

Sandi Layne

An Unexpected  
Woman

The Writer's Coffee Shop   
Publishing House

# Also by Sandi Layne

Éire's Captive Moon

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## Chapter One

*“In life, the ability to laugh is vital.”*

“Hello!” Mark Countryman called as he pushed open the glass door to the small Chinese take-out restaurant, China Town. “Just me.”

“Hi, Mark!” Anne, the woman behind the counter called back. “Taking this home today? Working hard?”

“Back to the office,” he told her with a grin. “It’s Wednesday.”

“Ah, of course,” the busy, slender woman said with a nod. They had become acquainted over the last several months. Anne was not, he was sure, her birth name, but she and the other people in the restaurant had evidently tried to do their best to make things easier on their patrons. He had discovered that Anne had three children, ranging in age from seventeen to five, which was surprising as she only looked to be about twenty-five herself.

She was, in fact, much closer to his own age of thirty-nine.

He gave her his order—surprising her when he ordered a different lunch combo than his usual. The phone rang behind the counter and Mark nodded, smiled, and sat in a sturdy metal chair. He didn’t patronize this place because of the decor, he came for the food.

“China Town. Take out, okay. White rice? Okay. Phone number? Okay. About ten minutes. Bye.”

While he waited, Mark watched the folks walking up and down the strip mall. He had been here for two years, coming through two mild hurricane seasons, but was still unused to the sight of people in shorts and T-shirts in the first weeks of March. In Glencoe, the small Californian mountain

community that had been his home for many years, March was still winter, in both temperature and wardrobe. Snow still lingered in places, sweaters and jeans were everywhere. In Ohio, where he had been working until being called to his present church, winters had been even longer. But here in Southwest Florida, in the spread-out community of North Fort Myers, it was a time of shorts, T-shirts and flip-flops.

Shop doors were opened along the strip mall's cement walk and the breeze brought a distant taste of salt from the Gulf of Mexico to the discerning nose. The Caloosahatchee was only one air mile from this plate glass door. A large river, with tides and weekend regattas, it was also the backyard for many of the area's more well-to-do residents.

"Mark!" Anne said, her voice echoing off the white walls as she lifted the white plastic bag with his lunch. "Ready!"

He paid for it, left her a tip, and was backing up to the door, telling Anne to have a good day, when the door opened and he collided with an incoming customer. "Whoa!" he exclaimed, arms flailing enough that he was relieved that all the food was secure inside well-packed containers.

"Hey!" the incoming customer said in response, her laughter warm as she caught him with one hand on either side of his ribs. "Steady, there," she advised, holding him until both his feet were firm on the faded tile floor. "Y'all right?"

"Yeah," he said, feeling more than a little embarrassed to have been caught so off-center, and to have been held up by a woman. Meeting her eyes, he had to catch his breath. "Thank you."

Her dancing brown eyes were bold below marked brown brows as she appeared to study him to assure herself he was, indeed, able to stand on his own. He had the definite feeling, though, that she was checking him out, which was disconcerting . . . and a little flattering. As brief as the contact had been, he felt the emptiness where her hands had braced him. Blowing out a puff of air, he tried to shrug the expectant feeling away.

Hands dropping to her sides, she nodded. "You're welcome. But hey, if you ever feel the need to step into a gravity well again," she said with a

laugh, “I’ll be more than happy to help!” Her wink was playful and he knew that she could indeed be flirtatious, given the opportunity.

It was not in his nature, though, to provide one. He could only look at her in surprise and regret that he couldn’t seem to respond in kind. He wanted to, but felt out of his depth with her. And gravity well? Was that a new slang term or something?

“Shelley! You’re early,” Anne said from behind the counter. “Busy day today?”

A strange upsurge of hope sent his eyebrows up. Shelley. Her name was Shelley and she was another regular at China Town. He knew he hadn’t seen her here before.

“Oh, yeah. I’ve got such a route, today!”

Her voice brought him back to the present, reminding him of his chagrin at having fallen right into this young woman’s arms. He didn’t stick around to eavesdrop on the conversation. He just wanted to take his disconcerted self out of China Town and back to the office, where things made more sense.

Except that they didn’t make sense when he reached the church. A huge delivery truck from one of the local, upscale furniture stores was parked at the entrance, and there was a team of muscular fellows hefting a desk through the glass doors as Mark approached. This was a large church, as such concepts were reckoned. Not a mega-church, but large. He was one of three Associate Pastors on staff, with his primary area of responsibility being the Education Ministries. Although it was not as physically involving as Youth Ministry, he felt he might be getting too old for that himself. Oh, he knew of several youth pastors who were his age and older, but these days he was just as happy to be working in a less high-energy position.

*Does that make me a wimp? he wondered with a grin. Or just an old fogey?*

An image of the blond-haired, brown-eyed woman from the Chinese restaurant made him think that maybe he was. He had, after all, found the first few gray hairs at his temples just last week.

“Dr. Countryman,” Letty said with a smile. She was the secretary he “shared” with the music minister. “Here are some messages for you, and don’t forget to check your e-mail.”

“What’s with the delivery truck?”

Letty rose and gave him an invoice. “New furniture.”

“I saw that,” he remarked. “When did this happen?”

“Oh. They called on Monday, and Trish was at the front desk. They told her they’d be coming today to deliver all of this, but she, ah—” Letty shrugged with silent apology.

“Forgot? Yeah. So what’re they doing?”

“Look at the invoice,” Letty said, her voice more enthusiastic as she began discussing decorating. Her short, black hair fluttered around her head as she turned this way and that, watching as a desk was removed from one of the offices.

“Hey! That’s mine!” Mark protested. “Wait a sec!”

Letty put one well-manicured hand on his arm. “Hang on. I got your desk cleared off, with Pastor and Marianne helping. We were all taken by surprise, Mark.”

He knew that Pastor Benjamin Keller and Marianne, Ben’s secretary, would have done a fine job making sure his stuff was out of the way, but still, Mark was irritated at the unannounced change. He didn’t want to express that to Letty, though, so he shook his head. “Okay. So how’d this happen?”

“See the invoice? Jacob Cairns apparently decided to surprise you guys and buy you all new office furniture. Look, in this collection there’s a desk, bookshelves, and a file cabinet.”

“What’d Pastor say?” he asked Letty, using the reference to their boss that the entire office used.

Letty slid a glance through slightly slanted eyes. “He was...

surprised. Called Jacob to, um, thank him.”

Her tone was rich in nuance. So was his. “Uh-huh. We’ll have to make sure we all send him appropriate expressions of our gratitude.” He grimaced as his bookshelves were carted down the hall, past the desk where he was standing with Letty, and down a short corridor to be deposited in the wide foyer of the building, where the church offices were housed under the same roof as the worship center.

Thanking Letty, Mark took advantage of the delivery men being out at the well-marked delivery truck to hurry to his office and see the chaos that was developing. His books were stacked against the far wall, under the windows, in rows about three books deep. With a sigh, he saw where his desk had been by the indentations on the carpet, and was thankful that no one had wheeled his chair out. He liked that chair and it was hard to find something truly comfortable. He had brought this one down from Ohio, and its brown leather ergonomic curves suited him well. Apparently, Mr. Cairns had not found it necessary to replace it.

He closed his eyes and remembered to give thanks for the generosity behind the gift of new office furniture. For every pastor on staff.

“Didn’t have time to call and warn you, Mark, sorry.” It was the senior pastor’s resonant voice and Mark turned with a smile. Ben’s expression was wry. “Mr. Cairns informed me that he will be coming out tomorrow to check the furniture to make sure it is in good condition.”

“From this store? I’m sure it will be.” The store was pretty much the premier furniture store in Florida. Mark had never even been in one of their showrooms. What was the point when he couldn’t afford a lamp from that place, much less a sofa?

“Excuse us!” one of the delivery men called, his voice sounding strained under the weight of a rather impressive desk. Ben had Mark chuckling by the dramatic way in which he drew himself up on the wall opposite where the desk would go. Between the two well-muscled delivery men, the desk made it through the door without mishap. “That’s good,” one of them, with the edge of a tattoo visible under the sleeve of his shirt, remarked. “Didn’t have to take the legs off.”



“Uh, yeah. Thanks. Good,” Mark said when it appeared the man was waiting for a response.

“Be back with the bookcases next.”

They left and Mark moved to the new desk strictly on autopilot. “Wow. Had you seen this before?” he inquired of his boss.

“No. It’s good furniture, though.”

“I didn’t doubt that for a minute.”

“Jacob wanted to give the church something practical, he said. Thought we could all use some new pieces.” Ben knelt to examine the drawers and then the keyboard tray that slid out from under the main work surface of the desk. The dark wood gleamed in the overhead lighting. “He wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Well, it certainly has been. Very generous of him.”

“Mm.” Ben didn’t say any more than that and Mark let it go.

He moved to his next concern. “What about our old stuff? We’ve got everyone coming tonight and I’m guessing that the foyer will be full.”

“Yeah,” Ben said, pushing himself up to his full height of just under six feet. Mark himself was about six feet, so the two men were all but eye-to-eye. “Well. We’ll just do the best we can. I’m thinking that Marianne, Letty, and Cris can sort through and recycle our old furniture. Might be able to donate some of it, too.”

“Excuse us!” The voice echoed down the hall, and the senior pastor and senior associate pastor hurried from that office down to one of the others, to be of what help they could.

“When I was in the Marines,” Ben remarked with a laugh, “we had a motto.”

“Semper Fi?” Mark guessed.

“No. Semper Gumby. Always flexible.” “Good motto.”



“Here’s my paperwork,” Shelley Roberts told Dinah in Customer Service. “Where’s my route for today?”

“And good morning to you,” Dinah said, tucking a long section of chestnut-colored hair behind one ear. “Here you go. Parts are pulled. Some of ‘em are over there at The Empty.” The Empty was a customer service workstation that was uninhabited. It had been empty—ominously so, some might say—since the building was constructed. Management didn’t want to hear anything about that, so it was a term only used by the furniture technicians and customer service representatives.

Shelley took the papers and nodded, her short blond hair scattering in playful disarray. She had the Naples route today. Most of her calls were down there anyway. Incredible houses. Luxury high-rises that just blew her mind on occasion. “Okay. I’ll go get that stuff out to the van then.”

“Wait!”

“What?”

Dinah shot her an incredulous expression. “Did you meet any cute ones yesterday?”

Shelley grinned. “Oh, yeah. One. Very hot. Very much a Tall, Dark, and Handsome.”

Dinah sat back in her chair so that her pregnancy was obvious. “Oh? Isn’t it just a shame that the TDH ones are customers?”

“Not this one. I saw him on lunch. Almost knocked me off my feet. Or,” she amended with a twinkle in her eye, “maybe I knocked him off his.”

“Tell!” Dinah demanded, busy hands beckoning for more information.

Shelley recounted her adventure, such as it was, of the prior afternoon. “He was on his way out, though,” she said with a dramatic sigh. “So I didn’t get to find out his name.”

“Too bad. But hey, there’s always Bret . . .”

The young women erupted in giggles at the idea. Bret was a furniture technician, like Shelley, and had the reputation for hitting on every single female in the entire company. No matter their age or status, he gave it the old college try. It was sad, but it was also kind of funny. At least, Shelley thought so.

She checked The Empty for the parts that would be needed for the day and saw she would need something from the warehouse. Which was cool. She had worked there for years before being transferred permanently to doing the in-home service calls. With a bounce in her step, she entered the enormous building adjacent to—but completely different from—the main business offices of the company. “Hey!”

“Shell! Good to see ya!”

“Good morning!”

“How are ya?”

“Lookin’ good.”

“Your dad’s over there.”

The various calls, comments, and pointed fingers had her responding as she worked her way over to her dad’s workstation. “Good to see you. Almost Friday. Hey, it’s just the uniform, you know? Thanks!”

The company’s uniform for the service techs was extremely serviceable. A midnight blue polo shirt with the employee’s name embroidered on the front in white and the company name and logo on the sleeve. It was paired with either slacks or shorts of an industrial-grade fabric, made to withstand hundreds of washings while maintaining the khaki color. Always worn with socks and hiking boots, sneakers, or steel-toed boots—

depending upon what the individual tech decided was necessary. OSHA, probably, would prefer the steel toes.

“Shell! Got your route for today?”

“Yeah, Dad. Just picking up some parts. How’re you doing? How’s Stephanie?” Her father’s wife was technically her stepmother, but Shelley could not bring herself to call Stephanie anything but her name.

Dad had remarried only a few years back, so Stephanie didn’t expect it either. Her father smiled a little and chucked her on the chin with a callused hand. “Doin’ fine, hon. No worries. Steph’s great. Got plans after church on Sunday?”

“Nope.”

“Good. Come over for lunch.”

“Who’s cooking?”

“She is.”

“Then I’ll be there,” Shelley assured her father.

After gathering her parts together and checking her map pages—she knew the Naples area, but it never hurt to double check—she climbed behind the wheel of her company service van and headed out for another day.

“Too bad I won’t be in NoFo,” she remarked to herself, referring to North Fort Myers, where she lived and, occasionally, worked. “Coulda been fun to see if Tall, Dark, and Handsome was eating Chinese take-out today.”

As she did her service calls, Shelley always prayed for the customers she was sent out to help. Her job was part craftsman, part salesman, part fire-extinguisher. Throw in amateur psychologist, dog handler, lizard-wrangler, child-teaser, and encourager of some note, and she guessed that would go a fair way to describing her work. She prayed, though, for the people she saw. Prayed in a general way for their lives, prayed that she would do well for them, satisfying their concerns by one means or another at her disposal. She truly just wanted the best for them all. Even the ornery ones.

The following week, her resolve was tested again. It happened a couple times a month or so.

“Shelley, you get a fun one today,” Dinah told her, moving a picture of her husband and pulling out the work orders for the day.

Taking the clipboard, Shelley flipped through the pages. “Which one? I don’t recognize any of these addresses.”

“The one at the church with the delivery damage. Mr. Cairns requested you.”

“Cairns?” She drew a blank. “Not a clue.”

“New stuff,” Dinah pointed out, standing and rubbing at the small of her back. “See? Not his house at all. Look, it’s a church.”

The women grimaced over Dinah’s desk. “Lovely,” Shelley muttered. “Another Wednesday shot to Mars.”

“Ha! You wish. And I thought you went to church?”

“I do. Not that one, but I do go. Cairns.” She shook her head. “Well, if he asked for me, I guess I’ll recognize him when I see him. And hey!” She grinned with a sudden thought. “Maybe Tall, Dark, and Handsome is at the Chinese take-out again.”

“Super Shell to the rescue? He should be so lucky. You look like a superhero.”

Shelley snorted. “Me?”

“Yeah! You’re so athletic. And you have those great calf muscles, and some serious definition with your arms. Haven’t seen your abs, but—”

By this time, Shelley was laughing silently into her paperwork. “I’m so not athletic. That’s my brother’s job. I just . . .”

“You just move furniture,” Dinah whispered loudly. “We won’t tell.”

After collecting her parts for the day and checking in with her dad, as was her usual routine, Shelley was out into the breezy March morning. All

during her first three calls, she was planning out a lunch hour stop at China Town. Maybe he'd be there. Same day of the week and everything.

Maybe. She wouldn't get to find out, though, until after that church call. So it was with a degree of impatience that she pulled up right in front of the main entrance, the company logo telling anyone who wondered who was imposing on their sheltered drop-off space.

Slipping her cell phone into a pocket on her shorts, her camera strap around one wrist and her clipboard in hand, she went through the doors, wondering what kind of delivery damage there might be and if she had any chance of being done in time to find Tall, Dark, and Handsome at China Town.

She had just come through the door when she was met by a face she definitely remembered. He had once left about two dozen tiny blue sticky notes on a coffee table. The table was distressed, meaning it was supposed to have the gouges and such in its surface, and was on the sales floor in that state—its proper state. Yet the man now facing her had gone round and round with her about it.

Dear Father in Heaven, she began silently as she came to him to shake his hand. Please bless Mr. Cairns and his day. Let his business go well and may his attitude be bright. And please, Lord God, hide the sticky notes! Thank you!

## Chapter Two

*“ . . . do not forget the zing!”*

He really hoped that the service guy would arrive soon. Mark felt he had been fairly good-humored about having his office virtually upended for a full week, but he was getting a bit tired of having to sift through stacks of papers and books for studies and notes for his research and classes. Additionally, he would be preaching Sunday night, and this upheaval was not conducive to clear thinking.

He had given serious consideration to just working from home this week. “Maybe I should’ve,” he remarked quietly to his computer screen as he played out the PowerPoint presentation for his evening class. Lights flickered on the phone. The intercom indicator. Ah, maybe he’s here, now. And I can get my books back up and my stuff organized again.

It was unsettling, working like this. Mark really was unhappy that he was feeling so ungrateful, though. Jacob Cairns had done a generous thing—all right, maybe for a tax write-off, but still—and Mark told himself that he had to pray for an attitude adjustment.

“Ah, here you are. Pastor Keller, this is the, ah, furniture technician I personally requested to see to these repairs.”

Ben’s voice was low-pitched and neutral, Jacob Cairns’s more strident. “Now, what happened,” Mr. Cairns was saying as the group passed Mark’s

closed office door, “is that the delivery team was in a hurry. That’s patently obvious. You’ll just have to touch up what they messed up.”

Then the voices were out of his earshot and Mark could only imagine they were going to Ben’s office first. The senior pastor had been given not only a large desk, but also a bookcase that measured the length of one full wall, a pair of leather conference chairs and small occasional table, in addition to a pair of file cabinets in the same rich wood from which the rest of the furniture was crafted. The only thing he had seen wrong was that the desk wobbled. But Mark figured that was due as much to the floor of the office as it was to any “delivery damage” that Jacob Cairns was insisting be fixed.

Mark powered down his computer and left his Bible open—God’s word was never wasted—on his new desk, and did what he could to tidy up the books he had been using. Wouldn’t do to present a careless image to anyone. Soon enough, he heard Mr. Cairns escorting the service guy down the hall.

“Now, this is Dr. Countryman’s office. I was really unhappy at the way the bookcases are standing. Not leveled at all. And there are several scratches on the desktop.”

Surprised, Mark leaned over to examine the desktop. He didn’t notice any scratches. He thought it looked to be excellent in quality and craftsmanship. The knocking on his door had him straightening his tie and forgoing his examination.

“Hello!”

“Dr. Countryman? May we come in?” Jacob Cairns’s voice was now smooth, in the manner of a diplomat.

“Yes, please, I’ve been expecting you.”

Then the door opened and Mark’s jaw dropped. It was the young woman with the sure hands from China Town. “Well, I sure wasn’t expecting *you*,” he murmured directly to her.





*Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome!*

Shelley sent a quick thank you to the Lord for the opportunity just to see the man again. He had a name: *Dr. Countryman*. She tried to recover and remember everything her father had ever taught her about “appropriate behavior” toward a client when he first started taking her on calls. “Dr. Countryman, good morning. I, ah, wasn’t expecting you either,” she said with her best professional smile.

“You know him?” the customer, Mr. Cairns, inquired with some surprise.

Shelley couldn’t seem to take her eyes from Dr. Countryman, but she did answer. “Not exactly, sir. We bumped into each other last week, but were not introduced.” To the tallish man with the olive complexion, incredible dark eyes and still-incredulous smile, she extended her hand. “Shelley Roberts, Dr. Countryman. Let me take a look at your desk, all right?”

He shook her hand and Shelley had to look away and swallow hard to get her thundering heart back where it belonged. Whoa. She could not maintain eye contact. Compelling her expression to obedience, she found Dr. Countryman’s face and noticed the interest in his eyes. That was encouraging.

She stepped past him to the desk, since Customer Cairns seemed to be very annoyed at its condition. “Ah, yes. Okay. There are some scratches to the finish here, and here,” she remarked, hoping she didn’t sound like some breathless teenager. “I can make those disappear.”

“The drawers,” Mr. Cairns said next. “They were making a strange sound when they closed. Dr. Countryman? Did you notice that?”

The question practically demanded that the office’s main inhabitant answer in the affirmative. Shelley met Dr. Countryman’s eyes as he said, “Maybe a slight banging sound, when they get fully closed.”

“May I?” Shelley asked, moving around the desk, where his Bible was open. She smiled a little. “Romans. My dad always says that that book is like the How-to Book for Christians,” she remarked as she knelt near the knee-hole of the desk and rolled open the lowest drawer. “Not peeking,” she said, looking way up at Dr. Countryman and Mr. Cairns with what she knew was a

reassuring manner. “Just listening to the glides.” She heard the gratifyingly smooth sound of the drawer sliding out before she checked its balance and alignment. “Sounds good.”

“But when it closes,” Mr. Cairns reminded her, sounding insistent. “It has a hard sound.”

Politely, she nodded and slid the drawer shut. It did have a bit of a metallic edge to it. “I can fix it so there’s a bumper back there, sir.” After checking the other desk drawers, she took pictures of the desktop. “Macro setting,” she said, letting the men know what she was doing. “This will be on the file, so I can remember to have the right stains when I come back.”

“When you come *back*?”

Both men had said that on the same breath. Shelley kept her expression politely neutral as she turned to face them fully. It was a little difficult. She felt almost as if Mr. Tall, Dark—Dr. Countryman—had sucked all the air out of the room with his sheer presence. She wasn’t stupid. She knew it was entirely a chemistry thing, but it was still a little overwhelming for her. Still, she did her best not to heed it. “Yes, Mr. Cairns. Dr. Countryman. The work order only indicated there was delivery damage. There was no indication of how many pieces would need touching up. I don’t have the time scheduled today to get all of this done. I’ll have to reschedule and come out for probably a full day, if the other two offices are like the ones I have already seen.”

“Seriously?” Dr. Countryman blurted out, sounding disconcerted. “I was really,” he continued, smoothing his voice out a little, she noted, “looking forward to being able to get my books back on some shelves.” He smiled disarmingly as he said this and she couldn’t help but smile back. He had that kind of charisma.

Nodding, she said she understood. “Let me take a look at them,” she offered.

Mr. Cairns accompanied her, pointing out a ding in the corner of one of the tall bookcases. “And here, too. Look at the scratches the delivery team made when they were putting the shelves in.

Shelley nodded, wishing Mr. Cairns would back off and give her a little room. He smelled like her last not-quite-boyfriend. Gucci aftershave that was a little too expensive. Not her favorite, for more than one reason. “Let me take some pics of this, too,” she said, swinging her camera up. After doing so, she glanced back at Dr. Countryman who was leaning resignedly against his brand new desk and eyeing his books. “Look. Let me go get the pictures of the other pieces. Then I’ll come back and try to get these level for you, okay?”

“Really?” he asked, his head seeming to jerk in surprise.

She grinned at him. “Yes. But,” she went on, putting her grin away in favor of a “laying down the law” face for a customer, “if you want these scratches and that ding fixed when I come back, you’ll need to have your books off those shelves. This one here and that one and the one down below on the other case. All right?” She really did not like moving a customer’s personal possessions, whether it was books or porcelain sculptures out of a curio cabinet.

His answering smile was warm. “All right.”

She wanted to sigh—maybe even swoon—but nodded instead and left the office on Mr. Cairn’s heels. While taking pictures of another desk with delivery scratches, a chair with wobbly wheels, and more dings on more bookcases, Shelley said all the right things to the new owners of the furniture Mr. Cairns had purchased. Then, she made a few notes on her paperwork and tried to return to the van.

“Now just a moment, young woman,” Customer Cairns said, coming to stand in front of her.

She couldn’t just walk around him. No, at all times she had to be respectful. In her line of work the customer was not always right, but they did require a good hearing and some definite pacification. “Yes, sir?”

“I paid good money for these pieces,” he said, his voice low and intense, as if to try to intimidate her. “I want them taken care of immediately.”

She made sure she was at her reassuring best. “I understand, sir. I want to give each of these pieces the time they deserve. But I can’t do that today, with my current route. To do it properly, I’ll require at least four hours, I’m thinking. Maybe more. I’ll want to dedicate half a day to these pieces exclusively, to do the job right, and I can’t do that today.” She smiled a little disarmingly. “The work order wasn’t very specific, as I said earlier. The office didn’t know to allow time for so many pieces.”

He looked disgruntled. “Well, I can’t be here for another day.”

“I’ve got pictures of everything you pointed out, Mr. Cairns. I’ll make sure to take care of each thing. Shall I ask Customer Service to call you for the rescheduling, or should they call the church’s office?”

“Here. Have ‘em call here. I can’t make it. But I will,” he added with a warning frown, “be in touch with Pastor Keller about it.”

“I’m sure you will. Now, if you’ll excuse me, sir, I have to get the tools to level the bookcases in Dr. Countryman’s office.”



*This is just nuts.*

Mark fidgeted at his desk, trying to add notes for his lesson that night, but all he could do was remember the last time a woman had knocked the breath out of him like Shelley Roberts had.

Her name was Dawn. A beautiful single mother with blond hair and blue eyes, she had been raising a teenage daughter all on her own. Her ex-boyfriend, Garrison, had been, and still was, a friend of Mark’s. Knowing himself attracted to the mother of his friend’s daughter, Mark had actually checked with Garrison before asking Dawn out. He remembered exactly when he knew he had fallen in love with her—it hadn’t taken him long at all. That feeling, the surety of it, had been a quiet strength in him.

It just hadn’t been a *mutual* feeling. Though Garrison had wronged Dawn in the worst possible way when they had both still been in high school, she had grown to care for him when they met again. Their relationship had

grown around their daughter, PJ—a girl in Mark’s youth group, now in her twenties—and it had been a beautiful example of forgiveness.

Mark had bowed out, Dawn and Garrison had married, and Mark moved across the country. God’s hand had been obvious in that relationship. Today, Mark was pleased to call Garrison and Dawn Chase his friends. It had been a long time ago. He had never felt like that for anyone else, though. Not in all the years since. Sometimes, out of sheer loneliness, it was easy to want to try to *make* a relationship work. That hadn’t worked well for Mark either.

Thankfully, he and Christina in Ohio had come to the mutual realization that wishing did not make it so; not even for two committed Christians who were trying hard. Too hard. His relationship with her had ended in much the same way as his time with Dawn—losing out to an old flame. He’d been pleased for Dawn and happy for Christina, but he missed the companionship.

He didn’t want to go through all that again. Closing his eyes, Mark wasn’t sure what to do. She was *there*. Occupying far too much mental space for someone he had met only a couple of times. It was like being a teenager again. Like he had no kind of control of his thoughts around her.

*Lord, he prayed, as he had many times before, I don’t want anyone unless you want her for me. So, please, put a bow around her, like that song I heard over the holidays said, would you? So I know? I want only what you want for me. I don’t want to blow it again.*

Less internally agitated, he was able to greet Shelley the furniture technician in a more settled manner. “I really appreciate this,” he told her when she returned, small black bag in one hand.

“Not a problem. Now, if you’ll just step back,” she advised him, indicating the area behind his desk with a look, “I’ll just get these bookcases level for you.”

She knelt to check something before grimacing and rising to run her hand along the back of the bookshelf. When he saw her hand again, she was holding a red plastic bag. Without discussion, she opened it, checked the contents, and sighed.

It was pretty quiet which made him a little uncomfortable. “You mentioned that your dad said something about the Book of Romans?”

“Yep,” she said, tossing him a quick smile over her shoulder before twisting her body almost impossibly around to snag the tool bag. “It can’t be an original,” she added before sliding out a small bar that Mark recognized to be a flat-headed screwdriver.

“It’s not. So, ah, do you go to church?” he asked next. It was a nonthreatening question. She was, after all, in a church. He was no stranger to sharing his faith, but it was best to walk carefully in a professional relationship.

“I do,” she told him. “Not this denomination,” she clarified with another glance that seemed to twinkle even in the indifferent indoor lighting. “The Bible is still the Bible, though, isn’t it? Now, I am going to have to lay this down, so make sure to stay where you are, all right, sir?”

He hadn’t fully grasped what she said until she was in the middle of doing it: tilting the heavy bookcase and bringing it gently down to rest on its side on the floor. He had shifted that unit a bit himself last week, and knew how heavy it was. Embarrassed, he tried to apologize for not offering to help.

She laughed lightly. “This is my job, Dr. Countryman. I do it all the time. That one in the bigger office would be a two-man job, though, if it needed leveling. That’s what these things are, by the way. Levelers.”

“Does it?” he asked, because he enjoyed her voice. A vivid voice in a medium range that made him think of cheerleaders and being a youth pastor again.

“Need leveling? No.” She attached four long levelers to the four corners of the bookcase. “There we go.”

“Let me help you get it back up,” Mark offered, stepping around the desk.

She only tossed him her smile again, the same one that she had offered him at the Chinese take-out place. “Not necessary, honest. Besides, you’re

not dressed,” she said, squatting to grasp the top of the bookshelf, “for hefting furniture. Trust me.”

Nonplussed, he could only watch as she stood slowly up and, with careful placement of her hands, maneuvered the bookshelf back to where it had been. He watched as she used the screwdriver-looking tool to make some adjustments in practically invisible holes before putting some small brown circle things in them. Then, she tried to rock it, but it didn’t budge. “Wow. That was pretty complicated,” he remarked.

“Not bad at all.” Then, with a lifted brow, she added, “No Gravity Wells!”

So she remembered. Gratified, he grinned. “So you meant that to be about my, ah, near miss last week?”

“That’s what I blame it on, anyway. You know, when I trip or something. Dense gravity.” In a swing of her body, she moved up her tool bag again. “Hey, any excuse is a good one.”

He eyed her carefully. She was a little above average in height, he guessed. Sturdy-looking. Not big, just sturdy. Athletic. “Were you on a softball team or something in college?” She blinked and laughed before proceeding to the next bookcase. This time he didn’t offer to help at all. It was, he admitted to himself, a pleasure to watch her work. He had to remind himself not to stare.

“Me? No, sir. Didn’t go to college and I didn’t have time for sports in high school. My brother is the athlete. I worked with my dad.” Mark was really impressed that she was able to continue the discussion while lowering the bookcase to the floor and installing the levelers. “What about you?”

“Me?”

Her blush was unexpected, covering most of her face and slipping down her throat. “Sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to pry. Look, just about done here.”

Wanting to put her at her ease again, he cast about urgently for another topic. Not only for her, but for himself. He didn’t want to leave an impression of any sort of indiscretion on her part to color her memory. “Not prying at all.

You're only establishing a basis for mutual understanding," he ventured. "And no, I wasn't much into sports in high school or college." He laughed lightly. "I guess I was kind of a geek."

"You?"

"Me."

Up went the second bookcase and in went the screwdriver. "There you are, sir. I hope you can get your books back up in short order. I'm not sure when they'll reschedule you—um, this call—but I'll try to make sure I am the one who comes out. I'm usually in North Fort Myers on Wednesdays."

"So you have a regular route for this kind of thing?" He was honestly curious.

She offered him half a shrug. "Generally. We'll get it taken care of, though. One way or another."

"I'm sure you will, Miss Roberts."

For just a second, he wanted to find something else to say to her. There was a sense of expectation about her, too, and that was intriguing. Her lips parted, in fact, but neither of them had words to fill a silence that suddenly became charged.

She recovered first. Casting her gaze to her arm, she made a show of checking her watch. "Well, sir. I'll be back."

"Good." He had just one more question. "May I ask you something before you go?"

"Sure!"

"What's your favorite book of the Bible?"

She had not been expecting that, he could read in the lifting of those dark brown brows and widening of the lively eyes. She didn't hesitate to answer. "James. Now there's a writer who was very in your face, you know? I like that. See you next time, Dr. Countryman."



“I hope so,” he murmured as she left his office. The book of James. He was completely, unexpectedly, unsurprised.