

Too Dead for his Britches
An 80s Church Lady Mini-Series Novella
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Too Dead for his Britches
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Chapter One

“Thank you for calling Baduga Fellowship Church where *your* blessings are *our* blessings. How much are you tithing today?”

I couldn't resist. If the devil didn't make me do it, then I'd own the remark for the pure and scandalous reason of getting under the caller's skin.

Since becoming the church secretary, I'd tried to watch my words, as advised by Barbara Barker, a deacon's wife. In my defense, I never saw the words tumble from my lips. And sometimes, I was just as horrified as everyone else.

Current call excluded.

Mr. Wales, a senior citizen who was tighter than a closed bank vault, coughed and cleared his throat before he finally said, “Hang on a minute.”

“You too.” I punched the hold button and stared up at Larry Elway, known to some as the deacon who rarely went home. Unable to ignore his seething glare, I cocked my head and sighed. “What now?”

“We don't ask our church members for money,” Larry said.

“We do when that member hasn't tithed in a year of Sundays.”

Not that I was judging.

“And you know this how?” Larry lowered his voice. “If memory serves me correctly, you've only worked here since October.”

“Memory nothing. You've practically stalked my office since you found out a new Baduga resident works here.” I waited a beat. “I have it on good authority that there's a side wager going on. Whoever collects the most dirt by the end of April ends up with a Baduga bakery certificate. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves.”

Pastor Mick would be.

“I don't have the faintest clue what you're talking about.” Larry turned on his heel and left my office.

“Remember, Larry, people can go *down below* for lying!”

Larry slammed the door to the main office entrance so I chalked that up as a win and returned to the line. “I'm back, Mr. Wales. What can I do for you?”

“Harper Kay is that you?” His low voice maintained a whispery pitch.

“Yes. You dialed my direct line, Mr. Wales.”

He sucked in a deep breath which caused an emphysema wheeze. “Wait there a minute.”

“Waiting,” I promised, taking a sip of cold coffee.

On the rare Sunday when Mr. Wales attended church, he was always late. He typically called ahead with instructions for the greeting team to ‘wait there a minute’ and often used the same directive when he left.

Since my arrival in Middle Tennessee’s small town Baduga, I’d ‘enjoyed’ many conversations with the elderly gentleman. On a good day, he spoke about cashing in some frequent flyer miles so he could meet his angels in the sky. On a bad one, however, Mr. Wales claimed there was already a toe tag with his name on it.

Since it was Monday, and a little early for our elderly parishioners, I was surprised to hear from him. “Did you mean to call Pastor Mick’s number?”

“No. I know where Pastor is at the moment. I’m calling for you.”

“What can I do for you?” I cradled the phone between my ear and shoulder. “Mr. Wales are you still there?”

“Yes. I’m here. And you probably should be.”

“I beg your pardon?”

He breathed heavier than before. “I’ll say again! You should probably start this way.”

“Well you don’t have to scream about it.”

“I didn’t think you heard me,” he said.

Unable to resist, I said, “Okay. Wait there a minute.” I cleared my throat, picked up a notepad and pen, and said, “Where are you exactly? Pastor Mick will be here soon and I’ll send him to you as soon as I see him.”

It was nine o’clock and I had a lot to do. A church member’s father passed away and I needed to arrange food and send flowers. Pastor Mick had a lot of patience for Mr. Wales and others like him.

I, on the other hand, did not.

Then again, I didn’t need patience. It wasn’t in my job description.

During my interview all those months ago, I was specifically told to handle the difficult women and leave the men to the senior pastor. I rarely deviated from those instructions.

At the thought, I said, “Mr. Wales, not to be rude, but I need to go. I have a really busy day ahead of me.”

“You’re about to have a busy week,” he said cryptically. “Now, wait there a minute.” I was already mouthing the words before he said them. “Jot this down.”

“I have your number.”

“I’m not giving you my phone number, young lady. Besides, unless heaven has a phone, you won’t need a number for Mick. Might need my address though.”

“Very well. I’ll take it down and give it to Pastor Mick.”

“Haven’t you heard anything I’ve said?” He waited a beat. “Pastor Mick won’t need an address or anything else. I know where he is because I’m looking at him!”

The bottom fell out of my patience at that precise moment. “Great. Put him on the phone.”

“Can’t do it. He’s dead.”

I pushed away from my desk so quickly that my chair crashed against the wall. “What do you mean he’s dead!” I wanted to jump through that phone and wring Mr. Wales’ neck. He’d taken the long way around the subject of death? What kind of person did such a thing? “What happened?”

Waiting for further explanation, I scrambled to find a larger notepad so I could write down any pertinent details. Someone might need them later, especially if Mr. Wales was responsible for the pastor’s death.

“Mick heard about Goldie and stopped by to extend his condolences. One minute, he was standing there, making small talk. The next minute, he said he was dizzy and needed to sit down. Before he could open his car door, he collapsed. Then, he had a seizure or stroke. I’m telling you, he fell dead right there.”

“Where?”

“In my driveway. Right next to his car.”

“Did you call the police?”

“Now why would I call the police?” Mr. Wales scoffed. “The only crime he’s committed is dying just a month or so after he accepted the job as senior pastor. By the way, reckon you’ll be able to stop payment on his sign-on bonus? I heard it was a big one.”

I twisted my lips and somehow resisted the urge to dignify his inconsiderate question with a response. Instead, I went to the window and peered outside to see if Larry's car was still here.

Nope. He's gone. Lucky Larry.

At this point, I could be a smarty pants or play nice. To put it in perspective, I was home alone.

Since joining the Baduga Fellowship Church staff, I'd worked night and day trying to improve my bad language, sarcastic thoughts, and lack of patience. All of those things proved challenging, especially since there were more pressing sins that I needed to correct. While trying to decide the best course of action, Mr. Wales sobbed.

My attitude needed a few tweaks here and there, but cry on my shoulder and I'd sing you a few lullabies. "Wait. Stop right there. I'll call the police, Mr. Wales. I'll handle everything."

"It won't do any good." He waited a beat. "Darn sure won't save his life now."

"Maybe calling the rescue squad would've changed the outcome," I suggested, not meaning to judge, but calling me shouldn't have been the first course of any action. I was barely out of diapers. Okay, so I'd been out of them for 17 or 18 years now, but not long enough to know how to deal with those who were just beginning to try them on again.

"Don't you judge me, young lady."

I didn't have to. A couple of church members would be happy to step up to the task. "I'll make the appropriate calls," I said, refusing to disclose that Pastor Mick had received a death threat the week before. "Don't move the body."

Mr. Wales mumbled something to himself before he said, "I'll wait here. My address is 909 Baduga Avenue."

I frowned. "You're located right next to the fire department?"

"Stone's throw."

"They have a paramedic there," I grated out.

Sniff. Sniff.

I looked up at the ceiling and was about to ask, "Why me, Lord" when I heard a more aggressive sob all over again. I could be empathetic, for crying out loud. It was my job after all, but at the moment, I couldn't process this at all.

None of it made sense.

Pastor Mick could not die. He was as healthy as a horse, everyone loved him, and he still had a lot of work left to do.

There must've been some mistake.

"Mr. Wales, I'm very sorry to hear about Goldie. Was she someone close to you?" Since I'd only lived in Baduga a short time, I still didn't know everything about our church members and their families.

"Heaven's no! Where'd you get that idea? Goldie was my goat!"

Since I didn't really know how to respond to a goat's death, I said, "Well, since you've been such a dedicated church member, I'm sure she's gone to a better place."

"Wish I'd been there to see her when she ran through heaven's gates. I bet that little goat went *baa-baa-baa* all the way home."

