

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired®

Made for Each Other

Irene Brand



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Аннотация

Single mother doesn't seek love Raising a teenager kept widow Aimee Blake too busy for a relationship. Or so she said. Her daughter was trying—with all her rebellious might—to cut the apron strings. So Aimee took some "me time." She attended a singles group and met a handsome counselor as not interested in romance as she was. With his painful family past and a failed engagement Jacob Mallory was a one-date kind of man. These days he committed only to his work. Problem was Aimee had discovered that she and Jacob were made for each other...

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**“Is this becoming a habit?”
Jacob asked. “We keep
running into each other.”**

“I’m not following you,” Aimee said with a low laugh. “I promise. I didn’t know you attended this church.”

“Yes, and it’s great that you’re here. Let me find a good seat for you.” Once seated, Aimee surreptitiously watched Jacob as he carried out his duties as usher. His voice was compassionate. He was gracious to old and young alike. She noticed again how captivatingly handsome he was, and decided that Jacob’s nature matched his appearance.

Was it just coincidence or was it significant that she had encountered him three times in as many days? Her Granny always used the expression, “It was meant to be.” Could that be true of her and Jacob?

IRENE BRAND

Writing has been a lifelong interest of this author, who says that she started her first novel when she was eleven years old and hasn't finished it yet. However, since 1984 she's published more than thirty contemporary and historical novels and three nonfiction titles. She started writing professionally in 1977 after she completed her master's degree in history at Marshall University. Irene taught in secondary public schools for twenty-three years, but retired in 1989 to devote herself to writing.

Consistent involvement in the activities of her local church has been a source of inspiration for Irene's work. Traveling with her husband, Rod, to all fifty states, and to thirty-two foreign countries has also inspired her writing. Irene is grateful to the many readers who have written to say that her inspiring stories and compelling portrayals of characters with strong faith have made a positive impression on their lives. You can write to her at P.O. Box 2770, Southside, WV 25187 or visit her Web site at <http://www.irenebrand.com>.

Made for Each Other

Irene Brand



For if you forgive men when they sin against you,
your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

—Matthew 6:14

To the youth of Harmony Baptist Church

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Chapter One

“You’re going to do what?”

Aimee Blake pivoted quickly away from the vanity where she was applying her makeup and stared at her daughter. With a bulging backpack slung over her shoulder, Samantha leaned carelessly against the doorjamb, her face serene, as if she hadn’t just tossed a bombshell in her mother’s lap.

“I’m going to ride to school with Jennifer. She’s picking me up.”

“Why?”

“Duh—because she can drive now,” Samantha said, avoiding her mother’s stare. “Jennifer’s parents bought her the most awesome car. I’ll just ride to school with her from now on.”

“Without asking me if it’s okay?”

Samantha rolled her heavily made-up, smoky-gray eyes, too heavily made up for Aimee’s taste. “Puh-leeze, Mom. I’m not a kid anymore.”

“Well, at fourteen, you aren’t an adult, either,” Aimee stated decisively. “Besides, Jennifer hasn’t had her driver’s license more than a month.”

Samantha shrugged dismissively. “So? She hasn’t gotten a ticket. Proves she’s a safe driver.”

Aimee stifled a grin. Even in her frustration, she was amused at Samantha’s adolescent reasoning. Before she could discuss

it any further with Samantha, Jennifer Nibert's screeching tires announced her arrival as she sped into the driveway. A slamming car door indicated that she was on her way to the house.

"You can go with Jennifer this morning, but we'll discuss the future tonight," Aimee said quietly. She stepped into the hallway a second before the front door opened and Jennifer wandered inside. As usual, Aimee was startled by the girl's appearance. She was dressed totally in black, except for the silver chains around her waist and neck. Aimee counted four earrings in her left ear, two in the other one. Heavy makeup disguised Jennifer's beautiful facial features and gold-green eyes.

"Ready, Sam? We've got to go. Oh, hi, Mrs. Blake. Come and see my new car."

With an inward sigh, Aimee stepped out on the porch. Jennifer pointed with pride to the two-door blue sports car parked in the driveway. "Pretty sweet ride, huh, Mrs. B.?" she asked Aimee.

"It's awesome!" Samantha agreed. "I love it already."

Although Aimee was worried at the thought of a girl as seemingly immature as Jennifer being turned loose in that car and with Samantha in it, she admitted, "It's very pretty. But it isn't a toy, Jennifer, so drive carefully."

"I always do," Jennifer said, and a beaming grin crossed her friendly, if a little scary-looking, face.

The two girls slid into the leather-covered bucket seats and fastened their seat belts. Jennifer threw the car into Reverse and backed toward the street, then stopped abruptly.

Samantha rolled down her window. “Hey, Mom. I forgot to tell you. I’m going to a sleepover at Jennifer’s tonight. Okay? Bye.” She closed the window and Jennifer quickly backed into the street and sped away.

This announcement, coming on top of her daughter’s surprise decision to stop riding to school with her, was more than Aimee could stomach. Her first reaction was anger, but the shock of Samantha’s sudden independence—or was it rebellion?—yielded quickly to concern. Aimee hadn’t suspected her daughter of deceiving her before, but she was convinced now that Samantha had deliberately waited to tell her about the sleepover after she thought it would be too late for her mother to forbid it.

Aimee wiped away the angry tears that threatened to spill from the corners of her eyes as she returned to the house. The pain in her heart was beyond tears. Was she losing her daughter, or was Samantha just growing up?

Glancing at the clock, she knew she didn’t have time to fret about the situation now. She had to be at work in forty-five minutes. She rushed into the bedroom to finish dressing for the day. Feeling in need of an extra boost to her self-confidence, Aimee sprayed on some expensive perfume she’d recently bought as a gift to herself. The aromatic lavender fragrance swirled around her as she left the house. Dreading the workday, Aimee drove out of the cul-de-sac where she’d lived for several years.

With a few minutes to spare, Aimee arrived at Eastside Elementary School where she had worked as a secretary ever

since the year Samantha had started kindergarten there. As she parked, Aimee glanced across the street to the high school where her daughter was now a student. Where had the time gone? She saw Jennifer's car in the parking lot and breathed a sigh of relief that they'd arrived safely.

Aimee glanced in the side mirror as she stepped out of the car, noting that her brows were drawn together and her lips were drawn tight, too. She couldn't greet her coworkers and the children looking as uptight as she felt, so she forced herself to put on a smile. Her efforts fell a little short, but at least she looked slightly more pleasant as she hurried toward the door.

She slowed her steps when she encountered a tall, muscular, nicely dressed man leading a boy with a backpack toward the building. At the door, the man turned and saw Aimee. His mouth parted in a smile that highlighted the most attractive face Aimee had seen in a long time. His elegant, handsome features hinted at a vital power that attracted her. A swath of curly hair hung casually over his smooth forehead.

"Good morning," he said, standing aside to let her enter first. "Thanks, and good morning to you, too," she answered, hopefully sounding more pleasant than she felt. Aimee thought she knew all the parents, but she was sure she hadn't seen this man before. He wasn't the kind of man one would easily forget. She glanced at the boy. She didn't recognize him either. Judging from the little guy's anxious expression, Aimee figured he probably was a new student.

“Do you work here?” At Aimee’s nod, the man continued. “Alex needs an entrance permit for being absent several days,” the man said. So the boy was already enrolled. Odd that she’d never seen him. “Where can we get it? He has a doctor’s excuse.”

“I can arrange that for you,” Aimee assured him. “The office is down this hallway.” She motioned to the hall on her right.

“Good,” the man said. “C’mon, Alex.”

The man held the office door for Aimee. She pointed to a row of chairs against the wall of the reception area, saying, “Just take a seat here for a few minutes until I boot up my computer. We’ll have Alex on his way to class soon.”

She went to her desk, laid down her purse and coat, and booted up the computer. She motioned to the pair to come into her office and take the seats in front of her desk.

“What’s your last name, Alex?”

The boy mumbled something, but she didn’t understand what he said. She lifted questioning eyes to the man who watched the boy with a tender, brown-eyed gaze.

He laid his arm on the boy’s shoulder. “This is Alex Putney. Give the lady your doctor’s excuse, Alex.”

Checking her computer records, Aimee noticed that Alex had been a student since the first of the year. He pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Aimee. The excuse for nine days had been written by a reputable doctor, so Aimee filled in the permit to send the child back to class.

“There you go, Alex,” she said as she handed him the paper.

“Sorry you’ve been sick.”

The man Aimee had assumed was Alex’s father reached across the desk to shake her hand. His fingers were warm and firm as they gripped hers, and the friendly smile he gave her suddenly wrapped Aimee in warmth. At the door of her office, he turned toward her, smiled again and said, “Have a nice day.”

Aimee wasn’t anticipating a good day, but it lifted her spirits some just to have someone wish she would.

Throughout the morning as she answered the phone, directed calls and entered report-card information into the computer, she thought of the thick, curly brown hair and dark eyes of the man who’d greeted her so warmly. As she thought about him, her day brightened a bit.

But as her eyes scanned the computer screen and her hands moved automatically across the keyboard, uppermost in Aimee’s mind was the “new” Samantha. Aimee had known the day would come when her daughter would broaden her horizons, but she wasn’t convinced that either of them was ready for it yet. She took her role as a single parent seriously. Too seriously? she wondered. She didn’t think so. At barely fourteen, Samantha still needed a great deal of parental supervision, didn’t she? More than anything, Aimee wanted to be a good mother, and she was worried about the path Samantha might be heading down.

Lisa, the financial secretary, stopped by Aimee’s desk. “I don’t know about you, but I’m glad we have the afternoon off. I’m bushed.” Lisa slanted a curious glance at Aimee. “You don’t look

so good either.”

“I’m all right.” She glanced at the clock. “Only another hour. It does give us a nice break when they have countywide in-service workshops for elementary teachers.”

“Got any plans for the afternoon?”

“The weekly grocery shopping, but I may hold that off until tomorrow.”

When Aimee put her fingers back on the keyboard, Lisa took the hint. “See ya,” she called as she returned to her office.

An hour later when Aimee left the building, a long afternoon loomed before her. Normally, she would be planning dinner on her way home, but unless she put her foot down and told Samantha she couldn’t go to the sleepover, she wouldn’t need to prepare dinner. When she entered the house, it seemed unusually quiet, and she thought sadly that she might as well get used to it.

“Oh, for cryin’ out loud,” she muttered. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Look on the bright side. For fourteen years, Samantha hasn’t given you any trouble, so count your blessings and deal with each situation as it comes.”

Through the window, she saw her friend Erica Snyder driving into her garage. Momentarily, she wished that she could be as calm about life as her neighbor, who had a tendency to shrug off trouble when it came her way.

When the phone rang a few moments later, Aimee figured it was Erica, who must have seen Aimee’s car in the driveway.

“Hi,” Erica said cheerfully. “Tonight is our singles get-

together at church. There's going to be a good program. Want to go?"

Erica was constantly trying to fix Aimee up, and she often invited Aimee to go with her to this monthly meeting at Memorial Church. She'd always turned down the invitation before, but now that Samantha was getting independent, perhaps the time had come for her to try something new.

"All right. I will." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Aimee regretted her impulsive decision.

Silence greeted her for a moment. "Well, not that I'm unhappy that you're finally going with me," Erica said, "but I am curious. Why the change of heart?"

"Samantha is going to a sleepover tonight, and I don't want to stay home alone."

"Great! The meeting starts at seven. I'll pick you up at six-thirty."

After Erica hung up, Aimee sat at the table and stared into space. "Now, why did you do that?" she finally said aloud. For a moment she considered calling Erica and telling her she'd changed her mind, but Aimee didn't want to disappoint her friend. For the first time, Aimee realized that she'd been so intent on making a good life for her daughter that she didn't really have a life of her own. Maybe it was time to change that.

Appraising herself critically in the mirror, Aimee decided that her long black hair needed a trim. And as she surveyed her image, she suddenly thought of the man she'd met at school this

morning. He'd been dressed impeccably in a dark gray suit, white shirt and a navy tie. Aimee fleetingly wondered what he had thought of her. Had he even noticed her? She hadn't even gotten his name.

Making up her mind quickly, Aimee called her hairdresser, who said she could work Aimee in. Two hours later, Aimee wondered if she'd taken leave of her senses when she came out of the mall with a short layered bob and a new outfit.

She was in the bedroom looking at her purchases when Samantha and Jennifer breezed into the house at four o'clock.

"Hey, Mom," Samantha called. "I'm home."

Aimee walked down the hall to meet them.

"Hello, Mrs. Blake," Jennifer said. "You look awesome."

Aimee was pleased at Jennifer's comment, since obviously Samantha hadn't noticed. "I had a trim this afternoon. The hairdresser also shampooed and styled my hair, which always relaxes me."

"That's what my mom says. I fix my own hair unless I need color."

Aimee compared Jennifer's black, Gothic hairstyle with her daughter's long, natural blond hair worn in a high ponytail. Aimee's refusal to allow Samantha to wear her hair like Jennifer's was another recent source of friction between them.

"Don't you think your mother's hair looks cool, Sam?"

With a careless shrug of her shoulders, Samantha said, "Kind of. It doesn't look like you, Mom. Hey, I need snacks and drinks

for the sleepover. You can fix me some stuff while I get my things ready. C'mon, Jen. Help me pack."

Samantha seemed tense, as if she expected Aimee to stop her from going to the sleepover. Aimee was annoyed at her daughter's demanding attitude. She could have at least said "please." As she opened the refrigerator door, Aimee wondered what would happen if she did tell Samantha that she couldn't go. Afraid that her daughter would go anyway, Aimee wasn't ready to put her to the test.

As she scanned the refrigerator, Aimee knew she should have gone to the grocery store rather than the hairdresser. Well, it was too late now. She didn't have time to buy groceries and be ready when Erica wanted to leave. She gathered some chips, cookies and pop and put them in a basket.

Samantha's room was on the ground floor of their split-level home, and Aimee walked to the head of the stairs and called, "Your snacks are ready. You're welcome."

Her new clothes lay on the bed, but her daughter's rotten attitude dimmed Aimee's pleasure in the beige linen pants and jacket. She put on the loose-fitting pants, pulled a white cotton tee over her head and slipped into the buttonless jacket, which featured white trim on the cuffs and lapel. She searched in her jewelry box and chose a gold chain and matching earrings, a gift from Steve when they'd become engaged. She still missed him.

Glancing in the floor-length mirror, Aimee scrutinized her appearance. She looked okay, but she still wished she hadn't

agreed to go with Erica because she dreaded telling Samantha where she was going. When she heard the girls coming upstairs, Aimee walked into the hallway.

“I’ll be out for a few hours this evening.”

Samantha whirled around and looked at her mother. “Excuse me? Since when do you have somewhere to go on Friday night?” Her long hair was hanging loose now, and with a quick flip of her fingers, Samantha brushed it away from her face.

“Since I decided to go to a meeting with Erica.”

“What kind of meeting?”

Aimee definitely didn’t like her daughter’s attitude now. She should be quizzing Samantha about her evening activities, not the other way around. But she wouldn’t embarrass Samantha by reprimanding her in Jennifer’s presence. Still, she couldn’t tolerate this sort of behavior, and she would deal with it later. With a sinking heart, she wondered what Steve would think if he knew she had allowed their daughter to develop such a belligerent attitude.

As kindly as she could, Aimee said, “It really isn’t any of your business where I’m going.” Although her nerves were on edge, Aimee felt like laughing at the look of disbelief spreading across Samantha’s face.

“What is with you, Mom?” Samantha demanded.

“Nothing is with me. I have a right as an adult to have my own plans, but I don’t mind telling you where I’ll be,” Aimee said tensely. “However, it would have been nice if you’d asked me in a

more civil tone. I'm going to a singles meeting at Erica's church."

"That's cool!" Jennifer said. "Go for it, Mrs. B."

But Aimee could tell by looking at her daughter that she didn't think it was cool. Was it anger or fear she detected in Samantha's eyes?

"You're kidding, right?"

Aimee shook her head. "No. Erica invited me, and since you're going to be away overnight, I couldn't see any reason to spend the evening alone. What time will you be home tomorrow?"

"I don't know," Samantha said sullenly and picked up the basket of food.

Lifting her perfectly groomed eyebrows, Jennifer glanced sideways at her friend before she said, "I've got a dentist appointment at nine o'clock, Mrs. Blake. I'll drop her off before then."

Surprisingly, Jennifer was a polite, seemingly well-behaved girl, and Aimee wondered if she had been judging the older girl too harshly based on her looks. She blamed Jennifer for a lot of Samantha's recent rebellious ways, but perhaps it was time to place the blame squarely on Samantha.

"Thanks," Aimee said to Jennifer. "Have fun tonight," she added.

Samantha didn't answer, but Jennifer said, "That's a cool outfit, Mrs. Blake. See ya tomorrow."

Apparently Samantha hadn't noticed what her mother had

on. She turned and assessed Aimee's new clothes suspiciously, casting another critical glance at her mother before she gave an impatient shrug and tossed her long blond hair defiantly. She left the house without a word and slammed the door behind her.

Aimee dropped into the lounge chair before the window in the family room and covered her face with her hands. She heard the chickadees and nuthatches at the feeder outside the window, but she didn't look up. Watching the pretty little birds usually lifted her spirits, but not now when her mind reeled with confusion. Soon her confusion turned to anger—not only at Samantha but also at herself. For years she had catered to her daughter's every whim, so what could she expect?

She clenched her jaw to stop the tears in her heart from reaching her eyes. She would address Samantha's rebellion later, but she wouldn't let this evening be ruined. She needed a night out. Later, when she heard Erica's car horn, Aimee pasted a smile on her face and left the house.

"Well, don't you look sharp!" Erica exclaimed when Aimee opened the car door and sat beside her. "That's a beautiful suit."

Aimee fastened her seat belt, and Erica pulled away from the sidewalk. "I haven't bought any clothes for months, so I went shopping today," Aimee said. "How do you like my hair?"

"Gorgeous! It takes years off of your age." Erica eyed her sharply. "But your eyes are pink. Been crying?"

"You're too observant," Aimee answered with a sigh. "Samantha wasn't happy when she heard where I was going."

“So...” Erica persisted.

“So I’ve made up my mind to start cutting the apron strings, and I don’t mean to separate Samantha from me. She’s already done that,” Aimee said. “I’m beginning to cut myself loose from her.”

“It won’t be easy,” Erica said sympathetically. “But for your own good, as well as Samantha’s, it’s time. In only a few years, she’ll be off to college.”

“I hope so, but it’s hard. I feel like I haven’t been a good mom, or Samantha wouldn’t be so rebellious.”

“Oh, it isn’t you,” Erica assured her. “It’s part of growing up. Just keep praying for Samantha.”

“Yes, I intend to,” Aimee said, although her prayer life was something else she’d neglected in the past few years.

Twenty minutes later, Erica bypassed the brick church building facing Madison Street and drove to an adjacent one-story metal structure housing a fellowship hall and classrooms.

“Please don’t make a big deal out of my coming to this meeting,” Aimee said. “I may never visit again, so I don’t want to call a lot of attention to myself.”

Erica’s eyebrows arched provocatively.

“I’m serious,” Aimee said.

“I’ll be good,” Erica promised as she got out of the car and walked toward the building. “I’m so happy to see this change in you that I won’t do anything you don’t like.”

Following her, Aimee took a deep breath, suddenly nervous

and wishing she had stayed home. As they walked down a short hallway, Aimee lagged behind Erica. Hearing the mingled voices of many people and occasional bursts of laughter, Aimee wondered what she was getting herself into.

“Ready?” Erica asked as they neared a doorway.

Taking a deep breath and squaring her shoulders, Aimee nodded.

Chapter Two

Several times throughout the day Jacob Mallory thought of the secretary he'd met at the elementary school this morning. As he counseled clients at his counseling service, the memory of her sweet, lavender scent nearly distracted him more than once. Aimee Blake, he'd noticed on the nameplate that rested on her desk. Although he'd lived in the small town of Benton for most of his life, he had never met her, which made him wonder if Aimee was new to town.

He worked late and went directly from work to the singles meeting, and as he drove the ten blocks, he thought again of Aimee, the woman with the gleaming dark hair and dark-blue eyes. The long lashes that framed her eyes created a stunning effect offset by her creamy complexion. But he thought he also sensed raw hurt flickering in those blue eyes, and he wondered what had caused her pain.

When he saw Aimee walk into the room with Erica Snyder, Jacob took a deep breath of utter astonishment. Momentarily, he wondered if he was dreaming or wide awake. But when the aromatic scent of lavender wafted toward him, Jacob knew that the woman with Erica was the same one he'd met this morning—the one who had distracted him all day.

When she entered the room with Erica, Aimee saw that it

wasn't as daunting as she'd thought. It had fewer than thirty people, and several strips of fluorescent lights shed light on the area. At one end was a kitchen, separated from the main room by a serving window. A podium and an electric keyboard were located at the opposite end of the room.

Two men stood near the entryway. Something seemed familiar about the muscular shoulders of one of them, and when he turned, Aimee recognized the friendly man she'd met at school earlier in the day. He must have recognized her, too, because he stared at her with a look of surprise. By the time they reached him, an infectious smile that spread to his dark eyes had stretched across his face.

"Well, hello again," he said.

Surprised at how pleased she was to see him, Aimee returned his smile. "I didn't expect to see you again, either, at least not so soon." She felt her face flushing. She hoped her remark didn't sound as if she'd been thinking about him.

Aimee sensed Erica's sharp glance. "Say, do you two know each other?"

"Not really," Aimee said. "We met at school this morning, and we haven't even been properly introduced."

"I can take care of that," Erica said. "Aimee Blake, this is Jacob Mallory."

"It's great to see you," Jacob said, moving closer and extending his hand. "Thanks for being so kind to my friend Alex today. He's a shy kid."

She placed her hand in Jacob's and welcomed the warm pressure of his hand grasping hers. This morning she had assumed he was Alex's father, but apparently he wasn't. Then why had he brought the little boy to school?

"I'll introduce you to the others before the meeting starts," Erica said, and Aimee and Jacob exchanged polite smiles as she followed Erica. Walking from one group to the other, Erica kept up a low commentary about the people in the room. Aimee was grateful for the information, hoping she would be able to associate names with faces. They finally sat in a row of chairs not far from the podium. Soon, Jacob stopped beside Aimee and Erica.

"Hi, is it okay if I sit with you?"

"Sure," Erica said. "I have to help set up the stage for our musicians when they get here. You can visit with Aimee while I'm doing that."

As Jacob took the chair to her right, Aimee sensed that Erica wasn't too excited about his sitting with them. She slanted a curious glance toward Erica but couldn't read her expression. For months, Erica had been trying to get Aimee "out of her shell," as she often described it, and Aimee would have thought Erica would be pleased to have Jacob Mallory befriending her. But Erica evidently wasn't keen on leaving her in Jacob's company, and Aimee couldn't imagine why.

In Aimee's opinion, Jacob seemed like a really nice guy—and he wasn't bad to look at either. Again, she noted the tall, well-

built man's thick, brown hair and dark brown eyes. His chiseled face was lean with a well-proportioned nose and a large, shapely mouth. Even more important than his physical appearance, he appeared to have a genuine interest in the people around him that instantly put Aimee at ease.

"Have you and Erica just met?" he asked.

"No. We've been neighbors for several years."

"I can't believe she's waited this long to bring you to our meetings," Jacob commented.

"Oh, she's invited me lots of times," Aimee answered, "but I've always refused."

Jacob's brows lifted inquiringly, but Aimee didn't feel like explaining her lack of interest in a singles group. When she remained silent, he said, "Tell me about yourself, Aimee."

Grimacing, she said, "I'm a widow with a fourteen-year-old daughter, going on twenty."

Jacob chuckled as if he understood what she meant, and Aimee added, "Samantha is spending the night at a friend's, so when Erica invited me to this meeting, I came as her guest. I don't intend to join the group."

"I'm sure you'll enjoy it," Jacob suggested.

"Probably, but my main job is being a mother. I started working at Eastside Elementary years ago when Samantha started there, so my job and being a single mom keep me plenty busy. How about you? Are you a native of Benton?"

"Except for four years in college and a few years at a job

in the eastern part of Virginia, I've always lived in Benton. I'm a professional counselor. I moved back home when I had the opportunity to buy a counseling service here."

"I assumed that Alex your son," Aimee commented.

"I don't have many relatives," Jacob said, his smile vanishing as he looked slightly disturbed, slightly wistful. "Alex is just a boy I'm trying to help. He's been sick and had to miss several days of school. His mother is ill, too, and she asked me to take him back to school and explain his absence. I met him through Substitute Siblings."

"Substitute Siblings?"

"It's a fairly new organization," Jacob explained. "In my line of work, I see a lot of children from dysfunctional families who are growing up without much love or guidance. The goal of Substitute Siblings is to pair these children with older adults who will be buddies to them."

"Sort of like the Big Brothers Big Sisters volunteers?" Aimee asked.

"Similar to that," Jacob said. "And because there wasn't a branch of that organization in Benton, my grandmother and I decided to start something. In a few cases our volunteers take the children into their homes on a temporary basis, but mostly they just befriend them by taking them shopping, to ball games, to movies or to other activities to make them feel wanted."

The chairman of the group rapped for attention. "Ladies and gentlemen, it's time to start our meeting. Let's come to order,

please.”

“It sounds like a worthwhile cause,” Aimee whispered.

“I think so,” Jacob answered. “If you’re interested, I’d like to talk with you further about it.”

“I’m interested.”

Aimee tore a sheet from the notebook she carried in her purse and wrote her phone number and address on it. She handed the paper to Jacob. He folded it and put it in his pocket as they turned their attention to the entertainment for the evening—a band that played popular praise and worship songs.

Aimee enjoyed the music, but throughout the program, she kept thinking about the man sitting next to her. He said he didn’t have many relatives. Did that mean his parents weren’t living, or did they live elsewhere? And why had her question about family disturbed him?

But she was more puzzled that she hadn’t heard of Jacob before this. She judged that he was about her age, and if he had lived in Benton most of his life, why hadn’t she met him? Until her marriage she had lived a few miles outside of Benton, but she’d attended school in town. Benton wasn’t big enough for their paths not to have crossed before.

When the meeting adjourned, Jacob stood, turned to Aimee and smiled. “Is it all right if I call you later?”

“Sure,” she said as Erica nudged Aimee and nodded toward the door.

As they said their goodbyes, several people invited Aimee to

become a part of the group. Although she'd enjoyed the evening, she wasn't ready to commit to anything. Besides, she wasn't sure how she would feel about regularly seeing Jacob Mallory. His presence kindled feelings she hadn't experienced for a long time—emotions that she didn't welcome. The less she saw of him the better off she would be.

“Did you have a good time?” Erica asked as she drove away from the church.

“To my surprise, I really did. Thanks for inviting me.”

“You're welcome,” Erica said tersely.

Aimee shot a surprised glance in her friend's direction. “What's the matter with you? I thought you wanted me to break out of my shell, try my wings and all that other advice you've handed out.”

“My advice was good, but my plan backfired,” Erica said wryly. “You picked up the wrong man.”

“Jacob Mallory is the wrong man?” Aimee stammered, shocked by Erica's words. “Besides, I didn't pick him up—you introduced him to me. Regardless of that, I thought he was a really nice guy.”

“He is, but I hoped you would find someone and form a permanent relationship. There are two or three men in our group who would like to get married if they could find the right woman,” Erica insisted.

“That still doesn't explain why you object to Jacob,” Aimee exclaimed, puzzled. “I just sat next to the man and talked with

him—that's hardly a prelude to matrimony. What's wrong with him? Who is he, anyway?"

Erica pulled into Aimee's driveway and turned off the car's engine. "Jacob Mallory dates women occasionally, but if they start getting serious, he doesn't call them anymore. He apparently isn't interested in a long-term commitment."

"So what. Neither am I. Besides, he didn't even ask me for a date."

"I heard him say he'd call you," Erica pointed out.

"Yes, about the Substitute Siblings organization," Aimee retorted, a little irritated with her friend. "He was talking about it when the meeting started. If I want to get involved in community service, it sounds like a worthwhile way to spend my time."

"That's true—they do tons of good projects. I know you think I'm butting in," Erica apologized, "but I want you to be happy. I don't want you to get hurt through anybody I bring into your life."

"I won't get hurt! I'm content with my life as it is right now. At least, I was until Samantha surprised me with her attitude today." Aimee opened the car door. "Thanks for asking me to go. I had a good time."

Aimee got out of the car, and Erica waited until she stepped up on the back porch and went into the kitchen before she drove away. Aimee locked the door behind her just as the phone rang.

"Hey, Mom," Samantha's voice answered her hello.

"Hey, yourself. Is anything wrong?"

"No, I was checking to see if you were home."

Although slightly irritated, Aimee laughed. "I'm home, Samantha. You didn't need to worry about your old mom."

"Well, I was just wondering," Samantha said sullenly.

"I'm home and going to bed, which I hope you're doing soon, too."

"Goodbye, Mom," Samantha said.

"Goodbye, honey." But Samantha had already hung up.

Aimee walked down the hall to her bedroom to change out of her new clothes and into pajamas. She sat down in the rocking chair beside the bed and picked up the picture of Steve that stood on the nightstand. How many times since his death had she looked at his picture wishing he was still with her? Usually just looking at his face, so much like Samantha's, brought her peace. But not tonight. Tonight, she felt that something, something more than the loss of Steve was missing in her life, and she wondered what the future held.

Restless, Aimee went into the family room and sat in a lounge chair, feet elevated, staring into the darkness. She thought once again about how unfair the aneurysm was that had caused her husband's sudden death. One morning he had gotten up full of life and love, twelve hours later he was gone, leaving her with regrets that she couldn't overcome—regrets she had tried to put behind her for fifteen years.

She had only been nineteen when she and Steve had married, and a year later she'd given birth to Samantha. She hadn't had an easy pregnancy. There were months of morning sickness that

even nausea pills didn't help, and during that time she dreaded the intimacies of marriage. Perhaps Steve had sensed this, for he hadn't made any demands on her.

And Samantha's birth was an ordeal, too. Aimee was in the delivery room for over twelve hours, and the birth resulted in a small tear that an incompetent doctor didn't take care of properly. She was so miserable that she didn't share Steve's bed when she came home, and when he died suddenly, she was devastated that she'd concentrated on her own needs rather than his.

Her remorse over how she'd failed Steve only added to the sorrow she felt after his death. Aimee had never admitted her guilty feelings to anyone, but they had certainly kept her from considering a relationship with any other man. Now, more than a decade of regret seemed like enough. Remembering how easy it was for her to talk with Jacob tonight, she wondered if it was time to put the past behind her and start a new life.

Aimee yawned widely and went back to her bedroom. She got into bed, turned out the light and snuggled under the blankets. Her body was weary, but her mind was wide awake. Where could she go for the guidance she so desperately needed—for Samantha and for herself?

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without fault, and it will be given to him.

Aimee bolted upright in bed, wondering why those words had come to her now. Why had she remembered that particular phrase? Convinced that the words were in the Bible, Aimee

turned on the light again. It had been a few years since she had seriously considered her relationship with God, although there had been a time when the church was an important part of her life.

She went to the walk-in closet in the hallway and stepped up on a stool. A Bible was at the bottom of a large stack of Samantha's schoolbooks. Being careful not to topple the whole heap, Aimee pulled the Bible free. It was Steve's Bible, and she was sure she could find what she wanted in it.

Carrying the Bible, she returned to bed. After a half hour of searching, she found the verse she'd remembered in the Book of James.

As she turned the pages of the Bible, she felt Steve's presence more keenly than she had for years. To her surprise, she also sensed the presence of God. Tears slid down Aimee's cheeks as she remembered when the Word of God had been an important part of her life—when she never started a day without reading the Word. She had gradually drifted away from her faith.

God, it's been so long since I've talked to You, I hardly know what to say. For starters, I suppose I should ask forgiveness for the way I've neglected You for years. I understand now that serving You should have been primary in my life. I should have encouraged Samantha to follow You, instead of putting school and activities before everything else. Starting tomorrow, with Your help, I'm going to change that.

When she laid the Bible on the nightstand, Aimee was relaxed

enough to go to sleep. As she again settled into bed and turned off the light, she knew it wouldn't be easy to live up to her new resolve in the light of day. But she was going to try.

By the time Aimee woke up, she had settled on her plan of action. Knowing that her relationship with Samantha hadn't deteriorated overnight and that it would take time to heal, she would go slow, but she also needed to be firm. The stakes were too high to make more mistakes.

As she dressed for the day, she remembered Jacob Mallory. Would he be a complication in the new beginning she contemplated?

Chapter Three

Aimee turned off the vacuum when she heard the door slam. Samantha plodded into the family room through the front door, dragging the bag that held her stuff. She was still in pajamas. Some of her hair was in the ponytail holder, the other half hung loose around her shoulders. Her half-closed eyes were a pretty good indication that the girls stayed up all night.

“Hi, honey,” Aimee said. “How was the sleepover?”

As she slouched toward the steps that went to her downstairs room, Samantha mumbled something Aimee didn’t understand. Aimee let it go and moved the vacuum into her bedroom, when Samantha yelled from downstairs, “Mom!”

Aimee went to the head of the open stairway, “Yes?”

“I’m trying to sleep,” Samantha said. “Pu-leeze! Vacuum some other time.”

“I always vacuum on Saturday morning,” Aimee replied. “I’ll be through in a half hour.”

Aimee finished vacuuming and started dusting. Usually, she crept around the house so she wouldn’t wake Samantha, but she made no effort to keep quiet today.

The telephone rang and Samantha didn’t pick up her extension, so Aimee answered.

“Hi,” Erica said, “just checking to see how you’re doing this morning.”

“Okay, I guess. Samantha is still in bed. I don’t suppose she slept at all last night. It’s time to have a talk with her, and I want her wide awake when that happens so I’m letting her sleep in. But I’m glad you called. What time is worship at your church tomorrow?”

“There’s an eight-thirty service and one at ten-thirty. I go to the later one. Do you want to come with me?” Erica said quickly, obviously pleased. She had asked Aimee to go to church so often that she’d given up.

“I am going tomorrow, but I’ll drive. I intend to give Samantha the option of coming with me, but I’m not expecting her to. Would you mind waiting for me at the church door, so I won’t have to sit alone?”

“I’ll watch for you in the foyer,” Erica said. “Good luck with your mother-daughter talk.”

“Thanks, I’ll need it.”

Jacob dressed in his running shoes and a pair of sweats, drew on a lightweight windbreaker and let himself out of the apartment he rented in his grandmother’s Victorian home. He turned on the MP3 player at his waist and got ready for his three-mile jog before church.

As he ran this morning, however, the inspirational music he was listening to was just background sound for his thoughts of Aimee Blake. His strong attraction to her surprised him. At times, Jacob wished that he had a steady girlfriend, but past

experience had left him with a slew of emotional scars. He had dated Megan Russell all during high school. He'd loved her and thought she loved him, but she'd betrayed him with another man in their senior year. And she wouldn't even tell him who the other man was. The pain ran so deep that he couldn't forget it, and he didn't want to get involved again. He dated occasionally but always avoided becoming serious about anyone.

He wasn't sure that would be true with Aimee. Already, he was looking forward to speaking to her on the phone and seeing her again. He definitely didn't want a serious relationship, so why was he thinking about her? If, after two brief meetings, he was eager to see Aimee, maybe it would be better to avoid her completely.

Jacob ran vigorously and, in spite of the mid-thirties' cold, his body was steaming when he came back in sight of the house. He slowed his pace to a slow walk as he reached the front lawn.

A pert robin hopped around the grass, looking for breakfast in the ground. Jacob smiled when he saw a few dandelions beaming their yellow presence in the frosty grass. Although many people disliked dandelions in their lawns, they were such hardy plants that they encouraged him to keep going when the way was difficult.

Before he went to his apartment over the garage, Jacob stepped inside the house to check on his grandmother. Looking at her small frame, gray hair and the many wrinkles lining her face, he knew some might consider her an old woman. But the depth of her spiritual faith and her good health belied her

seventy-plus years and made Stella one of the most powerful women Jacob knew.

“A nice morning for a run,” Gran commented. “How did the singles meeting go last night?”

“Very well,” he said. “The program was good, and Erica brought her neighbor, Aimee Blake, to the meeting. She seemed to enjoy it, and she may be interested in helping us with Siblings. I’m going to contact her about it.”

“I’ve heard Erica talk about a neighbor she’s wanted to bring to the singles meeting. She’s a widow, I believe?”

“That’s the one. She has one daughter who’s fourteen. We didn’t talk long, but I gathered Aimee was sincerely interested in our work.”

“We can use her help at the office,” Gran said. “A woman from Social Services called today, and they have two sisters they’d like us to lend a hand until they can find foster parents for them. It takes a lot of time to prepare profiles on new applicants, so I can use assistance. Besides, we have more children needing aid than we have volunteers.”

“I’ll contact Aimee sometime this weekend, and ask her to attend the Siblings meeting Tuesday evening.”

Although he wanted to see Aimee again, every time he started to dial her number that morning, Jacob got cold feet and backed out. Badly disillusioned by his fiancée when he was barely out of his teens, he had determined not to go beyond friendship with any woman again.

If she joined the singles group, he would see her monthly, but if he saw her more often in the Siblings meetings, his attraction might grow. He had a feeling Aimee was different from the other women he'd dated. Or was she? He hadn't reached a conclusion before he left for church that morning.

Intent on his job as an usher greeting parishioners and visitors and finding convenient seats for them, Jacob returned to the foyer just as Aimee opened the door and stepped inside. She looked a little lost until she saw him. A smile relaxed her face, and he wondered if she was aware of the enchanting picture she made when she smiled. He noted how the cobalt blouse she wore with a black suit brought out the blue of her eyes. She carried a silver bag, and large silver hoops dangled from her earlobes.

Completely disregarding his intentions to stay a safe distance from Aimee, Jacob hurried toward her with a smile. She returned his smile and accepted the hand he offered.

"Is this becoming a habit?" he said. "We keep running into each other."

"I'm not following you," she said with a low laugh. "I promise."

He took a bulletin from a rack and gave it to her. "Well, it's great that you're here. Let me find a good seat for you."

"Thanks, but I'm meeting Erica. I'll wait for her."

He indicated a row of chairs near the doors to the sanctuary. "Sit there. Erica usually arrives early, so she'll be here soon."

Aimee glanced through the bulletin as she waited for Erica,

surreptitiously watching Jacob as he carried out his assigned duties as usher. His voice was compassionate. He was gracious to old and young alike. She noticed again how captivatingly handsome he was, and decided that Jacob's nature matched his appearance.

Was it just coincidence, or was it significant that she had encountered Jacob three times in as many days? Her granny always used the expression "It was meant to be." Could that be true of her meetings with Jacob? Not that she expected anything from him, but she could use another friend right now.

Her attention was diverted from Jacob when Erica hurried into the foyer. Aimee felt her face warming when Erica caught her intense scrutiny of the man. Jacob would have escorted them to a seat, but Erica waved him aside.

"Why didn't you tell me Jacob would be at this service?" Aimee said as they walked down the aisle.

"I didn't think about it."

"He must be a busy man. If he's active here at the church, has a counseling business and manages Substitute Siblings."

"He's busy all the time. Sometimes I think he's a man driven to prove himself. He rarely misses a service. Neither does his grandmother, Stella Milton. If I see her, I'll introduce you to her. You'll like her."

"This is a big room," Aimee commented as they walked to the front of the long, formal sanctuary. They faced a pulpit several feet above the main floor, with a wide spread of organ pipes

as a backdrop. A praise band was gathering to lead the opening service. The communion table featured an arrangement of white lilies behind an open Bible.

“The room is full most of the time. Where’s Samantha? Wouldn’t she come with you?”

Aimee answered, “I didn’t ask her. She came upstairs and announced that she was going to the mall with Jennifer. Instead of arguing, I told her that was good so she wouldn’t be alone while I went to church.”

“She looked as if she thought I’d lost it, but she didn’t say anything. It’s obvious she doesn’t want to be with me, yet she doesn’t want me to go anywhere without her either. Rather ironic, isn’t it?”

The service felt a little like coming home. It was a familiar blend of hymns, prayer, Bible reading and a sermon. The minister gave a powerful sermon on the text “Choose You This Day Whom You Will Serve?” Now that she had recommitted to a closer walk with God, Joshua’s words when he called the Hebrews to repentance held particular significance for Aimee. Before the service was over, she realized how good it was to be worshiping with God’s people again.

Aimee didn’t see Jacob as she left the service. She felt a slight hurry to face Samantha and stop putting off the inevitable. She prayed for guidance on how to approach her daughter when she got home, for she didn’t want to antagonize Samantha and

cause her to be even more rebellious. But as a parent, she was responsible for guiding her daughter toward maturity and hoped to reestablish a loving connection.

She drew a deep breath when she heard Samantha enter the house. Sam was carrying a bag from one of the shoe stores in the mall. No doubt she'd been spending some of the birthday money her grandparents in Florida had sent her.

"Hi, Mom," Samantha said, and quickly turned to go to her room.

"Come in here for a moment, please."

Samantha paused on the threshold. "Why?"

"We need to talk," Aimee said, and Samantha's eyes narrowed a bit. Still holding her package, Samantha flounced down on the couch opposite Aimee's chair.

Drawing a deep breath, Aimee said, "I've done a lot of thinking since you left for Jennifer's sleepover yesterday. I've concluded that I haven't been a good mother to you."

Samantha's gray eyes, so much like her father's, opened in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Aimee said, "I've given you too much attention, too much love, too much freedom to choose your friends and make other personal decisions. Lately, you've been acting self-centered and disrespectful, at least to me, although I hope you show respect to other adults. Starting today, that has to change."

"What does that mean?" Samantha's eyes studied her mother pointedly.

“For starters,” Aimee answered, “from now on I expect you to assume some household chores, at least to clean your room and make your bed. And I’m taking you to school and picking you up as I’ve always done. When our relationship is better, we’ll talk again about you riding to school with Jennifer.”

Speechless for a few seconds, Samantha finally said, “You’re kidding, right?”

Shaking her head decisively, Aimee said, “I’ve never been more serious in my life.”

“Mom, when can I have a life? Stop treating me like a baby.” Samantha stared at her mother as if she were a monster.

“I’ve given you more freedom than I should have, and I’m not sure that was a good thing. I also had a call from your math teacher, and I didn’t like her report. Your grades need to improve overall. If you don’t carry a B average the rest of the year, you may have to take classes this summer.”

“That isn’t fair!”

“Perhaps not, but that’s the way it will be.”

“I’ll tell Grammy!”

“I’m sure you will, but Grandmother Blake isn’t your mother. She doesn’t get to decide what you do. Besides, I don’t think she would interfere in my decisions anyway.”

The phone rang, putting their discussion on hold as Samantha bounced out of the chair and ran to answer.

She soon returned and handed the cordless phone to Aimee. “It’s for you.”

“Who is it?” Aimee asked, thinking if it was Erica, she’d return her call later.

“I don’t know.”

Aimee sighed with exasperation. “Hello.”

“Aimee, this is Jacob Mallory. I had some information about our Siblings program in my car this morning that I meant to give you, but somehow I missed seeing you leave.”

“Erica and I left through the side entrance.”

“If you tell me where you live,” Jacob said, “I’ll drop it off at your house this evening. Or I have another suggestion—there’s a meeting of Siblings directors and volunteers Tuesday night. We’ll be discussing plans for the future. If you’ll attend, you could get an idea of what we do and meet the people you’d be working with if you decide to join us. I’ll pick you up if you want to go.”

Aware that Samantha was staring at her accusingly, Aimee deliberated slightly before she said, “I’d like to go to the meeting, and it would be great if you’d stop by for me. We live at 305 Simpson Place.”

“I’ll pick you up at half past six. Will that work?”

“That would be fine. See you then,” Aimee said and hung up the phone. To Aimee’s surprise, Samantha didn’t demand to know who had called, so Aimee didn’t comment on the belligerence reflected in her daughter’s eyes.

“That was Jacob Mallory,” she explained. “I met him at the meeting Friday night.”

“And you’re already going on a date with him?”

“It isn’t a date,” Aimee explained. “He’s invited me to a meeting to learn more about Substitute Siblings, a volunteer organization he and his grandmother founded.”

Samantha’s eyebrows lowered in an angry frown. “Is that the group who looks after orphans and street kids?”

“I understand that’s part of their work,” Aimee said.

“Mom!” Samantha shrieked. “If you have anything to do with them, everybody at school will make fun of me. How can you treat me like this? You’re so mean!”

Samantha ran to her room sobbing. Aimee jumped up and started to follow, but at the top of the stairs, she stopped abruptly. If she gave in to Samantha’s demands now, she might as well forget steering her daughter in a different direction. Although it was one of the hardest things she’d ever done, Aimee turned a deaf ear to her daughter’s theatrical sobs, went to her own room and shut the door.

Chapter Four

A robin that seemed to be singing from her windowsill woke Aimee the next morning. She lifted her head and through bleary eyes looked at the clock. Suddenly wide awake, she threw back the blanket, put on her robe and hurried to the head of the stairs.

“Samantha,” she called. “Get up. The alarm clock didn’t go off. We leave for school in thirty minutes.”

“I’m not going! I’m sick.”

Startled, Aimee lifted the bottom of her robe and hurried downstairs. Samantha’s door was open, and Aimee went in without knocking. Samantha was lying on a stack of pillows, a pitiful look on her face. Her eyes were swollen, and she was sniffing as if she had a cold.

Aimee got a thermometer from the adjacent bathroom cabinet and took her temperature. It was normal. So was her pulse rate.

“Stick out your tongue,” Aimee said. Samantha closed her eyes and complied.

Observing her daughter carefully, Aimee wondered if this was a stunt to get sympathy. If Samantha had been crying, that would account for the red eyes and stuffy nose.

“It’s too late for me call in to stay home with you. Erica isn’t working today, so I’ll ask her to check on you a few times. And I’ll call during my lunch break. You know, if you’re too sick for school today, you’re too sick to stay after school and cheer in the

game.”

Samantha’s glare was almost more than Aimee could stand, but she turned away quickly. While Aimee dressed she heard the water running in Samantha’s bathroom, and when Aimee was ready, Samantha was standing beside the door, fully dressed, with her backpack over her back.

“Feeling better?”

“A little,” Samantha said weakly. “I remembered a science test today. Better not miss it. And the squad is expecting me to be there to do our new routine.”

Aimee’s heart was a little lighter when Samantha meekly followed her out to the garage, slid into the car and fastened her seat belt. She had wondered more than once what she would do if Jennifer showed up to take Aimee to school. Perhaps the crisis was over. But when Samantha was silent on the way to school and got out of the car without saying goodbye, Aimee knew that although she won the first battle, the war wasn’t over yet.

Throughout the day, as she answered the phone, worked at the computer and handed out school supplies to the kids, Aimee’s thoughts kept shifting from Samantha’s rebellion to Jacob. She hadn’t been attracted to any other man for years, so what was it about Jacob that piqued her interest? Maybe he wasn’t any different from any other man she’d encountered in the past dozen years; maybe she had changed. It was a startling thought.

After Aimee watched Samantha cheer on her team at the

game, they made their way home. Samantha stayed in her room all evening, speaking only in monosyllables when Aimee asked questions. Tuesday morning, she was silent also. After school, however, Samantha replied amicably to Aimee's questions about her day. Aimee soon found out the reason for the attitude change.

"Mom, Mrs. Nibert asked me to go with her and Jen to a spring fashion show at the mall tonight. Can I go?"

"What time?"

"About six. She wants to treat us to Chinese before the show."

Aimee deliberated momentarily. That meant she would be home when Samantha left to be certain that Jennifer's mother was with them. She felt guilty about not trusting Samantha, but she wouldn't be comfortable at the Siblings meeting unless she knew that the girls weren't alone.

"I guess that will be all right if you get your homework done in the next two hours. You really need to get that math grade up."

Samantha didn't answer, just went to her room immediately. Aimee didn't hear any phone conversations, so she gave Samantha the benefit of the doubt that she was actually studying.

When the Niberts arrived, Aimee walked outside to greet them. "Thanks for taking Samantha. Do you know what time you will be back? I'm going out for the evening, and I don't want Samantha coming home to an empty house."

"I'm not sure," Mrs. Nibert said, "but if you aren't here, we'll stay until you come home."

Aimee thanked her, waved them on their way and turned

toward the house. She didn't really know the Niberts well, but she had to give Samantha some space. If fourteen years of parental guidance hadn't taught her daughter the difference between right and wrong, she had failed as a mother. It was time to have some interests of her own, and she turned her thoughts to the evening with Jacob.

By the time Aimee was dressed, she was so nervous, she couldn't sit still. While she paced the floor, she thought about how she felt the first time she had a date with Steve. Because she was only sixteen at the time and he was eighteen, her parents threw a fit when Steve asked her to go out with him. But she had known Steve forever, so in the end they trusted him. It wasn't quite the same as going out with Jacob, who was almost a stranger.

She didn't know why she was worried. Jacob seemed to have a knack of putting people at ease that must come from his profession as a counselor. Besides, she was only going to learn more about Substitute Siblings, right? This was definitely not a date. She just wished someone would tell that to her racing heart.

It had been a long time since Jacob had looked forward to anything as much as he did the evening with Aimee. As he drove the few miles to her house, he thought of the past few years when his only emotional outlet had been his clients and their problems. It had been a blessing when he had organized Substitute Siblings, for it kept his mind occupied with the needs of others rather than

his own personal life—or lack of it.

But no matter how many unfortunate children he helped, a part of his heart still seemed empty and unfulfilled. Was it time for him to trust someone again? Would Aimee be the woman he could finally allow into his life—and his heart?

Benton, Virginia, was a town of fifteen thousand, established two hundred years ago in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. He knew the town so well that he easily maneuvered through the narrow streets as he went to pick her up. Although he hadn't been in the subdivision where Aimee lived, Jacob drove directly to her house without any problem.

He parked along the curb and went to the front door. Aimee soon answered his knock.

She was as pretty as he remembered. As they walked down the sidewalk, he quietly surveyed her. Jacob had a knack for reading people's thoughts, but Aimee was an enigma to him. He had no idea if she was excited about their evening together. Although thoughts of her kept intruding into his mind, he wondered if she had thought about him at all.

Jacob held open the door of his SUV for her, rounded the front of the vehicle and was in the seat beside her before she had her seat belt fastened. "I haven't been in this subdivision before. Have you lived here long?"

"About fourteen years. My husband had a job in Washington, D.C., but after he died, I didn't want to stay there. My parents

live a few miles out in the country from Benton, and I came home to raise Samantha with the support of my family.”

He sensed that she was hesitant to talk about her husband, but he asked one more question, “Does your husband’s family live here?”

“Only a few cousins. His parents live year-round in Florida, as does my brother-in-law’s family. Samantha always spends two weeks with them during the summer. Occasionally, both of us go to Florida for Christmas.”

Although there were many more things Jacob wanted to know about Aimee, he would take his time. She’d already indicated that she devoted all of her time to her job and Samantha. Did that mean she hadn’t dated at all since she became a widow? Was she still mourning her husband?

Although he wanted to know more about Aimee, he didn’t want to pry. During the short drive to his offices, where the meeting would be held, they shifted the conversation to upcoming events in Benton, especially the city’s bicentennial celebration to be held in the summer.

“I’m on the planning committee, and we’ve had to revise our plans this month,” Jacob said. “David Harwood, one of the longtime educators in Benton, died a few weeks ago. The committee has decided to honor him at the celebration, so we’re changing our schedule to include him. Did you know Mr. Harwood?”

“No, but I’ve seen him on television several times,” Aimee

answered. "I heard about his funeral on the evening news. Apparently he had a great influence on the schools and educational program in Benton."

"That's true. He taught at Paramount High School where I attended, but he moved on to administrative positions soon after I graduated. The committee asked me to prepare and deliver a eulogy about him at the bicentennial, but I can't add anything more to my schedule. So they've asked a former resident who lives in Richmond to do it."

Aimee smiled at him. "It seems to me that you do have about all you can do now. Your counseling business, Substitute Siblings, the singles group and church commitments must take up all of your time."

"Just about," he admitted with a laugh. "But I want to keep busy. I suppose I could have found time to write the eulogy, but I didn't think I was qualified to do it. Mr. Harwood came to Paramount High in my senior year, but I wasn't in any of his classes. I was away from Benton for several years, and we seldom met after I moved back home. I didn't know him well enough to speak about him."

Jacob drove into the parking lot adjacent to his two-story, brick building. It was located in an industrial park with many other office buildings and a few factories. Surrounded by a brick wall, they entered through a security gate. Aimee had rarely been in this section of town and had no idea that so many corporations were located in the area. She was quietly thinking about how

narrow her life had been as they took an elevator to the second floor of his building and walked down a hallway to a conference room where the meeting was to be held.

Approximately two dozen people were in the room, and Jacob touched Aimee's arm and steered her toward the front where a small woman with short, iron-gray hair was talking with two men.

"Excuse me," Jacob said. "We have a guest tonight." He introduced Aimee to the two men, whose names she promptly forgot. Then he turned to the woman. "Gran, this is Aimee Blake." His eyes softened with obvious fondness for his grandmother as he turned to Aimee. "I want you to meet Stella Milton."

As they shook hands, Aimee quickly assessed Stella. The makeup on her wrinkled face had been skillfully applied. She wore diamond earrings, and her blue suit was trendy. Her dark eyes glowed with intelligence and warmth as she greeted their guest. Aimee judged that she was in her seventies.

Taking Aimee's arm, Stella said, "Come and meet our volunteers."

Stella explained that this was a regularly scheduled monthly meeting, and the first part of the meeting consisted mostly of reports. Although it seemed to be routine stuff, Aimee got a fair idea of what the Siblings volunteers really did. More than thirty children had been contacted in a month's time. The children had been taken on shopping trips, to ball games and movies, or out to eat at their favorite restaurants. The Siblings children as a group

had been taken to the circus at the civic center. She gathered that, for the most part, volunteers supplied the finances for these extras, as well as their time. Well, that wouldn't be an issue with her. Although she didn't consider herself wealthy, Aimee was thankful she had an adequate income.

During new business, plans were made for a Fun in the Sun Day at Pioneer Park, an outing for youth enrolled in the Siblings program and their parents. Jacob reported that two of the restaurants in the city had volunteered to provide food and drink. Before she knew it, Aimee had been paired with Jacob to plan entertainment for the youth who didn't want to participate in contact sports.

After the meeting ended, Jacob guided Aimee on a tour of the building. In addition to the conference room, there were three rooms on the second floor, one of which was the Siblings main office, plus his business offices on the first floor. He pointed out a waiting area, the receptionist's office, his consulting room, a small lounge and a snack room.

"I'm impressed," Aimee said as Jacob locked the door and they walked to the car. "Not only by the work of Siblings, but also with the scope of your counseling service."

"I feel that God has really blessed me to become so well established in such a short time. Since I was a child, I wanted to meet the needs of others, but I didn't think I had the ability to enter the medical profession. Counseling seemed to be the right outlet I needed to fulfill what God created me to do."

Jacob waved to the security guard as they drove from the parking lot.

“Your grandmother seems like a lovely person,” Aimee commented.

“She is. Everybody loves Gran.”

“What about your parents?” Aimee asked. “Do they live in Benton?”

The streetlights illuminated the interior of the SUV, and Aimee watched Jacob’s expressive face go blank. His jaw tightened and his eyes darkened with emotion.

Automatically, she stretched her hand toward him. “Oh, I’m sorry I asked. I had no right. Please forgive me.”

From what she had seen of Jacob Mallory, she wouldn’t have dreamed that there were any dark areas of his life that he couldn’t, or didn’t want to, reveal.

He took her hand and squeezed it gently. When he glanced toward her, the pain was gone from his eyes, and he smiled, but not as brightly as usual.

“Of course you have the right to ask. You’ve answered the questions I’ve asked about your family.” Still he hesitated, and finally said in a husky voice. “I assume I have a father somewhere, although I’ve never known him. He abandoned my mother when I was less than a year old. They married when they were students at the University of Pennsylvania, and I was born a year later. He hung around for a few months, but apparently he wasn’t ready for family responsibilities. He left one day and, as

far as I know, she never heard from him again.”

“I’m so sorry,” Aimee said.

Now that he’d started talking, it seemed easier for Jacob, but still his voice was distant as he continued. “Mother never got over his rejection. She died when I was six years old from a severe case of pneumonia and flu, but she’d been dying inside since he left her. She didn’t handle rejection very well, and I guess I don’t either,” he ended, almost in a whisper. Then he added, “Gran had most of the care of me while my mother lived, and she gave me all of the love I needed. I had a happy childhood, but I suppose all guys miss their dad.”

Up until now, Jacob had appeared to be without any problems. Maybe this was the reason he had chosen to become a counselor? He wanted to deal with his own hang-ups as well as the problems of his clients.

“So by not trying to get well,” Aimee asked quietly, “do you feel as if your mother rejected you, too?”

A look of surprise swept over Jacob’s face, and he replied thoughtfully, “Maybe so, although I hadn’t really thought of it before.” He laughed, and the tense moment seemed to have passed. “Aimee, you should have been the counselor.”

“I doubt that I would have succeeded in that profession,” Aimee replied with a chuckle. “It’s difficult enough to deal with one adolescent daughter.”

When they stopped in front of her house, Aimee put her hand on Jacob’s arm. “Again, I’m sorry for prying, but as for your life

with your grandmother, she did a great job in raising you, as far as I can tell. I don't believe you missed much."

"Thanks. I'm trying to be a credit to her. After all Gran has done for me, I don't want to let her down."

"Samantha isn't home yet," Aimee said, "so we're here in plenty of time. Thanks for asking me to the meeting."

He got out of the car and opened the door for her. As they walked toward the house, he asked, "Is it too soon to know if you're willing to be a Siblings volunteer?"

"Yes," Aimee said. "I'll have to think about it and see how I can fit it into my schedule. Maybe there's work I can do at home until school is out. I could probably help more during the summer break. But I'll find time to help with Fun in the Sun. I miss not doing things like that with Samantha."

She took the house key from her purse, opened the door and invited, "Would you like to come in and meet Samantha when she gets here?"

He shook his head. "I'd like to, but I have some computer work to complete tonight. Is it okay for me to call you?"

"Yes, of course."

Jacob's gaze traveled over her face and searched her eyes, suddenly causing a stirring of her heart she hadn't experienced for a long time. He bent toward her until she felt his warm breath on her face, and her pulse tingled at the thought that he was going to kiss her. Suddenly, he shook his head and stepped back.

"Good night, Aimee. I'll be in touch in a few days and we can

make plans for Fun in the Sun.”

Slightly disappointed, Aimee went inside and watched from the dark hallway as Jacob drove away. What had happened to her common sense since she'd met Jacob Mallory? She wasn't sure it was a good idea to start a relationship now, when Samantha was already testing the waters as an adolescent. It would probably be better to wait a few years, until Samantha was safely off to college. But Aimee wondered, if she waited, would she be losing her only chance of finding a new life—and a new love?

Chapter Five

Jacob had attempted to hide his distress so that Aimee wouldn't feel bad about saying the wrong thing to him, but as soon as he drove away from her house, reaction set in. A few blocks from her house, he pulled over to the curb, stopped the vehicle and slouched over the steering wheel.

His resentment of his absent father was one of the hardest situations he faced in living a Christian life. And when this resentment surfaced, he didn't even feel as if he was a good counselor. How could he counsel clients who had a grudge toward family members when he knew he hadn't forgiven his father for abandoning him? He'd prayed often for the grace to forgive his father, so why couldn't he put it behind him?

Aware of how his father's abandonment concerned Jacob, several times Gran had suggested that he search for his father. The last time the subject was mentioned, Gran had said, "For all you know, your father may be dead, or perhaps he was involved in a situation that made it impossible for him to contact you."

"Well, if that's the case, there isn't any need to search," Jacob had replied.

"But you're certain to have other relatives. Perhaps grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins," Gran had quietly insisted.

"I don't even know where his family lived. If only Mother had

told me more about him before she died. I think I remember asking her questions a few times, but she ignored me. She could have at least told me that.”

As Jacob pulled back onto the road and headed home, he realized that he resented his mother’s silence even more than his father’s desertion. She should have leveled with him about the trouble between her and his father.

And as he thought of their conversation, Jacob knew that Aimee had a point. He did have hard feelings toward his mother, too. He resented his father for abandoning him and his mother, and he blamed her for dying before he was old enough for her to answer some of his questions. He drove into the garage, turned off the engine and leaned his head on the steering wheel.

“God,” he moaned in distress, “I can’t carry this burden much longer. Give me some guidance. This is ruining my life.”

Jacob had almost kissed her. Why did he draw back? Aimee was alarmed at her own reaction. She’d wanted him to kiss her! What had happened to her? A week ago she was perfectly satisfied with her life. Now, it seemed like everything had gone haywire.

She had been content to live out her life as a mother, eventually a mother-in-law and a grandmother. Now, after seeing Jacob Mallory a few times, she wondered if that was enough. She finally had to admit to herself that she was lonely. She knew she was no longer satisfied with her life as it was.

As she undressed for bed, Aimee made up her mind that Samantha was still her first responsibility, and always would be. She'd have to be very cautious if there was going to be any room in her life for a friendship with Jacob. Still, as the week passed, Aimee was disappointed when he didn't call, and she wondered if it was already too late to guard her heart.

Although she had intended to return to Memorial Church on Sunday, when she woke up on Saturday with Jacob on her mind, she wondered if she should go. Was he annoyed because she had questioned him about his family? Since he hadn't called, she guessed he didn't want to see her. Or did he think she was expecting more from him than he was willing to give? If he was interested in her only as a possible volunteer for Substitute Siblings, she didn't want him to assume she was pursuing him by showing up at places where she knew he would be.

So on Saturday afternoon when Erica called and invited her to ride to church with her the next morning, Aimee turned her down. "I haven't visited my folks for a few weeks, so I'm going to see them tomorrow. I'll go to their church. That will make them happy. They haven't approved of the way I've neglected worship."

When Samantha came upstairs for dinner, Aimee said, "How about going to see Papaw and Grammy tomorrow?"

"All right, I guess," Samantha said.

"Let's leave early enough to go to church with them."

"Hey, what's up, Mom? Why are you pushing church at me

all of a sudden?”

Aimee felt her face flushing. It was hard for her to come up with the words to explain to Samantha about the time she'd spent with God a few nights ago. But she had to let Samantha know that she intended to follow the teachings of the Bible more closely in the future than she'd been doing for several years.

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