

Teacher's Plans

JoAnn Carter



Amanda had reached out to shake his hand when his words hit her full force. She withdrew her hand like she'd just touched fire and squeaked, "You're who?"

"I'm your new assistant. The principal said to meet you here."

Silence engulfed the room. Tracy shifted his weight to one hip, looking slightly uncomfortable for the first time. "He said you would be expecting me."

Amanda tried to cover up her shock. "Um, right...it's just..." *You're a man—not just any man—a drop dead gorgeous man!* She felt like she was drowning with no way out; she needed time to gather her wits. "Were you by any chance at an interview in the Board of Education building on June 13th?"

...Tracy laughed. "I think my first impression of you was correct after all."

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"This is a book that deserves a recommendation as a must read. Wonderfully done, Ms. Carter."

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"She has done a great job of conveying this storyline in such a way that it was absolutely impossible for me to put down."

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Dedication

To my mom, Carol Davis:
you've taught me more than any "teacher"
ever could. Thank you for believing in me.

To my dad, Ivan Davis:
you're still one of the best and most important
role models in my life.

I love you both more than words can say.

Finally, I'd like to dedicate this novel to the one who
has written the most beautiful romance and love
story ever—to God, my Savior.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.”

(NIV)—Jeremiah 29:11

Prologue

Amanda never cursed, but if she did, today would be the day.

Huge black rain clouds hung low over the top of Mount Mansfield and sheets of rain streamed down the windshield of her old Ford pickup. The wipers squeaked in protest as the black rubber half bounced, half swished back and forth. She reached to turn up the radio and accidentally brushed the top of the coffee cup in the middle console. It tipped precariously, splashing hot liquid onto her hand. *Incredible!* Amanda fought to right the mug as her wristwatch beeped. Easy to clean-up the spilled coffee, but she was ten minutes late for her meeting with the superintendent. Not so easy to fix that.

Amanda steered the truck into the first space she saw in the parking lot and then reached under the worn leather bench seat for her umbrella. After forcing open the creaking door, she leapt from the cab into an ankle-deep puddle. *Can anything else go wrong?*

As if cued by her thought, a gray sedan sped past and sprayed mud from her toes to her hips, covering her new suit! Tears of frustration stung her eyes, but she blinked them back. By the time she cleaned up, she'd be later still for the meeting.

Amanda glanced at her watch one more time while the secretary buzzed the superintendent over the little black box sitting on the corner of her organized desk. “Mr. Murray, Miss Manning is here to see you.”

His deep voice resonated through the intercom. “Send her in.”

“Right this way.” The secretary stood, motioning her to follow. “Can I get you a cup of tea or something?”

Tasty and comforting as that sounded, Amanda declined. The way her day was going she’d probably spill it...on Mr. Murray.

His back was to her when she entered. “Have a seat.” Mr. Murray’s voice echoed off of the deep filing cabinet against the wall.

The chair, a huge upholstered wingback, was creamy white brocade—a fact she didn’t notice until a smudge of mud from her jacket sleeve streaked the chair’s rolled arm. “Oh, great,” she said under her breath.

“I’m sorry,” he said, slamming the file drawer, “what did you—” It seemed words failed him, as he faced her. His eyes darted from her speckled suit, to the muddy shoes, then to the mess she’d made on the elegant chair.

Amanda prayed. If there’s any truth to that old ‘if the ground could open up and swallow me’ adage, this would be a great time to put it to the test.

Mr. Murray gathered his wits quickly, and smiling, extended a welcoming hand. “It’s Amanda, right?”

Amanda liked the feel of his warm grasp. “I’m so sorry to be late, and messy, but—”

“As long as you’re all right,” he said, letting her hand go before he pressed his tie down and sat behind his desk.

“Everything except my pride,” she admitted on the heels of a nervous giggle. She ran down the events of her morning and punctuated the story with a slightly louder laugh.

Fortunately, he was still smiling by the time she finished with her saga. “No wonder your students love you; you’re a great story teller.”

Amanda fidgeted with her watch. She never could figure out what to say when someone complimented her. Mr. Murray’s eyes lost a bit of their twinkle as he continued, “I only wish my story was half as funny.”

Amanda felt like she swallowed a golf ball as she listened to the ominous tone of his voice.

Leaning back, he cleared his throat. “I’ve reviewed the enrollments. Your special education department is projected to have twenty-two children next year.”

Wow. The way he’d looked, she thought for sure he’d announce that budget cuts meant he had to let her go. Then it hit her like a rock. “That’s seven more than this year.”

“I know.” He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed, “I’m just thankful you’re such a qualified and gifted teacher.”

Amanda didn’t know how to respond. *Twenty-two special needs children, all by herself?* “Will the board hire someone to share the workload?”

Mr. Murray extended a hand, palm up. “I wish we had money in our budget for that.” He fumbled with some papers on his desk before adding, “I’ve

suggested that the board hire an assistant, hopefully full-time, to help you out.”

Amanda nervously drummed her fingers on the arms of the chair and then clasped her hands in her lap. *Lord, what is Your will in all this? Are You telling me it's time to move on from teaching? I'm so tired of the struggle.* The last thing she wanted was to give in to her fears of inadequacy in front of Mr. Murray. She pasted a smile on her face. “Any idea when they will reach a decision?”

“I expect the board will have an answer within the next few weeks. First, it needs to be determined if we can come up with the financial resources. If so, it will just be a matter of finding the right qualified candidate. I'll keep in touch.”

Amanda realized she was being dismissed. She nodded and stood. “Sounds like you have a plan.” Albeit a very vague one. She glanced between the floor and the chair and grimaced. “Sorry for the muddy mess I made of your office.”

He waved her apology away.

If only she could just as easily wave away the mess in her life.

Chapter One

Late June

“Hi, Wilma.” Amanda called out as the bells on the *Cone Heads*’ door jingled. “I’ve got my summer application ready,” she said, depositing it on the brilliant blue-tiled countertop.

“Great to see you,” Wilma wiped her hands on a faded tea towel. “Don’t know why Leo insists you fill this out every summer.” She picked up the application. “We all know you’re hired.”

“You know Vermont. It’s all about tradition.”

The woman’s dark ponytail swished from side to side as she shook her head. “Please. As if I could forget.” She turned and said over her shoulder, “Let me put this on his desk so it won’t get lost. Be right back.”

“No hurry.” Amanda leaned against the counter. She looked over the beloved ice cream shop. It had stood at the corner of Creamery Road and Route 15 for as long as she could remember, and in all those years, not much had changed. Half a dozen small tables filled the center of the sunny room; on the far left wall, booths hugged shiny white tiles where a colorful country mural boasted a pasture of dairy cows. Working at *Cone Heads* made the month of June a little easier to bear. By the time, September rolled around again, she almost wished she could

stay right here, dipping ice cream and blending malts.

Wilma's sudden return roused Amanda from her reverie. "Well," she said, tossing a white apron, "you know the routine. A few of the prices went up and we've added a new flavor. Other than that, same ol', same ol'..."

"What's the new flavor?" Amanda asked, licking her lips.

Wilma pointed to a big cardboard keg in the windowed cooler. "Fudge macaroon."

"Mmmm...sounds delicious...and dangerous..."

Wilma wiggled her eyebrows. "Let's have some. After all, you need to know what it tastes like to sell it." She didn't wait for Amanda to agree. "Waffle cone, right?"

Free ice cream had to be one of the greatest perks of working at *Cone Heads*. Wilma carried two cones to the front of the counter and perched on a red vinyl-covered stool. "Have a seat," she said, handing one to Amanda. "Tell me all about the school year."

"Hard to believe it'll be over in two short weeks."

Wilma studied Amanda's face and then asked, "Tough year?"

Amanda didn't feel like going into the details. At least, not while licking fudge macaroon. "It could've been worse."

"Any idea when you can start here?"

"I'm officially free...let's see, not this next Monday, but the following one." Amanda took another lick of the cone. "Oh, this is yummy."

"Good. I need you as soon as possible, to help me avoid temptation." She patted her thigh. "My mother

always said, 'A second on the lips, a lifetime on the hips.' As you can see, I'm living proof it's true."

The women laughed as the doorbell jingled.

"You get this one," Wilma said, winking. "It'll be good practice."

Amanda handed her cone to Wilma and hopped off the high stool. Two handsome men in starched shirts, bright ties, and well-creased pants headed for the counter.

Wilma muttered under her breath, "They don't look like locals to me. Who dresses like that for ice cream?"

"Hi. Can I help you?"

"Give us a minute, please," said the shorter man.

"Take your time." Amanda studied the other fellow as he read the board. He was tall, with jet-black hair and bright blue eyes. She was thinking what long lashes he had when suddenly, he turned and flashed her a quick grin. Caught in the act of staring, Amanda felt her face grow warm.

"What's your favorite flavor?" he said, pocketing his hands.

"Me? Oh, I like this new one," Amanda said. "Fudge macaroon."

He grinned. "I was asking him," he said, pointing to his friend.

Laughing, the friend said, "Gimme a dish of mint chocolate chip, please."

The tall one nodded. "Sounds great. How 'bout you make that two?"

By now, Amanda's face felt like it was on fire. She turned, thankful for something to do. As she grabbed two bowls, the shorter man said, "Nice little town you have here."

She felt the tall one's eyes on her as she dipped. "We think so, too."

"We're on our way to a meeting in Jefferson, but we left a few minutes early so we could stop here."

Amanda looked up then, wondering how they'd heard about the place. As if in answer to her unasked question, the tall one said, "A couple of our co-workers have been here. Place comes very highly recommended."

She nodded. "That's always nice to hear."

Wilma grabbed the bowls and put them on a nearby table.

"How much do we owe you?" The man asked as he reached for his wallet.

Wilma propped a fist on a hip, and called over, "It's on the house, seeing it's your first time."

Free? No one gave away anything at *Cone Heads!* It was all Amanda could do not to stand there, gap-jawed.

"That's nice of you. But really—"

"Just remember to send more friends." And then she winked.

If Amanda didn't know better, she'd say Wilma was...flirting!

The rending screech of metal rubbing on metal, like nails on a chalkboard, jerked Amanda out of her daydreaming. She looked around and tried to find the cause of the hair-raising noise.

It didn't take long.

A broken foot on a chair rubbed against the gray linoleum as a boy rocked back and forth on the lopsided seat.

Amanda reached for the chair on her right, pulled it out, and patted the blue seat with her hand.

“Here, Gregory, sit in this one. It’s safer.” She pushed tendrils that escaped her French braid from her eyes. “I know it’s hard,” she added gently, “but you need to finish practicing the letters ‘k’ and ‘s’ in the sand.”

His little pink lips puckered into a pout. “But I just can’t sit no more,” he whimpered.

A wave of weariness washed over her. She tried to push it aside. “I’ll tell you what,” she said, brightening, “if you think you can finish your letters, I’ll let you stand here at the table with me.”

He stood up straight like a soldier and grinned from ear to ear. “I can do that!”

Experience taught Amanda that his focus could be very short-lived. She touched him to hold his attention, “But, you must do your best work. Do you think you can do that for me?”

Gregory’s gorgeous near-black eyes sparkled, “Yes, Miss Manning, I can.”

Amanda winked and patted his hand, then made her way through the classroom. Once she paid each child a visit to check their progress, she tidied a stack of books, picked up crayons, and pulled the shade down to shut out the bright afternoon light.

“I did it!” Gregory proudly exclaimed from his desk as the dismissal bell rang. “I knew I could, and I did.”

Amanda walked over to see his work. She clasped her hands under her chin. “What a fine job you did, Gregory. I’m proud of you.”

Amanda turned and addressed the rest of her students. Fifteen squirming, energetic kids scrambled as she called, “Time to put your things away in your cubbies and line up at the door.”

As the children shuffled about, Amanda's mind drifted. *If I did have an assistant, this would be much easier, but would it be enough? Lord, what is it that You want me to do? I love each of these children, but... I'm just worn out. Please give me the strength I need.*

Tiny hands tugged at the hem of her blouse. "Miss Manning, Miss Manning!?"

Amanda stooped to look into Callie's expectant green eyes. "What is it, sweetie?"

The frail little redhead wrapped her arms around Amanda's waist. "Oh, I just love you, that's all."

Amanda returned the hug. "What a sweetheart you are. How'd you know I needed a hug right now?" She looked into Callie's freckled face. "I love you, too." With a grin and a wink, she tousled the girl's hair. "All set to get on the bus?"

Callie shrugged into her backpack. "Yep."

"Yes." Amanda gently corrected. "And I'm glad you got ready so fast." Standing, she added, "Now how about showing me how good you are at standing in line?"

The final bell rang and Amanda walked with her students to the lobby. As soon as the students were loaded onto their buses, she headed back to her quiet classroom.

Amanda plopped down at her desk and glanced around. Sixteen student desks were arranged in four neat rows. In the back of the room, two long worktables were covered and scattered with remnants of sand and construction paper from their earlier learning activity. Amanda's gaze fell to her favorite corner. The welcoming, tidy spot held the

flip chart, surrounded by a rainbow assortment of floor mats circled at the base of the easel.

Carolyn, Amanda's colleague and dear friend from childhood, popped her head through the doorway. "Earth to Amanda. Earth to Amanda." Laughing, she added, "That's a deep look. Everything okay?"

Amanda cupped her chin in her hand. "I love these kids, love my job."

"But...."

"Since I was a little girl, all I wanted to do was teach," she added softly, "but working year-round at *Cone Heads* sounds mighty tempting about now."

Carolyn laughed. "Hang in there. It's only two more weeks."

Amanda simply stared at her.

"Know what I think? You've got the June Blues."

Amanda took a deep breath. Leave it to Carolyn to try to make her feel better. Only problem was, she doubted it would work this time. She ran a weary hand over the back of her neck. "I hope it isn't more than that."

Carolyn crossed the room in three long strides "Talk to me," she said, perching on the corner of Amanda's desk.

I guess there's no avoiding the inevitable. "I met with Mr. Murray earlier this week. Did you hear the enrollment for special needs is increasing for next year?"

"I did," Carolyn said soberly.

They were both quiet for a moment.

Amanda folded her arms across her chest and exhaled heavily. "I'm worn out, Carolyn. Mr. Murray mentioned an assistant but, you know as well as I

do, the budget is tighter than the dress shoes I wear on Sunday morning.”

“What you need is some breathing space.” Carolyn quickly came around the desk and tugged Amanda out of her chair. “I think it’s time we had a little treat. Maybe we can come up with a solution over something sweet and fattening.”

Amanda groaned good-naturedly and allowed her friend to lead her out the door. As they exited, Amanda blurted, “I’m considering giving up teaching.”

Eyes wide, Carolyn gasped, “Come on. You can’t be serious. You’re tired, that’s all. You need some good old-fashioned R&R. You’ll feel differently when—”

“No,” Amanda interrupted gently, “it’s not that simple. Class size keeps growing and, well, I just can’t do the job properly alone. The kids deserve more.”

“Listen to me.” Carolyn grabbed her friend’s shoulders and gave a gentle shake. “I’m not saying this because you’re my best friend. You’re a wonderful teacher. God has given you a very special gift. You can’t just throw it away.”

Amanda stood slump-shouldered, silent.

“No need to make any snap decisions. Why not just wait? See if Mr. Murray finds some money in the budget to get you help. Then you can decide, one way or another.” She gave Amanda another gentle shake, “Before you turn your entire world upside down.”

“But,” Amanda dared to voice one of her worst fears. “What if this is God trying to lead me somewhere else?”

Carolyn crossed both arms over her chest and tapped her foot. "So, maybe He is, but you can't know for sure until you give it some time. Pray on it awhile. If God is directing you elsewhere, isn't it best to wait and see His hand in things?"

Amanda knew Carolyn was right. Besides, she wasn't one to usually make quick decisions or rush to judgment. "Okay," she said, forcing an upbeat tone into her voice that she didn't feel. "You made some good points. Least I can do is talk to Mr. Murray again."

Tracy whistled a happy tune and took a seat behind the small cubical desk at the State's Board of Education Building.

Don looked up from his computer, then sat back and pushed the desk chair a few inches back. "What are you so happy about?"

"I just had an interview with Milltown Elementary."

"Oh, yeah?" Don raised his eyebrows and asked, "What position did you apply for?"

Tracy looked like a cat that just lapped up a bowl of cream. "They have an opening for a teacher's assistant."

"Hmm, you'd be good at that," Don acknowledged.

"I hope so. I like working with kids."

Don chuckled. "Since you have that goofy smile plastered all over your face, I take it things went well?"

"I think so." Tracy reached for a pen out of the jar and began playing with the cap. "I'm looking forward to working with the real McCoy."

Don threw his empty coffee cup in the trashcan next to his desk and asked, "What does that mean?"

"If I get this job, I'll be working with kids, not just people who act like them."

Don rolled his eyes, pretending he was insulted. "You kidding me? You're the biggest kid I know."

Tracy laughed. "Guess you got me there."

"Seriously, I hope you do get this position." Don leaned back in his chair and said, "You'll be able to come back to work here by the end of June, right?"

"That's the plan."

"Well, good luck to you then. I wish I had the opportunity to leave here for a few months. It might help me get a little bit more perspective. All I see now is a mound of papers."

"Speaking of which, I've got a lot of loose ends to tie up here if I do get offered that position. I'd need to start in August."

"You will," Don confidently said.

"I don't know..." Tracy hesitantly admitted, "There could very easily be someone more qualified."

Don shrugged off that possibility. "You have a good résumé. It'll pull through for you. You'll see."

"I hope so," Tracy said, picking up the pile of papers strewn across the desk. "I could use a little change of pace, too."