

Final Arrangements
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“Have you made the final arrangements?”

Tracey straightened in the uncomfortable pleather arm chair. Chin held high, hands crossed neatly in her lap, voice steady, and nerves a wreck, she fought to cover the fear and anguish she truly felt. “Tomorrow.” She focused on everything in the office except the man who had been her physician, and more importantly, a family friend since she could remember.

“I’m sorry, but we’ve run out of tomorrows.” The wrinkles adorning Dr. Simon’s face deepened as his gray brows furrowed. “We can’t put this off any longer.”

“We!” She drew in a sharp intake of air. “We!” Tears suddenly filled her eyes, but she refused to allow them to fall. “Not we. Me!” She lowered her face into her palms. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I... I’ll be fine.” She combed her hands through her shoulder length locs.

“It’s all right.”

“No. It’s not. It will never be all right.” She resituated herself in the chair. “But there’s no excuse for my behavior. I apologize. I’m thirty-six and was taught better.” She inhaled then exhaled deeply. “You’re right. I’ve run out of tomorrows.”

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Thomas nodded at fellow parishioners as he entered the church. He hadn’t attended services at Gospel Tabernacle since Tracey abruptly broke off their engagement three months ago, and he wouldn’t be there today if Reverend Green hadn’t insisted.

He walked thirteen rows down then slid into the pew he, Tracey and the children had shared many a Sunday. He scanned the faces in the quickly filling church, hoping to catch a glimpse of Tracey and the kids—his family. He blew out an exasperated breath, missing them greatly. Tracey had allowed him to see the children whenever he wanted and speak to them on the phone, but she wouldn’t allow him to have more than superficial contact with her. When he’d go to pick up the children, he’d see the pain in Tracey’s eyes, see that she wanted to join them on their outings.

“Good to see you, Thomas.” Mrs. Berkley turned her wide body in the pew in front of Thomas, knocking her grandchildren to the side.

“It’s good to see you, too.”

“I’m so glad that you and our little Tracey are gettin’ along again. She hasn’t been the same since...” she trailed off. “Oh never mind. I’m just glad you’ve come. Welcome home.” She faced the front.

The church filled, but no Tracey, and the children were not in sight. The couple seated to the left of Thomas must have thought the same as Mrs. Berkley, because they left extra space.

Services progressed as normal. Though Reverend Green's sermon was interesting and short, which Thomas was grateful for, he didn't see why his presence was needed.

The reverend stood at the pulpit but didn't say a word. People looked at each other with a thousand and one questions in their eyes, but remained quiet. The organist waited on his signal to play, and the choir fidgeted nervously.

"Bear with me, my children," Reverend Green finally said. "Lord, help me." He lowered his head in prayer.

An encouraging, "It's all right, Rev," and "Take ya time," came from the "Amen" pew.

"Humph, can you believe I'm at a loss for words?" His eyes momentarily settled on Thomas.

"We're here for you, Rev," Mrs. Berkley said.

"These past few months I've been counseling one of our flock in a manner..." He cleared his throat. "I apologize," he said, voice cracking.

Tracey stood. "It's alright, Reverend Green. This is something I need to do." All eyes were on Tracey as she walked from her front row seat to the right and up the six stairs, then joined the minister behind the pulpit, hugging him. "Thank you."

Thomas shook his head. He'd been so busy looking at the back door for her to enter he'd missed her in the front row. She was as beautiful and regal as ever in her royal blue blouse and black, flouncy skirt. He frowned slightly as he noticed her weight loss. When he'd picked the children up, she had always worn the most horrid sweats.

"Good afternoon, church," she said with a slight shake to her voice.

"Good afternoon," they replied.

She gripped the sides of the podium then glanced over her shoulder at the reverend, who was standing directly behind her.

"It's alright, child." He rested his hand on her shoulder.

She returned her attention to the congregation. "I've come to ask a favor of you." She paused, "My family... I love my children and..." She sniffed.

"It's alright, honey. Take your time. Take your time."

A feeling of dread overcame Thomas as Tracey tried to regain her composure.

She inhaled deeply, squared off her shoulders then said, “Three months ago I was given six months to live, and I’m in search of a loving home for my children.”

The church came alive with “awws,” “No Lawd,” “Jesus Christ,” “Oooo,” “Oh my God.”

She waited for the murmurs to calm down and folks to settle. “I can not die in peace worrying that they may be separated.” She lowered her head. “You’re all the family I have... And I love you all.”

Though tears streamed down her face and her voice quivered, to Thomas she was the strongest person he’d ever seen. His heart overflowed with pride, sadness and anger: pride in her courage, sadness for her situation, and anger that she hadn’t confided in him.

“As you know, the twins are ten.” She offered a weak smile. “Ready to hit those terrible teens.” She swiped her tears. “This morning I explained to them that I’m dying. I know this won’t be easy. They were only five when their father passed, and now I’m...” Her gaze lowered then as if she felt Thomas’s presence, she lifted her face and looked directly at him.

He could feel her calling to him, pleading for him. He stood, and Tracey ran out the door to the left of the choir stand. Though Thomas hadn’t moved, people immediately moved out of the pew to let him out.

Mrs. Berkley turned in her seat toward him. “Don’t you let that girl run no more.”

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Tracey rocked in the executive chair behind Reverend Green’s desk, biting on her nails. Disgusted Reverend Green had betrayed her trust and invited Thomas, she prayed Thomas wouldn’t follow her. She couldn’t face him.

The door opened slowly then Thomas peeked around the corner. Her heart lifted, as it always did when she saw him, but the reality of her life quickly submerged her in a now familiar depression.

He fully entered the office, closed the door then stood before the desk with his arms folded over his chest.

Tracey looked at the built in bookshelves that lined the walls as if she’d find the answer to his questioning gaze in one of the books.

He shook his head then grabbed the armchair from the reading area and set it beside Tracey. He turned her seat so they’d be sitting knee to knee then her face so she’d have to look into his eyes. “Why don’t you believe in me?” he asked.

The pain in his voice and displayed on his face hurt almost as much as her having to ask for someone else to raise her children. She knew he'd be there for her if she'd of told him, but she didn't want him there.

"I'm sorry." She lowered her head in shame for not being straight with him. He was a good man and deserved to know the truth.

She could feel him rest his hands on the arms of her chair. "I'm so angry," he said silently.

"I do believe in you."

"No. You don't. Hear me out." He drew in a deep breath then released it slowly. "I'm angry because you didn't trust me." He held his hand to his heart. "Angry because you would ask others to raise the children I love. Angry because you chose to go through this without me." He wiped the tears from her cheeks with the pad of his thumb. "Angry because I love you. Angry because you've given up on the life we have left to share. I'm angry..." he trailed off.

"I-I love you too much to ask you to give up your life to raise two children."

He drew her into his loving embrace. "Don't you know that you and the twins are my life? I haven't given up anything."

It felt so good to be in his embrace again, like she was home again. "I've been so scared."

He rocked her gently until she stopped crying. "I love you," he whispered into her hair then pulled back slightly. "Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" she squealed.

He stood then held his hand out to her. She took his hand and allowed him to lead her into the sanctuary. To both of their surprise, the congregation was still there.

Thomas, chest puffed out proud, chin held high, with his lady love on his arm, proclaimed, "We're getting married!"

The organist started playing "Oh Happy Day," the choir and some members of the congregation sang, others cheered, while still others clapped.

Reverend Green walked over to the happy couple and embraced them.

"Thanks for not listening to me," Tracey said.

Reverend Green grinned at the two. "I believe we have final arrangements to make for a wedding."