

It Might Have Been and Other Stories

Book Sample



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It Might Have Been

A wrong number. Not a scam. Just some innocent woman looking for her sister Pearl. Jason assured her that he wasn't Pearl, hit the end button, and slid the phone across his desk. He dropped his head onto his hand and tried to concentrate.

Inventory. Yay!

Even mental sarcasm fell flat. He should be pumped. The holidays approached with days off for leisure time, sleeping in, parties with assorted junk food, and perhaps a chance to head out to the park for a little fun and games. The image of a woman clad in a tight winter sweater and black leggings danced in front of his eyes. Heat licked his body.

The phone chimed. Jason tapped his fingers. Answer? Not answer? Hardly a life or death decision. He tapped the green button and slapped the phone against his ear. "Dad?"

"Jas?"

Carol? Cold water doused the flames. Oh heck, anybody but his stepmother. He'd rather have root canal. Not that she wasn't a perfectly nice person. It's just that with a root canal, you know what you're getting into. With Carol, Russian roulette seemed tame. Besides, he hated it when anyone shortened his name. *What? Two syllables asking too much? Jason. Oh, forget it.*

"Hey, Carol. What's up?"

"Jas, I don't want to take up your time, so I won't beat around the proverbial bush, but your dad's not doing too well. He's really struggling, and I just want to give you a heads up before you come visit."

Very subtle. Okay. It had been a while. A few weeks. Jason rolled his eyes over to the wall calendar—the one his wife had bought for him. Landscapes with hymns scrolled over the top. Oh yeah. Something safe that would keep his mind on celestial matters. Instead of other things.

Pine trees and a little manger scene. Hmmm...that time already?

He leaned back and let his chair fall into the relaxed mode. His head tilted, he considered the state of his office ceiling.

“You caught me, Carol. It has been too long. Waaay too long. I need to get my bu—, I mean, I should get Dinah and the kids and head out your way. Christmas season and all.” He grimaced at the thought of driving through snow and ice into Wisconsin but then the possibility of escaping Dinah’s family...

Carol ran rough shod over his thoughts. “You know, your dad always said that nothing mattered as long as his kids were happy. He still knows who you are. He recognizes me. Most of the time. But if you wait...”

Jason’s feet hit the floor with a slap. “What do you mean? He didn’t have any trouble recognizing me or the kids last time we were there.”

“A year ago.”

Jason smacked his forehead. He leaned in, peered at the calendar, and squinted. *Was it?* “Hey, you know. You’re right. I need to talk with Dinah and set something in motion. I’ll call you back, okay?”

“You won’t forget, now, will you?”

The snarky tone mixed with anxiety roiled Jason’s stomach.

“No. I won’t forget.”

Once home, Jason perched on a stool at the kitchen island and outlined a quick road trip. Dinah listened in empathetic understanding. Such a generous spirit. Of course. She visited her parents every month. Good woman that she was. He couldn't go most of the time, despite the fact that they lived only twenty minutes away, because, well, you know. He had a hell of a honey-do list and getting older wasn't a picnic; let me tell you. *Hey, I need some me-time, too.*

His mind wandered back to the woman he'd met at the park last week. Gorgeous. Funny. Didn't quote scripture while they strolled along the path. She wore a ring. He wore a ring. But still...

Dinah rattled on. "It's all settled then. Next weekend, we'll leave early Friday and be back by Sunday night. I'm sure your dad will be pleased. He loves you, you know." He eyes lingered on his face, like she was sending some kind of coded message.

Sheesh. Lay on the guilt with a trowel why don't you?

All evening, images of the park woman meandered through Jason's mind. In frustration, he cuddled up to his wife in bed, but she was already asleep. *Or so she wants me to believe. Great. Now I got nothing but a lousy trip to look forward to.* He yanked the blanket to his side of the bed, exposing his wife's slumbering form to the cold night air. *She probably doesn't even notice. Martyrs never do.*

Images of the park woman slithered through his mind. Her perfect form, flashing smile, the teasing glint in her eye. Then, out of nowhere, his dad appeared on the opposite side of a busy street. The old man tried to cross, but trucks and cars whizzed by in city traffic madness. The old man locked eyes with Jason, bewildered desperation peering from the depths.

He waved and called, “Ja-son!”

Jason dropped the woman’s hand, his heart pounding. “Dad? Hey, don’t try to cross there. It’s crazy traffic. You’ll get—”

Dinah’s scream ripped through the air as she ran out from behind, shoving the park woman aside. She dashed across the street, stopping traffic like magic. She reached her father-in-law’s broken body. In true super woman form, she carried the old man across the street, tears streaming from her disappointed, despairing eyes.

Her words shot Jason like bullets. “All yours.”

Suddenly another man, a shrewd well-dressed gent with clever eyes and high cheekbones stepped forward and swept everyone else away. He pointed toward a wide doorway. “If you please.”

Heat flickered through Jason’s body, but he shivered uncontrollably. “What’s this?”

“What you wanted.”

“Wanted?” Jason wrinkled his nose at a strange stink. “I never get what I want! Seems to me that I have to pay a pretty steep price for everything.”

The gentleman chuckled. “Think so? But it’s all free. Free will and all.”

Jason looked around for his father, his wife, his home, anything familiar and comforting. “But I wanted to see dad. I could’ve—”

Laughter rang in Jason’s ears. “The saddest words man ever penned, were the words...”

Jason bolted upright. Sweat beaded across his brow. He shivered. “Oh, God!”

Dinah murmured and rolled over. She reached out. “You okay, honey?”

The Sahara desert had filled Jason’s mouth. He couldn’t utter a word.

Dinah sat up and leaned in, her fingers stroking her husband’s arm. “Worried about your dad?” She cuddled closer, pulling the blanket around them both. “It’ll be okay. He’s a good man. He’s made his life and even if he doesn’t remember now, when he dies, he’ll know the truth. Besides, he’s not dead yet. You still have time.”

Jason hugged his wife, tears streaming down his face. The words, “It might’ve been...” rang in his ears.

Trying to Be a Hero

Susanne shivered. Rain had settled into a steady drizzle, and dark clouds hid any vestiges of the evening sun. One of the very last pink and golden leaves of the season fluttered in a gentle breeze and then, without warning, careened from the heights to land on her head. She tried not to take offense as she plucked off the ragged symbol of autumn beauty and held it before her eyes. She glanced up. “Trying to tell me something?”

Her car, tilted at an odd angle sat before her like a shopping cart that had lost a wheel. Without premeditated thought, she kicked the flat tire and immediately regretted her actions. “Oh,

holy cow, that wasn't so smart!"

"I'd say not. It might decide to kick back, and then where'd you be?"

Susanne glanced across the road and met a strange woman's gaze. Embarrassment and a tinge of fury ran laps around her insides. She knew perfectly well that she looked pathetic. She certainly felt pathetic. But heck, no one need make snide comments. Widening her stance like a prizefighter preparing to enter the ring, she ignored her toes yelping for immediate attention and faced the stranger. A scene from the OK Corral flashed through her mind.

Apparently, the strange woman had never seen the movie, didn't comprehend body lingo, or she simply didn't care how terrible Susanne's day had been since she breezed across the street as if it were mid-summer and the sun was shining.

"Flat, eh?"

Susanne peered at the outstretched hand. Like now was a perfect time to say howdy and make friends!

"I'm Georgia. Visiting my niece this week from Michigan. I saw the flat and hoped the owner might be some muscled guy who worked for an auto station." Her eyes roved over Susan's petite form and shrugged. "Guess not." Her eyes continued their stroll and landed on the elementary school. "You're a teacher?"

Mental fibers started to snap, but with a mighty yank, Susanne gripped her emotions and demanded that they stay in line. "Office secretary. Terrific job. Just, I can't get home with a flat tire."

Georgia pointed to the trunk. "You got a spare in there?" She shrugged. "I've never actually changed one myself, but I

watched my sons do it three or four times. How hard can it be?”

Bundled in a winter coat over a thick sweater, it was hard to tell Georgia’s body build, but Susanne guessed it to be somewhere between a heavyweight wrestler and Highland Dwarf. “Well, we can try, I guess. I hate to call the service station. So bloody expensive just to take it a few miles.”

In the style of a Commander and Chief taking charge of his army, Georgia flipped open the trunk, swept back the cover, lugged out the spare, dropped it handily on the ground, snapped open the enclosed tool kit, and plopped down on the wet ground, fitting the crank under the car. “I think it goes here.”

The word “think” sent another shiver down Susanne’s spine. But since Georgia seemed to be on a roll, she had no desire to interrupt. When it came time to unscrew the bolts, Susanne regained a modicum of self-respect by remembering “lefty-loosey” and thus saved her rescuer heaps of time.

The sudden downpour didn’t seem to affect Georgia like Susanne thought it would. In fact, it appeared to have no effect on her at all. The gray-headed woman unbolted the flat, switched out the tire, and then bolted on the spare with the same calm composure one would expect from a surgeon doing his fiftieth appendectomy. The painful tangle in Susanne’s middle began to loosen. Just a bit.

Once everything was put away and Georgia slapped her hands free of street grit and broken leaves, Susanne felt her newly assembled composure disintegrate. “Can I pay you for your—I would’ve—”

Georgia waved the suggestion away. “You would’ve called a tow

truck and paid a bundle. How far you live from here?”

“Oh, just a few miles. It’ll be fine. I really...” As Susanne pictured her empty apartment, loneliness galloped over confusion and ran it into the ground.

“Well, before you go, I want you to come in and have a hot cup of tea. My niece is off on one of her trips. God knows where this time. That’s why I’m here. I saw her for a few hours and off she ran. I stay and watch the house for a week. She’s got an old Tomcat that can’t find his way from the yard to the food bowl without help. So I got the job.” She shrugged. “At least it’s something to do...” She grinned at the replaced wheel. “In my declining years.”

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Embracing a hot cup of tea like a rescue buoy and ensconced on a very comfortable chair, Susanne wondered why this stranger felt like the best friend she never had.

Georgia plunked down, set her cup on a side table and leaned forward, clasping her hands over one knee. “Seems to me that you’d already had a bad day before you even saw your flat tire.”

Susanne’s sudden tears surprised her. But it was her own wracking sob that unhinged her.

Georgia sat comfortably in her chair, waiting, not cajoling or trying to hurry the process. She simply let the strange woman before her cry her eyes out.

Susanne could not have been more grateful. After she wiped her eyes with a tissue that seemed to spring out of thin air, she sat back, took a long sip of her lukewarm tea, and sighed. She lifted her gaze.

Georgia munched a fig newton. Completely at ease. No agenda. No tapping foot or imploring expression. Just calm acceptance, as if to say, “So this is how today is going. Huh.”

Susanne exhaled, pulled her feet onto the couch, and wrapped her arms around her knees. “I lied today. Have you ever lied?”

Georgia grunted. “Oh, yeah. Of course. We all do. Sometimes on purpose with lots of planning. Sometimes on the spur of the moment without thinking. We usually have a fairly good reason. Or at least, we think we do.”

“Well, I lied for one simple reason. To get back at someone who hurt me. I wanted her to feel bad. The details don’t really matter. Maybe she deserved it for the way she treated me. But the lie was all mine. I knew it was wrong. But I did it anyway. And what’s worse, I did it over and over again so that this woman’s reputation will now be forever shattered. Or at least, questionable.” The tears started again. “I wanted to punish her, but I punished myself far worse.”

“And then you got a flat tire.” Georgia snorted. “Bet you thought *Someone* was trying to tell you something, eh?”

Nausea rose and started an open rebellion in Susanne’s stomach. She couldn’t look up.

“Listen. You did an awful thing. No matter why, you knew it was wrong, and you did it anyway. So deal with it. You admitted it to me. So tomorrow, go tell the people involved that you lied. Apologize to your enemy, regain your self-respect, and stop hating yourself.”

Susanne blinked, her eyes stinging with the effort. “It’s not that simple. I’m the nice person. Everyone looks up to me. They trust me. She’s the witch everyone hates. If I do that,

they'll think I'm some kind of blithering idiot trying to be a hero."

"Well—in a way—you are."

A cat appeared on Susanne's right. It crouched, sprang, and landed on her lap. She yelped in surprise. And then, as the truth of Georgia's words hit home, she laughed.

Georgia grinned "You like cats?"

"Not usually. But this one—" She peered into the orange-eyed calico as he kneaded his paws into her lap and started his engines full throttle. "He's fine."

"Good. I'll leave him in your care while I go warm up the kettle. I think one more cup is in order before I send out into the rainy night."

Susanne leaned back against the chair and felt the cat curl up in a contented ball. Her shoulders relaxed and warmth spread throughout her whole body.

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Her nonfiction work focuses on the intersection of motherhood, widowhood, practicing gratitude, and rediscovering joy.

Her fiction novels expand from the OldEarth world to the Newearth universe—where deception rules but truth prevails.

She earned a Masters of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing for Entertainment from Full Sail University.

In her spare time, she serves as an election judge, a literacy tutor, and as secretary/treasurer of her small town's cemetery.

She is currently finishing a new science fiction novel in the Newearth world and a historical fiction & science fiction blend in her OldEarth series. To check out her stories, novels, inspirational books, and her film and TV scripts, visit <https://akfrailey.com/>



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