

By the time Easter arrived the winter snow had melted away and the trees were starting to bloom. Stephanie pulled up in front of a large, single-story house with a huge cottonwood tree in the front yard. She shut down the engine and grabbed her bottle of wine. Walking up to the front door, she heard a dog barking inside. A bald man with a dark brown goatee opened the door and greeted her with a smile.

"You must be Stephanie."

"I am. And you must be Dwayne."

"That would be me." He gave her a nod and she followed him through the door. Once inside she handed him the wine while a yellow Labrador sniffed at her clothing.

"Bella! Behave." Dwayne gave the dog a strong look as she wagged her tail. Stephanie stroked her head.

"It's okay. I love dogs." She was still petting the dog's head when Paul entered the room and greeted her with a hug.

"Happy Easter, and thanks for coming to visit our humble abode."

She looked around the beautifully furnished room. Antiques were proudly displayed on the shelves, with several paintings hanging on the walls. "I would hardly call this place humble. In fact, it looks like a photo from a home decorating magazine."

"Now you're making me blush," said Paul.

"You should have seen it when we first bought the place," added Dwayne. "It was a real fixer upper."

"It was indeed," said Paul. "Every night we'd come home from work and change into our grubbies. We ripped up carpets and replaced drywall. Then we repainted every room and refinished all the cabinets. The place looked like a war zone for months."

"But we eventually got it done."

"Then came the fun part." Paul's face was glowing. "Dwayne went antique hunting with me, but picking out the flooring, the paint colors, and, of course, the artwork, was my department."

"You know, some of these paintings do look a little familiar," said Stephanie. "I recognize the styles of some of our artists."

"Very good." Paul gave her a nod of approval and showed her around the rest of the house while Dwayne took the dog outside. Afterwards they rendezvoused in the kitchen where the scent of the roasting lamb made their mouths water. Dwayne offered her a soft drink and they sat down at the small table in the breakfast nook.

"We'll be eating in the dining room," said Paul. "It is Easter after all, and we don't use it all that often. So, enough about us. How was your Easter morning?"

"Okay, I guess." She still missed Danny but thought it best not to bring him up. "I had a nice, quiet morning, and then I called my mother to wish her a Happy Easter."

"Dwayne and I have an Easter tradition. Every year we spend Easter morning helping with the Easter egg hunt at a shelter for homeless families."

"We believe that helping others in need is what the spirit of the holiday is all about," added Dwayne. "And we both love kids, so it's very gratifying to see all the happy smiles on their faces."

"Although we'll occasionally have to referee whenever two kids spot the same egg at the same time. So far, we've not had any knock down drag out fights, but that's because we keep a few extra eggs off to the side. That way whichever kid loses the argument still has something for his Easter basket."

"But it's also exhausting," said Dwayne. "We have to get an early start. Then, after the hunt is over, we stay and help serve breakfast, so we're usually beat by the time we get home. We'll chill for a couple of hours, and then it's time to put the lamb in the oven."

*"Sounds to me like the two of you have a wonderful holiday tradition," said Stephanie. "Easter was nice, but kind of low key while I was growing up. I remember hunting for Easter eggs in the backyard when I was little, then, after my father passed away, Mom and I started going to church on Easter morning, but we somehow got out of the habit once I started high school." She talked about going to college in Boulder, and her decision to stay in Colorado after she graduated. Paul finally asked her the question she hoped would not be asked.*

*"So, I take it you never heard back from the fellow you were dating before you came to work at the gallery?"*

*She shook her head. "No. I made sure it would never happen. I blocked him from my phone and my email."*

*Dwayne perked up. "So, if you don't mind my asking, what did he do that was so terrible?"*

*"He cheated on me."*

*"You're sure about that? You know sometimes things aren't as they appear."*

*"I wish I were wrong, but, unfortunately, I'm not." She sighed. "I accidentally came across a stack of cards and letters from his old girlfriend. Turned out he was taking a time out from her to date other women, just to be sure she was the one. She even knew me by name."*

*"You know it's illegal to read other people's mail."*

*"Dwayne's a lawyer," said Paul.*

*"Really?" Stephanie perked up. "I used to work for Davidson, Franklin and Arias, although it's probably just Franklin and Arias by now. But to answer your question, the letters were in a folder which accidentally fell off a desk, and all of them were outside of their envelopes. As I went to pick them up I couldn't help but see them, and trust me when I say, I really wish I hadn't. Once I saw them I was horrified, so I ended it, right then and there, and I've not spoken to him since."*

*"That's understandable, but again, things aren't always as they appear..."*

*\*\*\**

*Danny spent Easter morning hiking and taking photos at Red Rocks State Park and had worked his way to the amphitheater as the sunrise service was nearing its end. He stopped to listen to the words of hope and new beginnings and he thought of Stephanie. A part of him would always love her, but he realized it was time to move on. Even if he never married, there was no reason for him to spend his life alone. What he needed was a woman who could be a good friend.*