

SAMPLE

Watch the Almond Blossom

Quiet Place Gardeners Book One

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Watch the Almond Blossom
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One

The word of the Lord came to me: "What do you see, Jeremiah?"

"I see the branch of an almond tree," I replied.

The Lord said to me, "You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled." Jeremiah 1:11-12

Lenora, are you coming?"

Lenora looked back at her brother and waved her hand. "Give me a minute."

Raf huffed and turned his attention back to Tawny, his new girlfriend, as Lenora followed an older man into the lot next to the church, where he stooped to pick a few leaves from a lettuce plant. She nearly lost her footing in the mud of the makeshift path between the church and the small garden plot.

"Oh," the man said, startling when he looked up and saw her. "Didn't hear you coming. I had this idea... But sometimes ideas don't turn out like you hope, you know?"

She smiled. Yes, this she knew well. Lately nothing had turned out like she'd hoped.

"What is this?" she asked, gesturing at the silver raised garden bin in the center of a small, debris-filled urban lot. "Does the church own this plot?"

The man shrugged. "Sort of. I mean, yes, it's part of the church property, but it's not good for much. Too small for another building, not a useful building. Used to be a little house, but that burned down. Then it became a little playground, but the neighborhood got dangerous, and kids stopped playing outside. Now it's nothing, and it's a mess, and nobody knows what to do with it."

"And the lettuce?"

"My idea," he said. "Community garden. Turns out I don't have a green thumb, and I couldn't get anyone else on board. Still not the safest neighborhood, and the church has other priorities right now. Good priorities. Hayes tends hearts and focuses on healing souls. Good things. I think the ideas of an old man might be as outdated as the man himself."

She looked over the man in question. He was probably in his late sixties or early seventies, although she didn't know much about older decades. He had a weathered face, thick white hair, and he wore a suit and tie, where most in the church had shown up in casual clothes today.

Lenora herself had worn a sundress, because this morning she'd felt the need to be fancy. Raf had mocked her, suggesting she was trying to catch the eye of one of the single men at the church, but that hadn't been it. She'd had no idea why today felt like a sundress day.

Now that she stood here in this muddy old lot with a man in a suit, she thought the Spirit might have had a hand in her attire.

"Lenora Calderon," she said, holding out her hand. "I'm visiting today. My brother is seeing Tawny Lambert."

"The nurse," the man said with an approving nod. "Sweet girl. Good family. Gerald Barnes. I go by Jerry."

Lenora shook the man's hand, pleased by the firm grip. He smiled at her and pointed to the lettuce. Four plants grew in the bin, and they didn't look especially healthy.

"Feel free to grab a few leaves," he said. "Not much else to plant this early in the season."

"Tell me your vision here," she said. She was entering dangerous territory, she knew. She'd been restless and confused for months, and latching onto Jerry Barnes's vision wasn't a smart idea.

However, she had no vision of her own, and she was sick to death of her own choices, so why not hitch her cart to some other star? Except, as Jerry had already said, he was here on this star alone. She was also a guest at this church. Next week she'd go back to her own church. What was she doing?

"I envisioned a few gardens filled with vegetables, and parents and kids could come and weed a little, harvest some fresh things to take home. Maybe kids could play in that corner there. No more mud and broken-down old toys and whatever happened over there."

He pointed, and Lenora followed his gaze. Yes, the lot had a couple moldering piles of who-knows-what along the far side. She got the feeling this would be a great place to sell state secrets at midnight. Maybe it would be good for staging a duel.

"How did the church end up with this?" she asked.

"It's always been part of the church. At first a tiny parsonage was here, but it burned down years ago. The playground was a good idea, but nobody wanted to put in the maintenance. A few years ago the church was floundering, and resources were a problem. Now it sits. I'm not sure how all the debris ended up here. Pretty sure we didn't put it there."

"Thank you," she said, "for sharing that."

"You know how to grow things?" Jerry asked, hope in his voice.

"No," she said. She tilted her head, seeing Jerry's vision. Then she saw one of her own, a vision she'd tried to expel from her mind the past few months. That vision wouldn't leave her alone, and it was wreaking havoc on

her life. “I understand visions that don’t work out. Can I...? I feel like praying about this garden. I don’t know why.”

That was a lie. She knew exactly why. But Raf would kill her, and she had to get her head out of the clouds and focus on her life. But she couldn’t explain this to Jerry, not in the two minutes she had before Raf screamed at her to get her tail out of the garden and into the car, thus the lie.

Jerry’s eyes widened, and she hated the hope there. She didn’t want him to hope. Except she’d said the words out loud, and how could a request to pray for someone’s dream produce anything but hope?

“You sure can,” the man said. He handed her a handful of lettuce, and she took it with a smile, knowing what it meant. These were precious leaves, more than most would realize, and she understood perfectly. “Let me know if God has anything to say to me.”

She laughed at the wording. “I sure will.”

She tiptoed out of the muddy lot, hoping not to ruin her sandals, and found Raf and Tawny waiting. Raf had his arms crossed over his chest, and he frowned at her. Then he frowned at the lettuce.

“He wanted a community garden,” she said to her big brother.

“I’m sure he did. Lenora...”

She opened her hands in a gesture of surrender. Surely he didn’t want to play out this argument in front of Tawny. The third date wasn’t really the appropriate time to hold a sibling squabble in front of potential spouses.

“Jerry’s a nice old man,” Tawny said. “He’s been part of the church forever. He’s one of those who can’t quite catch his breath.”

She was referring to the church suddenly tripling in size. Lenora had learned this morning that the little downtown church had languished for years, and then the new pastor had come, a younger man with an inordinate amount of charm, and he’d reeled in millennials and Gen Zs from the nearby schools, and things had taken off. Students, families, and of course the older members were all trying to get along and adjust to the new dynamic of the church.

They got into Raf’s old car, and he drove them to Tawny’s place. She was a nurse at the local hospital, and she lived in a decent-sized condo on the western edge of town.

“I wish I could take you to lunch,” Raf said in a dreamy voice as Tawny slid out of the passenger seat. Raf tried to follow her, but she held out her hand.

“My shift starts soon,” she said. “There will be other opportunities, I promise. I was so happy to worship with you today. And Lenora, thanks for tagging along. I wanted both of you to be there. I’ll see you guys later this week.”

She ran up the six steps to her stoop, and Raf waited while Lenora moved from the back seat to the passenger seat.

“What did you think?” he asked as they drove home. They’d rented an apartment ten minutes away, not as nice an area as where the nurse lived, since both of them were students. Their parents were helping them with rent, which galled Raf more than Lenora, but even with help, their place was small and leaned toward sketchy.

“I liked it. She’s right about the pastor. Very charming. Very young.”

Raf snorted. “He’s not that young. Older than we are.”

“Still, it’s a big responsibility for a guy who’s all of twenty-six? Twenty-seven?”

“I liked it,” Raf said. “Solid teaching.”

“Very true,” Lenora said. “I didn’t mean to sound insulting. What Tawny said about the man loving Jesus was true, and that’s what matters.”

“So tell me about your trip into the mud to get wilted leaves. Please don’t tell me you’ve got some wild hair about a garden.”

She pressed her lips together. Okay, she wouldn’t tell him. He barked in laughter.

“Oh, my goodness, Lenora. It’s been months. Let it go. Or... You should just change gears. What you’re doing isn’t working, so follow your heart already. Did you learn nothing on our trip? Since when is the right thing always the expected thing?”

“I’m so close to my degree,” she said.

“A degree you don’t love that doesn’t lead to jobs. Change gears. Pivot, dear sister. Not like we’ve never pivoted before. Horticulture, maybe.”

She looked out the window. What she saw in her head wasn’t horticulture. Or maybe it was. Maybe she didn’t know what was involved in horticulture. What she saw in her head was a throwback to the most amazing few months of her life, a time when she’d healed, learned, played a role in the kingdom of God in the most vivid, tangible ways possible. Somehow, she didn’t think *horticulture* summed it up.

“Maybe you should go back,” he said, his voice barely audible. “I think you left your heart there, Lenora. I won’t hate you if you did. Do what you love. You know that’s what I want for you. What all of us want for you. If that means living with our big brother across the world, then so be it.”

“No,” she said. “I don’t think that’s what I’m called to do.”

“Then what are you called to do?” he asked. “Because a degree in physics isn’t it.”

“I know. I can’t answer that, and I don’t want to pivot without some sort of direction. No, what’s in my head isn’t a career or answers to my problems. In fact, it’s a new problem.”

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“Just what we need,” Raf said, heavy on the sarcasm. “You’ve had your quota of problems for the next few years. It’s someone else’s turn. Try to find something calm to do, something that doesn’t lead to problems. Knitting.”

She giggled. “Yes, I’m sure my future is in knitting. Raf, that man I met today, Jerry, has a vision for a community vegetable garden. He doesn’t know how to make it happen.”

“Sounds innocent enough. Not that you know the first thing about vegetables, but if digging around in the dirt with an old man quells some of your restlessness, then grab a trowel and go to it.”

“That’s not what I want to do. Maybe. I mean, I think there’s a space for a vegetable garden. But when he was talking, I could see it. Clear as day, a lot like Michelle when God gave her the vision for the stained-glass window.”

She and Raf had spent a few months with their older brother at a Christian retreat center not far from Australia, and they’d worked on a project with two people, Michelle and Tyler, who’d needed God to intervene in their lives in a big way. God had intervened in her and Raf’s lives there, too.

Michelle, who didn’t have a creative bone in her body, had envisioned a stained-glass window, one of the prettiest things Lenora had ever seen. God had wanted that window to happen in real life, and Lenora had loved watching God put together a team of people, one that included her and Raf, to pull off one of the most beautiful projects she’d ever seen.

Today she’d seen something prettier. And something complicated that might throw her life and plans into an uproar.

“Tell me,” Raf prodded. “What did you see?”

“I saw a prayer garden, Rafael. Complete with a little building and paths and a fountain. I saw all of it, and it’s a massive project, but I can’t unsee it now that I’ve seen it.”

Raf sighed. “I had a terrible feeling that’s what you were going to say.”

“MAY I HELP YOU?”

Lenora let out a screech and spun around, pressing her hand to her chest as she started laughing. Havenwood church’s pastor grinned at her.

“Apologies,” he said. “You were in worship last week. I’m sorry I didn’t catch your name.”

He held out a hand, and Lenora shook it. The man was handsome and charming. He would be easy to mistrust, except she’d heard his sermon Sunday and knew the man had some spiritual grit to him.

“Lenora Calderon. My brother is seeing Tawny Lambert.”

Pastor Hayes smiled. “Tawny. Sweet woman. May I ask what you want out here?”

“Sorry. I guess I’m trespassing. I got this itch, and my brother told me to leave it alone, but when God puts an idea in your head, it’s hard to get rid of it.”

“If God puts an idea in your head, I’m not sure you’re supposed to get rid of it,” the man said. He looked at the small lot, which was overgrown and filled with trash. Clearly people dumped things here. “May I ask what he put into your head?”

She walked to the silver garden box and ran her fingers over the lettuce leaves. “I met Jerry Barnes.”

“The Barnes couple warms my heart,” Pastor Hayes said. “He wants to garden out here. I’m not sure how or if we can make that happen. It takes resources and manpower. As much as the church is growing, I…” The man shook his head and didn’t finish the thought. “Your idea?”

She spread out her hands to take in the entire lot. “A prayer garden. A small building, paths, flowers. Maybe vegetables, yes. A fence to keep people out, except that would keep people out, so I haven’t figured that part out. I have this image in my head, and I wish I could draw. This isn’t the best area. Maybe a few small trees and some running water would give people a small haven. A place to visit with God, to exhale the mess of the world and inhale the love of the Father.”

Pastor Hayes furrowed his brow, and she knew he hated the idea. Well, that made this easier. She’d tried and failed, and she could get back to classes and her part-time job and stop trying to relive a few glorious months from a year ago.

“If I connected you with an artist, could you try? To draw it? Because now that you’re saying the words, I can see it, too. Exhaling the world. Inhaling the Father. This church is growing, but we’re a house of cards. I hate to say that. I hate that it’s true. But it is. This congregation desperately needs to exhale the world and inhale the Father. I don’t know if trees and flowers are the answer, but… I can see it, too. Tell me about the building.”

She walked toward the corner of the lot, against the brick wall of the next building. The church sat on the corner, but this little lot had the church on one side and a vape shop on the other. A rickety fence stood at the back and separated it from the church parking lot, which took two lots behind the church and this lot.

“Right here,” she said. She poked through some debris and laughed. “Wait. Was this a shed? It’s a pile of something now, but this looks like the remains of a shed. It doesn’t need to be large. Space for a few people to get out of the rain. Maybe a way to make some of this usable in cooler weather.”

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Pastor Hayes smiled. “Yes. That’s where I pictured it, too. And a small water feature here?” He pointed. “Except water is fraught with trouble. We don’t need neighborhood children drowning in our prayer garden.”

“Then a dry bed. I looked online for ideas last night, and maybe we need a stony dry creek bed. Some wind chimes, maybe bamboo, can be sound, since we won’t have the sound of water. Jerry’s veggies can go over here. Or just flowers. I don’t know.”

“Dry creek bed.” The man laughed. “When God gives you an idea, he makes it somewhat complete, doesn’t he?”

“I was overseas a year ago. I spent time at a Christian retreat center on an island very far to the south where my oldest brother works. I needed to heal. Anyway, I was part of a garden project there. It was meant to be a small prayer garden with a little tea house at its center, but it grew out of bounds and became a walled garden with a prayer tower and a stained-glass window. It was the most amazing, Spirit-led project I ever saw, and being part of that was intoxicating. I’m having trouble coming back to real life. Everything here feels so small, like we put Band-Aids on gushing wounds.

“Not that I think a prayer garden will fix gushing wounds, either, but my heart gets excited about the idea. I don’t know how to let it all go.”

“Then perhaps letting it go isn’t the answer,” the man said. “By the way, I’m Graham. You haven’t called me *Pastor Hayes* yet, but I’d love it if you would call me Graham. Like I said, we would need resources and people to pull something like this off, and I don’t know if it would have value, either. I know we can’t turn it into a walled tower. But I can see it, maybe the garden you see. That’s not normal for me, to see something so clearly, something this detailed and beautiful.”

“I’m going to pray about it,” Lenora said. “In fact, I’m already praying about it. I promised Jerry I would do that.”

“Talk to Jerry. I can give you his contact information, or maybe I can give him yours? I’m probably not supposed to give information to women I find wandering our empty lot.”

Graham laughed. He had a brilliant smile.

“I’m happy to let you connect us. Thank you. My brother is worried. He thinks I need to go back to the retreat center to live. My older brother lives there. I don’t think that’s what I’m meant to do. But the truth is I haven’t known what to do since I left St. Ninian’s Sanctuary.”

“That’s the retreat center?”

“It is. It’s an amazing place, and I had an amazing time. But I think this life can be amazing, too. At least I hope so. I’d hate to think God only works on islands in the middle of a cold ocean.”

“I admit some days I long to retreat myself.”

She tilted her head. “This church is growing. But you’re not happy.”

He shook his hands. “Story for another time. God is working, and sometimes that leads to problems. Right now, I feel more hope than I have in a while, even though I’m not sure I can help you in any way.”

Soon he went back inside to do his work, and Lenora walked the lot, poking into debris and jotting down ideas. The pastor had held out a strange mix of hope and warning. And his suggestion that things weren’t going well in his church...? She wasn’t sure what to make of it, but she was reminded of her time at St. Ninian’s, where it had taken a group of misfits to see something great happen.

“Well, God,” she whispered. “I feel like a misfit, and it seems Jerry and our charming pastor might feel the same. Bring on the great things.”

Two

Yes,” Lenora said. “That’s it. Isn’t it beautiful?”

Raf put down his pencil and tilted his head. The man was in school to become a veterinarian, but he could also draw, and Lenora had asked him to help her get her ideas on paper.

“What you need are dimensions,” he said. “A blueprint. This is just a vague idea. I think to sell your idea, you need to be more specific. However, yes, it’s beautiful. Lenora, the pastor didn’t hold out hope for resources or manpower. Don’t get your hopes up.”

She was hovering behind Raf, and she caressed his shoulder.

“I hear you. I know you’re worrying. I thought we were past this.”

“So did I. But all that healing you did over the past few months... I feel like it isn’t holding. I thought you came back feeling better about things. I almost feel guilty because I did. I decided to go to vet school, met Tawny, and feel like things are going well. But you’re not doing well, and that bothers me.”

“I’m fine,” she said. “A little frustration is different from what I went through before. I’m okay. I think God fed me so much in the past year that I’m having a little trouble digesting.”

“So this garden is a case of indigestion?” Raf asked, laughing. “I think you don’t have a career ahead as a poet. But you also don’t have a career ahead as a physicist, do you? Why not cop to it and change to something you love?”

She moved to sit across the table from him, pulling the page toward her. She touched the little building. He was right about sizes. How many people would fit in this building? How big was this space? For someone studying physics, she was remarkably bad at thinking about the size of something.

“The way I feel about this drawing makes me think you’re right. Horticulture? Botany? Business? Construction? What kind of degree does a person need to make a garden? How often does something like this even come up? I don’t think this is a career, Raf. I think it’s just a garden that God wants to happen, and I happen to be the one God asked to get it going. When this is over, I’ll need my real life still to be intact.”

“I think you’re wrong, but I’m your brother. I’m supposed to argue with you, I guess. I have to study. You probably have to study, too, although if you flunk out, you might finally get yourself going in the right direction.”

She wadded up a napkin off the table and threw it at his chest. He laughed and stood.

“You throw like a girl. I’ll pray about it with you. I’m pretty sure praying about the prayer garden is a given.”

“Thank you.”

He left, and she opened her laptop. Dimensions. Tomorrow she would measure. Only she wanted to talk to Jerry, and so far he hadn’t contacted her.

She checked her email, surprised to find a message from Jerry. He asked her to call. He said he knew young people didn’t like phone calls, so he’d messaged first. She laughed at that and picked up the phone. Within a few minutes she had a date with an old man in an empty lot tomorrow afternoon.

“Thank you, God,” she said. “I hope this idea leads us to something wonderful. Graham says his church is in trouble, and I don’t know if flowers and plants can change anything, but maybe they can. Maybe, since more than one of us can see this garden, you want to work here. Guide us and direct us and don’t let us get proud or run ahead. I know sometimes you scroll out your plans slowly. I’m willing to listen and wait and will try hard not to run ahead.”

Raf would laugh at the prayer, because running ahead was Lenora’s signature move. But that had been before. In the past year she’d grown wary. She had taken a few hits and learned a few lessons. She hoped God was using those to make her better.

Regardless, Raf would laugh.

“I ADMIT I WAS surprised when Hayes called,” Jerry said as he wheeled his wife into the old lot. At least Lenora assumed the older woman in the wheelchair was Jerry’s wife. The woman had graying blond hair and a bright smile, dressed in a bright blue and green jacket in deference to the cool morning. Early summer could be unpredictable here.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about this lot,” Lenora admitted. “Graham already told me the church might not be able to do this, but he suggested I draw it and talk to you.”

She stopped talking, suddenly doubting. She held Raf’s drawing in her hand, along with two others he’d done this morning, rough sketches of a little building and different perspectives on the main garden. Jerry wanted vegetables, something practical, and she’d come with a fanciful garden to install in a poor, urban area.

“Well?” Jerry asked. He was smiling at her.

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“Oh, be nice,” the woman said. She held out her hand. “My husband forgot to introduce me. I promise he loves me, even if he forgets that not everybody knows my name. I’m Bitsy Barnes.”

Lenora shook Bitsy’s hand, and Jerry apologized for the slight.

“I’m not much for manners,” the older man said. “I spent my life working at the factory on Fourth”—he pointed west—“and didn’t get much practice.”

“And he’s excited,” Bitsy said. “Don’t let him convince you otherwise. There’s something about having someone come alongside you when you have a dream that flusters a person, don’t you think? I don’t think it happens often.”

“I hope this turns out to be something like your dream,” Lenora said, finally handing over the drawings.

“You’re a good artist,” Jerry said, handing each to Bitsy after he looked at it.

“No, I’m not. But my brother Rafael is. Graham said he could see it. I told him what I saw here, and he said he saw it, too. But like I said, he isn’t hopeful about getting funds. Or volunteers.”

Jerry and his wife exchanged a look Lenora couldn’t read, although she knew it wasn’t hopeful.

“Yes, that might limit us. But there are ways to raise funds,” Jerry said, still looking at the page. “Any vegetables?”

“There can be. I’m not sure of the practicality of the whole thing. This area isn’t completely safe. Do we give this a wall and lock it up at night? Right now this lot is always open, but once we build and plant in here, there are things to damage and steal.”

Jerry looked around, and Bitsy reached for his hand. The man’s face softened when he took her hand. Lenora wondered about the wheelchair but didn’t ask.

“Well, it needs to be accessible for the likes of me,” Bitsy said. “But yes, security is an issue.”

“What about practicality?” Lenora asked. “I helped build a space like this on an island retreat center where prayer is built into every day. My brother works there. The nature of the place and the fact that people lived nearby meant it was practical. I understand that there the building and grounds are used every day. But here it’s different. Here everything is different.”

“An island retreat center,” Bitsy said with a sigh. “What a glorious-sounding place. Would God give three of you a vision if it wasn’t something he wanted done?”

Lenora looked at one of the pages, which Bitsy had returned to her. “I don’t know. Sometimes I run ahead. Raf pointed out I haven’t been content

since he and I came home. He thinks I should go back to the island. Because my older brother lives there, I could work there if I wanted. He thinks I lost my heart there. I don't think that's true, but it's true I'm discontent here."

Jerry nodded and pointed to the notebook and tape measure on the ground near her feet.

"I admit the same," he said. "Retirement isn't my favorite, although I do like time with my girl here."

"We aren't meant to retire," Bitsy said. "Yes, it was time for Jerry to stop working at the plant. But as long as we live, we do things for God's kingdom. Maybe this is the thing Jerry is called to do right now. Let's take your measurements. Let's act like we think God wants this until he says otherwise."

"We should pray first," Lenora said. She laughed. "And probably the whole time we do this."

"So true," Bitsy said. Jerry reached out a hand for Lenora, and she gripped his cool, callused hand with her left and Bitsy's warmer, softer hand with her right while the older man prayed for wisdom, resources, and patience as they considered this call. Then he took the tape measure in hand and headed for the far wall.

They'd only been measuring a few minutes when a huge African-American man emerged from the vape shop and stood on the pocked sidewalk watching them.

"Is there a problem?" Jerry asked.

"No, sir," the man said. He looked a little scary, taller and broader than the average man, but when he smiled, his teeth white against his dark skin and his eyes alight, he looked much more approachable. "Did they finally sell this lot? This has been an eyesore long enough, but I'm curious who my neighbor will be."

"You own this shop?" Lenora asked. She set down the notebook and walked toward the man, extending a hand. His warm, damp hand dwarfed hers, but his grip was gentle. "I'm Lenora Calderon. The church owns this property, and we might put a prayer garden here."

Jerry walked to them with the drawings in hand, and the man looked them over.

"Well," he said. "Prayer garden. Here? I'm not sure what to say to that. I'm Vittorio Johnson, and yes, this shop is mine. You got permits for this yet? The building, I guess?"

"No," Lenora said. "This is early stages. We might not have the funds or manpower, but we're stepping out until we slam into a wall."

Vittorio smiled at that. "Well, if you all need a word at the city, I promise I'll come to your defense. This lot attracts bad seeds. Everyone knows the church is empty at night, and this place is dark, and while I might

sell smokes and vapes here, I don't sell drugs and don't like it happening outside my door. I doubt this garden will be a place to attract that element."

"Drugs," Jerry said, looking over the lot. "That could be a problem."

"No, it's a problem already," Vittorio said.

"Do you live nearby?" Lenora asked. Vittorio pointed east.

"Two blocks that way."

"And is the area dangerous?" Bitsy asked. "If someone prays here, will they be in danger?"

"No, ma'am," Vittorio said. "Long as the sun's up. But vandalism after dark? That's an issue. I have a loft over my shop, and I lived there for a few months. It looks rougher than it is out here, but the drugs are a problem. Not everyone wants to fight for this area."

Lenora looked around, imagining gang members out here selling drugs at night. Did God want her and the Barneses to endanger people? Wait, did this small town have gangs? She didn't think so, but every place had criminals. She wasn't so naïve to think otherwise.

"So you don't mind a prayer garden next to your vape shop?" Bitsy asked. The huge man smiled at her.

"I do not. Don't think I'm going to be out here bowing my head, but don't mind if all of you do it. Bring a little excitement to the street to watch it happen."

"First we have to make it happen," Lenora said. "Or God has to make it happen."

Vittorio looked at the church, which needed a fresh coat of paint. It looked as tired as the rest of the street. "That place has been here long as I can remember. Don't know much about it. But I guess we'll see if the people inside can fight this place and make something beautiful happen. I wish you good luck of that."

With that the man returned to his shop, and Lenora looked over the street with a new eye.

"So we might want to fence it off," she said. "I hate to close people out."

"At night," Bitsy said. "I mean, is it safe in any city to be in a small lot after dark? Probably not. I don't think this changes a thing, except that man... I think we'll start praying for Vittorio Johnson. God might have something to say to that man."

Lenora laughed and wrote down the name in her notebook. "Yes. Definitely. And maybe we can pray against whoever's been here at night. Or we can pray for the people and against their criminal behavior."

"I think that sounds wise," Jerry said. "Those building a prayer garden should probably be praying souls themselves. And I admit, after seven decades in this world, most of those spent loving God, I am not always a praying soul."

Bitsy nodded agreement, and Lenora had to admit that until a few months ago she'd been the same.

But she'd seen amazing things in the past few months, and more than anything, she wanted to be a praying soul for the rest of her days. God was real, and he got close and messed around in the dirt of the world, and she wanted him messing around in her corner. Always.

"I KNOW," LISA SAID angrily. "We can't afford it. We can't afford anything. Why can't you find another job? A good job? Then we could live somewhere bigger and nicer, and I could get a phone."

With that Lisa stomped into the next room, about three feet from this room, and she threw herself onto the bed. Amanda sighed and sat on a creaking kitchen chair. Things had been so much easier when Lisa was little, when her little girl thought her mother could do no wrong.

Seemed all of that had to balance out here in her eleventh year, when she was certain her mother could do no right.

But was her daughter wrong? Why couldn't Amanda find a better job? Lots of women had good jobs. Even single mothers could be something in this world. So what was Amanda's excuse?

Lack of high school diploma, mainly, but she sure never planned to explain that to Lisa. Lack of family support. Lack of resources to fix her educational deficiencies. Yes, she had a few obstacles in her way, insurmountable obstacles.

"Is that true?" she whispered. She'd always followed God, always prayed, but she didn't hear many answers, at least not answers that made sense. God seemed to have no trouble telling her no. But at the same time, some of the yeses had been spectacular, like Lisa, her healthy baby after several prenatal tests had warned otherwise. This affordable apartment, which had been its own kind of miracle.

God took care of them, but sometimes she wished God felt a little more extravagant about those answers. Getting by was better than starving, but wouldn't the occasional luxury be better than getting by?

"I have to stay late tomorrow," she said to Lisa, who rolled to her stomach and glared through the doorway. "It's overtime. Don't look at me like that when I'm announcing overtime. I'm doing my best."

Lisa sighed and came out. She leaned against Amanda's side, since Lisa standing and Amanda sitting were the same height.

"I'm sorry. I know that, Mama. But doesn't it feel unfair sometimes? God takes care of us, but not really good care of us. Why does he take really good care of Sarah and June?"

Watch the Almond Blossom

“I don’t know. I want you to have a phone. I do. But we can’t do it right now. I’ll ask for more overtime, and maybe I’ll look for a better job.”

“Then you might be gone all day,” Lisa said. “It’s hard when all the good things have a bad side, isn’t it? All of life is like that.”

For eleven, Lisa had a deeply philosophical soul. The girl was smart and could get much further than Amanda herself had. She just had to deal with this smart, sensitive little girl and keep her on the right path until that could happen.

Some days she didn’t know if that was possible.

The next morning, as usual, she left for work hours before Lisa woke up, long before sunrise. Mrs. Hutchins would pop into the apartment at seven to rouse Lisa and put her on the bus. The system wasn’t perfect, but it worked. Amanda was eternally grateful for the retired woman next door, although her health was failing, and she’d told Amanda two weeks ago that soon she might have to move in with her son.

She had no idea what to do when that happened.

As she drove past the old church, she noticed two men in the corner of the abandoned lot and cringed. She wished she could move out of this neighborhood. She assumed the men were selling drugs, all while her baby slept in an empty apartment a block away. Not that there had been any break-ins or muggings reported lately, but all it took was once.

“Watch over her, God,” she said. She smiled at the dim cross in front of the old church. She went to church across town, but every morning she passed this old downtown church with its weathered cross underlit by a small light, and every morning she prayed as she passed it. “Guard Lisa as she sleeps. Then keep guarding her when she wakes up, and on the bus and at school. Fill her with joy when she sees me in the pick-up line this afternoon, the way I fill with joy when I see her. Guard her heart so she won’t make the messes I did, and help her to honor you every day of her life.”

She wished someone had prayed the same over her in her childhood. She smiled as she passed the church, because the tired building and the tired cross called to her today like it never had before.

That was her place, and suddenly she knew it. Not a nice building in a nice part of town where all the kids lived worlds better than Lisa did. No, she needed something from the little downtown church, and maybe, just maybe, they needed something from her.

Except for Lisa, she couldn’t remember anyone ever needing anything from her before.

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