

No Easy Solution

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Chapter One

Gil Turner was tired. He had been on the road for five hours now. His legs were cramping, his back was hurting, and now, to top it all off, he was getting a headache too.

This same trip from St. Louis had only taken him four hours the other time he'd made it. However, this time he was driving a twenty-foot rental truck with all his worldly possessions packed in it. Worse than that, he'd let the dealer talk him into pulling his Focus behind the truck. That had more than doubled the tension and aggravation he'd been suffering through all day. He'd never driven a truck before, much less pulled anything before either.

He didn't know what it was like to have a nervous breakdown, but he was sure he had to be getting close to one by now.

As he thought about it though, it was still better than having his mother and Aunt Eunice follow him down in his Focus and his mother's car. He was twenty-nine years old now and didn't want to start his new life down here with his controlling, overemotional mother and aunt hovering over him.

His thoughts came back to the road. The poor excuse of a road he was on only compounded everything. He couldn't believe it but the signs said that it was actually a state highway. He was used to wide city streets and freeways. He'd never been on a road like this one. He sure was glad he didn't have to travel any county roads. This one was bad enough. It was so curvy that most of the curve signs had an "S" on them and a suggested speed of twenty-five miles per hour. A few were even fifteen miles per hour. It was also too narrow. So narrow that he cringed every time he had to meet another vehicle bigger than his little Focus.

Ah, at last, there was a sign saying that he'd just entered Crowley County. That was good. But another sign fifty feet behind it said that Crowleyville was still another twenty-five miles. That was bad. Driving this truck and pulling his car, it would take him another hour on this winding mountain road.

He wasn't going to make it without stopping at least one more time. He had to stop. Thankfully, he was coming into a small town. He'd just pull off somewhere out of the way and rest for a little while.

Just as Gil saw an extra wide shoulder to pull onto, he noticed flashing red and blue lights in his side mirror. As he eased the truck and trailing car off the road, the patrol car pulled off right behind him. So much for hoping the guy only wanted to get around him.

Just as Gil was thinking that this was the first time he'd ever been pulled over by the police, there was a loud rapping on his window. He rolled it down and a big hand rested on the door. Gil looked at that hairy, freckled hand then forearm, on up to equally large biceps. Finally, his gaze made it the rest of the way up past the khaki uniform and badge to the red face beneath a cowboy hat. There were freckles there too. He could just see some dark red hair peeking out beneath the hat.

"License and registration, Son."

Gil struggled to get his wallet out of his back pants pocket to retrieve his license, and then leaned over to open the glove compartment to get the registration. As he was doing so, he wondered at the guy calling him 'son' since he couldn't be that much older than Gil.

When he handed his license and registration to the officer, they were snatched up as if they were food offered to a starving man.

The guy took a long look at Gil's driver's license, turned without another word, and went back to his car.

Now, Gil was starting to get a little worried. What had he done? He knew he'd been well under the thirty-five mile an hour speed limit since he had slowed down to find a place to pull off. Maybe there was something wrong with the taillights. That was it. It couldn't be anything else. It had to be that.

After almost five minutes of Gil squirming and sweating, the officer came back to Gil's window and handed him back his information.

Pointing at the license in Gil's hand, he said, "It says there that you live in Creve Coeur. What you doing way down here in my county boy?"

From the way he asked that question, Gil had a sinking feeling that the guy already knew the answer.

"I'm moving down here to be the pastor of First Baptist Church in Crowleyville."

"Where's your wife and kids?"

"I'm not married."

The big guy leaned down to get right in Gil's face. "Are you a troublemaker boy?"

Gil was shocked. He had always tried to live his life the way he thought God . . . and his mother would want him to and he had certainly never been accused of being a troublemaker before.

"No, sir, I wouldn't do that."

The officer leaned back, took off his hat, and waved it in front of his face in an effort to relieve the sweltering August heat and humidity. That was when Gil was able to get a good look at him. He had to be at least six four and two hundred and fifty pounds with no fat. His hat had plastered a ring of dark red hair to his head.

Placing a huge hand back on the window, the big guy leaned down again and said, "I'm the sheriff of this county and all I got to say to you Boy is that you'd better not stir up any trouble here like the preacher before you at that church did. You hear?"

Gil had no idea what the sheriff was talking about but knew he had better agree. "Yes, sir. I understand and I assure you I won't be causing any trouble."

"You'd better not, but then we'll see . . . won't we?"

With that, the sheriff stomped back to his vehicle, which Gil now noticed was a SUV rather than a regular car.

Once the sheriff's vehicle pulled out and passed him by, Gil breathed a huge sigh of relief. He just sat there for the next fifteen minutes with his head back against the headrest and his eyes closed trying to come down from his nervous high.

When he could finally get his body to move, he opened the door and slid out of the cab. After walking around the truck and car twice, he climbed back in behind the wheel.

Once he was back on the road, Gil couldn't keep the strange incident he'd just experienced out of his mind. What was that all about? Most especially, what was the sheriff talking about? Trouble? Pastors weren't supposed to cause trouble, were they? What could the last pastor have done? He made a mental note to ask someone at the church the first chance he got.

When Gil finally saw the city limit sign for Crowleyville, he wasn't sure he should breathe a sigh of relief and be thankful or not. Well, no matter what happened next, he was approaching his new home, even if an ominous dark cloud did hang over the town both literally and figuratively.

Now, all he had to do was maneuver this truck, pulling a car, through town to the church and then on up the hill to the parsonage behind it. That would definitely be tricky. He would have to get the truck through the church parking lot then up the narrow driveway to the house.

Gil was concentrating on his driving but a sign on his left still caught his eye. He took a quick glance over there and was shocked. The building was obviously a bar and it had one of those marque-type signs with The Early Bird on top. But the message on the board was what threw him. It said, "Go Home Turner."

He sure hoped they were talking about someone else named Turner.

His hopes were dashed when he turned his right-turn signal on to pull into the church parking lot. As he came to an almost complete stop, he noticed a group of five or six people standing on the sidewalk across from the church. They were all carrying signs and waving them at him. The signs all had the same message written on them.

Uh oh, what was he getting himself into now?

* * *

Mary Jo Early wiped the bar between her and Floyd McCracken again as he laughed another one of his booming laughs. She swiped at the bar a little more this time. She was getting angry, and couldn't put a finger on why. She was only half listening as Floyd continued.

"You should've seen the look on that little guy's face when I looked in his window at him. I wonder if he had to change his pants later."

He boomed out another laugh.

This time, she felt she had to say something. "Floyd, you always were nothing but a big bully. All the time we were growing up, you picked on everyone smaller than you, and of course, that was just about everyone."

"Yeah, Little Bit, but I never hurt anyone and I especially never picked on you, did I? In fact, I always made sure no one else did either."

She had to admit that her older cousin had always been there for her in so many ways, especially two years ago when her parents had died in that boating accident.

She sighed softly and tossed the cloth under the bar. "No, Floyd, you've always been good to me."

She looked across the bar and up at Floyd. Why had all the height in her family been on his side? With her at five three, and him at six four, she could pass under his arm. They were alike in their dark red hair and lots of freckles though. She almost laughed. Those were the two things she wished she hadn't gotten from her mother.

She turned back to Floyd when he started talking again. "I still think the sign out front and the signs at the church were a great welcome for that new preacher. We don't want another do-gooder coming here thinking he can just pick up where Dawson left off before folks ran him out of town, now do we?"

"Floyd, you know the signs weren't my idea. It was Carla who came up with it and her who's down there across from the church now with her friends."

She shook her head and swiped at the bar again. "Oh Floyd, I'm beginning to wonder if that might not have been such a good idea after all."

Floyd grunted. "What do you mean, Jo? We have to stand up for our rights in this county. We can't let a bunch of hypocritical do-gooders try to tell the rest of us how we're supposed to live our lives, now can we?"

"Just the same, Floyd, we can't go around acting like we're still on the playground either. Besides, this new preacher hasn't done anything wrong yet. Why not give the guy a chance to prove himself?"

Floyd snorted. "He's another Baptist ain't he? That's proof enough for me. They're all the same, nothing but do-gooders who're always trying to push their beliefs on the rest of us."

She knew that getting mad at Floyd wouldn't do any good. Her cousin was one of the hardest headed, thickest-skinned persons she'd ever known. But if she didn't get away from him right now, at least for a few minutes, she might just smack him.

"I'm going out front to change the sign."

As soon as she walked out of the air-conditioned bar, Mary Jo felt like someone had thrown a wet blanket on her. The heat and humidity of midday in the Ozarks of southern Missouri was almost unbearable.

She had just finished changing the sign to announce her happy hour when a minivan pulled into the lot and five giggling and talking girls piled out. All but one scattered around the parking lot, jumped into their cars and trucks, and then left.

The driver of the van, a tall willowy blond girl, headed over to where Jo stood. That forced Jo to look up at her sixteen-year-old sister, Carla Sue. Why was she the one who had inherited all the good physical traits from both sides of the family that Mary Jo had always wished she'd gotten?

Jo smiled as Carla was bouncing up and down with excitement. "Oh Jo, you should have seen the look on that preacher's face when he saw all of us across the street waving those signs at him. I thought he was going to explode, his face got so red."

Jo knew that this wasn't the time or place to tell Carla what she thought about what she and her friends had done. Instead, she said, "Let's go on inside and get lunch. Floyd's here and will probably be eating with us."

Later, after lunch, Jo began to wonder about the new preacher at the Baptist church. What was he like? She'd heard that he was a good thirty years younger than the previous old bigot had been. Maybe he wouldn't be a fire-breathing troublemaker like Dawson. She could only hope so.

She had just finished taking in a beer delivery when her best friend, Sue Ann Vickers, came in and did her usual runway walk from the door up to the bar. As always, Jo had to struggle not to laugh. Sue Ann had been in one fashion show more than ten years ago, but still walked the way she'd been instructed back then.

"Hey Jo Jo, how you doing today?"

Sue Ann was the only person who had ever called her Jo Jo. She couldn't remember when it had started. They'd been best friends since first grade so it had probably started back then.

She turned to Sue Ann and said, "Other than being tired in the middle of the day, mostly from putting up with Floyd for two hours and feeding him lunch, I guess I'm okay."

Sue Ann frowned. "When you going to throw that freeloader out of here at lunchtime or better yet, start charging him?"

Jo smiled and said, "I don't mind that so much, he is my cousin after all, and he does watch over this place for me. A free lunch here and there isn't a bad price to pay for extra police protection."

Sue Ann only snorted.

When Sue Ann didn't continue her diatribe against Floyd, Jo knew that her friend had something else that she thought was extremely important to relate to her, so Jo waited her out. Otherwise, Sue Ann wouldn't be away from her beauty shop in the middle of the day.

"I just saw that new Baptist preacher down at the church unloading his things from a truck." She waited, apparently for Jo to comment and when she didn't, continued, "Well, I'd say that he may be young, but he sure isn't much to look at though. He can't be any taller than me even. And he's kind a skinny too."

At five ten, Sue Ann was taller than a lot of the men around the county and she never missed an opportunity to make note of that fact.

When Jo still didn't comment, Sue Ann, snorted and said, "Don't you want to go down there and get a good look at your new enemy?"

Jo was surprised that first Floyd and now Sue Ann were both expecting her to start fighting the new preacher even before he preached his first sermon.

"Sue Ann, you of all people should know that I'm not that type of person. I don't want to fight with him or anyone else for that matter."

Sue Ann looked disappointed. She only stayed for a few more minutes and left seeming to be somewhat frustrated or disappointed with Jo.

Well, so much for her day . . . so far.

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Gil pulled the truck into the church parking lot and stopped it near the narrow drive that led back to the parsonage. Looking up at the house, he knew it would be much easier to unload the truck if he could somehow manage to get it up that long narrow driveway and then turn it around to back it up to the garage. Then he realized that there was no room to turn it around up there.

Therefore, he would have to back it up and he didn't even want to think about trying to do that. He knew that he had done well just to get the truck from St. Louis to here without any major mishaps. He wasn't about to push it. Besides, he was so tired that he thought he might drop any minute.

He opened his door and slid out of the truck. Well, at least he could unhook his car and thus get it out of the way.

He had just finished unhooking the car and moving it over to a parking spot nearby when a big pickup with four rear wheels pulled in next to him. The driver looked familiar but Gil couldn't place him. He was sure that he was a member of the church though. And they must have met two weeks ago when Gil had been here to preach in view of a calling.

Of course, the church had voted to call him or he wouldn't have just lived through one of his most harrowing experiences driving that truck down here.

Gil stood next to his car waiting for the older man to approach him. He was about Gil's height, but much heavier with short, dark brown hair under a baseball type cap. He was wearing bib overalls. At least that's what Gil thought they were. He'd never seen any before except in the movies.

"Hey there Pastor, remember me, Richard Dickens, chairman of the deacons?"

They shook hands and Gil felt bad for not recognizing this all-important man in the church. "Hello, Brother Dickens, I'm glad to see you."

The other man smiled and said, "I'll just bet you are. Oh by the way, you can just call me Richard. Everybody else here at the church does. Just about everybody else in town does too. We sure don't get too formal around here."

Gil nodded but chose not to comment as he mentally compared his casual polo shirt and Dockers with Richard's overalls with a t-shirt underneath.

"You going to back that truck up there to the parsonage, or would you like for me to do it?"

Gil felt as if he'd suddenly been set free of some kind of bondage. "If you could, I sure would appreciate it. I've never backed one of those things up before."

"Sure thing Pastor. The keys in it?" When Gil nodded, Richard jumped into the cab and cranked the motor. He quickly backed it out into the middle of the parking lot and swung around then begin backing it up the long narrow drive to the parsonage.

Gil followed along on foot and marveled at how easily Richard whipped the truck all the way up to the garage in no time at all. Well, that was great. Wasn't it?

As soon as Richard stopped the truck, he jumped out and went to the front door of the parsonage. He pulled a set of keys out of his pocket, opened the door then disappeared inside, and a few seconds later, the garage door opened.

Gil was somewhat winded when he finally made it up the hill to where the truck was backed up to the garage. He hadn't realized how out of shape he was and made a mental note to start back on his exercise program as soon as possible. He'd spent the past year trying to find a church and had neglected his exercise routine.

When Gil stopped at the side of the truck, Richard came out of the garage and stood in front of him.

"Well, Pastor, I don't want to be hurting your feelings none, but you look like you're about to drop in your tracks. Why don't you get a load off?"

When Gil started to protest, Richard held up a hand and said, "Don't you worry a bit now, I got three other men from the church on their way over here, and we'll have this little truck unloaded in no time at all."

Gil felt somewhat embarrassed carrying small boxes while the other four men unloaded all his big or heavy things. He had tried several times to help them but had been relegated to the small things each time. They'd argued that most pieces required two sets of hands to carry, and he was the odd man out. But he still felt bad though.

He didn't have much, just a living room set, dining room set, and one bedroom set, complete with a king size bed. The other three bedrooms would just have to sit empty for now. Other than that, he had books, lots of books. Ten years of college and seminary had more than doubled an otherwise large collection of books.

He was glad that the study, which was just off the foyer at the front of the house was already furnished with a desk, desk chair, two visitor chairs, and most importantly of all, three walls of empty bookshelves.

When all the furniture and boxes were unloaded, Richard came up to Gil where he was unpacking books in the study.

"Well, Pastor, looks like everything's all done here." He paused while he took his cap off and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "If you'd like, I can take that truck down to Butch's place on the other side of town. All you'll have to do is stop in there anytime soon and settle up with him."

"That would be great Richard. I really appreciate all you and the others have done for me today."

“Aw it wasn’t nothing. We always help the new pastor move in. It’s just the way we do things around here. We do try to take good care of our pastor, you’ll see.”

He started to leave but stopped, turned back, and said, “Bert Smith, who’s our janitor at the church will be coming over here once a week to clean the house and scrub the toilets.”

He paused with a smile on his face, “That is if it’s okay with you.”

Gil had to smile. He was beginning to think he was going to like the way they took care of their pastor here. “That’s fine Richard, and thanks again.”

With that, Richard jumped in the truck and drove it back down the hill and out of the parking lot. The other three men had already left.

Gil sat in his new desk chair, behind his new desk, in his new study and thought back over the last two hours. What in the world was he doing here? This town and these people were so much different from what he was used to that he almost felt like he was in a foreign country. Then there were the “Go Home Turner” signs he’d seen.

Suddenly homesickness almost overwhelmed him.

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Jo was so tired at five o’clock, that she could barely climb the stairs at the rear of the bar to the upstairs apartment she shared with her little sister. She needed to talk to Carla about her actions today, but wasn’t sure when would be a good time. She never seemed to know anymore. But when she stopped to think about it, she realized that Carla was just being a teenager, that was all.

She had grilled some hamburgers for their supper and when she passed through their kitchen, she placed it on the table and went to get Carla. She was in her room on her bed with earbuds in her ears listening to her music, as usual.

Jo knew the only way to get Carla’s attention was to stand in front of her until the girl opened her eyes and saw her.

It took a minute, but it worked.

Carla took the buds out of her ears and looked up at Jo. “Is it suppertime?”

Jo nodded and said, “Let’s go eat while it’s still hot.”

Neither one said much while they ate, and Jo was glad since it gave her time to relax and cool down before she tried to talk to Carla. Why was she so uptight?

When they had finished working together to clear the table, rinse the dishes, and load the dishwasher, Carla started to leave the room, but Jo stopped her.

“Carla Sue, could you sit with me in the living room for just a minute? I need to talk to you.”

Jo could see the emotions flash across Carla’s face. Everything from anger to resentment to boredom showed on her sister’s rather expressive face. She stood there staring down at Jo for so long that she was afraid Carla might refuse.

Then, finally, Carla shrugged her shoulders and said what Jo knew all teenagers say but it still irritated her.

“Whatever!”

Once they were settled at opposite sides of the living room, Jo felt that she could finally talk. It would not have been easy for her, the big sister, to try to discipline her little sister when said “little” sister looked down at her from five inches above.

Carla looked at her expectantly, almost defiantly and Jo knew she had to tread carefully. She gathered her thoughts and began.

“Carla Sue . . .”

“Are you trying to be like Mom by calling me Carla Sue when you’re mad at me?”

Carla’s interruption threw Jo off and caused her to forget the line of reasoning she’d planned. “No, at least if I was, I didn’t realize that was what I was doing.”

Carla smiled at her minor victory and Jo realized that Carla knew she had flustered her big sister.

“Okay, Carla . . . let’s start again.”

When Carla only glared at her, Jo knew she had to back up and try a different approach. “Carla, you and I only have each other now. Sure, I know we have aunts, uncles, and cousins all over the county, but that’s different. We’re sisters and that means a lot to me, and I hope it does to you too.”

She paused to let that sink in. When Carla’s face still showed no emotion, she continued, “I love you and I want you to be happy more than anything else in my life right now.”

With that said, Jo leaned back in her chair and watched Carla. At last, there was a little bit of emotion playing on her face. That should be a good sign.

“The more I’ve thought about it since this morning, the more I’m sure that what you and your friends did with our sign and then the signs down at the church was wrong.”

That certainly produced a reaction from Carla. She leaned forward in her seat and said, “But, you didn’t tell us we couldn’t and you didn’t try to stop us.”

Jo frowned. “No I didn’t. You’re right. I was just as wrong as you girls if not more so because I should have known better and I should have stopped you.”

Carla’s voice was dripping with sarcasm when she said, “Is this where you remind me that you’re the adult here and I’m the child? You may be fourteen years older than me, but you’re still not my mother.”

Jo felt like Carla had slapped her. “No, I’m not your mother, but I am your legal guardian and I’m trying my best to do exactly what Mom and Dad would have done if they were still here.”

She couldn’t help it when she burst into tears. She tried to fight it, but she’d had such a terrible day and she suddenly felt so overwhelmed. She looked over at Carla and saw that big tears were streaming down her cheeks too.

Jo stood and slowly walked over to Carla. When Carla finally looked up at her, Jo held out her arms and Carla leaped into them.

All wasn’t well between them yet, but it was much better than it had been a little while ago.

Later, after Jo hung up the phone from talking or rather listening to Sue Ann for over an hour, she wasn’t sure whether she felt better or not.

Sue Ann had talked mostly about what others around town were saying about the new Baptist preacher. He sure was getting quite a reputation already and it was only Thursday. Wait until Sunday came around then people really would have things to say about him.

She was starting to get sleepy and was about to head for her bedroom when she noticed Carla standing in her bedroom doorway.

Jo knew when her sister wanted to talk and she also knew that if she said anything before Carla was ready, the conversation would be over before it started. So she waited.

“Jo . . . I miss Mom and Dad.”

That was when Jo saw tears in Carla’s eyes that began to roll down her cheeks.

Jo stood and Carla walked into her embrace. They just stood there holding each other for a few minutes. Carla pulled away first and almost fell down onto the couch and Jo quickly sat next to her without saying a word.

When Carla did speak, Jo was shocked.

“Why haven’t you gotten married yet, Jo? You’re thirty years old after all.”

Jo couldn’t think of anything to say so she just said the first thing that came to mind. “Thanks for reminding me.”

Then when she realized how serious Carla was, she gentled her tone and said, “I guess I just haven’t met the right guy yet?”

Carla pulled a tissue from a box on the table in front of the couch and wiped her eyes. “Are you sure it isn’t because of me?”

“No, of course not! Where did you get that idea from sweetie?” Jo tried to think if she’d ever said or done anything that would have given Carla that impression. She was sure she hadn’t.

“I don’t want to cause you problems. You didn’t plan to get stuck with me.”

Jo shook her head. “Oh, Carla, I don’t feel that way at all. I don’t feel like I’m stuck with you. I wouldn’t have it any other way. We’re together where we belong and that’s where we’re going to stay.”

Teary eyes turned toward her and she could see that Carla wasn’t finished yet.

“But if you did get married, what would happen to me?”

“Oh, Carla, no man will ever come between you and me. If I did get married, he would have to accept you just the same as if you were my daughter.”

As Jo pulled her little sister into another hug, she thought she now knew where this conversation had come from.

They sat next to each other that way for another few minutes before Carla went to bed.

Jo sat there for a long time, thinking. Marriage! She hadn’t thought about it. She wasn’t too sure she wanted to try it. Three of her friends she’d grown up with had been married and were already divorced. That included her best friend Sue Ann who was now stuck raising her six-year old son alone.

Well, she thought, as she headed to her room to get ready for bed, she certainly wasn’t in any hurry to get married . . . if she ever did.