

Making Amends

by
Melinda Clayton



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ThomasJacobPublishing@gmail.com

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The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly corrupt: who can know it?

Jeremiah 17:9

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Chapter 1: Tabby

Von's hibiscus plant was dying. I had told her it would, but she's got a stubborn streak a mile wide and she never has liked taking advice from me, especially not when it comes to her plants. For an instant, I couldn't decide whether to tell her about it or let her see it on her own. I have to admit there's something funny about Von when she's angry, the way she pokes her bottom lip out and scrunches up her forehead, looking for all the world like a female version of Elmer Fudd. In the end, though, I decided to tell her. She might *look* funny when she's angry, but being around her when she's angry is no fun at all. If the plant died before she could work her magic on it, I knew I'd come to regret it.

"Von!" I yelled, stepping up into the mobile home that serves as the office for Von's Plants and Such. We had argued over that name, I remembered. "Plants and such? What the hell's that even supposed to mean, Von? What's the *such* part of it?" I had asked, bending over to pick up a stack of seed catalogs that had slipped off the even bigger stack teetering on her kitchen table.

"It's quaint," she'd responded, not even bothering to look up from *Fruiting Plants of Florida*, a book from which she could quote entire paragraphs, and often did. "It's catchy. People will remember it. Just wait and see." She licked her finger and turned the page, letting me know she was finished with the conversation.

As it turned out, she'd been right. Thirty years later, Von's Plants and Such covered nearly three acres and was known for carrying the most healthy, productive plants in central Florida, if not the whole dang state. Von even had an advice column in the *Volusia Sentry*, where she answered everything from, "What're these little shell-looking things all over my Mexican petunias?" (scale bugs) to "Why do my roses keep getting black spot no matter what I do?" (Because you live in Florida, honey.)

For a woman who knew just about everything there was to know about plants in our zone, it was particularly frustrating for her that she couldn't figure out why her hibiscus plants kept dying.

"Von," I repeated, using the doorframe to heft myself up, "we've got to get a step for this door. My knees aren't what they used to be, and one of these days I'm going to get stuck halfway up with no obvious solution but to fall back down, and then I'll have to sue your ass. Anyhow"—I paused to catch my breath—"you're not going to want to hear this, but—"

She shushed me, holding up one calloused hand while with the other she pointed to the little thirteen-inch television perched on the back corner of her desk amid ledgers, receipts, and those endless catalogs. "Tabby," she said, and I knew by the way she said my name something was wrong. Von is not a soft person. When Von goes soft, I go on high alert.

"What?" I moved around the desk so I could see whatever it was she was staring at on the screen. She reached up and pulled me down to sit on an upside-down orange crate, not letting go of my arm once I'd settled.

It was the audio that got my attention before the picture did. "Thirty-year-old Robert Clark," the newscaster was saying, "who was kidnapped by his father at the age of five, was arrested in Tampa,

Florida today and charged with the murder of his father, fifty-three-year-old Vernon Clark. According to ...”

I couldn't hear any more due to the buzzing in my ears. My eyes wide, I looked at Von, who took my chin in her hand and turned my face back to the screen. There he was, my precious baby, my little boy, the half of my heart that piece-of-shit ex-husband of mine had stolen from me twenty-five years before. Video showed him escorted to a police car, hands behind his back, the officers flanking him, guiding him into the backseat of the cruiser with a hand on top of his head.

Funny, I thought, my last clear thought for a while, they couldn't find him when he disappeared, but let him kill the bastard who stole him and they sure as hell knew how to find him.