

finding me



KATHRYN
CUSHMAN



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To Maxine Methvin and Daphene Cope—great mentors
and role models. You've poured yourselves into the lives
of so many young people over the years.

Thank you for believing in me
and encouraging me to be the best I could be.



For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

2 Timothy 4:3–5

Prologue

26 years ago

David Waters slid into his usual corner booth, promising himself once again that today would be the last time. He knew it was a lie. He'd be back again tomorrow. And the next day. And the next. Why should he feel guilty about that? It wasn't like he was doing anything wrong. He was simply eating lunch in a diner. No crime in that.

"Hey, handsome, whatcha having today?" She wore her usual white V-neck, with just enough cleavage spilling out to be provocative, but not so much that she looked, as his wife would call it, trashy. David felt something like happiness for the first time all day.

"I don't know. What do you suggest?" He smiled up at her—not because he was trying to flirt but because just being around her made him smile.

"Ha. I've got several suggestions I could make, but why don't we stick to the issue at hand? I'm thinking . . . how about today's

special, which is the buttermilk fried-chicken sandwich. Crispy breaded chicken, buffalo ranch sauce, bleu cheese crumbles, lettuce, and tomato, on a toasted French roll.”

This sandwich would not be approved by his cholesterol-watching doctor, and most certainly not by his food-gestapo wife. “Sounds delicious.”

“Oh, it is, believe me.” She wrote on her order pad, shaking her head as she did so. “Men are so lucky. I eat one of those things and for the next two weeks I’ve got to do double time in the gym.” A quick glance at her lean and toned legs made David think she spent double time in the gym every day, anyway. “I will say, though, I’m glad to see you eat this way. It’s just so manly, you know? Never could stand to be around a man who eats salads and tofu.”

David was more than a little sure he’d ordered neither during the past few weeks. “Well then, I guess I pass the test.”

“Handsome, you pass the test in all sorts of ways.” She winked at him. “I’ll be right back with your iced tea.”

He watched her walk away, the short denim skirt revealing unseasonably tanned legs. One deep sigh later, he had forced his attention to the booth where he was sitting. The red vinyl seats were worn and dull, the Formica tabletop beginning to crack and peel around the edges. *Just like my life*, he thought. David put his elbow on the table and leaned his forehead into the space between his thumb and middle finger. Everything felt so hopeless. Overwhelming to the point of crushing. What was he going to do when his mother’s insurance ran out at the end of next year? There was no way he could afford to keep her in Brighton Manor on his own, and the slightly more affordable options offered a greatly decreased level of care. Maybe she had lost enough mental capacity that she wouldn’t know it, but he would know it.

“Things that bad?” Her voice cut through his self-pity, and he

looked up to see the iced tea sitting on the table before him. “I’m a good listener, if you need someone to talk to.”

“Thanks.” He took a sip. “I’m fine, really. Just a little tired.”

“I’ll keep the iced tea coming then, until we get you tanked up enough to make it through the day.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m just here to help.” She tilted her head to the side and winked.

Everything about her was so inviting. So approachable. So . . . alluring.

And it wasn’t like his wife had even looked at him in the past week. The kids kept her running in circles, as did the committees she was on at church and school—all of it zapped her time and energy. There was nothing left for him. Not that he blamed her, exactly, but truth was, he felt neglected at home, so he came here to get his daily fix.

There was nothing wrong with him being here like this, nothing wrong at all. All he was doing was eating.

“Here’s your lunch. Anything else I can do for you?”

A surge of something completely enjoyable raced through him as she leaned forward to set down the plate. Okay, he should probably stop coming here so often. Maybe just tomorrow, and then he would stop.

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Present day

You better watch out. Boss man is looking for you, and he's got that red-faced, eye-bulging look we all know too well."

Kelli Huddleston dropped her purse into the drawer of her desk, glancing over her shoulder toward the front door, resisting the urge to run toward it. Just ten yards away, the threshold of escape. Unfortunately, it was a threshold she couldn't afford to cross—not yet. "Great. Do you know what he's mad about?"

Tammy's face was grim. "Mrs. Layton's son called this morning. Jimmy's been in a rage ever since."

Kelli twisted her bracelet around on her wrist. "Did my name come up—in the phone call?"

"Jimmy took it back in his office so I couldn't say for sure, but judging from the way he came charging out of his office looking for you a few minutes later, I'm guessing the answer is yes."

"I'm sunk." Kelli dropped into her chair.

"Tell me you didn't open your mouth again."

Kelli shrugged. "I might have."

“I’ve been warning you about that.”

“But it’s wrong. He didn’t do any of that work he was charging her for. Mrs. Layton is in her eighties and the sweetest little lady you could ever know. It would never enter her mind to double-check her contractor’s billed hours. Her kids all live hundreds of miles away. What was I supposed to do?”

Tammy shrugged. “Mind your own business, I guess. I’d like to sit around feeling guilty about some of the things I see around here, and sometimes I do, but times are hard right now. This is no time to be out job hunting.”

She was right, and Kelli knew it. It had taken eight months after graduation before she’d found this receptionist job, one that on paper she was overqualified for. Still, there were some lines that could not be crossed, no matter how desperate she was. “I’m all for minding my own business, but in cases like this, how can you stand it?”

“I’ll tell you how. I’ve got two kids who look to me to keep them fed and warm. They don’t ask me whether I double-checked my boss’s numbers, they don’t wonder if I’m policing other people’s work, but they do know what it’s like to be hungry when I’m between jobs. They know what it’s like to have the electricity cut off because we couldn’t pay the bill, and to have the landlord knocking at our door wanting the overdue rent. They know more about those things than any kid should, and I aim to do my best to help them forget about it.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to judge you.”

“Good, because I don’t have the time or patience for it.” Tammy returned to her desk. “Now, it’s time to get busy. We’ve got lots to do.”

“Yeah.” Kelli considered whether she should go in search of Jimmy or let him come find her. She finally decided on the latter. Perhaps the extra time would help him cool off. “Need help with

anything?” Only now did Kelli notice Tammy’s light brown hair. Normally gelled to a manageable amount of wave, today it frizzed into a giant halo around her head, giving something of an Albert Einstein impression. Kelli looked a little closer and noticed the coffee stain on Tammy’s shirt. “Are you okay?”

Tammy shuddered. “No, I’m not. My alarm clock didn’t go off this morning. Rachel and Billy were late to school, I was late to work, I’m trying to leave early today because Rachel’s got a softball game this afternoon, and I’m already so behind from last week that I’m buried—” She threw her hand over her mouth while her face blushed deep purple. “I’m sorry.” She shook her head, her face truly repentant. “I didn’t mean—oh, Kelli, I can’t believe I just said that. I really didn’t—”

“I know you didn’t. Now tell me what I can do to help.” The sooner they got busy, the sooner this awkwardness would be over.

“Would you mind helping me with these bills? I’ve got everything printed, just have to get them all out with today’s mail.”

“Of course.” Kelli picked up the stack from Tammy’s desk and placed it on her own. The phone rang before she sat down. “Good morning, Dalton Construction, how may I help you?” Kelli transferred the caller to Reed’s office, then went about her task.

Fold. Stuff. Seal. Fold. Stuff. Seal. It was a mindless duty, one easily accomplished while answering calls and directing clients and salesmen in the appropriate direction. She liked being busy—the more she had to keep her occupied, the less time she had to think.

Jimmy Dalton came sauntering down the hallway. “My, my, look who’s here.” He grabbed some M&Ms from the jar on Kelli’s desk and tossed them into his mouth. His sleeves were starched and pressed, his pants perfectly creased. He looked more like a big-city lawyer than the owner of a smallish construction company. “Kelli, may I see you in my office please?”

“Sure.” She followed him down the hall. One of the side effects of grief was that it numbed her to almost every other emotion. She supposed in this case it was a blessing, because other than a vague sense of dread, she felt nothing.

“Have a seat, please.” He gestured toward one of the padded chairs opposite his desk. He didn’t sit himself, he simply leaned back against his desk, arms folded. “How’s your morning been so far?”

Kelli tried to keep her face neutral. “Fine.”

“Well, that’s good for you. Unfortunately for me, mine’s been very upsetting.” The office phones were ringing down the hall. “Would you care to guess why my morning was so bad?”

Kelli looked up at him and saw him glaring back. She tried to affect a confused expression. “I have no idea.”

“Don’t you?” He paused. “What have you been up to?”

“What do you mean?” Kelli’s mouth had gone dry. Jimmy remained silent and simply stared at her. The *beep-beep-beep* of the forklift backing up came from just outside the office window, a phone rang somewhere down the hall, and Kelli began to hear her own heart racing in her ears.

“I got a call from Kevin Layton today. He’s an old high-school friend of mine, did I tell you that? Anyway, it seems his mother heard some bad things about me and about the remodel work we’re doing on her bathroom. You know anything about that?”

“I . . . uh . . . well . . . two weeks ago, you billed her for six hours of design and drafting time.”

“Yeah, so? We’re remodeling her bathroom—design and drafting is what I do.” He put his hands in his trouser pockets, his suntanned face showing not a hint of comprehension.

“You were in Hawaii two weeks ago.”

He sat on the corner of his desk and smiled up toward the ceiling. “Mm-hmm, yes, I was. Wish I still was.” He shook his head and looked down at Kelli. “Sorry, lost in memories there.”

“How could you have worked six hours on Mrs. Layton’s project if you were on vacation in Hawaii?”

He made his way over to his leather executive chair and sat. “It’s quite simple, Kelli. I’m surprised I have to explain this to you. I was . . . thinking about her project on my trip. The sound of waves crashing nearby always heightens my creativity.” He propped his feet on his desk. “And of course, the girls in bikinis and three daiquiris didn’t hurt either. Yep, I got a lot accomplished while lying on that beach.”

Yeah. Lying is right, just not on the beach. “Jimmy, that’s—”

“Listen, Kelli”—he leaned forward—“this company has come upon some hard times financially, and I’ve realized quite unexpectedly that I’m going to have to lay off an employee. Of course, I hate to have to do it. I always strive to be as loyal to my employees as they are to me.” He paused and looked at her for the space of several heartbeats, which were coming faster and faster with each passing second. “But sometimes these things can’t be helped.” He steepled his hands atop his desk. “Since you were the last one hired, you are the obvious choice of who must be let go. So, I’m—” he coughed into his hands—“sorry—” another cough—“to inform you that we can no longer offer you employment here.”

Kelli knew her mouth was hanging open, but she couldn’t help it. Jimmy continued to look at her, waiting for her to leave, she supposed. Finally she found her voice. “Is this . . . effective immediately?”

He nodded, and as he did so, he actually grinned. “I’m sorry to say it is. You are still on probation until June, so there is no requirement for longer notice. I’d appreciate it if you’d clean out your desk immediately.”

Kelli somehow managed to stumble from his office and back to her desk, where she took her purse out of the drawer, slamming it shut with every bit of her strength. How dare he do

this? She gathered the few personal items she kept here—a glass paperweight with an ocean scene inside and the carved wooden pencil box her father had made for her in celebration of her new job. Had he known what a lout Jimmy Dalton was, maybe he wouldn't have bothered. She kicked her desk chair hard enough that it fell over backward. She took a deep breath. “Bye, Tammy. I'll miss you.”

Tammy had already come to her feet during the spectacle. She stood shaking her head. “Tell me he didn't.”

“He did.”

“Oh, girl.” Tammy walked over and threw her arms around Kelli. “I was afraid something like this was going to happen, but I'm so sorry it did. You take care, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Kelli?”

“Yeah.”

“Be glad you're in a place in your life where you can choose to do the right thing.”

That wasn't quite as true as Tammy believed. Everyone seemed to assume that the death of Kelli's parents had left her with some kind of large inheritance. After all, their upscale house had already been in escrow when they died. From the outside, it probably appeared that a large cash payoff was days away. No one knew about the mountains of debt, the long list of creditors that had taken every last dime from the estate. Everything was gone, a complete loss brought on by many years of overspending. Kelli had her own debts, too—college loans, car payments, and rent. Still, she mumbled, “I guess so.”

“Be even more grateful for your courage and integrity. Hold tight to them. Once you start to let them go, they're almost impossible to get back. Stay just the way you are, and you'll be fine.”

Kelli nodded. “Thanks, Tammy.” And with that, she shuffled

out to her car, wondering how all this could possibly ever be fine. She knew the answer. It couldn't.

Oh, Daddy, I wish you were here so I could talk to you.

But Daddy wasn't there, and Kelli was going to have to find her own way. Time to buck up and get on with it. Whatever *it* was.