

Pushing Up Daisies

Chapter 2

Jen climbed from her car, stretching. Waitressing was back-breaking work, but for now, it was all she had. Her eyes widened when she spotted Millie sitting on her porch step, having an animated conversation with—the air.

“Millie, what are you doing here?”

“Maisie and me been waitin’ here for you,” she pursed her lips as if addressing a dull child. “What else would we be doin’.”

Jen sat beside her. “Where’s Kate?”

“Oh, she’s doin’ Kate things.” She lifted a finger to her lips. “Shh. Don’t tell. I’m supposed to be nappin’.”

“You shouldn’t sneak out. You could get hurt.” Jen stood and held out her hand. “Let me take you back.”

Millie swatted it away. “I ain’t no child. Anyway, Maisie says I gotta make sure you don’t tell our secret. Maisie was real mad at me.”

Jen shook her head, baffled. “But I thought Maisie said it was okay to tell me.”

Millie’s brows drew together, as if the pieces no longer fit. “It was okay when we were havin’ tea, but later, when Maisie and me talked about it, he—” She faltered, confusion clouded her eyes. “—she was mad.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t have to. Just promise you won’t tell anyone my secret.”

If Millie's husband had been murdered, it wasn't a secret Jen could keep.

A robin fluttered down and hopped along the walkway. Jen seized the moment. "Thank you, Jesus," she murmured under her breath. This was the distraction she needed to steer Millie in another direction.

"Look, Millie! I think that's the first robin of spring."

"Don't be daft. I been seein' robins for two weeks now."

"You have? This is the first one I've seen."

"That's 'cause you work most of the days, and robins don't come out at night."

"Are you sure?" Jen nearly laughed out loud. Distraction successful.

"Course I'm sure. Don't you know nothin' about birds?"

"I guess not," Jen said. "What else do you know about them?"

Thankfully, the conversation shifted to birds and flowers. Then, without warning, Millie stood and looked around as if making sure no one was watching. She pulled an envelope from her pocket and pressed it into Jen's hand.

"You take this," she whispered, darting another look over her shoulder. "Maisie don't know I'm doin' this. Never tell anyone."

Before Jen could respond, Millie hurried down the walk and disappeared into her backyard, singing "Jack and Jill."

Jen followed, wanting to be sure she made it inside safely. She stopped short when Millie bypassed the porch steps, rounded the corner of the house, and lifted a metal basement door. In seconds, she vanished inside.

So that's how she sneaks out without Kate knowing.

Jen returned home and pulled the envelope from her apron along with her tips and order pad. She sank into a chair and opened it.

A thick stack of crisp hundred-dollar bills stared back.

Where would Mille get this much cash? And why keep it from Kate?

Heart pounding, Jen stuffed the money back inside and tucked the envelope into her dresser drawer. After a quick shower and a change of clothes, she headed next door.

Kate answered her knock.

“Hi, Kate,” Jen said, peeking into the cozy living room. “Is Millie around?”

“She’s napping,” Kate replied with a smile. “I’ll tell her you stopped by.”

“Could you check and make sure she’s okay?”

Kate frowned. “Of course. Is something wrong?”

“No, I just thought I saw her through the window.” Jen silently asked for forgiveness for her lie.

Kate stepped away and returned moments later. “She’s sleeping like a baby. I love having this time to get things done without worrying about what she might get into.” Jen nodded, keeping Millie’s visit and the money to herself.

Do you want to come in for a minute?” Kate said, tucking a dish towel into her waistband.

“I see you’re busy, but I was wondering, does Millie have any family?”

Kate smiled. “She has a niece and a nephew. They’re her brother’s children. Beth’s married with three adorable kids. Millie loves when they visit. But her nephew Andrew is definitely her favorite. He stops by at least once a week and always brings her a treat.

“I’m glad to hear that,” she said, stepping back. “I’ll let you get back to your quiet time.”

“You sure you don’t want to come in? I don’t mind the company.”

“Maybe another day. I’m pretty wiped from my shift.”

“I’ve seen you coming and going in your uniform. Where do you work?”

“Dee’s Diner. It’s nearby, and enough for now.” Jen caught the flicker of curiosity in Kate’s eyes. “It’s a story for another day.”

“I’m happy to listen,” Kate said gently. Her eyes spoke of someone who also faced hardship.

“Thanks. I may take you up on that.”

Back home, Jen retrieved the envelope and searched for a better hiding place. She finally tucked it beneath the onions in a basket on the counter.

The week passed in a blur of long shifts and exhaustion.

One evening, a strange car sat in Millie’s side of the shared driveway. As Jen stepped out of her car, a tall man emerged from Millie’s house. His slightly shaggy hair and five o’clock shadow suited his relaxed confidence.

“Thanks, Drew.” Jen heard Kate say as she followed him onto the porch. “She’s as happy as a clam. What made you bring kids’ building blocks?”

He shrugged. “I wanted something different. Thought she’d enjoy the challenge.”

A crash sounded inside.

“Uh-oh,” Kate said. “I think her tower just imploded.” She hurried back in.

Millie’s voice drifted out, singing “London Bridge.”

Drew turned, took the steps two at a time, and headed for his car.

Jen waited, hoping he would have a minute to talk. When he spotted her, his face broke into a warm smile.

“You must be the new neighbor. Aunt Millie’s been talking about you all afternoon.”

“Good or bad?” Jen asked, noticing the amber flecks in his dark eyes.

“Good,” he said, then paused. “Is there bad?” He teased.

“I hope not.” She hesitated. What might Millie have told him? “If you have time, I’d love to learn more about Millie. She doesn’t always make sense.”

“I know what you mean.” He extended his hand. “Andrew Barns. My friends call me Drew.

His grip was warm, slightly calloused.

“Jennifer Wallace,” she said, liking him immediately. “My friends call me Jen,” she teased, warming to his broad grin.

“If I call you Jen, does that make me a friend?”

“I think it does, if I can call you Drew.”

“Deal.”

“Would you like to sit?” She gestured to the wicker chairs on her porch. “I’ll grab us some lemonade.”

“Oh, no thanks. Aunt Millie and I have been drinking tea all afternoon. I’m full up.” His soft chuckle was accented by the laugh lines around his eyes. “I’ll sit for a few minutes, but you look tired.” His gaze flicked to her uniform.

Jen smoothed her apron self-consciously, noticing the coffee stains. Not exactly how she’d planned to meet someone like him, but it was too late now.

She sat, and he waited until she was settled before taking his seat.

“So, Jen.” He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. “What about my aunt do you find interesting?”

Where to begin? She chose carefully. “Why does she love singing nursery rhymes?”

Drew laughed. “That’s it?”

“And other things, but that’s most interesting.” As long as she ignored a missing husband, murder, and stacks of cash.

“It probably is,” he said, nodding. “Aunt Millie was a preschool teacher. For the last couple of years, she’s been singing those old songs all the time. Sometimes they fit what’s happening around her... and sometimes they don’t.

Jen had a feeling they made more sense than he realized.