

DREAM BIG

The Third Gather in Novel

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❧ CHAPTER ONE ❧

Everyone Is Welcome . . . Really?

Most of the cleanup and takedown from Jose and Terri's wedding had been completed. Claire was sitting in a chair under the tent that had been erected in her backyard for the big occasion. And big it was!

She was rehearsing the day's events in her mind—she and pretty much everyone else had been knocked off their feet with all that had happened. She and Alan, her husband, had agreed to host a wedding for a lady they had known only for a short while. That had been a weird happening in a long string of weird happenings.

Claire knew the bride only because her daughter, Becky, had shown up at Claire's Tuesday ladies' Bible study, also known as Gather In Ministries, several months ago. Becky had turned the Bible study group on its head for a while, but most

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of the ladies quickly accepted her and treated her like an adopted daughter.

Becky's mother, Terri, started coming to the Bible study too and had become friends with Luisa there. When Becky decided to run away, Luisa got her brother, Jose, a local police officer, involved in the search for her. Jose, in a strange round-about way, ended up finding Becky and fell in love with Terri in the process.

When Jose popped the question, the ladies all came together to arrange a rehearsal dinner, a wedding, and this fabulous reception—and Claire had to admit, it had turned out beautifully. The fall colors with the mums, the beautiful centerpieces, and the colors for the wedding party all made the scene appear almost make-believe.

How the day had unfolded, however . . . well, that was a different story altogether!

Becky—who hadn't been seen or heard from in months and had no idea it was her mother's wedding day—had arrived at Claire's front door early that morning with a lady Claire had never laid eyes on before. That was Liza, who discovered as the bride walked up the aisle that Terri was her long-lost daughter, Mary. That meant she was also Becky's grandmother. The revelation had all the guests excited—and a little confused at the details. Terri, Jose, Becky, and Liza were understandably euphoric.

Claire was still in the dark about the details of the reunion but clearly recognized that the day could only have been directed by the hand of God. She was also sure that, somehow, Becky would take credit for the marriage.

“Are you going to stay out here all night?” Claire’s daughter, Diane, interrupted her reverie by walking over and setting a loaded tea tray on a nearby table. Claire’s sister, Annie, and her friends, Lisa and Deb, followed right behind. The latter three completed the board of Gather In Ministries and had been instrumental in the achievement of the afternoon’s festivities.

Diane began dispensing the steaming goodness of Claire’s favorite tea as her friends settled in around her. They had not stopped discussing the events of the day.

“I still get to giggling when I think about all that happened today!” Annie had found the day to be a comedy on steroids. Her spirit was contagious, and soon the five of them were almost hysterical with laughter, especially Claire.

Claire had been holding so much inside throughout the day that she found it difficult to control the laughter that was overtaking her now. It was a little embarrassing, but for someone who maintained a tight control over so much in her life, the release was definitely therapeutic. It was a good thing she was with friends. They knew she had a strange quirk of sometimes laughing inappropriately when she was stressed or overtired, but no one other than Alan and maybe Annie had ever seen her this out of control. If the group found Claire’s behavior odd, however, they also found themselves laughing at and along with her.

Deb felt the need to repeat the events of the day as she knew them. Claire was sure that it would take several days or even weeks before the full details would be known and she would be able to put the events to rest.

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“First of all, for Jose and Terri to fall in love because Becky ran away!” Deb was so expressive in her delivery, she had the group nodding in agreement. “Then Becky finds a lady to take her in, and they don’t even know they are grandmother and granddaughter. Then”—each time Deb started a new sentence, she became more animated—“*Then* Becky comes back on the exact day her mother is getting married. What I don’t get is how did she know she should dress up?”

Claire filled in that detail. “They stopped to see Jan at the beauty shop, and Jan told them about the wedding. Apparently, this Liza lady decided to dress Becky. It’s probably a good thing.” Claire couldn’t keep her sarcasm to herself. She had instantly loved Liza, but Becky had been a challenge for Claire from the beginning.

“Well, I was just shocked when Jose and Becky saw each other—that they already knew each other. I wonder what Terri thinks of that.” Lisa paused, then added, “I don’t know why Jose didn’t tell her he’d found Becky, but he’s such a good guy, there must be a reason.”

But Deb wasn’t finished with her dramatic replay. She was practically jumping up and down as she added, “*And then* the cake decorator gets sick, and Liza ends up decorating the cake. *With your family’s secret recipe icing!* It’s just too crazy!” She interrupted herself. “Oh, I don’t want anything to be wrong with Edith, but do you think God removed her just so Liza could make the cake? Diane, Annie, you guys need to find out how you’re all related!”

“They are not related to us!” Claire’s voice might have been a bit harsher than she intended, but it only caused the group

to burst into laughter again. She laughed along, her nervous habit betraying her again. It certainly was not because she had found this new revelation joyous or amusing. Inside, she was not happy at all. It was time to change the subject.

Claire stood abruptly and indicated the flowers still on the tables. “Why don’t you all take a mum and a centerpiece home with you?” The group had done an amazing job for Terri and Jose—and for that matter, Gather In Ministries as well. They certainly deserved much more than flowers, but they’d already refused any payment. The flowers seemed appropriate to Claire.

Annie dove into a nearby mum. “Thanks, Claire, I love these colors!” Claire had decided if her sister were a flower, she’d be a mum. The fall colors, the hardiness of the bloom, and its ability to stand alongside any other flower all created a picture of Annie. Anyone who met her loved her instantly. People loved to be around her, and she made everyone feel comfortable. Interestingly enough, she did not enjoy being the center of attention, so Claire was sure roses and lilies would never describe her.

Claire continued clearing tables. Her thoughts went back to the events of the afternoon. How *had* Jose and Becky known each other? That part of the puzzle she still couldn’t put together. And how on earth had Becky ended up with Terri’s mother, her grandmother—that was still a mystery too. So many unanswered questions . . .

What Claire had taken from the day was that she and Liza might be related. If that proved to be true, then she would find herself related to Terri and Becky as well. She and Liza had three things in common—their family name, a Western

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Pennsylvania heritage, and a unique family recipe for cake icing. The possibility of their being blood relatives had to be remote. That thought calmed her more than she had been since all this became knowledge during the wedding reception. The last name Knight was not unusual. When she was a kid, every telephone book in Western Pennsylvania had pages of *Knight* listings. And they weren't all related.

But still, Liza had the icing recipe. That baffled Claire. It had been in the family for generations. There was no ice cream in the recipe, but its texture and taste were similar, and it was the only icing Claire's family used.

Claire walked from the backyard into the house. Surveying the kitchen, she realized there was probably enough food left over for another full reception. She immediately picked up the phone and dialed Sue, her next-door neighbor.

Sue answered on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Hi, Sue, it's Claire. Why don't you plan on coming over tomorrow after church? We have so much food left over from today, I'm going to call everyone I know for a picnic! It's supposed to be sunny but cool as of right now. If it's too chilly, we'll go indoors. Let's say two o'clock? That gives everyone time to go to church and still go home to change if they want."

After confirming Sue and Kyle would be over at two the next afternoon, Claire called Louie and Rob. The neighbors on her street had been the same for almost thirty years and were more family than friends.

"Louie, don't cook a thing tomorrow, just come over around two. We have enough food here for an army!"

Louie grinned at Claire's opening words. She didn't even realize she hadn't said hello or identified herself when Louie picked up. But that was Claire.

"Sure, I have a cake in the oven right now, should I bring it?"

Louie was always baking something, and Claire enjoyed her talent. "No need this time. We still have wedding cake left."

"Oh, wonderful! If I eat a piece of it tomorrow," Louie quipped, "do you think we'll be related?"

Claire didn't laugh.

"Well, okay then. See you tomorrow! Thanks for the invitation." Louie hung up without saying goodbye.

Annie, Lisa, Deb, and Diane had just started taking down tables and chairs under the tent. Claire went back out to stop them, announcing the picnic she had just set in motion for the next afternoon. Diane, Annie, and her girls were already spending the night, so they'd be there.

Deb nodded as she spoke, "Great, I'll be here, but I'll be bringing Judy with me. We were going to get a bite after church anyway."

"Claire, do you think Liza and Becky are still in town? We should call them and ask them to come over too. Then we can dig deeper into our family histories." Annie turned to share her idea with Lisa and Deb, and before Claire could respond, Lisa had her cell phone out and was calling Becky.

"Becky, hi! Are you and Liza still in town?"

Claire busied herself with the cleanup but stayed close enough to hear Lisa's conversation.

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“Great. We’re doing leftovers tomorrow after church and wanted to see if you and Liza would like to join us.” After a pause, Lisa replied, “Yes, of course you are invited! It’s at Claire’s house—everyone’s welcome, really!”

Lisa sure doesn’t mind inviting people to my house! Claire knew she’d have invited them anyway, but it felt better to blame someone else for Becky’s presence.

It didn’t take long to finish what was left to clean up. Once finished, the group quickly headed to their homes. Claire gathered her houseguests around the kitchen table after the last lady had exited, for one last cup of tea before calling it a night.

The conversation quickly became another rehash of the newfound family members. Diane and Annie were convinced Liza and Becky were related to them. The two were discussing aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, trying to fit them into the family tree. Neither noticed how quiet Claire had become. It was just as well; she really didn’t have enough energy to engage in a debate about their family heritage.

Claire finished her tea, took her cup to the dishwasher, and said her good night. She was ready to be alone and was looking forward to her bed.



Claire, Alan, Annie, and her girls were sitting in church on Sunday morning. Diane was sitting with some friends. As the last song came to an end, Claire felt a punch on the back of her arm. Startled and feeling pain, Claire let out a yelp that sounded like an ape trying to vomit just as the room fell silent.

Embarrassed and angry, she turned around to see Becky and Liza sitting behind them. They had apparently walked in during the song, and Claire had not seen them. *How does she do it?* Claire fumed. *She gets the best of me every single time!*

“This morning, we’re going to take a look at our families.”

You’ve got to be kidding me. Claire groaned internally as she turned her attention back to the front of the room. The pastor had started his sermon.

“Each of us has the family we know, but we need to see what Jesus says about who He considers to be members of our family. Jesus actually told His mother and siblings that His family was everyone who does the will of the Father.”

Claire allowed her attention to wander. After what seemed to be hours, she was finally drawn back to the message. “In closing, I encourage you to embrace your family, love them like Jesus would, and reach out to share God’s love with your brothers and sisters in Christ.”

“Well, slap a wet rat, he was speaking right to us!” Liza whispered to Becky, but everyone in Claire’s row could hear her.

After singing “The Family of God,” a song by the Gaithers, church was dismissed. The last thing on Claire’s mind was embracing Becky or anyone else for that matter. She was hoping to make a quick exit and get home before her guests showed up.

Becky, however, positioned herself right in front of Claire. “So what are we? Are you my sister?” Before Claire could respond, Becky grinned and said, “No, wait. How old are you? You’d have to be my aunt or something!” Finding herself funny, Becky started to laugh.

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Liza put an arm around Becky just as Claire was opening her mouth. Claire was sure Liza had no idea she had just saved Becky from being slapped.

“Claire, we are so excited about the cookout today.” Liza gushed. “We can talk family all afternoon. Of course, we’ll have to see if we’re related or if there are just a lot of similarities, but I’m thinking we must be cousins! As a matter of fact, Pastor confirmed it this morning. Anyway, we’ll figure all that out this afternoon. We’ll see you at two—we’ll be there with bells on!”



The house and yard were full of friends and family by two o’clock. Everyone was helping themselves, and the casual atmosphere gave the afternoon a familiarity that warmed Claire. She walked into the kitchen and found a large group congregated there.

“Hey, Claire, this is great!” She found herself staring into the face of a young man she didn’t know.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think we’ve met. Who are you?” Claire was attempting to be kind, but her face must have revealed her consternation.

“Whoa, if I’m not welcome, I’ll just leave, but Becky said everyone was welcome, and Liza was sure you’d be fine with me coming.”

Claire had no idea who this kid was, and as she allowed her eyes to roam the guests, she realized she did not know a couple of others as well.

“We might be related anyway—I just ate some cake, and I hear that’s the key to membership.” He was laughing, and the others joined in. Apparently, Becky and Liza had shared the icing on Terri’s wedding cake story from the evening before. “Oh, by the way, since we’re related, I’m Scott.” He held out his hand in Claire’s direction. She shook it as a gesture of politeness.

Based on his manners, Claire decided he must be Liza’s friend. Any friend of Becky’s would have been wild like her. Claire had only known Liza a little more than twenty-four hours, but she liked her, so she let herself relax about the uninvited guests.

Claire looked for Becky several times during the day but did not see her with her friends. She finally asked her whereabouts. “She’s been in and out of the bathroom all afternoon, says she doesn’t feel good.” Claire had no intention of having a discussion in a bathroom with a sick girl, so she decided to postpone her conversation.

By six o’clock, most of the guests had gone home. Claire, Diane, Annie, and Deb were finishing the last of the dishes. Without asking, Claire started hot water for tea. She set out the cups and proceeded to make her favorite blend. The friends all gathered around the kitchen table.

“What a fun day! How ’bout that Scott and his friends, showing up with Becky and Liza.”

“Who would invite people to someone’s house and not even tell them?” Claire interjected the question but recoiled when the response was simultaneous laughter from the other three. “What is so funny? I still have no clue who those kids

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were or how they got here. Did they talk to any of you about it?”

“Claire, umm, I do need to tell you something.” Annie’s laughter sounded a little nervous now. “I invited Liza, Becky, and Scott here for Thanksgiving! Look, Claire, you always invite extra people, and they might be family, so they should be here anyway. And Becky said she’d ask her mother and Jose too, so . . . it might be five extra people.”

Deb and Diane’s laughter subsided as they observed the look on Claire’s face. Diane came to Annie’s defense.

“Look, Mom, my whole life I’ve dealt with strangers for our holidays. This is no different—remember what you’ve always told me? Everyone is welcome, really!”