,” she said as she emerged from the stairway, cordless phone in hand. “I didn’t mean to be on the phone so long.”

Their neighbor’s attention turned to Abby. “That’s all right. I don’t mind. Please call me Harmony.”

“You left Harmony down here unpacking while you were on the phone with one of your friends?” Joseph was surprised to see a look pass between Abby and Harmony. It was a look that told him they had a secret. What was going on here?

“Unpacking?” Abby noticed the half filled cupboard. “Oh, Ms. Solberg, I mean Harmony, you didn’t have to...”

“I don’t mind,” Harmony said simply.

“How did you know where we’d want things?” asked Joseph, his gratitude for the meal she’d cooked ebbing.

“Well, I just thought that your everyday stoneware should go above the dishwasher for easy unloading.”

Joseph quirked an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yes. It all depends on the kitchen and how it’s laid out. Everything should go as closely as possible to where it will be needed. It’s all about flow.”

“Is that your expert opinion, Ms. Solberg?”

She quailed a bit under his stare. “Of course you can put everything where you wish. I was just...just trying to help.”

There was a noise from the stairs, comparable perhaps to a stampeding herd of buffalo. Noah and Peter came into the kitchen.

“When’s supper?” asked Peter. At fourteen, his appetite was bigger than he was.

“Soon,” answered Joseph, turning his attention to his sons. “Where’s Aunt Hope?”

“She’s helping the terrible trio get their room set up. What smells so good?”

“Our neighbor, Ms. Solberg, has made supper for us.”

Joseph introduced his sons. “Ms. Solberg, these are my sons, Noah,” he indicated his seventeen year old, “and Peter.”

She smiled at them. “I’m happy to meet you. Please, call me Harmony.”

The boys made appropriate responses. Then Peter asked “What did you make for supper?”

Harmony came out from behind the cupboard as she recited her menu for them. She inched toward the door as she spoke, so that when she got to “I hope you all enjoy it. I’ll just pick up the dishes tomorrow.” She ducked out before anyone could stop her.

Joseph watched her go. He should stop her, he thought, but he wanted to ask Abby about her visit with their neighbor. He’d catch up with Harmony herself later. “Peter, Noah, Ms. Solberg unpacked—”

“She said to call her Harmony,” Abby reminded him.

“Yes, thank you. Harmony unpacked our ‘everyday stoneware.’ You two set the table while Abby and I take care of the casserole.”

The teens grumbled about setting the table being ‘women’s work’ but it was more out of habit than any actual intention of complaining. Joseph waited until the boys had gone into the dining room before he turned to Abby. “How long was Ms. Solberg here?”

Did he detect a flash of guilt in his daughter’s eyes? She picked up some potholders from beside the stove. Joseph didn’t recognize them. They must be Harmony’s.

“She came over about five.”

“Five? You two must have found a lot to talk about.”

Abby shrugged and opened the oven door. The chicken casserole smelled almost good enough to distract Joseph, but not quite. “So what did you two talk about?”

Abby set the casserole down on a hot pad. She turned to her father and with a hint of defiance; she told him “We talked about boys.”

He hadn’t expected that. “Boys? What about them?”

“I...I told Harmony that you wouldn’t let me date yet, even though Ethan asked me out, and you know him from youth group and everything, and he’s a really nice guy...” She paused to take a breath. “I told her about all of that.”

“Oh really? And what did the helpful Ms. Solberg say about that?”

“She talked to me like a real person. She didn’t just tell me to wait until I was older, like you and Aunt Hope..”

“So,” prompted Joseph, containing his anger with difficulty. “What did she say?”

“She said I should ask you about going out with Ethan and some other friends. That way it wouldn’t be a date, and we wouldn’t be alone, but...”

“What about the phone call? What was that about?”

“I called Chrissie,” Abby admitted, referring to her best friend. “I wanted to see what she thought. But I wasn’t setting anything up, honest. Harmony said I had to ask you first.”

Well, at least she had that much sense. Didn’t she know better than to go around dispensing advice to other people’s children?

“So, what do you think, Dad?”

“About Ms. Solberg?”