



Her shy neighbor, Ken, cleaned the front and back windows on her car every morning before she left for work. The two of them habitually passed in the courtyard. She never failed to offer a happy hello and comment on the weather. *How much could anyone say about the weather in Bakersfield? It rarely changed except by temperature.* Ken answered in monosyllables and smiled, but he rarely maintained eye contact for more than a split second before his face flushed. Yet, she was lonely and wanted to get to know this tall, bald man with eyes the color of the California sky. She devised a plan.

Taking a deep breath she left her apartment and pretended to lock the front door. Ken sat in a rocking chair on his front porch. Ruth swallowed, rubbed her stomach to squelch the rumbling threatening to make her throw up, and walked over to set the deception in motion. “Good morning, Ken. I need your help, if you aren’t too busy.” Ruth’s knees were weak and she shook.

Ken stood and stepped closer. “What’s wrong? You look upset.”

“Well, I locked myself out of my apartment. And, my car. Could you come to the back patio and see if you can get the sliding glass door open?” Ruth fidgeted with the strap on her purse.

Ken took his keys from the pocket of his slacks. “The office can unlock it for you. I’ll drive you over there.”

Darn. Her plan wasn’t working. She needed a cigarette. “I know. But, they charge fifteen dollars. I’m embarrassed to say it, but I can’t afford it.”

Ken nodded. “In that case, I’ll see what I can do.”

Walking side-by-side, Ruth and Ken crossed the yard and went around to the patio.

Ken jiggled and jerked on the gate handle. It didn’t budge.

“There’s a board loose on the side of the gate. Maybe we could pull that out far enough to reach the latch.” Ruth pulled on the board.

Ken took the board from Ruth and opened a space large enough for her to reach through and release the latch.

The board sprang back into place when he released it.

Ruth glanced around, she was proud of her small patio. A table brightened by a floral tablecloth with an umbrella providing shade, and two chairs occupied a corner. Plants and flowers in pots mimicking her garden in Oklahoma brought a sense of solitude and beauty to the space. Mini roses and honeysuckle climbing a trellis scented the space with sweetness. An old ladder held containers of happy-faced petunias.

“Your patio is nice, Ruth.” Ken leaned over to smell the roses and honeysuckle.

“Thank you. It reminds me of home.”

Ken tugged on the sliding glass door. It was partially locked, but with a quick tug it slid open. “Ruth, I don’t think your door was locked securely. Maintenance needs to look at it.”

Stifling a giggle behind her hand and sucking in a fake shocked breath she said. “That isn’t good. I’ll be more careful. Come on in.”

Ken looked at the plants, the ground, and the sky. Anywhere but at her. It had been years since he had been around a woman who interested him and made him want to know more about her. “Oh, I don’t know. You probably have several things to do.”

Ruth took his elbow. “Come in. I don’t have anything planned. I’m off today.”

Ken followed her into the dining area. A cherry pie with steam still coming from slits in the crust sat in the center of the table. Fresh brewed coffee filled the space with its welcoming aroma. “Smells good. And, looks delicious.”

Without missing a beat Ruth thanked him, poured two cups of coffee and cut two pieces of pie. She gestured for him to sit. “Do you need sugar or cream?”

“Neither. Is something going on?” Ken took a bite of the warm pie. He moaned, then laughed when she sweetened her coffee with about four grains of sugar.

Ruth lifted her cup in a salute. “Just enough to take the bitterness out. *I need to drop this charade. I’m not a deceptive person.* Well . . . the truth is. . . I’ve been wanting to meet you and actually talk to you about more than the weather. I gather you’re shy, and I wonder why you always clean the windows on my car. The rest is, well, what I need to tell you is . . . I wasn’t really locked out. I’m very cautious, even paranoid, about being locked out of my car or home. I have extra keys in my purse and the wheel well of my car.” Ruth looked down and sipped her coffee.

She glanced up to see Ken’s face flush. When he cleared his throat she spoke up. “I apologize if I’ve overstepped my bounds.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m flattered. You planned this? Did you know about the board in the fence?”

Ruth cleared her throat and nodded. “I not only knew about the board, I actually loosened it myself. I removed a few nails.”

Ken shook his head. “I have to admit, your creativity is impressive. I’ve never known anyone to go to such lengths to talk to another person.”

Ruth stood, picked up the plates, and put them in the sink. She carried the coffee pot to the table, topped off their cups and sat down. “I couldn’t think of a way to talk to you. More than just in passing. I’ve told you I take care of an elderly couple, but I am off every Tuesday.”

Ken lifted his cup and sipped the coffee and asked. "I've seen a man younger than us come by for breakfast several times a week. I thought, I wondered--"

Ruth's full-throated laugh caused her to choke on the coffee. She coughed into her fist then held her hand up in a wait-just-a-moment gesture. When the coughing abated she said, "Oh, goodness, that's my nephew. I moved here almost a year ago to take care of my brothers. One died before I made the move, but I still have a brother living here and another one in Texas. I also have several nieces and nephews I never had a chance to get to know. Frank comes to check on me. I feed him biscuits and gravy."

Ken's face reddened from the collar of his blue shirt to the top of his bald head. "May I ask a personal question?"

*He sure blushes easily. It's kind of sweet.* "Of course." Ruth smoothed the hair at her temple.

"What happened, to make you come here? All the way from Oklahoma."

Unexpected and surprising tears filled her eyes, she blinked to stem them and dabbed at the corners with a napkin. "My husband died almost eight years ago. I found out right away that I had to go to work. There was no extra money. No insurance. My brother paid the funeral expenses. We had a one hundred acre family farm. At first I worked as a waitress, but it was more than I could physically manage. So, I began doing home care for the elderly. My daughter mentioned in passing that I should take a break and visit my California family. That was Thanksgiving, I was up all night thinking. By the time the sun rose I had decided to move here. I had nothing left. Both of my children lived far away from me. So, I sold the farm. I got here in April and I like it. What about you? Are you from here?"

“I’m a retired truck driver, that’s why I clean the windows on your car. I know how important it is to have good visibility on the road. When I was driving I enjoyed the runs I made here. I’m originally from Minnesota, the warm weather here was a plus for me. That, and the agriculture fascinated me. There is so much synchronicity in the fields. Planting seasons, gathering the fruits and vegetables, and shipping them out has to be done with precision.”

“I think it would be interesting to see the management of the farms. I had a large garden back in Oklahoma so I had to pay attention to the weather and seasons. The fresh vegetables I had available were so much better than produce in a local store. What else did you like about Bakersfield?”

“It’s nice being less than a four hour drive to the coast, the Redwoods, the mountains, and Las Vegas. There is so much to see around here.”

Ruth grew quiet. For the first time in ages she was speechless. She was frightened. Here she sat in her own home flirting. Flirting! She was 61 years old for Christ’s sake. A widow. She finally asked the question she really wanted an answer to. “Are you single?”

Ken steepled his fingers beneath his chin and smiled. “Yes. I am. As a matter-of-fact I’ve never been married.”

Ruth put her hands on her lap and clenched them together. *Never married. What kind of man has never been married in this day and age?* “I like the idea of having so many things to see and places to go so near. But, I haven’t seen the coast. Not yet. I haven’t been to the mountains, but on clear days I can see them from my living room window. I guess I’ve never been anywhere to speak of. I lived in west Texas and New Mexico when I was raising my kids. We did come out here on vacation once in the late 1950’s. When my husband retired in 1969 we moved to the family farm where he grew up.” Ruth sighed as the dreams she had held close to her heart

surfaced. Dreams to travel and experience different things. Saying it out loud resurrected her desire for adventure.

Ruth took Ken's cup when he scooted it to the center of the table. He had to speak up or he might lose the nerve to ask Ruth if she was interested in going for a ride. "Have you seen the windmills at Tehachapi? Would you like to take a quick drive out there? There's also a railroad tunnel near there."

Ruth clapped her hands. "Yes, I would love that. I've never been there, but I've read about them in the paper."

Ken stood and pulled Ruth's chair out for her. "OK. I have a quick errand I need to run. Can you be ready in about an hour? How do you feel about having a late lunch at an old-fashioned diner?"

"Sounds like fun. I'll be waiting. Thank you." Ruth walked Ken the few feet to the front door and opened it. She watched him cross the courtyard, admiring his long stride. The feeling that life was beginning anew made Ruth's heart soar.

*Adventure, companionship, and, maybe even love awaited.*