

Walking the Line

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Chapter One

Joanne Lewis was tired. She blew out a deep sigh. She felt tired a lot lately. It just seemed that she never got everything done that she needed to get done. Oh well, this day was a joyful day for her new best friend, Grace Donaldson, who was marrying her childhood friend, Kent Jackson, today.

Joanne was so happy for Grace who had been through a really bad time of it in her first marriage. Marriage! Joanne didn't even want that word to slip into her thoughts. She'd been through the ring in that area as well. No! She wasn't going there right now. She didn't even want to think about it, especially not today. David had been out of her life for four years and she and the girls were doing just fine, thank you very much.

Her solitude with her morning coffee was interrupted by her daughters' normal rush into her kitchen upon rising in the morning.

Her kitchen! Wow, it sure was great to be able to say that. Sure, the kitchen in their old two-bedroom apartment had technically been her kitchen. However, this kitchen was in their new house for which she'd saved for four years to get the down payment.

Now, they were finally settled in their own home and her daughters both had their own rooms. They were all three loving it.

The girls bickered back and forth, as they grabbed bowls, spoons, cereal, and milk for their breakfast. Being a little less than a year apart, they seemed to be so much closer than most sisters were, yet they also seemed to argue and fuss at each other more than most sisters. Oh well, she still loved them to pieces.

Once they were at the table eating their cereal, Joanne looked across the table at them. Katie, who was seven, looked so much like her mother that it often brought a smile to Joanne's face. They both had the same shade of red hair that they kept shoulder length. Katie even had the same dark green eyes that Joanne had always thought was her own greatest downfall in the looks department. Of course, she had always been teased as a child about her red hair. But not Katie. She seemed to love her green eyes and her red hair. Go figure.

Samantha, on the other hand, looked more like her father with her red hair being darker and her eyes weren't quite as green. Sometimes, Joanne thought that if Samantha had been a boy, then she would have been exactly like her father. At eight, she seemed to be developing a personality somewhat like David's, and that bothered Joanne.

She almost laughed at her use of past tense, even in her mind. David was still alive. At least, she hadn't heard any different. However, she hadn't heard anything from or about him in the four years since he deserted them. When he left, he'd said he was going up to Alaska somewhere. She just hoped that he stayed up there.

Joanne had to smile again as she looked around at her kitchen which was now painted a cheerful yellow that just seemed to keep her in a good mood whenever she was in it. She loved yellow, even though her red hair wouldn't allow her to wear yellow clothing. But her new yellow kitchen more than made up for it.

Although there were a few other things she wanted to work on, she was happy taking it all one room at a time. Naturally, she'd started on the girls rooms first. They always came first in Joanne's mind. She had to keep her girls happy. That was her main goal in life.

Joanne smiled to herself when she thought about how much help she'd received from some of the other teachers at the school, and some of the police officers through her friend and fellow teacher, Judy, whose husband Hal was the police chief. She never would have been able to redo those three rooms so quickly and for so little expense without all their help.

Since she'd had so much help with the first three rooms, she wasn't going to have to wait to finish the rest of the house. It was so great to be living in such a wonderful little town that Strawberry, Missouri was. She'd grown up in the St. Louis area and things were so much different there. Her parents still lived there but

she thought she'd just about gotten them convinced to move down here since they'd just retired a few months ago.

Wouldn't that be great for the girls to have their grandparents close by? Although, she couldn't deny that David's parents, who lived in Strawberry, were very good with both her daughters and her. In fact, Roberta watched the girls every school day until Joanne finished at the high school.

Joanne often marveled that Clay and Roberta Lewis were nothing like their only son. No one had ever said, but she suspected that David might have been adopted. But that didn't really matter. Clay and Roberta were great with her and the girls. They'd even helped her with her remodeling.

"Mom?"

Joanne mentally shook herself to bring her focus back on her daughters who had finished their cereal and were both standing across the table from her now. Samantha had just called out to her.

"Yes, Dear?"

Samantha looked over at her younger sister then back at Joanne. "Who gets to push you down the aisle at the church tonight? I think it should be me since I'm the oldest."

Joanne smiled at the competitiveness between her girls. She shook her head. "No one will be pushing me down the aisle tonight. Grace and I have talked it over and we think it would be less of a distraction if I wheeled myself down the aisle. Okay?"

The girls looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and rolled their eyes the same way, then left the room without a word.

Joanne watched them leave. For some reason, both girls loved to push their mother around in her wheelchair. She couldn't see any reason why it could be bad, so she'd always allowed them to do it, whenever possible. But she'd also tried to alternate between the two so they wouldn't argue about it.

Now, as she wheeled her chair toward her bedroom, she began to plan her day. She needed to do a couple of loads of wash and do a quick housecleaning before they all had to get ready for the wedding, which was scheduled for four that afternoon.

She groaned when she thought about how bad the rehearsal had gone last night, at least for her. She dearly loved her new best friend, but Grace had paired Joanne with Kent's brother for the ceremony. Larry Jackson was one of the most obnoxious persons that Joanne had ever known.

Larry was always rude to her now that she was in this wheelchair. Of course, when she thought about it, he'd been anything but nice to her before her accident. He was such a nuisance. Larry was the total opposite of his twin brother Kent.

Oh well, she'd make it through the actual wedding much better than she had the rehearsal, wouldn't she? After all, she didn't think Larry would grab the handles on her wheelchair and race her down the aisle the way he had last night. At least she hoped he wouldn't.

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It was a little past noon when Larry Jackson finally crawled out of bed that Saturday. That was almost literally, what he did. He had such a terrific headache that he couldn't even stand up straight, as he made his way carefully and painfully to the bathroom then on into the shower.

Once he had stepped out of the shower and dried off, he pulled on a pair of jeans and headed for the kitchen and coffee. He needed coffee, lots of coffee. It seemed like he practically lived on the stuff lately.

He was sitting at the table drinking his third cup of coffee when he heard his cell phone ringing. But, the question was, where was it? Well, as dinky as his apartment was, it shouldn't take him long to find the stupid thing. It wasn't in the living/dining/kitchen area so he figured, by process of elimination, that it must be in his bedroom ... somewhere.

When he found the phone on the bed, under a pillow, he finally answered it. The caller-id showed his brother Kent was calling. He didn't want to talk to Kent right then. For that matter, he didn't really want to talk to anyone, especially feeling as bad as he did. However, he knew that if he didn't answer it now, that Kent would just keep calling until he did.

"What do you want so early on a Saturday morning?"

Kent didn't laugh, so Larry knew that his twin wasn't in a good mood.

"Where are you Larry? Please don't tell me you slept it off in some girl's apartment in Kansas City. It's one o'clock and we've got to go pick up our tuxes at one-thirty."

Larry looked up at the clock on the wall and groaned. It was that late all right.

"Okay, Bro, keep your shirt on. I'm at my apartment and I'll be ready by the time you and Jolly can get here. Okay?"

He heard Kent sigh heavily through the phone. "Larry, how many times do I have to tell you that if you keep calling Matt that, one of these days, he's going to flatten you for sure?"

Larry laughed loudly as he disconnected the phone. That was a mistake. His head felt like it was going to fly right off his neck. Still, he couldn't help but laugh at the image of Kent's best friend Matt Livingston stomping Larry flat. The man sure was big enough that he could do it too. Matt was six-seven and weighed at least three-hundred pounds.

Larry opened the refrigerator and looked for something he could put in his stomach that might not come right back up. He found a hotdog that had somehow escaped his attention last night. He grabbed the hotdog and a bottle of orange juice. He ate the hotdog cold and drank the juice from the bottle.

Then he hurried as fast as his head would allow him into his bedroom to finish getting ready to go with Kent and Matt.

He had just finished tying his shoes when he heard a horn out front. That didn't sound like Kent's car. He went to the door and stepped out onto the walkway outside his apartment, leaned over the railing, and looked down three floors to the parking lot. He didn't see Kent's car and was about to turn around and go back inside when he heard his brother calling his name.

He looked back over the railing and saw Kent waving at him from the open passenger door of a white van. He looked a little closer and saw that Matt was driving. He figured that must be Matt's work van.

Just as Larry was stepping off the stairs at the ground floor, the manager's apartment door opened right next to him. Oh brother. That was all he needed.

Marty Edwards was standing there in short cut-offs and a t-shirt, smirking at him. She was one of those petite blonds that turned heads when she walked past and she knew it too. He and Marty had hooked up a few times over the years. All right, more like at least once a month in the six years he'd lived here.

Sometimes it was nice and convenient that she was so close but the rest of the time, it was a nightmare. She was super jealous and was always spying on him so much that he couldn't even bring a girl back to his apartment anymore.

"Hi Marty, gotta go, my brother's waiting on me out there."

If he'd hoped that would send her back inside her apartment, then he was sadly mistaken.

She reached out and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I've got steaks ready to grill tonight. How about seven?"

Larry was glad to have a believable excuse this time. "Can't this time, Marty. My brother's getting married at four and I'll be tied up there most of the night."

He removed her arms from around his neck. "Gotta go right now. We're going to get our tuxes."

He motioned toward the van where they could both see the giant man sitting behind the wheel looking rather impatient. "You wouldn't want Matt Livingston to get mad at me and put me out of commission for a while would you?"

Marty stepped back into her doorway and Larry almost ran out to the van and jumped in the backseat.

After two hours of having to endure the company of two squeaky clean clones of Matt's dad, the preacher, Larry finally made it back to the relative safety of his apartment. He'd even been able to avoid Marty on the way up.

His escape hadn't been too soon either. Both Matt and Kent had started harping on him about his drinking, running around with women and just his whole life in general.

He was fed-up with so many people always trying to tell him about this thing or that thing that he was doing wrong or needed to do differently. What part of 'It's my life' didn't they understand? Leave me alone people. He was doing just fine with his life exactly the way it was. He wouldn't change a thing about it even if he could.

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When Joanne parked her special minivan in the church parking lot, she saw Larry Jackson going into the building with a short blond woman that she vaguely knew. Marty Edwards was sort of known around town as a barfly. Joanne also knew that Larry and Marty spent a lot of time together. She snickered to herself. It must be rather convenient for them with both of them living in the apartment building that Marty managed.

The girls started to race up to the door as Joanne was maneuvering her wheelchair out of the front and down the ramp. She called out to them, "Girls, please stop and walk calmly and ladylike with me up to the door."

They both stopped in their tracks and waited for her to wheel her way up to them. As soon as she did, each girl took one of the handgrips on her chair and began pushing her up the ramp to the front door of the church. Joanne had to hide her smile since her daughters seldom shared anything that way.

When they reached the double doors at the front of the church, Hal Wallace was standing there holding one wide open for them. Joanne smiled her thanks up to the police chief and called out to Judy, his wife.

"Hi Judy, you sure look nice. That dress looks great on you."

Judy Wallace stepped forward, leaned over, and hugged Joanne. "And just look at you Dear. I sure am glad that Grace didn't go with any of those other colors she had in mind for the bridal party. You look simply lovely in that royal blue dress."

"Thank you Judy. Are the others already here?"

Judy pointed toward the bride's room just off the foyer where Betty Sue Livingston stood in the doorway. Joanne had a funny thought that she was glad she wasn't going to be next to Betty Sue who was six feet two inches tall. Thankfully, Betty Sue's husband, Matt, was six feet seven. What a lovely couple they made. She'd gone to their wedding in this same church last February.

Samantha and Katie both stayed with their mother all the way into the bride's room. Betty Sue closed the door just as Trish Howard came over and gave all three of them a hug.

Grace's daughter, Brianna and Kent's daughter, Michelle grabbed Samantha and Katie and led them off to a corner of the room where giggles were soon heard.

Just then, Grace stepped out of the small dressing room attached to the bride's room. "Oh Joanne, you look so lovely."

Joanne looked at Grace as she made her way across the room, holding up her short train. She noticed that Grace hadn't put her long blond hair up as so many brides did. No, she'd let it flow over her shoulders and down her back. It created such a beautiful effect.

"Grace, your hair is simply stunning. I'm so jealous with my drab red hair."

Grace leaned over and hugged Joanne, then stepped back. "Are you ready to do this Joanne? I'm so sorry that I paired you with Larry. I didn't think that even he would mess up his own brother's wedding rehearsal the way he did last night."

She seemed thoughtful for a moment. "I sure hope he hasn't had time to start drinking yet today."

Joanne wanted to put her friend at ease. "I just saw him come into the church ahead of us. He had Marty Edwards with him but he didn't look like he'd been drinking."

"Oh praise the Lord for that. I just pray that he'll stay that way."

Before Joanne knew it, it was time for them to assemble in the foyer with the men. They lined up in the order they would go into the sanctuary. First came the daughters of the bride and groom.

Joanne always marveled at how much the two girls looked alike. They were both seven and the same height too. They also had the same shade of long blond hair with matching dark blue eyes. Of course, they looked lovely in their blue dresses that matched the rest of the dresses.

Next came Betty Sue with one of Kent's friends, Wally Cooper, a local police officer. Then it was Joanne with Larry beside her.

As Joanne wheeled her chair into position behind Betty Sue, Larry stepped up beside her. She wasn't surprised at all when he leaned down and whispered in her ear.

"Just say the word Red and I'll ditch Marty and take you away from this place."

To her embarrassment, Joanne blushed and could only shake her head emphatically as she refused to look up at the irritating man.

He laughed loudly making her suspect that he had indeed been drinking already.

"I love to see redheads blush. They do it so much better than anyone else with that pale complexion, right Red?"

Matt stepped up behind Larry and grabbed his arm, almost lifting him up off his feet. Joanne looked up at Matt and from her where she sat, that was a long way up.

"Larry, one of these days, I'm going to forget I'm a Christian now and pound some sense into you."

Larry started to say something but Matt cut him off. "On second thought, I will do it if you do anything to mess up this wedding for my little sister. You hear me?"

With that, Matt shook Larry a little and Larry only nodded as Matt let go and stepped back into position beside Trish who was the matron of honor.

Joanne turned to look back at Grace as she stood next to her father, Pastor Henry Livingston. She was so happy for Grace that not only would her father be walking her down the aisle but he would also be performing the ceremony. In addition, Grace was marrying a man who Joanne knew without a doubt would be very good to her. How nice!

Before she could start envying Grace, Joanne turned her attention back to the man beside her. That was enough to stop any thoughts of marriage.

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Larry had seen Joanne Lewis' van pull into the parking lot as he and Marty made their way up to the front of the church. It was always more than a little strange for him to go into any church. He'd spent so many miserable hours as a kid in his mom's church. Well, no more. For a long time now, he had been able to do just exactly what he wanted to do and going to any church, other than for weddings, was not even close to making the list.

He had looked down at Marty by his side. Yeah, she'd nagged him all afternoon until he'd relented and agreed to bring her to the wedding tonight. He couldn't understand the fascination that all women seemed to have with weddings. To him, weddings were to be avoided at all cost. He'd been through one of those once and he wasn't ever going there again. Talk about a disaster that had sure been one of the worst for him.

As he and Marty had passed through the door, the chief cop was holding it open for them. Wow, the old cop had actually held a door for Larry and it wasn't a jail cell door either.

He shook himself to bring his thoughts back to the present. He was standing next to one of the few women that he had just never been able to get anywhere with. She had always turned him down cold. He could seldom even get her to carry on a conversation with him. Joanne Lewis was just like Grace had always been.

Grace! There was a woman he'd really wanted but had never been able to get. As usual, his brother had always been in the way. Kent and Grace had been together constantly when they were kids and on into high school as well.

Many times, Larry had wished that Grace would have looked at him the way she had looked at Kent back then. But, no, it had always been Kent.

Now, he turned to look back at her at the end of the line. She was absolutely beautiful standing there next to her dad. She was the most beautiful woman Larry had ever been around. All kidding aside, he had just recently realized that he'd been more than halfway in love with her all these years.

That stunk! There wasn't much of anything he could do about it now, as if he ever could have. Now, all he could do was to watch her marry his twin brother.

He needed a drink. He started to reach inside his tux. He'd placed a small bottle in there earlier. Immediately, Matt was leaning over him glaring down at him. Therefore, he pulled his hand out of his pocket and turned away from Matt.

That was when he noticed that Joanne was looking up at him from her wheelchair. Was it ever some kind of look too. What was her problem? If he wanted or needed a little drink, what business was it of hers, or Matt's? Nobody told him what to do. He reached into his pocket again.

This time, Joanne reached her hand up and touched his elbow gently. "Please don't Larry."

Her soft pleading voice stopped him faster than Matt Livingston's hard glare and menacing voice ever could have. Why?

Well, he wasn't going to think about that right now. Besides, the music must have changed because the blond twins, as they called themselves, were starting to walk down the aisle holding a big basket of flowers between them.

He'd always liked kids but he'd never been around his brother's little girl, Michelle, very much. In fact, neither had his brother. Kent's wife had divorced him and disappeared with Michelle five years ago. Now, Michelle was back and she seemed to be here permanently this time. Good for Kent.

Larry looked at the other little blond girl who looked so much like Grace. He'd never been around her much either. That was because Grace had lived in St. Louis for eight years but also Grace usually had nothing to do with him and kept her daughter away from him as well.

Now, Wally and the Amazon were entering the church and he and Joanne would be next. He knew she'd gotten really mad at him last night when he'd pushed her down the aisle real fast. But it had been fun and he didn't even want to think about why it had been so much fun. Well, from the sideways look she was giving him right then, he knew she was worried that he'd do it again.

He leaned over halfway. "Not this time Red. No need to worry. Some other time though. Okay?"

She snapped her head around and looked at the open doorway ahead of them. He knew that she was going to have a little trouble keeping her wheelchair from going too fast down the sloping aisle toward the altar, but he also knew that if he touched her wheelchair, she'd probably smack him one. Well, if she did get going too fast, he would grab it anyway, whether she liked it or not.

Then they started down the aisle and he could tell that Joanne was holding on tightly to both wheels. He looked a little closer at her then. He had known Joanne before her accident and knew that she was about five-eight but she couldn't weigh much over a hundred pounds. In spite of that, she was holding her wheelchair back pretty good. He was surprised.

When they made it to the front, she went off to the left and parked her chair next to Betty Sue and he went over and stood next to Wally.

The rest of the wedding seemed to pass quickly as Larry barely paid attention to anything that was going on around him, especially anything the preacher said. He was still deep in thought about three women. Three? Yes, Grace who was no longer available, Marty who usually was and Joanne who probably never would be. Why Joanne?

He looked next to him at Joanne where they were in the receiving line in the foyer of the church. Had he ever really looked at Joanne ... really looked at her? No, he probably hadn't. At first, she was David Lewis' wife and therefore untouchable. Then, she had that car accident and wound up in a wheelchair. Not long after that, David was gone.

But what about the four years or so since David left. She was divorced now. Why hadn't he ever paid her much attention? Sure, he'd told his brother once that he liked blonds not redheads. But that had been mainly to irritate Kent. As he thought about it, he didn't have anything against redheads after all. In fact, this particular redhead, if she wasn't in a wheelchair, would be quite a good looker.

Not only that but her complexion wasn't too pale like most redheads he'd seen. It was smooth and almost creamy. She didn't have many freckles either, just a few across her little button nose. She was actually almost beautiful in her own special way. Why hadn't he ever noticed her before?

Okay, he'd have to do some thinking about that. But right now they were going down into the basement for the reception. He'd never thought much about it before. In fact, he'd barely registered that the church had one of those chairlifts that carried a person up or down the basement stairs. Matt was helping Joanne into the thing and then he carried her chair down the stairs.

All of a sudden, Larry wondered about other things that Joanne could no longer do like normal people. How did she drive? He knew she drove a minivan. He figured it must be have hand controls.

Larry hit himself on the head. Why was he thinking these things?

He was glad when Marty chose that moment to step up next to him and latch onto his arm. He'd been thinking some very dangerous thoughts. He was definitely going to have to avoid them in the future.

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As soon as Joanne slid into her wheelchair that Matt was holding for her, she noticed Larry standing up at the top of the stairs. He was staring down at her as if he'd never seen her before. What in the world could be going on with that man now?

Well, she knew that Larry did some strange things quite often. Why not now? As long as he didn't disrupt the reception, she shouldn't really care what he did. So far so good. He hadn't done anything bad yet. They'd at least made it through the wedding.

She had to focus on wheeling her chair toward the head table, which was setup for the bridal party. Just as she started, she noticed that Matt was going to push her. But before he could, both of her daughters stepped up and replaced him on the handles.

They were giggling again as they pushed her. That was interesting. When was the last time she'd heard both of her girls giggling at the same time. It had to be the influence of Brianna and Michelle who seemed to giggle quite often. Great! Her daughters definitely needed to have some fun in their lives. She made a mental note to try to get the four of them together some more in the future.

Once her daughters positioned her at the head table and raced off, Joanne looked around the large room where tables were setup all over. She saw Larry standing with Marty Edwards in the back of the room near the chair lift. Somehow, she just didn't think that they made a good couple. Stop! Why was she thinking something like that? They certainly were not her concern ... at all.

Joanne felt a light touch on her left arm and turned to see Trish Howard sitting in the chair next to her. That was great. She'd always liked Trish but was never around her much except at the diner that Trish owned and Joanne couldn't afford to go there very often.

“Hey Sweetie, you look so lovely today. I’m sure all the young men out there must think so too.”

Joanne blushed and shook her head. “Oh no Trish. I’m not in the market for another man, not for a long time. I’ve had my fill, that’s for sure.”

Trish just smiled and shook her head. “You know Dear, things just don’t always work out the way we plan them. I said very much the same thing all the way up until the night that my Richard proposed to me.”

She took a sip from her water glass. “And you know what? I didn’t even hesitate to tell him yes.”

Joanne remembered then that Trish’s husband had died five or six years ago in an airline crash. Nevertheless, the dear sweet lady was one of the happiest women Joanne knew. How could she be? She’d always meant to ask her. Well, why not right now?

“Trish, please don’t take this wrong but I need to know the answer to a question I have. I’m sure you know all about my accident and then David running off on my daughters and me. It’s been so hard for me to overcome all the resentment that I felt.”

She hesitated, not knowing how to go on. However, Trish reached out a hand to cover one of Joanne’s and smiled.

“You want to know how I can be so cheerful when I lost my husband to such a horrible accident.”

Joanne could only nod her head and wait to see what Trish would say.

This time Trish chuckled. “You know, you’re not the first person to ask me that question. Well, it’s really a two-part answer. The first part has to be that I turn to the Lord every morning and ask Him to help me to be a blessing to someone today.”

That didn’t surprise Joanne since she’d noticed that Trish seemed to have a special relationship with several women Joanne’s age and younger including Grace and Betty Sue.

Trish clapped her hands together softly. “And you know what? The second part of my answer is that He’s always given me someone like you to love and encourage.”

While Joanne was still trying to process that, Trish laughed. “Would you like that?”

“What do you mean?”

Trish laughed again. “You see, I’ve got both Betty Sue and Grace settled with fine young men and I ...”

Joanne threw up both hands between them. “Oh no Trish, I just said I don’t need or want a man in my life right now.”

Trish merely shook her head slowly and kept smiling. “Have you stopped to take a real good look at your daughters lately?”

That truly shocked Joanne. “Why, what do you mean?”

Trish covered Joanne’s hand again. “What I mean is this.”

Trish pointed to a corner of the big room where Samantha and Katie were with Brianna, Michelle and Kent’s two nephews. They were all laughing and giggling. She could tell that her daughters were having the time of their lives. Oh!

Joanne thought she should say something. “I guess they haven’t been too happy since David left.”

“No Sweetie. I notice it every time you bring them into the diner or here at church. Why don’t you bring them in more and even see if Grace will bring her girls too?”

Well, that sure gave Joanne plenty to think about. Thankfully, Joanne was spared from having to give Trish any kind of an answer right then since all the rest of the wedding party was sitting down and Trish returned to her seat next to Grace. Larry sat in that chair and Betty Sue was on Joanne’s other side now.

Larry didn’t say anything at first. He just sat there staring out at the rest of the tables. Joanne noticed that from time to time, he’d glance her way quickly before looking back out over the hall.

What was getting into Larry lately? The looks he was giving her were starting to bother her. He seemed to be a little too interested in her all of a sudden.

No way! She was never going to get involved with another man who drank and was gone from home more than he was there. In other words, Larry was too much like David. No, Larry seemed to be even worse than David ever was.