

*Love
Remains*

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Dedication/Acknowledgment

Prologue



You'd think she won the lottery or something." Katrina Breitingler glared at the woman flouncing by, nose in the air.

"She'll be lording it over all of us until someone else achieves the same feat." Lindy Patterson crossed her arms and blew a lock of blond hair from her eyes.

"One would think she'd be mortified that it happened when she's still so young." Celeste Evans craned her neck to continue watching the woman in question.

Helen Bradley made a derisive raspberry sound. "Young, my foot! You know she's had work done."

"The least she could do would be to stop coloring her own hair." Maureen O'Connor touched her professionally hued auburn tresses. "Hers always looks so brassy."

Trina clicked her tongue, feeling slightly guilty. "Listen to the five of us. Standing here being catty about someone in church."

"You're right. Someone might overhear us and tell her." Lindy looked over both shoulders.

"We sound just like teenagers. It's unbecoming of us to speak ill of someone else." Trina set her lips in a firm line and looked at her four companions.

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“To *spea*k ill of her, but not to *think* ill of her?” Lindy, Trina’s best friend since high school, winked.

“You know what I mean. Honestly. We’re almost eighty years old, and we’re still acting like sorority girls.” Trina raised her hand to signal her husband, who’d just entered the back of the sanctuary.

“But what are we going to do about *her*?” Helen jutted her chin toward the object of their ire.

“There’s nothing we can do. Until one of our grandchildren get married, she’ll keep taunting us with the fact that she’ll have great-grandchildren before we do.”

Lindy grabbed Trina’s arm. “That’s it!”

“What?” Maureen asked.

“All of us have grandkids who’re getting up into their twenties and thirties. High time they should be getting married.” Lindy pulled the rest of the girls into a huddle.

“Don’t remind us,” Helen wailed.

“No, listen. We make a pact. Since each of us prides ourselves on knowing our offspring well, we’re going to be very picky about whom our grandchildren choose. So we narrow the pool.”

Trina stared at Lindy, following the train of thought to the next logical step. “We set our grandkids up with each other’s grandkids.”

“Exactly! We take the guesswork out of finding suitable partners for them.”

“But how—?” Celeste’s question was cut off by the organist beginning the prelude.

“We’ll work that out later—we’ll talk about it at coffee on Thursday.” Lindy stuck her right hand into the middle of the circle. “Who’s with me?”

Trina hesitated only a second before placing her hand on top of Lindy’s. Celeste, Helen, and Maureen quickly followed suit.

Lindy looked around at each of them, beaming. “I hereby dub us the Matchmakers.”

Chapter 1



The sharks were circling.

Bobby Patterson had been at the party a total of three minutes. But half that time was all it took for the smell of fresh blood to circulate among the single women.

“Hey, you must be Bobby. Patrick told us you were coming. I’m. . .” (fill in the blank with a female’s name).

He shook hands, smiled, greeted, laughed, introduced himself, and promptly forgot the names of the couple dozen women who continued to circle around. . . as if there weren’t a couple dozen other guys out on the back deck supervising the few men in charge of the grills.

“Diesel Patterson!” The masculine voice boomed through the room, and Bobby started to relax.

“Mack Truck Macdonald.” He accepted Patrick Macdonald’s hand for a vigorous handshake, which turned into a back-slapping hybrid embrace. A *bro-hug*, they called it back in California. Here in Nashville, Tennessee, he wasn’t so sure. Having been gone for sixteen years, he had a lot to relearn about his hometown.

“I can’t believe you actually came back, man. When you left the day after graduation, I thought you had shook the dust of this place

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off your feet for good.” Patrick led him through the large gathering room and the open french doors to the expansive deck attached to the back of the house.

“I thought it was for good, too. But, you know, once your parents and grandparents get to a certain age, it’s nice to be nearby.” The edge of annoyance caused by the excessive female attention began to dissipate when Bobby was once again surrounded by men. Quick surveillance gave him a count of twenty-two men, in their early twenties to early forties, well-dressed—though they all wore jeans or shorts, they were high-end and new-looking—and with only a slight diversity in ethnicity, just as the women had been.

“Hey, y’all.” Patrick raised his voice to get the attention of the majority of the guys standing around drinking sodas from red plastic cups and cans. “This is Bobby Patterson, my high school football buddy I was telling you about. He’s just moved back to Nashville and will be looking for a church home, so let’s make him welcome tonight and convince him he wants to rejoin Acklen Avenue Fellowship—because we could really use him on the softball team next summer.”

After Bobby met a few of the guys, Patrick cuffed his shoulder. “I’ll leave you to it, then. I’ve got to go back in and help in the kitchen.”

“Thanks, Mack.” Peripheral sightings informed him the women had grown tired of the segregation and were infiltrating the formerly all-male encampment outside.

One of the men standing near Bobby nudged the guy beside him. “Hey, pressure’s off us. New meat.” He jerked his head toward Bobby but grinned at him. “The gals in this group are great. . .once they get used to a guy. But don’t worry. We’ll try to protect you as best we can.”

Bobby returned the guy’s smile—he’d identified himself as Steve—and stifled his frustration. One of the reasons he’d left California was that the undercover work he did for the California Bureau of Investigation made it impossible to become an active member in a church, to be a part of a community, to meet someone.

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Yeah, that last one was laughable. Ever since leaving New Mexico fourteen years ago, the possibility of meeting someone he'd want to spend the rest of his life with had been pretty much nil.

"So, Bobby, what brought you to Nashville?" Someone—the guy with the mole on his jaw. . . Chris—handed him a can of soda.

Though already the Saturday before Labor Day, the heat of summer lingered on, so Bobby really didn't care what flavor the drink was, as long as it was cold and wet. "I'm an agent with the Tennessee Criminal Investigations Unit."

"Oh, yeah?" The pronouncement drew quite a bit of interest. "Like. . . are you out there busting the drug dealers and murderers and stuff?"

Bobby shook his head. "No, I leave that up to guys who have a higher threshold for excitement than I do. After two tours in the Middle East, I prefer chasing the guys who commit crimes from behind desks—fraud, conspiracies, political corruption, and stuff like that."

As he suspected, the others picked up on the mention of war and his involvement in it. "What branch?" the former marine asked. Had to be former—wasn't in great shape, but still wore the jarhead haircut.

"Army—infantry. You?" Might as well get it out in the open.

"U.S. Marine Corps, baby." He raised his sleeve to show the USMC tattoo at the top of his bicep. "Did my tour five years ago. Afghanistan."

"I got back six years ago. A year in Afghanistan and a year in Iraq." To keep the conversation from turning to politics—as it had always done when the topic of the war had come up out on the West Coast—he cast around for another; his gaze came to rest on the orange baseball cap of the slender twentysomething across from him. "How're the Vols looking for this year?"

It turned out to be the perfect diversion. With the University of Tennessee's first football game of the season tomorrow, the entire group surrounding him jumped into the conversation—and warded

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off all but a few of the hardiest women—until the grillers announced the meat was finished and carried the pungent platters, piled high with hot dogs and hamburger patties, through the crowd and back into the house.

Bobby's new acquaintances ushered him inside. The forty-some-odd people all crowded into the house made it feel much smaller than before, even when split between the family room and living room.

He turned to Steve—only to find the shorter guy had been replaced by one of the generic-looking females he'd met on his way in. She smiled up at him expectantly.

"Restroom?"

Her expectation fell into disappointment. "Past the kitchen and to the left."

"Thanks." His hands had been touched by so many people tonight that he wasn't about to use them to touch food that was destined for his mouth until he had washed them.

Unlike the houses he'd been looking at online, most of which were new or recent construction, the kitchen in this older home was cut off from the rest of the house by walls. Not the best setup for holding parties like this. Something to consider as he planned to get involved in the singles group at whatever church he decided to join and would love to host gatherings.

He rounded the corner and headed down the hall between the kitchen and dining room.

Someone zipped out of the kitchen, mitt-covered arms laden with an aluminum pan so full it sagged in the middle.

Both of them stopped short—and Bobby jumped back as a wave of baked beans sloshed over the side of the pan.

"I am so sorry!"

Bobby, who'd reached out to steady the woman, froze at the familiar voice. He dragged his eyes up from the mess on the floor to the face that had haunted him for fourteen years.

"Zarah?"



The horror at almost spilling an entire pan of baked beans on someone dissipated into frigid shock upon discovering the near-victim of her clumsiness was the one person she'd never expected to see again. Zarah Mitchell tried to regain her balance, both with the pan of beans and with her own emotional equilibrium.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated, not knowing what else to say. She'd always run the risk that she might one day see him again—she'd known that when she moved to Nashville fourteen years ago. But why here? Why now?

"Whoa! What's the idea?" Patrick's voice came from behind and above her. "Oh, good. I was hoping to introduce the two of you."

Zarah couldn't tear her eyes away from the vision in front of her—terrified he was real and terrified he was a figment of her imagination—until he reached out to take the pan from her.

"No introductions necessary, Mack. Zarah and I met each other a very long time ago." Giving her a tight smile, Bobby turned and carried the pan to the dining room. Zarah's chest tightened, and it had nothing to do with the relapse of pneumonia that had landed her in the hospital again for four days this week.

Bobby Patterson. Her first love. The man she compared all others to. The reason her father kicked her out of the house the day she turned eighteen.

She risked taking a deep breath, filling her lungs only until a coughing fit seemed imminent. She turned to face Patrick. "I—I'll get something to clean this up." She skirted around him and slipped back into the kitchen. But with five other people in the small space, relief was not to be found.

Pulling the roll of paper towels off its holder and grabbing the trash can, Zarah set about the task of cleaning up Patrick's beautiful new wood floor. Fortunately, not much had spilled; unfortunately, that meant it didn't take very long to clean up.

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A shadow blocked the light, and she looked up. Patrick towered over her, arms akimbo, a dishrag hanging from one hand. “I was about to get that. I sure don’t understand why you feel you have to act like a maid every time you come here.”

“Not a maid.” Zarah wiped up the last of the bean sauce and tossed the wad of towels into the trash can. She used the edge of the can for leverage as she got back up on her feet. “As your co-leader in this group, when we’re at your house, I think of myself as the hostess. And when a good hostess spills something, she cleans it up. She doesn’t leave it for someone else to do.”

“Which I understand. However, I just visited you at the hospital three days ago. You don’t need to be down on no floors cleaning stuff up.”

“I appreciate your concern. But I’m fine. And I should know. This isn’t the first time I’ve made a comeback from pneumonia—you know that, too.” She turned to pick up the trash can to take it back into the kitchen, but Patrick snatched it out of her hand.

“Yeah, I know. This is the second time in four months you’ve landed in the hospital because you were too stubborn to take care of yourself after the first time your mule-headedness landed you there.”

“I promise I’m fine.” Instead of following Patrick into the kitchen, she continued down the hallway to the guest bathroom. Finding it empty, she entered and locked the door behind her. It didn’t take long to wash the stickiness from her fingers. Once her hands were clean and dry, she leaned against the marble countertop and stared at her reflection in the mirror.

After all these years, after everything she’d lived through, seeing Bobby Patterson standing there made it seem like no time had passed—though he seemed taller than she remembered and much larger and more muscular at thirty-four than he’d been at twenty.

Why hadn’t Kiki warned her Bobby was coming home? As his grandmother’s best friend for more than sixty years, Katrina Breitingner knew everything that happened in the Patterson family—most of the time before the rest of Pattersons knew it. Zarah pulled her cell

phone out of her pocket and slid it open to tap out a text message to her grandmother. Kiki knew the whole story, so Zarah could not understand why her grandmother wouldn't have given her some forewarning that the man who broke her heart was in town.

She exited the bathroom just as someone else was about to knock on the door. She plastered on her best I-am-fine smile and made her way down the hall to face the specter of her past.

With almost fifty people gathered in the main living areas and on the deck of the seventeen-hundred-square-foot house, avoiding Bobby turned out to be relatively easy. All she had to do was stay in the kitchen. But she couldn't hide in there all night. She had obligations. Grabbing the bottles of diet and regular soda out of their ice bath in the sink, she went out to circulate.

As expected, in the living room where most of the younger women sat around talking and eating, there was one main topic of conversation: Bobby Patterson. How tall he was. How cute he was. How muscular he was. How square his jaw was. And most ridiculous of all, an argument over whether his eyes were blue, green, gray, or hazel. Zarah could have answered the question for them. His eyes were blue, green, gray, *and* hazel, depending on the lighting and what color he was wearing. Tonight, dressed in a maroon polo shirt, his eyes probably looked hazel. In the brief time her gaze had been locked with his, the color of his eyes had not been her primary concern. But oh, how well she remembered the deep, dusky green they were the few times she had seen him in his army dress greens.

She moved from the living room into the den, where more of the guys were gathered. Off to one side stood Patrick and Bobby. Neither had plates in his hands, so she assumed either both had eaten already or, as Patrick was wont to do, they were waiting until everyone had been served before getting their own food. As a visitor, Bobby should have been one of the first people to eat tonight. But it didn't surprise her that he would wait. He was just that kind of guy.

Bobby suddenly looked away from Patrick and caught her watching

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him. She sucked in a startled breath, which caught in her fluid-filled lungs and triggered a coughing spasm. A couple of people standing nearby turned to ensure she was okay until Patrick made it to her side. It took awhile for her to be able to breathe enough to tell him she was fine. Patrick tried to make her sit down, but she refused; as a leader in this group, she knew people looked to her for strength and support. She could not show any vulnerability.

So they wouldn't see how weak and shaky the coughing spasm had left her, she carried the empty soda bottles back to the kitchen. It was all she could manage to pull the appropriate recycling bin out from the pantry and toss the empty plastic bottles into it. A couple of big black trash bags slouched on the floor in front of the sliding glass door that connected the kitchen to the deck. She sank into one of the chairs at the kitchen table and stared at the trash bags for a moment. As soon as she caught her breath, she'd get back to work.

After what felt like a long time, Zarah forced herself to stand up. She pulled the red drawstrings at the top of the bags closed, tied them, and shoved them with her feet under the table—which was where Patrick always put them during a party. She put a fresh bag in the large trash can and hooked another onto the knob of the pantry door—both of those would be full soon, too. With every muscle in her body weak from fatigue and exhaustion, she trudged to the sink, slipped on the pair of pink rubber gloves she'd given Patrick for his last birthday, and started washing the empty serving dishes and utensils that had already been brought in from the dining room.

"I thought I might find you in here."

Patrick's voice startled her, and she dropped the heavy metal pan she'd been scrubbing with a *clank* against the dishes still in the sink.

"Don't sneak up on me like that. You want to give me a heart attack on top of my pneumonia?"

Patrick laughed his signature booming laugh, erasing the concerned scowl from his expression. "Come on. Everyone's wondering where you are."

Yes, much as she didn't feel like it, she should be social at this thing. Building relationships with the younger women was the only way she would be able to mentor them and teach them to treat single men like brothers rather than prizes to be competed over. She understood the desperation that many of the young women felt; she'd felt it herself in her mid-twenties when the majority of her friends from college got married. Thank goodness, though, for Flannery and Caylor. At one and two years older than Zarah, her former roommates were also still single. The three of them, best friends since Zarah had moved into their apartment her junior year of college, shared all the agonies and joys of unmarried life together—something many single women did not have: a shoulder to cry on, listening ears, and more than one person who understood where she was coming from.

"Zarah, come sit with us." A group of older single women waved her over to join them. Uncomfortably, she eyed the space they made for her on the sofa, knowing her size-fourteen hips would never fit in that narrow gap.

The boom of Patrick's voice reverberated through the house, though Zarah could not make out what he was saying. But as more people flowed into the room, crowding it even further, the intent of his announcement became clear. He herded the last few people into the room ahead of him, then made his way through the crowd at the perimeter to stand in the middle, a stack of papers in his hands.

Zarah groaned. Patrick and his games. While she appreciated the fact that his seemingly endless supply of mixer games had helped them build this singles' group from a Sunday school class of about eight to the vibrant active group of almost sixty they had now, she personally hated playing these games. And he knew it. Which was why he'd come and gotten her out of the kitchen—because he loved to torture her.

The papers passed from hand to hand around the room as Patrick gave the instructions. People Bingo, he called it. The point, he said, was to learn new and interesting facts about other people in their group. Each of the twenty squares had hobbies, activities, places, and

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stuff like that written in them; and they were each tasked with going around the room and finding someone who had been there or done that. When two of the ladies on the sofa, who enjoyed these kinds of games and usually won them, jumped up to participate, Zarah sank down gratefully into the space they vacated. Until her tired muscles hit the soft cushions and pillows, she hadn't realized how much they were knotting up.

She wanted to close her eyes, to let the exhaustion she'd been holding at bay all day at work and all evening carry her away. But she couldn't; she had to pretend she was having fun playing Patrick's game.

So with great effort, she pushed herself up off the sofa and joined the melee. She read through the list of items needing to be matched to people.

Born on the East Coast. Knows how to knit. Still has their appendix and tonsils. Has been skydiving. Knows karate. Has been to Las Vegas.

Her eyes fell onto the box in the middle of the far right column: *Served in the military.*

She glanced around the room. As far as she knew, the only two people in this room who had ever served in the military were Ryan and Bobby. She made a beeline for Ryan.

She avoided the cluster of women—both young and old—who used this as an excuse to converge on Bobby and find out whatever they could about him. The great thing about such a cloud of admirers was that they created such a buffer, it gave Zarah the confidence to move freely around the room without worrying about another unexpected tête-à-tête with him.

But she did catch snippets of his answers to some other questions. Yes, he'd served in the army for ten years, achieving the rank of sergeant. Yes, he had been stationed overseas during his ten years, including two tours of duty in the Middle East. No, he had never been to Vegas, even though he'd lived within a few hours' drive when he'd been posted at Fort Irwin. No, he had never been skydiving, unless repelling out of

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helicopters in his air-assault training in the army counted for skydiving. No, he had been born right here in Middle Tennessee.

“No, I’ve never been married.”

Zarah looked down at the sheet trying to find where that question came from, but could not find a box labeled *Has ever been married*. She shook her head; the audacity of some of these women.

Bobby continued speaking. “But my grandmother keeps nagging me to introduce her to my fiancée.”