

Diplomat

[When I finished the short story, Ambassador, I thought of Jane, Milt's widowed wife and realized she might have a story to tell. So, I sent a "telegram" to that spot in "character limbo" where all otherwise unoccupied characters live and asked her to visit for another tale. Happy to be on the scene again, she came. This is her story, a journey beyond her widowhood into the next phase of her life. Oh, by the way, this is another of my "adult" Christian stories, so keep in mind it deals with more mature themes (but suitable for older teens). Enjoy the journey! – T. H. Pine]

∞ 1 ∞

“Who’s that man over there, I wonder?” Jane asked, as she, Alice and Bill sat in the Sunday morning service, filling a pew with their combined six kids.

“I have no idea,” Alice replied. “Bill, do you know who that man is?” She pointed surreptitiously in his direction.

“Oh, that’s Cal. He’s more than a bit strange. Some folks call him ‘Crazy Cal.’”

Alice and Jane exchanged looks and returned their attention to the service.

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The reason Jane asked about Cal centered on two things. First, he looked like a handsome man. Tall, with a chiseled face, Roman nose, high forehead and dark eyebrows over pale, gray eyes, a strong chin and jaw line, he looked to be in his mid-forties, early fifties and sported a full head of salt-and-pepper-gray hair.

Second, Jane noticed he seemed to be talking to himself; not loud enough so she could hear, but he seemed to be conversing with someone. She noticed he had half-a-row’s space next to where he sat on the end, even though the auditorium looked mostly full, as if people wanted to avoid being near him. He looked neatly dressed, almost immaculately so, which led Jane to assume he didn’t smell bad.

Who is Crazy Cal? she thought.

∞ 2 ∞

Three years after Milt’s death, Jane’s life had settled into some sort of normalcy again. After Bill had come to Christ, she found she no longer spent sleepless nights thinking about Milt. She slept, deeply and soundly, as if Milt’s “mission” to see Bill saved, once completed, allowed her to rest. She sometimes dreamed of Milt and enjoyed his dream-state company. Now, she shifted her attentions to her three kids—Juliana, Lacey and Todd—and derived companionship and affection from them. As if reading her needs, Juliana, ever the sensitive one, would spend much of her free time with her mother. Jane appreciated it, but worried that her beautiful daughter neglected her own social life.

Alice and Bill encouraged her to date, so she reluctantly joined the “Unattached Singles” group and even dated a couple of the men. Although they seemed solid citizens—one of them a divorcé, the other still unmarried—neither revved her motor. She attended some of their functions, met prospective suitors, but refrained from further dating, remaining a resolutely unattached widow.

She didn’t feel ready to move past Milt.

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“Pastor Wade,” Jane asked after the service, “Who is that man, Cal, who sits all alone, his row almost empty. Are people avoiding him?”

Pastor Wade's smile faded. "His is an unfortunate case. He lost his wife a year ago ... terrible thing; she had been kidnapped, raped and murdered."

"Oh, dear Lord; how terrible!"

"He sort of came apart. Oh, nothing dangerous, mind you; he just became completely OCD and carries on imaginary conversations with his dead wife, Mirabelle. Folks avoid him because they're spooked by his strange ways. It's a sad case, really."

"Does he have any children?"

"One, a boy, but he went to live with his grandparents when Cal went ... well, he's not capable of dealing with a sixteen-year-old."

"Juliana's sixteen. It's so sad he can't be with his son."

"He gets to visit, but Eric is spooked by his strange ways and doesn't like to spend any more than a brief time with him and only when the grandparents, his late mother's parents, are around."

"Have you tried to counsel with him?"

"I've tried, but I'm no professional and he's totally closed off. Even his psychiatrist hasn't been able to reach him."

"If someone were to go over to him, would he respond?"

"To some extent. He's not completely disconnected, but you never know what he'll say, or do. Would you like me to introduce you?"

"Would that be okay?"

"I think it's good for him. Just be prepared for some strange reactions."

∞ 3 ∞

"Cal, I'd like you to meet Jane Worthington," Pastor Wade said to the tall man who stood off in a corner of the foyer, engaged in another imaginary conversation.

Cal looked up at him, then over at Jane. "What's your middle name; yes, your middle name?" he asked peremptorily.

"It's Camille," Jane replied, sticking out her hand. "It was my grandmother's name."

"Camille, Camille," Cal said, looking down at Jane's extended hand. He took it in his and lifted it to examine it minutely. "You have lovely hands, lovely hands. Jane's too plain for such lovely hands. You should be Camille; yes, Camille. I'll call you Camille; yes, I will."

"Why, thank you for your compliments, Cal. I appreciate that."

Cal locked eyes with Jane, as if to determine her thoughts through her pupils. "You're welcome, Camille; yes, welcome." Cal broke free and headed out the door, stopping for a second. He turned to face Jane. "I'm here every Sunday; yes, every Sunday." Having delivered his message, he turned and bustled off.

"I'm impressed with how much you got him to interact," Pastor Wade said.

"I barely said anything."

"Yet he looked at you and volunteered information."

"Where does he go?"

"He's staying at an assisted living facility. He has medical insurance and it's covering his needs, but, sometimes, he just goes off somewhere. No one has any idea where. He always returns by the next day."

The following week, Jane decided to sit with "Crazy Cal."

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“You can’t just sit with that weirdo,” Bill admonished.

“He’s not dangerous, Bill,” Jane retorted.

“Yeah, but everyone will see you.”

“So?”

“Hey, suit yourself.”

Jane located Cal in his usual, isolated seat and sat two seats away. He started, looked at her and looked forward again. “You can’t sit there; no, you can’t,” he mumbled.

“Why not?” Jane asked.

“It’s Eric’s seat; yes, Eric’s seat.”

All at once, Jane realized what had been going on; Cal had been having conversations with his family to his right. She guessed that his dead wife, Mirabelle, sat next to him and Eric in the next seat over.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said and moved over.

Cal nodded and turned his head to the front. During the service, she noted that, far from acting distracted, Cal paid strict attention to what went on. He occasionally leaned to his right and spoke softly to his invisible wife, just as she and Milt had done.

“Crazy Cal” somehow didn’t seem so crazy anymore.

∞ 4 ∞

“So, what did you find out?” Bill asked when they met up after the service.

“I didn’t go over there to spy on him,” Jane answered.

“Please don’t take offense, Jane,” Alice cut in, “but why *did* you go sit with the man?”

Jane thought that one over for a moment, unsure of her motives. “I suppose, after learning what had happened to him and, since we seemed to hit it off last week, I wanted to get to know him better.”

“What on earth for?” Bill asked.

Jane felt a little irritation at Bill’s insensitivity. “Because he’s a fellow human being in pain and isn’t that what Christians *should* do?”

“Oh,” Bill replied, looking chagrined.

“I don’t mean to pry,” Alice said, “but what *did* you find out from sitting with him; *anything*?”

“Well, I now know why he talks to himself.”

“Really? Why?”

“He’s talking to his dead wife and estranged son.”

“But there’s nobody there,” Bill said, stating the obvious.

“Of course not. My theory is that his wife’s death and his son’s absence have caused a break with reality. In his mind, they’re with him.”

“Did he tell you that?” Alice asked.

“No, I found out when I inadvertently sat in ‘Eric’s seat’ and he corrected me.”

“And you put all that together from that?” Bill asked.

“Bill, what’s with you? Why are you finding all this so difficult?”

“I don’t know ... I just don’t want you putting yourself in a bad situation.”

“How so? I’m not dating the man.”

“I’m just nervous, that’s all.”

Pastor Wade's arrival interrupted their conversation. "Hi, folks! I see you sat with Cal today, Jane; good for you! He actually mentioned it to me just now. You're really getting through to him."
"I'm glad I can help. He's really a nice man and I feel so badly about what happened."
"Well, I really appreciate what you're doing and I'm sure Cal does too."

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The following Sunday, Jane took her seat, three down from Cal, noting the looks some of the other members of the congregation gave her. *Well, that's just too bad for them, isn't it?* she thought.

"Don't sit there; no, not there." Cal said, shaking Jane from her thoughts.

"I'm sorry; am I sitting in someone else's seat this morning?"

"Your seat's here," Cal replied, indicating an open seat to his left. He had moved down one this morning.

"Oh, I didn't realize you saved a seat for me. Thank you very much."

She got up, squeezed past the two empty seats, making as if people occupied them, moved past Cal and sat down. "This is much better, thank you."

"You're welcome. It's your seat now; yes, your seat."

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The cozy arrangement continued for two more Sundays, when Jane witnessed another breakthrough. Halfway through the service, Cal leaned over to speak to his imaginary wife and then toward her.

"We like Pastor Wade," he said, sotto voce. He's good; good sermons."

"I like him too," Jane whispered. "I came to Christ in this church; my late husband too."

Cal looked at her, his eyes wide. "Your husband's dead; he's dead?"

"Yes, he died of cancer almost three years ago."

Cal's eyes filled up and a stray tear traced a path down his cheek. "I'm so sorry; yes, so sorry." He leaned over toward the invisible Mirabella and "spoke" to her. Then he leaned back toward Jane. "Mira's sorry too; so is Eric; yeah, they're sorry too."

Jane leaned forward. "Tell them I appreciate it."

Cal gave Jane an intense look, but said nothing for the rest of the service.

Jane wondered what thoughts occupied Cal's troubled mind.

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Cal followed Jane up the aisle and put out his hand to touch her arm before she could leave the auditorium. She turned to face him.

"Do you see them?" he asked her.

"Who? Mira and Eric?" Cal nodded and Jane briefly considered what she should say. She decided on the truth. "No, I don't, Cal. Do you?"

"I *do*; yes, I do. They're always with me; always."

Following an impulse, Jane reached out, took one of Cal's hands and held it in both of hers. "Cal, I want you to know I'm your friend. If you ever need to talk, just let me know." She fished in her purse for paper and a pen and wrote down her name and number. "Here, take this. Feel free to call me anytime."

Cal looked down at it, then back at Jane. "Thank you very much," he said and walked briskly away.

∞ 5 ∞

For the next few weeks things at church went along without much change. Jane's three kids, who missed Jane, wanted to sit with her, so they sat, beginning three seats down on the right and Jane sat to Cal's left. Encouraged by *their* actions, more people came and filled the row.

Cal no longer sat alone.

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One night, Jane got a call at midnight, just after she had climbed into bed. Thinking of Cal's situation, she sometimes sat looking at Milt's photo and told him of what she had been up to the past weeks with Cal. To her surprise, she felt better for it. She had just turned out the light when her cell phone warbled its merry tune.

"Hello?"

"Is this Jane Worthington, of 555 Insular Drive?"

"Yes. *Cal?*"

"Yes, it's me, Cal; it's me, all right." Cal said, his voice sounding agitated.

"Is something wrong, Cal?"

"I'm lost; yes, lost. Can't find home. Can you help?"

Jane questioned him, got some landmarks and thought she knew where he had gone. Then she had an idea. "Give me the nearest house address."

"No houses; no, no houses."

She finally got a street address of a commercial building. "Okay, stay put, Cal, and I'll come get you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, stay put; you'll come."

"That's right. Just wait there for me."

Jane dressed, put the address Cal gave her into her GPS unit and drove there. When she arrived at the seedy, old business district of the city, she saw Cal sitting on the curb. He got up when she pulled over and she could see he looked a mess, his usually neat garb disheveled. She popped the passenger door of her van open so Cal could get in. He had a black eye and his face looked grimy.

"Cal, what *happened?*"

"They beat me up; yes, beat me up."

Jane assumed muggers had set upon Cal, who shouldn't have been in that neighborhood at the late hour. "Did they steal your money?"

"No, don't carry a wallet; no, no wallet."

"Why didn't they steal your cell phone?"

"I kicked their asses; yes, kicked 'em good."

Jane had little trouble believing Cal's story; he looked tall and fit enough. "That's good. How long have you been walking? Are you injured badly?"

"No, just sore. I've been out since this morning; yeah, since morning."

"Oh, my! All day? Have you eaten anything?"

"No wallet; no money; no food."

About to take him to his room at the assisted living facility, Jane had another idea. "Cal, would you like to go with me to my house? You could clean up and I could make you something to eat. Would that be okay?"

Cal gave her his usual, intense look and then nodded.

"Will they miss you where you live?"

"No, I leave all the time; yes, all the time."

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When they got to the house, Jane gave Cal some hasty instructions. “Cal, you must be quiet, or you’ll wake the children. Can you be quiet?”

Cal held his index finger to his lips. “I’ll be quiet; yes, really quiet.”

Jane spirited Cal up to her bedroom. She figured it would be better for him to use *her* shower than the second floor hall one, so as not to disturb the kids. She set Cal up with what he needed and looked for some of Milt’s old pajamas. Then, she tiptoed down to the kitchen with Cal’s clothes to wash them and to see about food. After ten minutes, when she heard the water stop running in the shower, she went back up to check on Cal. When she entered the bedroom, Cal stood naked in the middle of the room, holding a towel, his damp hair sticking out in all directions and his black eye making him look almost comical.

He turned to her. “I can’t find my clothes; no, no clothes.”

“I ... uh ... I’m washing them. Sorry, I should have made it clearer. She went to the bed and picked up some folded items. Here are some pajamas you can wear.”

Cal walked over to her and put his hand on her shoulder. “Thank you for helping, Camille; yes, helping.”

Jane handed him the pajamas and he began to put them on. Since he made no move to cover up, she couldn’t help but notice his sturdy, masculine body. Naked, he looked fitter than he did in clothes. Her eyes dropped to his middle and a wave of desire swept over her, making her knees weak.

“I ... uh ... I-I’ll go down and get you something to eat. Just be as quiet as you can when you go down.”

Cal, standing there in only the pajama tops, repeated the index-finger-to-lips gesture. “I’ll be quiet as a mouse; yes, quiet.”

Jane hurried from the room, fleeing from the sight of Cal’s unclothed form.

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Lord, forgive me, Jane prayed as she stood at the stove, confused and shamed by her erotic thoughts over Cal’s nakedness. *Why am I acting like this? Is it because I miss what Milt and I had together?* It had been over three years since she had sexual relations and she keenly felt the pressure. But she had to control her urges. It wouldn’t do to be further confusing Cal with *that*, nor did she wish to sin.

Cal entered the kitchen so quietly, when she turned around and saw him standing there, she jumped. A sudden wave of sorrow swept over her when she saw him in Milt’s pajamas. He had combed his hair and looked neat and somewhat comical in Milt’s too short pajamas; only his black eye kept her from grinning.

“Uh, why don’t you sit at the table and I’ll set you up?”

Cal sat and quietly watched her bring the dishes to the table and fill his plate with scrambled eggs and crisp bacon. She poured him a steaming mug of coffee and gave him a glass of tomato juice.

“I hope this is okay.”

Without a word, Cal bowed his head to say grace to himself and went to work on his food. He didn’t say anything until he had finished.

“Would you like more coffee?” Jane asked.

He stuck out his mug and she refilled it. He sat back, looking content, took a sip and put the mug down.

“That was good, thank you; yes, very good.”

“You’re very welcome. I meant what I said about being your friend.”

“Why are you doing all this; yes, all this?”

“It’s nothing, really. I’m just doing my Christian duty.”

“They all think I’m crazy. ‘Crazy Cal,’ they call me.”

“Well, they shouldn—”

“Do you think I’m crazy?”

“Well, I sit next to you, don’t I?”

“You didn’t answer my question; no, you didn’t. Do you think I’m crazy?”

Again, Jane decided the truth would be best. She poured herself a mug of coffee, sipped it black and answered. “Cal, you sit in church, talking to yourself.”

“I’m talking to Mira; to Eric.”

“I understand why you do that, but Mira’s dead and Eric’s with his grandparents.”

“I see them, you know; yes, I do.”

“I can believe that, but no one else can and it makes them uneasy around you.”

“You sit next to me; yes, you do. You said so yourself ... your Christian duty; yes, duty.”

“Cal, it’s because I’ve suffered a loss too. I just wanted to get to know you better ... to try to reach you.”

“Reach me? Why?”

Confronted with the question, Jane examined her feelings toward Cal. Why had she reached out? What did she hope to gain? Did she *only* wish to help, or did some other reason motivate her? She replayed the scene in the bedroom in her mind. Again, she opted for the truth in her answer. “Because, from the first day I saw you, I thought you were a handsome, interesting man and I wanted to know why you sat alone.”

Cal scrutinized her with his direct gaze until Jane blushed with embarrassment. “You are a beautiful woman; as beautiful as Mira was.”

Jane noted the absence of repetition and decided to go for broke. “You said ‘*was*.’ Does that mean you understand that she’s gone?”

Cal dropped his gaze to the tabletop. “I know she’s dead, even though I can still see her. I just don’t want to let her go.”

Cal looked back up at her with the saddest look she had ever seen, even when *she* had looked into the mirror after Milt’s death. Sudden tears sprang up into her eyes, blurring her vision.

“Camille, why did God let Mira die? I mean ... to be ripped from life like that. It doesn’t seem fair. She didn’t deserve what happened to her. She was a wonderful person, a wonderful Christian.”

“I asked the same thing when Milt got cancer and died so young,” Jane confessed. “But I took some comfort from the fact he’s in heaven with his Lord. Perhaps you could take comfort from knowing that about Mira. The man who did that will burn in hell for what he did, but your wife is with Jesus now.”

“I miss her so much and I’m lonely all the time. Even my son can’t bear to be with me. He doesn’t understand. He grieves too, in his own way. He’s better off with his grandparents ... yes, he is.”

“He’s better off with his *father*, Cal. You need to pull yourself together ... for *him*.”

Cal locked his gaze with Jane’s and she could see the sanity behind his eyes, the *true* Cal. He had loosened his grip on reality for a season, but he hadn’t gone too far. Perhaps he could come all the way back and she could help. His next words caused a thrill in her chest, as if he had read her thoughts.

“Will you help me, Camille?”

Jane looked back at this sad, wounded man, who caused such strong feelings in her heart. She thought back to that first morning, when she asked Pastor about him. She knew at that moment, *that very morning*, what her answer would now be.

“Yes, Cal, I will.”

∞ 6 ∞

“Jane, have you lost *your* mind?” Bill asked. “You can’t bring a crazy man into your house. Think of your kids.”

Annoyance sprung up in her heart at Bill’s patronizing words, but she swallowed a sharp retort. “Bill, he lost his wife; he’s not a sociopath. You should see how much progress he’s made already.”

“But ... in your *house*?”

“I’ve talked with the kids and they’re okay with it. They want to help too.”

“You know this will start rumors at church,” Alice added. “To have a strange man in your house, well”

Jane had to admit she raised a good point. “I know, but the three kids will be there and he’s going to be staying in the downstairs guestroom.”

“I still think you’re crazy to do this,” Bill replied. “I’ll worry about you.”

Jane smiled and laid her hand on his arm. “Thank you for your concern. I appreciate it very much. Please, pray for us all.”

Bill gave her a sad look. “Count on it.”

∞ Q ∞

“Pastor, I want to speak with you in private,” Jane said after the Sunday service. Cal stood next to her.

Pastor Wade couldn’t help but notice that Cal held her onto her hand. “Uh, sure. Wait for me in my office. I’ll be there as soon as I finish greeting the departing members and visitors.”

She and Cal went in and took seats in front of his desk.

“I’m nervous,” Cal said, looking around.

“There’s no need to be. This isn’t an inquisition.”

“What if he says I can’t stay with you?”

Cal’s not using repetition gave Jane hope; he seemed to be dealing with his stress more normally. “It’s not up to him. I’m merely meeting with him to keep it all out in the open, so people won’t get the wrong idea.”

“What wrong idea?”

The question brought Jane up short. “Well, having you, a man who’s not my husband in my house ... well, it’ll make some people think the worst.”

Cal pondered her words. “I’d never do anything bad; you know that, don’t you?”

“Of course; I know you wouldn’t.” Jane laid her hand on his, where it rested on the arm of the chair, just as Pastor Wade entered. She fought the urge to snatch it away.

The pastor took his seat behind his desk. “So, how can I help you?”

“I want Cal to come live at our house.”

“I see. You do understand, and this is no offense to you Cal, that he has ... *issues* to deal with.”

“Camille is good for me; yes, she is,” Cal said. “She’s helped me a lot.”

“I understand that, Cal, but—”

“There’s more to it,” Jane interrupted, relating the story of Cal’s calling in the middle of the night and what had happened to him. “. . . In addition, I’d like to start joint counseling with you, so as to keep everything out in the open with the congregation. What do you think?”

Pastor Wade studied his hands on the blotter before him. “Jane, Cal, a church is made up of people. Some will understand, some will think the wrong thing. I like your counseling idea; keep everything open and aboveboard. Personally, I’m for it. Seeing Cal sitting here shows me it’s helping already.” Pastor fell silent, reflected, then spoke. “I’d like to talk with you both separately. Jane, you first.

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“Jane, I realize Cal’s not dangerous, but you’ll have him in your *home*. I, uh, I saw that little handholding thing when I came in. I’m going to be a bit blunt and I want you to be honest in your answer to my question, when I ask it. You’ve been without a man for three years and I’m pretty confident you miss what you once had with your late husband. Is this situation partially motivated by physical attraction?” He held up his hand to keep Jane from answering before he finished. “Cal may act strange, but he’s neat and clean and a handsome man and there’s the physical attraction factor. Be honest with me.”

Jane smiled. “I’ve always appreciated your honesty, Pastor. Yes, he acts strangely sometimes, but you haven’t heard the conversations we’ve had. He’s made progress already. He’s even admitted to me that he understands Mirabelle is dead. He’s also breaking out of his repetition habit and usually only resorts to it when he’s stressed, like now. Even then, you *had* to have noticed it’s much better.”

“That’s great, but it doesn’t answer my question.”

Jane sighed. “Yes, I think Cal is an attractive man, for the reasons you mentioned,” she remembered the scene in the bedroom and hoped she didn’t blush, “but I’m also a Christian and so is he. I think we can deal with the situation. It’s part of the reason I want us to enter counseling with you.”

“I see. Will you go out and send Cal in?”

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“Cal, what do you think of Jane’s suggestion?” Pastor Wade asked.

“I like it; I do. She’s a wonderful woman, doing her Christian duty. I like her and her three children, too.”

“You *do* understand that you can’t think of her in the same way you did Mirabelle.”

Cal’s eyes widened. “What Mira and I had was special; it was. Camille is my friend; she’s not Mira; I know, I know that.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Pastor Wade said, then went to his office door. “Jane, will you please come back in? Cal, I need to speak with her alone again for a few more minutes.”

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“Jane, since you’re suggesting Cal come to live with you, I’d be amiss if I didn’t give you the whole story about him.”

Uh-oh, here it comes, Jane thought.

“Even before he lost Mirabelle, Cal was OCD, almost excessively so. It’s why he’s so neat and orderly, even shattered by grief as he is. He retreats into it to help him cope and it’s helped him to keep what remains of his sanity together. Mirabelle helped level off his compulsions and she had him to the point you hardly noticed, but his way of repeating things surfaced at times, even then; so

what you told me isn't surprising. You're going to have to understand his compulsions and make your kids understand as well. Are you willing to do this?"

Jane thought about Pastor Wade's blunt words, but she had already made up her mind about Cal. "Yes, I'm still willing."

Pastor got up and went to the door to call Cal in. "Okay, I'm not going to say I'll allow what you're suggesting, Jane, because you're an adult and so are you, Cal. I'm not your parent, guardian, or warden, but I want to set up some 'safety valves' for this situation, *if* I'm going to counsel. I'm going to have you meet with me again, only I want Bill and Alice here. If they agree, I want to propose this: I want you, Jane, to meet with Alice every night at first and go over the day. Cal, I want you to do the same with Bill. That way, you'll both be accountable to someone. Okay?"

"I think it's a good idea, Pastor," Jane agreed. "It's fine with me."

Pastor looked at Cal. "Cal?"

"Yes, I can do that."

∞ 7 ∞

With the guidelines in place, Cal moved into Jane's house. Jane went out of her way to make the guestroom as cozy for him as she could, but with a little leeway for him to adapt to his needs. She might as well not have bothered, for Cal preferred his room to be as sparse as a monk's cell—the morning after he moved in, she found various items neatly stacked outside his door.

Quiet and unobtrusive, he asked for little and hardly disrupted the family routine; mealtimes being about the only time they knew he occupied the house. Though they agreed with their mother about having Cal there, the two older children nevertheless maintained a reserved attitude toward their guest. Only ten-year-old Todd made an effort to reach out.

"Mr. Cal, do you like baseball?" he asked at breakfast one day.

Cal fixed him with his unflinching gaze. "I played as a boy, yes, and I used to throw a ball around with Eric; but not now; no, not now."

"Would you like to with me?" Todd asked, undaunted.

Cal smiled. "Yes, I'd like that; I would."

After breakfast, Jane watched them out in the yard, throwing the ball back and forth. Cal caught and threw it with the precision of a machine, patient when Todd missed one, or he had to go retrieve a bad throw from Todd. Though few words passed between them, her son enjoyed the time and told his mother so afterwards. Jane felt good about the connection and felt better about her decision to have Cal stay with them.

Each evening, she and Cal would go over to Alice and Bill's house and meet with them. Jane would discuss the day and sometimes express her feelings on her decision. Alice listened intently and expressed her support and encouragement. Jane had no idea how the talks between Cal and Bill went.

Yet, not everything went as smoothly.

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One morning, Jane noticed that the kitchen seemed unusually clean and questioned Cal about it.

"Cal, did you, by any chance, clean the kitchen?"

He nodded and smiled. "I made it sparkle; I can earn my keep that way."

"When did you do all this?"

“This morning.”

“But it’s only seven. When did you do it?”

Cal gave her a sheepish look. “I don’t need much sleep. I was quiet. Did you hear me?”

“No, I’m usually sound asleep in the wee hours.”

“Did I do wrong?”

Jane realized she would need to adapt to Cal’s ways, just as Pastor Wade had intimated. What he had done might have been unusual, but not a problem, per se.

“No, I appreciate your help. The kitchen looks really nice. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.”

A couple of days later, Cal had spruced up the bathrooms, straightened three closets, complete with Post-it Note labels with which to locate things, and had begun on the basement. Jane let him go, for he would never throw anything out without asking and she got the bonus of a neat and orderly house.

Cal’s neatness, however, did meet with one major roadblock—Juliana.

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One day, Juliana came home from school, went to her room and came storming out into the kitchen, where Jane stood preparing supper, waving a Post-it Note.

“*Mooommm!* My room’s been cleaned and I can’t find anything! Was Cal in my room?”

With a sinking feeling, Jane went to Cal’s door and knocked. “Cal, may I speak with you?”

Cal opened the door. “I heard Juliana yelling. Is she angry about something?”

“Did you straighten up her room?”

“Yes, this morning. Is there a problem?”

“You shouldn’t have done that. Juliana considers it a violation of her privacy.”

“But her room was messy.”

“Cal, I know how you are about neatness, but, as much as I’ve wanted to just go in there and clean her room myself, I’ve agreed to let it be her space and I just close the door. She knows I’m not happy about it and I have her clean it periodically, when things get too bad. Do you understand?”

Cal nodded sheepishly.

“I think you should apologize to her.”

Jane could see Cal ponder her words, his face sad. “Okay, I will. I should leave her room messy; yes, messy.”

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He walked to Juliana’s room. The door stood open. She stood in the middle of her room, a bunch of Post-it Notes in her hand, her anger rendering her immobile. Cal walked in and Juliana swung her head around. Anger limned her face when she saw Cal.

“What are *you* doing here?” she spat.

“I shouldn’t have cleaned your room; you like it messy; yes, messy.”

“You’re dammed right I do!” she went to the bureau, pulled out a drawer, spilling its contents on the floor. “See? *Messy!*”

Cal automatically stooped to pick up one of her things, a pained look on his face, and began folding it. Juliana snatched it from his grasp and threw it to the floor. “Stop doing that!” she screamed.

“No, *you* stop!” Jane said from the doorway. Two heads swiveled her way. “Cal, come over by me.” Cal moved to her side and she put her hand on his shoulder. “Juliana, you knew when we all agreed to have Cal come to live with us, that he had ... issues. Now, you go flying off the handle

and for what; because he straightened your room? You know the arguments we've had over the very same subject." She turned to Cal. "Cal, I know it's hard for you to not make things orderly and I know why. I appreciate what you've done so far, but you have to ask us from now on when you want to do something. Do you understand?" Cal nodded. "Juliana, I want you to go to Cal, stick out your hand and apologize for overreacting."

Juliana looked sullen, but she did as Jane asked and Cal shook her hand.

"I'm really sorry; yes, I am," he said.

Just then, Todd burst into the room. "Mom! Mom! You should see what Cal did! He not only organized my room, he hung up these cool plane models. There's even a model of the Lunar Lander!"

Curiosity got the best of everyone and they all went to Todd's room. Sure enough, the room looked neater than a model house display and various aircraft models festooned the ceiling, hanging at various levels and in different attitudes. Jane turned to Cal.

"Where did you get all the models?"

"I made them. Todd talks so much about airplanes, I thought he'd like them; yes, I did."

"I love 'em!" Todd exclaimed, going over to hug Cal.

"Where's Lacey?" Jane asked, remembering her middle child.

"In her room, I think," Juliana replied.

They all went to her room and found her calmly doing her homework. Jane looked around the room and turned to Cal.

"Cal, did you clean Lacey's room, too?"

"I brought her laundry to the laundry room and put it in the hamper, but her room was already neat, so I just straightened a few things."

Jane smiled at Cal's unintended humor. As it turned out, Lacey, the "neatnick" of the family, kept her things neat and organized, even making her bed in the morning before coming to breakfast.

"Well, I have to get back to supper, before it burns," Jane announced.

"May I set the table?" Cal asked.

Jane looked over at Juliana. "Yes, you may and I'd like Juliana to help you. Then you can help her pick up that mess on the floor of her room."

Juliana gave her mother an accusing look, but, with slumped shoulders, followed Cal to the dining room. Jane later cast furtive glances from the kitchen and saw that they seemed to be working together successfully. When they finished, they both walked to her room.

∞@∞

"I'm sorry I got so mad at you," Juliana confessed, as she helped Cal pick up and fold her things. "But you *have* to know what a violation of my privacy that was."

"I see now that I was wrong. I'm a guest here; yes, I am."

"Why do you do that, Cal?"

"Do what?"

"Add that stuff on the end of sentences."

"What stuff?"

"Like what you just did before. You ended with, 'yes, I am.' You didn't need to say that."

"It's part of the way I am."

"If you understand how you are, why can't you change?"

"It makes me feel better."

"How?"

“Well, I add words on the end of sentences because it ‘finishes’ the sentence for me. Does that explanation satisfy you?”

Juliana looked at Cal, as if seeing him for the first time. “Is that part of your OCD-ness?”

“Yes, I suppose. I like things to be neat and orderly; it’s why I straightened up yours and Todd’s rooms. When I’ve done that, I can go on to something else.”

“It must have been real bad to lose your wife like that.”

Cal gave Juliana one of his sad, vulnerable looks. “Yes, it was. I missed her so much I could even see her next to me. Eric joined her when he didn’t want to see me in real life. It must have been hard to lose your father, too. How do you cope?”

Juliana nodded, her eyes glittering with unshed tears. “I mostly cried a lot when I thought of him. He was a great dad.”

“Do you see him?”

“Not like I see everyone else, but I have this picture of him in my mind, though it’s kind of fuzzy now.”

“Does that make you sad?”

“Sort of, but not as much now and I have Mom and my brother and sister. Look, I’m sorry if I brought up a sad subject for you,” she apologized, tears finding a path down her cheeks.

“It’s okay. I miss her, but I try to remember the happy times we had and that helps, too.”

Juliana surprised Cal by stepping forward to hug him. He nervously and tentatively put his arms around her and she hugged harder. He could feel her crying against him.

“You can always come to me, if you want to talk,” he said.

“Thanks,” she replied, her voice muffled by Cal’s shoulder. “The same goes for me.”

“One thing’s changed already, since I’ve lived with you all here.”

Juliana lifted her head to meet Cal’s gaze. “What’s that?” she said with a sniffle.

“I don’t see Mira and Eric anymore.”

∞Q∞

Later, after supper, Cal helped Jane with the dishes.

“Thank you for defending me earlier, with your daughter,” he said. “We made up before, in her room.”

“I’m glad to hear that. What you did wasn’t so bad, really. As it turned out, in Todd’s case, he liked what you did. I just wanted you to understand that you need to ask people when you want to get involved in their personal ‘space.’ There are no ‘bad guys’ here, just a difference of opinion.”

“You’re a diplomat.”

“A diplomat? Why do you say that?”

“You negotiated peace between me and Juliana; yes, y...”

“Thank you, Cal. I never thought of it that way.”

“Well, it’s true.”

“Thanks. I’ve noticed you’re not repeating things as much. Is it because you feel comfortable here?”

Cal nodded. “When I apologized to Juliana, I lapsed ... that’s the word Mira used ... and she asked me about it.”

“I hope she didn’t hurt your feelings. Did she?”

“No, no; and she’s right. I realize my compulsions must seem strange to others. When I ... lost Mira, it got worse. She helped me a lot. You were the only one who would talk to me for the longest time, other than Pastor and the people where I lived, but they had to. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad Juliana didn’t hurt your feelings.”

“Camille, do you like me?”

Jane met Cal’s gaze and, not for the first time, found herself admiring his cool, grey irises. Yet, behind the coolness, she could see warmth too, the warmth of a good man who had been slammed hard by life. She thought of her years with Milt—another good man—and a wave of sadness swept over her. Like Cal, she had seen the harder side of life and she wondered if she could experience a relationship with him. She rinsed her hands and dried them, turning to face him.

“Cal, I’m going to be honest with you. The answer to your question isn’t a simple one. Yes, I *do* like you, but I’m still trying to sort out how I feel about losing Milt. I suppose I wanted to help you because some part of me sees you as a possibility. Then again, I have no right to assume you’d simply move on from your grief over losing Mira. I know that’s probably not what you wanted to hear, but there it is.”

Cal reached out and took one of Jane’s hands in his. Without looking up, he spoke. “When Mira was ... when she was gone, I thought my life was over. I did the wrong thing when I tried to shut the world out, retreat into my compulsions, because I hurt Eric and now he’s a stranger to me. But, coming to live with you, being with you, Juliana, Lacey and Todd, made me see that. I asked what I did because I want to move past what happened and get my life back. I don’t want to be ‘Crazy Cal’ anymore.” He raised his head and met Jane’s gaze again. “And I think I’m in love with you.”

Cal’s words hit Jane hard. She hadn’t expected such a clear declaration of affection. “Cal, I ... I’m honored that you felt safe enough to share that with me, but I—”

“I want to kiss you, Camille. Will you let me?”

Jane’s heart fluttered in her chest, her sadness replaced by a more basic emotion—physical attraction. She’d have to tread carefully, but she felt she could allow a chaste kiss. She didn’t trust her voice, so she simply nodded. She saw Cal lean in and closed her eyes. His soft lips met hers and, in seconds, she felt his strong arms go around her. *Uh-oh, be careful girl*, she thought, as a soft moan escaped her throat and she relaxed into his embrace. None of Cal’s compulsions mattered at that moment and she knew that she could indeed have a relationship with him—a relationship of love and affection. Though she wanted nothing more than to have him sweep her up in his arms and carry her into the bedroom, the place she saw him standing naked before her, she broke off the kiss and pushed away.

“Did I do something wrong?” Cal asked, his face a mask of worry.

“No, but if we’re going to have something together, we have to do it right, as Christians. I don’t want us to go too far. If we’re on our way to romance, it can wait until we’ve gotten to know each other better. Okay?”

Cal smiled. “Yes, I’m willing to wait; wait as long as it takes, now that I know you care for me. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For showing me the way.”

“The way to what?”

“How to love again.”

The months passed toward summer. Everyone in the Worthington household adjusted to Cal and he adjusted to them. Todd enjoyed playing the various backyard sports he could talk Cal into and Lacey, ever the tomboy, often joined in. She sometimes roped Cal into some of her more feminine pursuits and Jane enjoyed watching Cal, with his usual OCD thoroughness, attempt to plait her hair—which she wore long and fussed over endlessly—into complicated braids under her direction. Juliana, though still somewhat aloof, had called a truce and even began keeping her room neater.

Cal finished organizing the basement, even painting the walls and floors, and asked Jane if it would be all right to work on sprucing up the outside of the house. She agreed and it brought up another subject.

“Cal, do you have a driver’s license?”

“Yes, but it expired.”

“I’ve been thinking; we should get you reinstated. In that way, you could run to the home improvement store for supplies, without having to wait for me.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

“There’s another reason too,” Jane said, blushing.

“What’s that?”

“So you can officially take me out on a date.”

Cal smiled, leaned forward and gave her a peck on the cheek.

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The day came for his driver’s test and Cal provided Jane with more than his usual amount of entertainment. First, he insisted on performing a thorough “pre-drive test,” as he called it. Jane watched, trying to conceal her mirth, as the instructor waited impatiently, taking notes. That done, Cal finally took his position in the driver’s seat, taking another small eternity to get everything set. Needless to say, his performance during the drive proved flawless and he maintained his speed with the precision of a rally-car driver.

The instructor seemed happy enough to mark Cal as qualified, probably glad to get the ordeal over with. “Wow, your husband sure is meticulous; he drives with more precision than anyone I’ve tested.”

“Yes, he is thorough, isn’t he?” Jane replied, pleased at the inference of Cal being her spouse.

“Is he as meticulous at home?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Wow, most women would kill to have a husband half that careful.”

“Yes, I suppose I’m blessed,” Jane said, not bothering to correct him.

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The night eventually came when Cal and Jane were to go on their first, official date. Jane fussed endlessly in her room, fretting over her hair and outfit, until time put an end to her indecision. With a sigh, she left her room to face her beau.

“You look stunning,” Cal said, a big smile spreading over his face.

“I think you need glasses.”

“No, my vision is perfect. You *do* look stunning.”

“You look pretty sharp yourself,” Jane replied, changing the subject, noting Cal’s crisply creased, tan slacks over brown loafers, along with a light blue, broadcloth shirt, navy blue blazer and red tie.

“Thank you. I wanted to look good for our first date.”

“Well, you’ve succeeded.”

“I like the simplicity of your black dress and single strand of pearls. I also like your hair up like that. It frames your face and emphasizes your, warm, brown eyes.”

“Did I overdress?”

“Not at all. Shall we go?” Cal walked Jane to the van, opened the door and made sure she had buckled in tight. Then he thoroughly checked the vehicle, even taking a tire-pressure gauge from his pocket to check the pressure in each wheel. That done, he got in and went through his “pre-start” check, as Jane looked on in amusement. “We’re going to have to stop and put air in the left-front tire. It’s three pounds low,” he announced.

“I think it’ll manage,” Jane countered.

“Oh, no. Your safety is paramount.”

“Thank you for thinking of me, but you should have taken care of all that *before* we got in the van to go on a date; it’s a real romance-killer.”

A look of dismay swept over Cal’s face. “Oh, am I being too OCD?”

“A little and I understand, but you might want to modify your approach, so as not to make other people impatient.”

“What about you? Are you feeling impatient?”

“No, I understand and I love you for your solicitousness. Can we go eat now? I’m hungry.”

“Certainly,” Cal replied and started the van.

The drive to the restaurant provided a lesson in proper driving and Jane had never felt safer. Cal handed the keys to the valet parking attendant.

“Be careful on the turns,” he instructed. “This van is wider than many cars and longer, too.”

“I’ve got it sir,” the attendant replied, smiling as he handed Cal the parking ticket.

∞@∞

Dinner turned out perfectly. Cal had picked the restaurant with the carefulness of a general plotting his next battle. Once there, his concern for Jane’s satisfaction and elegant manners toward the wait staff would have humbled a Victorian gentleman. Jane had fun trying to visualize him in a frock coat, vest, ascot and top hat. Afterwards, supper having been an unqualified success, they decided to take a walk along the waterfront, where the restaurant stood. The evening proved warm, the scents of summer strong down by the water, and Jane carried her sweater, leaving her shoulders bare. At that moment, on Cal’s arm, she felt a flush of romantic heat wash over her.

“Thank you for everything, Cal. The dinner was perfect and you were the perfect gentleman.”

“My pleasure, Camille.”

“I like how you call me by my middle name. I haven’t heard it since my Gran called me ‘Cammie.’”

“You’re much too beautiful for such a plain name as Jane, though it also fits you.”

“Oh, in what way?”

“It’s a *comforting* name, so like the way you make me feel.”

“I make you feel comfortable?”

“Please, don’t take that the wrong way. Ever since I met you in church, you’ve made me feel comfortable enough to want to change how I am. Mira did that for me, too.” Cal stopped, turned and gave Jane a worried look. “Does it bother you to hear me talk about Mira so much?”

“No, it doesn’t. She was such an important part of your life.”

“I think of her all the time.”

“I don’t mind at all.”

“Do you think of your late husband, Milt?”

“Every day.”

“Good.”

“Why is that good?”

“Because, if you didn’t, I’d worry that you hadn’t gotten past his death.”

“Have you gotten past Mira’s?”

“Mostly, but I sometimes cry at night when I ... when I ... think of how she died.”

Jane’s heart lurched when she visualized the sensitive man before her crying over the heinous way a monster had torn his beautiful wife from him and she wondered if she would have been able to cope half as well. She reached up and laid her hand on Cal’s cheek.

“I love you, Cal, and I think we could have a life together.”

“I do too,” Cal replied.

“You *do*?” Cal nodded. “Will you kiss me, Cal?”

He stepped forward, put his arms around her and kissed her. Jane didn’t care who saw and kissed back with the enthusiasm of a teenager. When they broke it off, her breath came in ragged gasps.

“Oh, my dear Lord ...” she breathed. “I want you so badly, I feel like I’ll explode if we don’t take this to its conclusion.”

Cal’s eyebrows flew up in surprise. “Camille, are you saying what I—?”

“Yes, Cal; it’s been far too long since I’ve been with a man sexually. I try to live as a good, Christian woman should, but I can’t seem to get my desires out of my mind. Back when ... well, when I saw you naked in my room ...” Jane swallowed hard. “I wanted you to throw me on the bed and ravish me. I know that sounds so wanton of—”

“They’re the thoughts of a beautiful, sensuous woman, too long denied fulfillment,” Cal interrupted.

“Let’s find a Justice of the Peace and get married,” Jane blurted, shocked at her rash words.

“But—”

“We can make it our little secret and announce our formal wedding plans later. What do you say?”

Cal pondered Jane’s rash words and smiled. “It’s so *not* what I would do, but are *you* sure?”

“Yes, at this moment I am, but I’m afraid, if I stop to think about it, I’ll chicken out. How about you?”

“Yes; I think Mira would want me to. She’d like you as a best friend, I think.”

“Milt would have liked you too.”

“Then, let’s do this.”

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They located a Justice of the Peace, got him out of bed, and arranged to have him marry them in his living room. The man’s smiling wife provided a bouquet for Jane to hold.

“It’s so romantic to see an older couple so eager to marry,” she cooed.

Her husband opened his little black service book and intoned the timeless words. “Do you, Jane Camille Worthington, take Calvin James Clarke as your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold”

As Jane listened, her mind went back to the time she and Milt stood before the minister, listening to these same words. Both had married in their thirties, considered late in some people’s eyes, but the two of them had been glad they waited until they found each other.

When Jane pronounced her “I do!” in a firm voice and the Justice of the Peace uttered the final phrase, “... I now pronounce you husband and wife,” she felt surer of what she had done than anything in her life since marrying Milt and coming to Jesus.

The look on Cal’s face told her he felt the same way.

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Jane, aka “Camille,” stood facing Cal in the fancy hotel room they had booked for their brief “honeymoon.”

“Now that we’re official, I’m nervous as all get out,” she confessed.

“Me too. I’m afraid I’m going to go all OCD over this.”

“Cal, for once you can be as OCD as you like.”

“*Really?*”

“Yes, I want you to make love to me with all the thoroughness you possess. When we’re done, I want to be exhausted and fully satiated; I mean that, Cal.”

“I’ll do my best,” Cal said with a smile.

Cal began by undressing “Camille” slowly, an article of clothing at a time, folding each piece and laying it on the bureau. She stood, eyes closed, and let her heat build as he uncovered her, until she stood, fully naked before him.

“You’re so very, very beautiful,” Cal breathed, “just as I thought.”

Camille’s eyes popped open. “Cal, I’m in my late forties. *Really.*”

“I mean every word of it. You defy your age.”

Camille smiled. “Now, let me undress you.”

Cal stepped back and closed his eyes, not opening them until he stood before her, his body and ardor fully revealed.

“I’d say we’re both ready,” Camille quipped, as she looked down at his middle.

Cal smiled, swept her up in his arms, and carried her to the bathroom. “Let’s shower first.”

Camille reveled in the hot water washing over her, as she thrilled to Cal’s every, intimate touch as he washed her. She also enjoyed his pleasure when she washed him. By the time they had dried off and moved to the bed, she vibrated like a well-tuned harp. Without another word, Cal proceeded to make love to her with all the OCD thoroughness he could muster. Camille accepted his devotion with a grateful heart.

The tears she shed came, not from sadness, but from long-postponed joy.

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Camille awoke, suffered a moment of confusion over her surroundings, and then remembered. She looked at the clock—five a. m.! Panic replaced her disorientation, when she realized they had to get home.

“Cal, wake up!” she urged.

Cal came awake slowly and smiled up at her. “You were wonderful,” he said.

“So were you. I’ve never felt more fulfilled in my life, but we need to get home.”

Cal looked at the clock and sat up quickly. “You’re right.” He retrieved his clothes from the bureau.

“Do you think you can skip the ‘pre-flight’ on the van?” Camille asked, as she dressed.

“I’m already skipping a shower,” Cal replied and they both had a good laugh over that.

∞@∞

The two sneaked into the house and everyone still seemed to be asleep.

“I wish you could come to my room, Cal,” Camille said, “but we’d best stay in our own rooms.”

“I’ll miss your warmth next to me,” Cal commiserated.

They kissed before going their separate ways, the sound of someone clearing her throat shocking them. They whirled around and saw Juliana standing in the hall in her robe.

“Hi guys,” she said with mocking brightness. “Anyone care to tell me where you were all night?”

Camille turned to Cal. “You go; I’ll speak with my daughter.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to hear this from both of you,” Juliana said. “This ought to be good.”

∞@∞

“Cal and I are married,” Camille said without preamble, once they had positioned themselves around the kitchen table with mugs of coffee.

“*What?*” Juliana exclaimed. “But you were supposed to be going out on a date.”

Camille reached over and took Cal’s hand. “Cal and I have had feelings for a while now and, well, one thing led to another and we had a Justice of the Peace marry us.”

“How could you *do* this, Mother?”

“I’m not sure I understand and I’m not happy with your tone, young lady.”

“You just met him and what about Daddy!”

“Honey, I admit this may seem sudden, but Cal’s been with us for a while now and my marrying him doesn’t mean I love your father any less.”

“Oh no? It didn’t take you very long to marry *him*.”

“It’s been over *three years*, Jule. Am I to be denied happiness for the rest of my life; or Cal, for that matter?”

“But he’s”

“Strange?” Cal asked.

“Yes. Your word.”

“I realize we’ve been at odds—”

“Don’t presume you know how I feel!”

“Juliana!” Camille exclaimed. “Watch your tone! You have little idea what motivates *me*, either. Though it may not be according to your sense of fairness and justice, Cal and I have found each other and we’re happier than we’ve been for years. Can’t you be happy for us?”

“He’s not my father.”

“I know that,” Cal replied, “and I wouldn’t ever try to replace him, but Camille is happier than—”

“Stop calling her that! Her name is *Jane*!”

Jane/Camille put down her mug, sat back and sighed deeply. “When I married Cal, in the back of my mind I thought of you, Jule, and figured this would not make you happy, but I didn’t anticipate such a negative attitude. This isn’t all about *you*, what *you* want. I’ve been alone for a long time, trying to do my best for the three of you. You may consider Cal strange, but you’re overlooking how much progress he’s made. All I ask is that you keep this among the three of us until we figure out how to break it to Alice and Bill and Pastor Wade. Can you do that?”

“You want me to lie?”

“I’m going to overlook that for now. No, I’m not asking you to lie; just not say anything for a while, okay?”

Juliana nodded sullenly and Camille wished she felt better about it.

∞ 9 ∞

Camille and Cal sat before Pastor Wade's desk to give him their "report." The weekly sessions with him, Bill and Alice had lessened to monthly and finally to every other month, but Camille had called this meeting to broach the subject of their marriage. She discussed it with Cal and they decided to just come out and tell him. They had also decided that Cal, as the spiritual head of the household, should be the one to do it.

"Pastor Wade," Cal began, "There's no way to sugarcoat this. Camille and I have married. We've fallen in love and—"

"You're *married*?" Pastor blurted. "When did *this* happen?"

"Two days ago. Camille and I have had feelings for one another, all aboveboard I might add. When we went on our first, official date, well, that love cemented into the desire to marry, so we went to a Justice of the Peace."

Pastor sat back and shook his head. "Wow. I always had misgivings about you going to live with—"

"Now, wait a second, Pastor Wade," Camille cut in. "With all due respect, you're making it sound like we snuck off to my bedroom and ripped off each other's clothes. We did the honorable thing and got married. I'll admit we didn't go through a formal courting period, but I'm not ashamed of it at all."

"Then why didn't you come to me?"

"Again, I mean no disrespect, but we're both in our late forties, older than you are. We don't need anybody's permission to marry. Besides, it all happened kind of suddenly."

"Alright, Jane, don't get upset. All I'm saying is that, if you knew where your relationship was leading, you could have done it more formally."

"I prefer to be called Camille now and sometimes our hearts aren't dictated by the formalities."

"I'm wondering how to break it to the congregation."

"I'm relieved you're not thinking of telling us to leave," Cal said, "but couldn't we just announce our desire to marry and have you perform the ceremony? We were thinking of doing just that anyway."

"The justice of the Peace just made our physical relationship legal in the eyes of society," Camille explained, "but we want to have a church service to announce it to our Christian family."

"I suppose it could work; no need to mention the civil ceremony. Okay, I'll agree to it."

"Thank you, Pastor," Cal said, stood and stuck out his hand.

The pastor stood as well and shook it. He smiled. "I wish you could have waited, but I'm also happy for you both. Congratulations."

Camille got up and went around the desk to accept Pastor Wade's hug and congratulatory kiss.

∞@∞

"You did *what*?" Bill exclaimed. "Jane, I think you've lost your grip. What were you thinking?"

"Good grief, Bill," Alice countered. "Lighten up!"

"Thanks, Alice," Camille said. "Bill, I haven't appreciated your lack of support and negative attitude all along with regard to Cal. He's my husband now; *deal* with it."

"Okay, okay, but you have to admit this is all kind of sudden."

“Sudden? Cal’s been with us for nearly a year.”

“Bill, why don’t you go talk with Cal?” Alice suggested. “I’d like to talk with Ja . . . , er, Camille.”

∞@∞

When Bill left, Alice asked Camille a question. “Why are you going by your middle name now?”

“Because Cal likes it better than Jane. He thinks my first name is too plain for my beauty.”

“He really said that?” Camille nodded. “Oh, that *sooo* romantic!”

“Yes, behind his OCD compulsions, he’s a poet.”

“What’s he like . . . *otherwise*?”

Camille smiled. “As a lover? Girlfriend, you just *think* you know what lovemaking is until an OCD man makes love to you. Cal actually worried about it and I told him to give his OCD free reign. Alice, it took him *fifteen minutes* to undress me. Then, he carried me into the shower to wash me; he was so thorough, I practically squeaked.”

“And *then* . . . ?”

“My, you *are* curious, aren’t you? Well, by the time we made love, it almost came as a relief. I’ve never felt so satisfied in my life!”

“It sounds like your honeymoon was an unqualified success, but, seriously, how’s Cal’s OCD doing?”

“He’s mostly dropped the speech quirks and is making a herculean effort to keep his other compulsions under control. He says I’ve helped him there, like Mira did. I love him all the more for it.”

“I have to admit I was surprised to hear you had married, but I got the impression you liked Cal from the start.”

“You’re right on, there. When I saw him in church that first morning, he captivated me. It was the first time since Milt died that I felt interest in another man.”

“Well, I’m happy for you both.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. I wonder how Cal’s doing with Bill?”

∞@∞

“I wish Pastor hadn’t suggested we meet like this,” Bill confessed. “I feel like I’ve let you down. I’m sorry.”

“Perhaps you tried too hard, focusing on what made you uncomfortable. Camille just let me be and it gave me the latitude to change. It’s why I fell in love with her.”

“Really? I never thought of it that way.”

“Bill, you need to relax around me. I’m not some clone of Rainman, after all and, as the film showed, he was a rather likeable fellow. OCD isn’t contagious either.”

“Oh, I don’t think that. It’s just I’m nervous when you get like . . . well, do what you do. Come to think of it, you *do* seem different lately.”

“It’s because of Camille; she’s helped me a lot in that area. Obsessive-compulsive Disorder is a compensatory maneuver. When someone like me feels threatened, we use it to restore order to our lives, to control our environment. When Mira was . . . *killed*, there, I said it, I went off the rails and retreated into my OCD routines. It made me look crazy and I admit to that. But Camille saw through that and helped me.”

“Is it really that simple?”

“Well, I may have simplified somewhat, but with OCD, at least with me, when my environment became more stable, I responded in kind.”

“Wow, I feel like such an insensitive dope.”

“You haven’t been insensitive, just nervous.”

“Yeah, I guess I have. It was like that with Milt. When he came to Jesus, it made me nervous and I pushed him away, but he was great about it and helped me see he was still my friend.”

“I hope we can become good friends.”

“You *do*?”

“Yes. Just ignore some of my quirks and feel free to point out when I’m going over the top; it’s what friends do. Believe it or not, even when it gets bad, I listen to people’s comments. Camille did that with me. If I seem different, *she’s* the reason ... she and her kids.”

“How are you getting on with them?”

“Todd’s my biggest fan, Lacey’s sort of indifferent and Juliana and I are working under a truce.”

“Well, at least there’s no open hostility.”

“It was a little rough with Juliana, but I sort of brought it onto myself. She’s a good kid, really. It isn’t easy for kids to see their mother with another man who’s not their father.”

“Yeah, you have a point. Wow, I feel like I’m the one who needs counseling.”

“I think Pastor Wade realized that we *both* needed this. I look forward to us getting to know each other better.” Cal stood and stuck out his hand.

Bill stood to shake it. “Oh, *heck!*” he exclaimed and drew Cal into a hug.

∞ 10 ∞

Alice arranged for a wedding shower for Camille and the wedding ceremony and reception that followed a week later at the church occurred without a hitch. Many of the guests voiced surprise at the pairing, but, if any had reservations, they didn’t display them. Cal and Camille attributed it to the fact that those who opposed the match didn’t come to the ceremony.

The newly married couple took a honeymoon trip to a nearby beach resort over a long weekend and returned home to begin their married life together. As it turned out, a trip to the mall a few days later rectified the situation between Cal and Juliana.

∞@∞

Cal made all his “pre-drive” checks on the van and everyone piled in it to visit the mall for some early Christmas shopping. Camille took Todd and Lacey in one direction to shop for Cal and Juliana, leaving the latter to shop for their gifts. Juliana made a show of indifference and kept some distance from Cal. Though it made him sad, he nevertheless gave her her space.

Juliana peered into a store window, searching for gifts. Cal stood fifty feet away, keeping her under his gaze. In an instant, the peaceful scene changed, when a couple of teen boys around Juliana’s age sidled up on either side of her. Cal couldn’t hear the words, but he could hear her raised voice and the fear in it. As the two young thugs moved even closer, trapping Juliana, Cal moved in.

“Leave me alone!” Juliana cried, terror in her heart, but her words went unheeded. She looked around for Cal, but couldn’t see him anywhere.

“Hey, baby, what’s the deal?” one of her antagonists said.

“Yeah, don’t you li—?” the other started to say, but a hand on his collar stopped him.

Juliana whirled to see what had occurred and the sight of Cal, holding a teenager by the collar in each hand, caused a wave of relief.

“Get mall security!” Cal exclaimed.

As Juliana ducked into a nearby store, one of the teen boys tried to take a swing at Cal, but he swept his feet out from under him and the teen slumped to the floor, still in Cal’s grip.

“Lemme go!” the other cried, his bravado replaced with childlike fear.

“Shut up!” Cal ordered. “I don’t want to hurt either of you, but I will if I have to; yes, I will!”

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“You should have seen it, Mom!” Juliana exclaimed, her eyes wide. “Cal had both boys by the collar, like two stray cats!”

Camille could hardly believe the scene before her eyes. Juliana sat next to Cal, at one of the food court tables, her arm threaded through his as she told her tale. She even laid her head on his shoulder a couple of times! Cal sat with a small smile on his face.

“I’m glad Cal could be there to help, Jule,” Camille said.

“By the time security got there, the two looked like rag dolls, hanging from Cal’s grip. He’s so strong!” Again, Juliana laid her head on Cal’s shoulder!

Camille thanked her Lord for ending the stalemate between her new husband and her eldest daughter. The fear Juliana experienced had driven any animosity toward her stepfather from her heart. Camille thought back to that morning, when she met the wonderful man who had suffered the loss of his dear wife, the grief in his heart as keen as hers over the loss of her spouse. Now, God had worked out the wrinkles in the relationships between her eldest child and her new husband.

Thank you, Lord, she prayed in her mind.

∞@∞

As they prepared for bed that night, Camille and Cal heard a knock on their bedroom door. Cal threw on a robe and opened it. Juliana stood there in her robe and pajamas.

“Can I speak with you in private?” she asked.

“*Me?* Not your mother?”

Juliana nodded and headed to her room. Cal followed. When they got there, Juliana indicated that he should sit on her bed and she took a seat next to him. Cal couldn’t help but notice that her room seemed much neater.

“I, um, I wanted to ... to apologize for the crappy way I treated you for so long.” Cal went to speak, but she held up her hand. “No, don’t say anything yet; I have to get this out. I was surprised when you and Mom married and I stupidly blamed you for trying to take Daddy’s place, but it wasn’t your fault. Daddy’s gone ... and Mom needs someone in her life.” Juliana looked up and Cal could see tears fill her eyes. “Well, what I wanted to tell you was ... I’m glad it was you.”

At that point, Juliana broke down completely and sat crying, looking forlorn and sad. Cal moved closer and put his arms around her. She fell against him and sobbed like a wounded toddler. Because of his own pain, Cal understood that most of her tears weren’t over her rift with him, but over the loss of the man who had helped to give her life. Tears of his own filled his eyes and he thanked God for the opportunity to help another, that help born out of his own sorrow.

“I love you, *Dad*,” Juliana said, her voice muffled by Cal’s robe.

A pang went through his heart at Juliana’s heartfelt words of affection. “And I love you, *daughter*; yes, I do.”

Thank you, Lord, Cal prayed silently, *for giving me a second chance.*

One-and-a-half years later ~~~

Thirteen people sat on Camille and Cal's new deck—Cal, Camille, Juliana, Lacey, Todd, Eric and his grandparents, Sam and Edna, Bill, Alice and their three kids, Bill Junior, Scott and Alicia—about to enjoy a barbecued meal. Cal stood at the grill—an apron wrapped around his swim briefs, his tanned physique honed from hours spent in the sun—fussing with hamburgers, trying for the perfect “sear.” No one minded his OCD tendencies when it came to his cooking, for his grilled fare rivaled any chef's on a cooking show. Everyone on the deck wore swimwear of some sort, since a beautiful, rectangular, aboveground pool adjoined the deck—another of Cal's “projects.”

Cal now had his OCD at bay, abetted by the fact he could expend his energies on household projects. After he had finished with the basement, he painted the house from top to bottom and began on the deck and pool projects, finishing them the following summer. Those projects, coupled with his ongoing “maintenance schedule” on the house and car, kept him on an even keel and Camille worked with him to deal with his other “issues.” Now, only the occasional quirk gave him away.

Eric and his grandparents had come for the weekend, now that he and his father had reconciled. Cal and Juliana's reconciliation had been the springboard for an attempt with Eric and, once the boy had seen the improvement in his father's OCD tendencies, he slowly warmed up. He still lived with his grandparents, but he now spent the occasional weekend with Cal and Camille and longer when his grandparents wanted to travel.

To a casual observer, the one thing he or she would notice first came in the form of Camille's pregnancy. Dressed in a miniscule bikini and with an enormous belly, she seemed to revel in displaying her fecundity. She and Cal had enjoyed conjugal relations enthusiastically and had not used any form of birth control due to her age, so the pregnancy came as a complete surprise. Nevertheless, once over the shock, they both fully embraced the prospect of a new addition to their family.

Camille's OB-GYN took a cautious approach to this late pregnancy, but Camille, viewing it as a gift from God, refused to act the invalid. She remained active and it proved a good move, since her pregnancy advanced smoothly. She refused any tests to determine the sex or any abnormalities. Whatever problems the baby presented, they'd love it and raise it to the best of their abilities. This did not please her doctor, but Camille and Cal trusted that the Lord, having granted them a baby late in their lives, knew best and would see them through, whatever happened.

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Just after midnight, when everyone had gone to bed, Cal and Camille enjoyed the pool, she without her bikini.

“You look so beautiful pregnant,” Cal said, as he massaged her shoulders, “especially *this* way.”

“I'm delighted you think so, but I feel like a whale, floating in the water like this. It feels good to get out from under the curse of gravity for a while, though.”

“I've worried about you every day,” he confessed.

“That's your OCD coming out. I'm fine.”

“But you're almost fifty.”

“Thanks for reminding me. I'm fine, *really*.”

“But doctors say—”

“Cal, I got a late start having children even back when Milt and I married. I didn’t have Juliana until I was thirty-one and I had Todd at thirty-seven. God’s chosen to bless us; just go with it.”

“I’m so glad you found me.”

“No more so than I am.”

Cal kissed the top of Camille’s head. “When I lost Mira and when Eric left, I thought my life was over. I knew my situation with Eric came from my quirks, but I just couldn’t help myself. I should have trusted the Lord more. I failed.”

Camille looked up at her husband. “We don’t always have to do it alone; sometimes God sees fit to use another to help us.”

Cal smiled. “I thank him every day that he sent you.”

“It goes both ways. I missed Milt in my life and felt I was vanishing. Oh, I had my three kids to live for, but, as they got older, I felt like I would fade away until I just disappeared. Then I saw you and a kernel of hope blossomed in my heart.”

“Really? But I must have looked totally crazy, talking to people only I could see.”

“When Pastor Wade told me what had happened to you, it didn’t seem crazy at all and I wanted to help you.”

Cal moved in front of Camille and placed his hands on either side of her distended belly. “I love you, Jane Camille Clarke.”

“Wow, I haven’t heard my first name in so long, I nearly forgot I had it.”

“Camille suits you so much better ... oh, I felt the baby kick just now!”

“He dozed for a while, but he’s awake now.”

“*He*? You think it’ll be a boy?”

Camille nodded. “I get a feeling from the Lord that it’ll be a he, just as I’m confident he’ll be healthy and beautiful. Hey, are those tears? You’re *crying*?”

Cal nodded and then found his voice. “I love you *so much*, Camille; yes, I do.”

∞ Epilog ∞

Camille Clarke, ne Jane Worthington, lay on her back in bed, grateful for being able to assume a horizontal position. She looked over at the glowing clock face on the nightstand—five-seventeen, a. m. The photo of Milt stood next to it. She had never put it away, since Cal insisted she leave it there. She turned her head to look at her sleeping second husband.

Cal seemed to approach sleep as he did most things—assiduously and thoroughly. He often would compose himself for sleep on his back and, when they awoke in the morning, he’d still be on his back. Camille wondered if he even moved at all. When he woke up, it would be completely and suddenly; fully awake to face a new day. He also never failed to be chipper and happy upon arising. She envied him that.

The reason Camille lay awake at this hour stemmed from the fact that small contractions had begun, precursor to the “big show” soon to come; as Baby Clarke prepared to make his way into the world, right on time. She reached for the photo of Milt on the nightstand and held it in front of her. Her night-adjusted eyes could make out a hazy outline and some of the features on his face.

“Well, Milt,” she said softly, “who would have thought I’d be about to deliver a baby at nearly fifty? When God saw fit to take you home to him, I could only think of joining you soon. Now, I’m going to have a new baby to raise, with the help of another good man.” She cast a glance at Cal. “You’d be good friends, I think. He’s so different from you, yet you both have great hearts.”

Another, stronger contraction began, and Camille practiced her breathing exercises, while she absently stroked her belly, her fingers describing circles. When it subsided, she took the photo from her chest and replaced it on the nightstand. She stared up at the ceiling, as tears left the corner of her eyes to run down her cheeks and pool in the cups of her ears.

Lord, thank you for all your blessings, she prayed. Forgive me for not trusting you enough when Milt ... died. I had no idea what you had in store for me and I'm delighted at the things you've shown me. Thank you for my wonderful family and thank you for Cal. Not only has he given me a new name, he's given me a new lease on life. Thank you for arranging th—

A sudden gush of water from between her thighs signaled the beginning of the messy process of labor and birth, heralded by the onset of a strong contraction. Camille's new-life adventure had set her on yet another course. She grunted from the effort of dealing with her strong contraction. When it subsided, she would wake Cal. She smiled, for she knew one thing for certain.

God would work it all out for the best—in his own good time.