

Another Solution

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Chapter One

Most people loved Friday because it was the last day of their workweek but not Jason Walker. He loved Friday because it was the first day of his three days off every week. Yeah, he loved his schedule. Even though ten hour days did get kind of long sometimes, the three-day weekend almost always made up for it.

Jason loved his job as well. He knew lots of guys in law enforcement who only stayed in it because they had too many years in to quit. They didn't want to lose their retirement benefits. But not Jason. He liked almost every aspect of being a Crowley county deputy sheriff. If he thought about it though, much of that was due to his good friend Floyd McCracken being the sheriff.

Jason and Floyd had grown up together with Floyd being a couple of years older. Then they'd been detectives together back when Floyd's uncle had been the sheriff. In fact, they had been partners on most of the cases they worked on.

On this Friday, Jason was driving out to his granny's house or rather farm. She owned several hundred acres but only about half of it was farmland. His gramps had begun leasing out all their farmland long before he died five years ago. So now, Granny just kept up the area around the house and Jason tried to do most of that on his Fridays and Saturdays. He always did more than what she told him she wanted done. He knew that if he didn't do those extra things she would.

He didn't want her doing any of the outside chores anymore even though she seemed to be in perfect health. She certainly was quick to tell everyone including her doctor that she was fit as a fiddle. But he knew she was in her early seventies and therefore would be more susceptible to things going wrong with her health the older she got. And he intended to take good care of her no matter what.

After all, she and his gramps had raised him since his mother died when he was two. They had always loved him and treated him like both a son and a grandson. He had to smile when he thought about it though. He had always received the best parts of being a son and the best parts of a grandson, never any of the bad.

Sure Granny came across as a gruff, cantankerous old woman to most people but Jason knew she had a heart as big as all outdoors.

He knew one of the things he'd have to do right away was to fix the fence around the chicken coop. Granny insisted on keeping a large flock of chickens both layers and fryers. And he for one was glad she did for she made the best fried chicken in the county and he also loved to benefit from some of her huge breakfasts whenever he could.

As soon as he pulled into the yard, he noticed that Granny was sitting in her rocker on the porch. He cherished that picture from his childhood. Except back then Gramps had always been sitting in the identical rocker to her left.

When he jumped out of his pickup, climbed the steps, and sat in Gramps' rocker, he wasn't surprised to see a steaming cup of coffee sitting on his side of the small table between them. She was sipping her own cup.

Granny always knew when he'd be there and would always have either coffee in the mornings or iced tea at other times of the day setting there waiting for him.

He smiled over at her and said, "Good morning Granny. How are you today?"

She made a loud harrumphing sound and while still looking out at the woods behind Jason's truck said, "Not a good morning. No not a good morning at all."

He waited knowing that she would finish when she was ready and not before, no matter what he said or did.

"That blame Dickens boy ran over my flower bed with the wagon again."

Jason tried not to laugh. He knew Granny would whop him one if he did. Part of the lease to one of the local farmers, Richard Dickens, included the use of the barn. Jason knew Richard quite well since he was a deacon at the Baptist church where they were members.

He also knew that before Richard leased the barn, the flowerbed in question didn't exist. He was sure that Granny had put it there almost in the way of any machinery coming out of the barn. She seemed to thrive on fussing at others. But he was used to it and loved her in spite of it or maybe even because of it.

"Did you call Richard and tell him?"

She didn't say anything for a moment then jerked her head back. "Did."

Jason waited some more.

"Said he and his wife would come over this afternoon and fix the damages to it."

Jason did smile then. "Well, won't that make things all right?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and growled, "Won't be the same. Still have to go out and do it myself after they leave."

Jason did laugh then and drew a stern look from his granny. He knew better than to continue that conversation. So he finished his coffee, stood, and said, "I guess I'd better get started on that chicken coop. Don't want any of those critters getting loose now do we? I'm afraid Ole Sandy might have a little too much fun chasing them."

Sandy was his gramps' old coonhound and at the sound of his name, the dog came trotting around the corner of the house to investigate.

Granny looked over at the dog and said, "No chicken feathers hanging from his mouth. Good thing for him."

As he was walking toward the chicken coop, Jason laughed at the gruff way she talked about the old dog. But he knew she loved that dog if nothing else but because he had been Gramps' hunting dog.

Jason had just finished fixing the chicken coop and had started on the fence around Granny's garden when she called him in for lunch.

Once he was seated at the large kitchen table across from Granny's chair, Jason leaned back and watched her as she set the cold cuts, cheese, and homemade bread on the table.

Homemade bread was one of the things he missed about not living out there anymore. He'd moved into an apartment in town when he'd first hired on with the sheriff's department. Then a couple of years later, he'd bought a townhouse where he still lived by himself.

Granny interrupted his thoughts. "Been watching you at church. You been giving the eye to that young thing that works at the hospital pert near a year now."

Jason wasn't surprised at that statement. He knew Granny was one of the most observant people around. Still, he knew better than to respond to such a baited statement so he waited knowing Granny wasn't finished anyway.

"Like her looks. Why don't you ask her out?"

He chuckled. "I did and she shot me down . . . big time."

“Is that all?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did she give you a reason, something you can wait on for her to change her mind?”

He wasn't really sure he wanted to answer that question. He knew from experience though that she'd just keep after him until he did anyway.

“Yeah, she said she wasn't dating anyone for a while. It seems that a few years ago she was supposed to be getting married but the guy never showed up at the church.”

Granny snorted. “Your grandpa would've hung a polecat like that from the barn rafters by his thumbs.”

“I agree with you on that one. But the biggest problem, at least for me, is that the guy was a cop.”

“Oh!”

“Yeah. But she did say that when she had worked it all out she would possibly go out with me.”

“Well, what you waiting for then?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Don't you know that when a woman says maybe then you keep asking until she finally says yes?” “And she will, eventually.”

All afternoon Jason thought about what Granny had said at lunch and by three o'clock, he had just about decided to try Karen again the first chance he got.

* * *

When Karen Bierstadt finished with her eleven o'clock appointment, she remembered that she had slept late that morning and therefore hadn't packed a lunch.

She laughed at herself. A psychologist would call that a Freudian Slip because she really wanted to have lunch with her best friend, Daisy Bates. Daisy was a nurse at a doctor's office just outside the physical therapy entrance of the hospital.

She grabbed her cell phone hoping that Daisy didn't already have other plans. Daisy agreed immediately.

They met in the parking lot and jumped into Karen's car for the short drive to the BFF Coffee Shop.

Karen took a second to look at her relatively new friend. Daisy was just a little shorter than Karen's five feet five inches but more rounded. Karen envied Daisy her shape. She had always been thin and athletic whereas Daisy had a shape that turned heads. But the thing that Karen thought really set Daisy off from other women was her beautiful thick brown hair that had natural red and blond highlights mixed through it. That was such a contrast to Karen's own long black hair that she kept up or in a ponytail for work.

No wonder Jason had asked Daisy out when she first moved to Crowleyville. How could Karen compete with women like Daisy? Whoa, where did that thought come from? Who said she wanted to compete with anyone for Jason? And just why did his name even come up anyway?

As they walked through the coffee shop door, Sue Ann McCracken who was nine months pregnant called out to them from her position on a stool behind the counter. “Is that table in the corner okay ladies?”

She pointed to the only empty table in the place.

As they took their seats, Karen was glad she had a whole hour for her lunch and she knew Daisy did too.

Jo Turner came flying by, placed menus in front of them and said, “I'll be right back to take your orders girls.”

Karen really liked both of the women who owned the coffee shop together. Sue Ann was the sheriff's wife and had owned a beauty shop before. Jo Turner was the wife of the pastor at Karen's church. She envied the

two women their strong friendship. They had been best friends since first grade thus the name of the shop which most people simply called Best Friends.

After Jo took their orders a few minutes later, Daisy turned to Karen with a serious look on her face and said, “Mike asked me a curious question last night, one I hadn’t thought about for some time.”

Karen wasn’t sure what was coming next. Daisy’s husband was a high school teacher but he hadn’t always been one though. He’d been an undercover DEA agent who had been shot a year and a half ago. The bullet had lodged near his spine causing him to be paralyzed for six months before they’d finally been able to go in and get it out. He’d been a patient of Karen’s in PT and was now walking quite well.

Daisy continued, “He asked me about you and Jason Walker. He reminded me that you told Jason almost a year ago that you would eventually be able to go out on dates again and you might go out with him when you did.”

Karen knew where this was going but didn’t want to say anything just yet.

“Well?”

Karen tried to pretend that she didn’t know what Daisy meant but that didn’t work. Daisy just glared at her with a half-smile on her face until Karen answered her.

“I guess you could say that I’ve been thinking about that a little bit lately.”

When she didn’t continue, Daisy prompted her. “And . . . ?”

“And I guess I’m about as ready as I’ll ever be.” She quickly added. “But I’m still afraid or at the least nervous.”

Daisy smiled, reached across to pat Karen’s hand, and said, “That’s okay, Karen. There are ways to get around that fear.”

Karen was surprised at Daisy’s casual comment. “There are?”

“Sure there are.” She seemed to think for a moment then said, “Why don’t you and Jason go on a double date with Mike and me tonight?”

Karen laughed. “But you’re married. You don’t go out on dates . . . do you?”

Daisy was nodding her head before Karen finished. “We sure do. When Mike and I got married, we decided that we never wanted to lose the magic that was there when we were dating. So we agreed to go out on a date, just the two of us, at least once a month. Lucy is okay with that because when we don’t take her with us, Mike’s mom keeps her at the home. Not only does Lucy love Sarah but she also gets to spend time there with Bert and all the rest.”

Karen remembered that before she took the job at the clinic where she was now, Daisy had been the director of the Sparrow Foundation Home for Challenged Adults.

Daisy suddenly giggled. “Oh no you don’t Karen. You’re not going to get me off track here. Why don’t you try it? A double date would be the perfect way for you to ease back into dating.”

She giggled again. “And there’s no one more perfect to start with than Jason Walker. Don’t you agree?”

Karen wasn’t going to answer that question. If she said yes, it might sound too much like a commitment of some sort. And even if she did go out with them the way Daisy was suggesting, she didn’t want Jason to get the wrong idea.

Daisy was still giving her a pleading look so she relented and said, “Okay, I will go along with you and Mike tonight and if Jason just happens to go too, then fine.”

She thought quickly. “But I’m not going to call him.”

Daisy laughed this time and said, “Don’t worry about that part. I’ll give Mike a call in a little while. He’ll be glad to call Jason and you know that Jason will jump at the opportunity.”

She touched Karen’s arm. “Mike says that you’re all Jason ever wants to talk about. So I just know that Jason will come along too.”

When Karen started to deny it, Daisy shook her head vigorously. “That poor boy’s been half in love with you since the first time he saw you. You should hear the way Mike describes that first day when Jason pushed Mike’s wheelchair into PT and he saw you.”

Karen tried to laugh along with Daisy but couldn’t quite manage it. What had she just gotten herself into? Was it too late to call it off?

* * *

Jason had just finished repairing the garden fence and was talking to Richard and his wife Naomi when his cell phone rang. He quickly looked at the caller ID. He didn’t really want to go in on his day off. But since he’d finally allowed Floyd to promote him to sergeant, that happened much more than before.

He was relieved when he saw that it was Mike Bates.

“Hey Mike what’s up?”

Mike laughed and Jason wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that laugh until Mike started talking.

“What’s the one thing you’ve been hoping would happen for almost a year now?”

Jason knew what Mike was talking about immediately. His so-called best friend, as well as Floyd, and a few of the other guys at the department had been ribbing him about his infatuation for Karen Bierstadt all that time.

“Hey man, you’d better not be pulling my leg now.”

Mike seemed to sober up on the other end of the line. “No joking here . . . at least not this time. Daisy called me a little while ago and said that she had lunch with Karen and she was able to talk Karen into going on a double date with the three of us tonight . . . if you’re available that it.”

Jason felt like shouting, dancing, or something else equally outrageous. Was his dream finally coming true? After all, Karen had become his dream girl over the past year.

He still couldn’t believe it. “Okay, you said you’re not kidding but would Daisy?”

“No way man. Daisy was almost as excited as you are.”

When Jason didn’t respond to that, Mike said, “Well are you?”

Jason was still thinking about how much he’d wanted this very thing for so long. “Am I what?”

“Are you going with us you dope?”

Jason almost shouted into the phone. “Of course I am. When . . . where?”

“Daisy and I will pick you up a little before six and then we’ll swing around to the other side of the complex to Karen’s townhouse. That okay with you?”

“Sure it is. I’ll see you then.”

He disconnected and just stood there grinning until Richard said, “Are you okay Jason?”

“Okay? Sure, I’m okay. In fact, I’m just great. Karen finally agreed to go out with me.”

Richard smiled and slapped Jason on the back. “That’s good news my friend.” Then he got a twinkle in his eye. “Now don’t blow it Son.”

Jason didn't stop to think about the fact that even Richard knew all about his feelings for Karen. He just rushed into the house to tell Granny he was leaving and she surprised him yet again. When he told her about the date, she cackled and said, "Bout time. Looks like I'll be getting me some great-grandkids after all."

Jason wasn't even going to respond to that. He just kissed her on the cheek and raced out to his truck. He had to get home and get ready.

By the time he made it back to his townhouse, it was almost five o'clock. He went through his bedroom to his bathroom pulling his clothes off as he went and stepped right into the shower.

He just stood there under the shower head letting the hot water beat down on his head for a few minutes in an attempt at clearing his mind somewhat. It didn't work very well though. All he could think of was that he was finally going out with Karen. Finally!

An hour later, Jason was standing outside his front door waiting for Mike and Daisy. He didn't have long to wait. When they pulled into his driveway, he quickly jumped into the backseat.

As Mike was backing out of the driveway, Daisy leaned over the front seat and giggled. "You're not the least bit excited are you Jason?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Why should I be? I've only been waiting a year for this night."

Laughter rang out from both sides of the front seat.

When Mike pulled into the driveway of Karen's townhouse, Jason jumped out and rushed up to the door. It opened before he got there and Karen stepped out. Wow! He almost fell over. She was so beautiful with her glorious long black hair loose and hanging down her back all the way to her waist. The pale pink dress finished off the look that was about to knock Jason off his feet.

She looked at him shyly and said. "Hi Jason." When she walked past him toward the car, he raced ahead of her to open the door for her.

Soon they were all entering the steakhouse and Jason wasn't sure what he was supposed to do next. But Mike saved him. He watched as Mike stood behind a chair, pulled it out, and helped Daisy slide it forward.

Jason grabbed the next chair and pulled it out for Karen. His sudden thought almost made him laugh out loud. Even a monkey could imitate Mike the way he did.

But the smile she rewarded him with almost knocked him down again. He realized then that he'd better get his head straight quickly before he made a fool of himself.

Daisy and Karen seemed to resume a conversation that it sounded like they'd had at lunch today leaving him looking at the back of Karen's head.

He felt a punch on his other shoulder and looked back to see Mike grinning at him. Mike leaned toward him and whispered in his ear. "You better cool down before you spook the poor girl. Can't you see she's as nervous as you are?"

Was she? He looked closer. He watched Karen's hands revolving around each other in her lap and listened to her nervous giggle at whatever Daisy had just said. Yes, Mike was right. That realization did more to calm him down than the huge breaths he'd been taking.

Jason was concentrating so hard on trying to figure out how he could calm himself down enough so that he could make Karen more comfortable when he realized Mike was talking to him.

He turned back to Mike and said, "What?"

Mike just shook his head and laughed. Jason knew Mike was making fun of him but this was his best friend here. He'd let him get away with it . . . for a little while.

“I said that one of my students said that she overheard several boys talking about how they’ve been harassing one of the guys from the home. From the way she said they talked, it sounds like it was Bert.”

Before Jason could respond, Mike added, “Boy, I’m glad I’m not a cop anymore. I don’t think I could keep from busting heads if I caught some kids harassing Bert like that.”

Jason nodded. “Yeah, I know what you mean. It really is hard sometimes though.”

He turned back to look at Karen again and didn’t realize how long he did so until she turned around, frowned at him and said, “Would you stop staring at me like that?”

Jason didn’t know what to say to that but what came out of his mouth embarrassed him immediately.

“You’re just so beautiful. I can’t keep from looking at you.”

He heard a loud chuckle from his other side, which he chose to ignore.

* * *

Karen had been trying to avoid looking at Jason while she listened to Daisy talking about some of her five-year-old daughter Lucy’s antics that evening on the way to the home where Mike’s mother now had Daisy’s old job.

Karen marveled at how good a fit it was for Sarah Bates, a retired school teacher to be the director of that home where Bert and the others lived.

But when she’d turned toward Jason and caught him staring at her the way a cat would a mouse hole, she had to say something. She had simply asked him to stop. But she certainly hadn’t been prepared for his answer or excuse or compliment or whatever it had been.

She knew she was blushing furiously because her face and neck were both so hot that she quickly took a drink from her water glass in an attempt to cool off. That was when she heard the tinkling sound of Daisy giggling to her right.

Before she could think of something to say, Jason quickly added, “I mean . . .” He shook his head then tried to smile at her. “I guess I’ll just say that I meant what I said.”

Karen blushed again but finally found her voice. “Thank you Jason. That was a nice thing to say. But it does make me a little uncomfortable when you stare at me like that.”

Jason didn’t seem to know what to say to that.

Out of the corner of her eye, Karen noticed that Daisy was giving Mike a look and even nodded at him.

Therefore, she wasn’t surprised when Mike spoke up. “Well, Jason, what do you think of the Cardinals chances this year?”

While the two men began to talk about baseball, Karen gave Daisy a knowing smile. Daisy reached over, squeezed Karen’s hand, and began talking to her about a patient from her clinic who was one of Karen’s PT patients too.

After they had exhausted that subject, Daisy said, “Karen I sure miss being in the same Sunday School class as you.” She looked thoughtful for a moment. “But, I do enjoy being with Mike in our young couple’s class.”

Karen smiled back at Daisy and said, “Yes, I miss having you in there too. But I have made friends with a new high school teacher. Her name is Brandi Leonard. She’s a year younger than I am but she has black hair almost as long as mine. People mistake us for each other quite often.”

Mike heard that last part and snorted. “Yeah, she was one of the teachers hitting on me last year.” He thought for a moment and said, “But she was really nice about it when she realized I wasn’t available.”

Daisy laughed and said, “Yes and I know exactly when that happened too.” At Mike’s puzzled look she explained, “Don’t you remember? It was when I pushed your wheelchair into class one Sunday and when she came over to us I put my hand on your shoulder.”

“Oh yeah.” He laughed loudly. “You’re right. She never bothered me again after that day.”

Mike and Daisy talked for a few minutes about their experiences while they were dating last summer. That left Karen and Jason staring at each other.

Suddenly Jason laughed. “Do I get to say something about you staring at me too?”

Karen immediately dropped her eyes and blushed furiously again.

He reached out and touched her hand lightly. “I’m sorry Karen. But I couldn’t resist that. But you can look at me as much as you want.” He snorted. “After all, if you do then that means I can stare at you too.”

She found herself laughing at Jason’s silly remarks but was also surprised that she was beginning to relax ever so slightly.

Their meals came then and they all held hands as Jason asked the blessing on their food.

Listening to Jason pray sent chills down Karen’s back. It was so nice that he was a strong Christian. And he wasn’t afraid to share his faith either. She remembered Daisy telling her that before Mike accepted the Lord, he used to complain about how Jason was always talking about God to him.

Then she came to a realization that warmed her heart. She had been so afraid to date again, after what Larry had done to her that she had turned this wonderful man away. Larry! She tried not to think about him anymore but forced herself to do so right then.

Jason and Larry were both cops. Yes, that was true but that was where the similarities ended. Larry was not a Christian. Also as she looked back, there were so many of his personality traits that were not good that she wondered how she’d ever agreed to marry him in the first place. She could certainly see them clearly now especially when she compared him with Jason.

She didn’t realize she was shaking her head until Jason said, “Are you okay, Karen?”

She gave him a puzzled look and he said, “You were frowning and shaking your head. Did I do something to offend you?”

Before she could think about how it might sound, she blurted out. “No Jason. In fact, I just finally realized that you are nothing like my ex-fiancé.”

It looked as if he tried to smile. “Is that good or bad?”

She grinned at his concern. “Oh yes. It’s good . . . very good.”

She thought that might end the discussion on that topic but Jason wasn’t finished with it yet.

“When I compare you to any other girl I’ve ever known, they don’t even come close to you Karen.”

She tried not to blush again but wasn’t successful. So she tried for a bit of levity. “I’ll bet you say that to all the girls you date.”

He was shaking his head vigorously before she even finished talking. “No way!” His face grew serious. “Karen, I haven’t been on a single date with anyone else since that day I met you in PT. I just haven’t wanted to. I felt that you were more than worth waiting for.”

She was blushing again and she hoped he was finished but he wasn’t.

“I would have waited much more than a year for you Karen.”

That was when they both remembered that they weren’t alone at the table. This time Jason joined her in blushing. Mike and Daisy had been observing them quietly for some time now. How embarrassing!

Later, when Mike pulled into her driveway, Karen quickly opened her door and jumped out but Jason caught up with her just before she reached her front door.

She turned to him and she could see it written all over his face that he wanted to kiss her. And surprise of all surprises, she thought that she might actually want him to. But they had an audience and she reached out her hand which he took like it was a lifeline.

“Good night Jason, I had a wonderful evening.”

He grinned and said, “So did I.”

He hung his head which reminded her of Bert. “Would you go out with me again Karen? This time just you and me?”

She nodded and spoke softly. “Yes, Jason, I would like that very much.”

She felt that she needed to wait. So before he could ask, she said, “How about next Saturday night. Friday nights are not as good for me since I’m so tired from working all day.”

He continued to grin and said, “That’s just fine. Can I call you in between now and then?”

She nodded and turned to open her door.

Once inside, she simply sank into the nearest chair without even turning on the light. That was when she realized she was grinning just as Jason had been.

She laughed when she also realized that Jason didn’t have her phone number. Oh well, he wouldn’t have any trouble getting it from Daisy.