
Chapter 1

Janelle Langley stood silently at the graveside, staring at the coffin covered with flowers. The speaker was saying something, but she was only vaguely aware of his voice. She was trembling as she took a final look at the abundance of flowers, including the ribbon that said, ‘Loving Husband.’ The more she looked at it the more she trembled, but not for the reason she should be trembling. And that was what had her feeling numb.

Lexi Granger, her best friend since sixth grade, took her arm and led her back to the chairs they had recently vacated. “Janelle, you’re shaking. Sit down a few minutes and take some deep breaths. Are you okay?”

“Yes, of course I’m okay.” She looked at Lexi. “No, I’m not even close.” She sighed deep and long. “I don’t know. The truth is I’m numb.”

“That’s understandable, with what you’re going through. You just lost your husband. Of course you’re upset.”

Janelle looked around to be sure no one was standing too close before clutching Lexi’s hand. “But that’s just it. I should be

really upset, but I'm not. I'm just numb. I'm trembling because I don't feel devastated, or even sad like I should, and that's wrong."

"It hasn't hit you yet," Lexi said with a sad face. "Do you want to stay here a few minutes?"

"No," she said rather quickly. "Actually, could we get a cup of coffee and go to the park for a little bit?"

Lexi cocked her head to the side and studied her best friend for several seconds. "Okay, you know Max's boss has rented a room at the Hampton Inn and is having a meal served so everyone has a place to go afterwards to talk about and remember Max. It's not like you to blow something like that off, so if you want to go to the park for coffee, something major is wrong, isn't it?"

Janelle sighed again and nodded, tears in her eyes. Lexi knew Janelle hated to cry in public and seldom lost her battle with the tears, so that meant this was serious. "Okay, let's go. My car's over this way, but let me just tell someone we'll be there a little later, that you need a few moments to yourself first. I'm sure they'll understand."

Fifteen minutes later the ladies were walking around a duck pond at a nearby park, coffee in hand. "Okay, tell me what's wrong," Lexi said, knowing Janelle was not one to beat around the bush.

"Like I told you, I feel numb. But it's not for the right reason."

Lexi paused to study her friend again as she digested her words, trying to understand what she was trying to say. "What would be the right reason for you to feel numb as you're burying your husband?"

"Because I'm heartbroken, I don't want to go on living without him, I'll miss him tremendously."

"Oh," she said quietly before directing Janelle to a nearby bench.

Janelle sat down, but turned to face Lexi. "I'm not those

things, and that's the problem. What kind of horrible person am I?"

"Okay, wait a minute. I know you and Max have had some problems this past year or so, but I know you, and I know you're not trying to tell me you're glad he's gone." When Janelle didn't answer, she looked over at her. "Are you?"

"No, not really," she said quietly after looking around to be sure they were still alone. "But Lexi, the last year and a half has been awful. He changed. I don't know why, what caused it, or even when exactly it happened, but he's been so hard to live with the last year or so it's been terrible. It's like I've constantly felt on edge."

"What do you mean on edge?"

"He didn't appreciate anything I did, and nothing was good enough. It's like the more I tried to please him, the more he grumbled. He loved pot roast, but if he seemed upset about something and I made pot roast the next day, he complained that I fixed it on a weeknight and his mother used to make it on Sundays. One night he complained that I wore jeans all the time and it would be nice to see me in something a little dressier once in a while. The next night I dressed up more and he asked why I was wearing good clothes just to stay home."

"Oh, Janelle, I'm sorry. I knew you've had problems, but I had no idea it was that bad. Why didn't you say something?"

"What could I have said, that my man I loved and thought I wanted to spend the rest of my life with had turned into a jerk?"

"No, of course not, but you could have given me a hint at how bad it was."

"Last night I realized I didn't say anything to you or anyone else because I—"

"Because you what?"

"I tried several times to talk to him about us, and asked what was wrong or why he'd changed. He always insisted he hadn't changed, and any problems we might be having were all my

fault.” She paused and swallowed hard before finishing. “I guess I believed him and felt guilty all the time, while trying to figure out how to make amends. After a while I simply gave up. The last couple of months I haven’t felt like I’ve been living, but simply existing. I tried to do what I needed to do so he didn’t complain too much. I had his meals ready, the house was kept nice and the clothes were clean, and then I tried to stay out of his way.”

“Oh, Janelle, I had no idea. That’s why you’ve turned down my invitations to lunch or shopping or —”

“Or anything else you asked me to go to, yes. I’m sorry, Lexi, I should have said something.”

“Yes, you should have, but I should have pushed you more, and I’m sorry I didn’t. I knew something was bothering you, but I thought you were just still run down from having pneumonia.”

“That’s what I told you, and it was partly true. It took longer than it should have to get my energy back after being sick, and my doctor was starting to worry. I really think it was because I’d lost my zeal for life.”

“You were depressed.”

“I was, and I didn’t know it. But I tried to pull myself up by the bootstraps, and I did start feeling better, physically. But it wasn’t until the last few days that I realized I’d let him convince me that our problems were my fault, or even that I had in fact been depressed.”

“And now he’s dead,” she said as she thought through what all she’d just learned. “Oh, wow.”

“Yeah. And what’s worse, over the past few days since he died I can feel my depression leaving. I no longer dread the evening when he’ll be home from work. Honestly, I don’t actually feel depressed any longer. Now, like I said, I feel numb.”

“If you feel better already, I don’t think you were actually clinically depressed. It seems to me more likely that you were just plain sad, or upset. Depressed, yes, but it was a temporary condi-

tion caused by an outside influence. That influence has ceased, so your depression has ceased, as well."

Janelle looked up at Lexi, her eyes wide. "I think that's exactly what's happening. I no longer feel so overwhelmingly inadequate, which is a very freeing feeling."

"I'm sure it is."

"But now I should be feeling sadness, and I'm not." A few tears escaped her eyes as she said, "Lexi, I'm a terrible person. My husband has just died and the only tears that I've shed are because I'm so ashamed of myself. I'm ashamed that I'm not sad, that I'm not crying over him. What is wrong with me?"

"I think you just need time. You've just been able to start feeling normal again after being in a very dark place. That's a big emotional thing in itself, and I think it's too soon to throw yourself into another big emotional state, which grief and sadness is. You need some time to accept one before you can deal with the next."

"So you're saying right now I'm an emotional mess?"

Lexi laughed, glad to see her friend still had some of her sense of humor. That was a good sign. "I might not have said it in exactly those words, but basically, yes."

"What you said makes sense. I think I need some time to think all this through before I'll be able to come to terms with his death. That sounds crazy even to me, but honestly, right now I don't feel the terrible loss I know I should be feeling. But there are people at the Hampton Inn waiting to console the grieving widow. What am I going to do?"

"Oh, boy."

"That's why I wanted to talk to you before going there. I'm not grieving. Well, at least I don't think I am. Like I said, I'm numb, but one thing I do know is I'm not your normal grieving wife. Everyone's going to think I'm a horrible person. And the worst part of it is I can't argue with that. How can I be this

uncaring, thoughtless? I may have a lot going on emotionally, but it seems I should still be mourning his passing.”

“Okay, stop there. Janelle, we’ve been best friends since sixth grade, and I will not allow you to even say that. You are a very caring person. Right now you’re confused, and you’re in shock. Over the next few days you’ll be able to come to grips with your feelings and it will all make sense. For now, you’re going to make an appearance, thank people for their well wishes and kind thoughts, and we’ll leave. We’ll tell everyone you’re still in shock and having a hard time dealing with all of this, and you really need some time to get your head wrapped around the fact that he’s gone. You can do that, can’t you?”

“I should be able to do that. Stay with me, though, please. If I look like I’m about to lose it, get me out of there.”

“You got it. If you’re ready, let’s go and get this over with. Then we’ll go home and talk if you want. It sounds like you’re already thinking it through pretty good, and realizing he had you believing the trouble you two were having was your fault is a good start. You know now that’s not true, don’t you?”

“I do. And you’re right, I think I need to do some thinking, but then I might need someone to talk to.”

“You know we can talk anytime you want. In fact, I’m going to hold you to it because I want to know what all was going on, how he got you to believe it was your fault, and why the hell you didn’t talk to me about it.”

“You know,” Janelle said seriously, “I think he had me brainwashed to an extent. I didn’t have a job, I couldn’t really leave, so I stayed and tried to improve, and when that didn’t work, I tried to adjust. The problem was he continually got harder and harder to live with, and I felt more and more helpless.”

“Bad combination.”

“For sure. But anyway, I think I need a few days to think this all through. Then maybe I can see how I really feel. Hopefully

I'll have some feelings then. Anything would be better than being numb."

"I'm sure you will. I think that's a good idea to take some time to think first. I worry about you being alone, though. Why don't you come stay with us for a few days or so?"

"No. Thank you, but I think I do need to be alone. My first real thoughts came last night when I was alone in the house, looking around. My mind was empty and glancing around brought all sorts of thoughts tumbling around, and memories, and I ended up taking what I think was a good first step. I no longer feel like it was all my fault. I want to try doing that again, but I think I need to be alone."

"Okay, I'll trust you on that, but you have to promise me you'll keep in touch. If you don't call me at least once a day, I'll call you. If you don't answer, I'll be at your doorstep."

"Fair enough. I appreciate that, Lexi. Now, let's go get this thing over with."

Lexi stayed at Janelle's side, and explained to several people that she was still in shock and having a hard time coming to grips with what had happened. No one questioned that, especially since he had died in an automobile accident, which made her loss a sudden thing. Together they made it through an hour and a half of well-meaning people telling her how sorry they were for her loss. Once Lexi drove her home, Janelle collapsed into her favorite chair, exhausted.

They talked some, and Lexi felt better once she was convinced that Janelle indeed no longer blamed herself for the trouble she and Max had been having. "I think that's a good start, but I think you should seriously think about finding a therapist to talk to. You've been through so much the past year or so, I'm sure some counseling could help you sort all your feelings out."

"You might be right," Janelle admitted. "I'm not normally big on counseling, but I think you're right, and I'm suffering from

emotional overload. Maybe someone who doesn't know me or what's happened the last year or so could help me sort through it all."

Eight months later, the two ladies were sharing a pizza while making plans. "Are you sure you want to sell your house?" Lexi asked.

"I don't really see that I have much of a choice. Max never wanted me to work, and he never believed in life insurance. He felt when you're young you should work and put enough back for your retirement. I'm sure he didn't plan on being killed at 27. I'm just glad I at least talked him into taking out the insurance on the house loan so if he couldn't work the house was paid off."

"I'm definitely glad you had that."

"If we wouldn't have, I have no idea what I would do. Anyway, since I don't have a career, some way to support myself, I have to come up with something. Back when I started seeing my counselor she suggested I had enough on my plate then, and if I had enough savings to live on temporarily, she thought I should concentrate on getting myself in a better place first, and that made sense to me."

"Yes, I agree."

"I'm glad I did that. I'm doing much better and feel ready to move forward now with my life."

"I can tell. I've never met her, but I'm impressed. She's obviously helped you because you're the lady once again that you were during the time you and Max met and the first three years you were married. I'm so happy to see that."

"I feel more like her again, too. I feel like I have my life back, and like I said, I'm eager to move on and see what life has for me now."

"So you've been able to come to grips with your loss?"

"I have. She helped me see it's okay for me to mourn the memories of our first three years of our marriage and that man I fell in love with, but it is completely understandable and okay to not feel bad or miss the man he had become, or the last year or so of our marriage. That's exactly what I do now. I still get bleary-eyed when I think back on the man I married and our good memories, and I probably always will. But now I realize that I'd lost him a year or year and a half before his death. I was mourning him during that time, which helps explain why I was so sad and depressed."

"So you had already spent a year or so mourning that man you loved," she said more than asked.

"Right."

"That makes sense. So, moving on now, do you have any idea what you're going to do, or where you're going to live?"

"Not exactly. I have to do something soon, though, because our savings are running low. Even though I don't have a house payment, I still have utilities and living expenses. I got the bill for the house insurance, and that gave me the idea to sell it. I don't need a big house. Max wanted the grand house, but I never had much of an attachment to it. If I sell it and buy a smaller house, my living expenses will be lower, and it will give me a little bit to live on while I decide what I'm going to do for an income."

"Any ideas there?"

"Not really. My degree is in art and general business. That's about as generic and useless as you can get. I'm thinking maybe I need to go back to college and get some classes that will qualify me for a job. My problem is I don't know what kind of job I want."

"Maybe you should just focus on getting your house ready to sell and finding a new one, and not push yourself to find a job yet. Maybe something will draw your interest. If not, we can talk to an employment counselor about a career choice. They may mention something you haven't even thought of."

Janelle took another bite of pizza while she considered that option. "This is really good pizza. Why haven't we eaten here before?"

"Because it's new. It is really good, though, isn't it?" She stopped suddenly and put her pizza down. "Have you ever thought of opening a new business?"

"I don't know anything about starting a business, or what kind of business I would want to start. Besides, starting a business takes money, and that's something I'm low on."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Lexi said, picking her pizza back up. "So, tell me what kind of house you're looking for. How big do you want, and what area are you looking to be in?"

"As long as it's in the city I don't have a preference, or a specific area in mind. I think I would prefer something newer so I shouldn't have to worry as much about maintenance issues, but I'd like something a little different. Maybe a different layout or something, instead of the normal straight ranch style, and I definitely want something smaller. I certainly don't now and never did need six bedrooms, five baths, an office, library and great room."

"That is a big house. I can see why you want to sell it, even if you didn't need the money. That's a lot of house to take care of."

"Yes, it is. I have no idea how much it's worth, but I sure hope I can get enough to find a smaller one and still have a tidy little nest egg left to live on until I can go back to college or find a job."

"Oh, I would think you should be able to do that. I mean, it's a beautiful house."

"It is. It's just not my style."

They spent the next half hour finishing their pizza and talking about what all would be involved with selling her house and buying another one. They were both getting excited and were eager to start the house hunt.

Two weeks later Janelle was nervous as she answered the door to invite Angie Harper into her house. Angie was a realtor Janelle had talked to about listing her house and helping her find a replacement. She agreed to come look at her house and give her an idea how much she felt it would sell for, and how much it would cost to find something else smaller. She hoped Angie had good news for her.

She was surprised to see a man and woman at the door. She assumed the lady was Angie, but she had no idea who the hunk standing beside her was. As quickly as that thought came to her mind, she shook her head. Where had that come from? Sure, this man was gorgeous, the epitome of tall, dark and handsome, but it wasn't like her to notice. Since she'd been seriously involved with Max, even before they were married, she'd been a one-man woman, and other men just didn't seem to catch her eye. Now this rather tall, six feet or a little over, man with thick dark brown, almost black hair and an athletic build certainly had. When he looked at her and smiled, he was even better looking. That inviting smile somehow seemed to finish the whole package perfectly.

It took all the concentration she could muster to clear her head and look back to the lady who was speaking. "Janelle? I'm Angie Harper, and this is my brother, Ben Murphy. My husband normally comes with me to help measure a house I'm going to list, but he wasn't able to come. Luckily, my brother offered to help."

"Nice to meet both of you. Come on in." She forced herself to keep her mind on business. After all, Ben was probably married, and she was hardly looking to start another relationship yet.

Janelle gave them a tour of the house so Angie could get an overall feel for it. Afterward they sat down to talk some, before

she and Ben measured each room. “You have a beautiful home, Janelle,” she said, starting the conversation off. “May I ask why you want to sell it?”

“I lost my husband nine months ago, and this is way more house than I need,” she answered honestly.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Angie said, “but I certainly understand why you might want a smaller one. This is a large home.”

“It is. To be honest, though, I’m also looking for some equity from it. I’ve taken some time to grieve and adjust, but now I need to find some type of employment so I have an income. I’m hoping this will provide a little money to live on while I’m looking.”

“I understand,” she assured Janelle, “and I’ll be happy to try to help you make that happen. What type of house are you looking to purchase?”

She explained what she’d been thinking about. “Are there any like that available, or am I looking for something that will be hard to find?”

“I think we’ll be able to find something you like. Let me show you a few listings and see if any of them pique your interest.”

Twenty minutes later Angie and Janelle had plans to tour four houses, and had three more she would be interested in seeing if she didn’t like any of them. Angie then moved to what she felt she could get for her house, and Janelle was very pleased. The amount quoted was higher than she’d hoped, so she would be more than satisfied if she could get that.

With that information, Janelle gave Angie the go ahead to list the house. They went back through the house again, with Angie and Ben measuring each of the rooms as they went, and Angie asking a few questions here and there.

When they were in the family room Ben, who had been quiet all evening, letting the ladies talk and conduct their business, stopped at some paintings on the wall, studying them intently. He looked at more hanging in the hallway, and yet two more in the

master bedroom. "Janelle, excuse me, but could I ask you a couple of questions about these paintings?"

"Yeah, sure," she said a bit hesitantly. "What would you like to know?"

"They're beautiful pictures. I noticed you have several, maybe half a dozen by this artist. They're all extraordinary, but when I look at the signature, I'm not familiar with the artist, J. Anders. Do you know this person; is it someone local? I'd love to see about purchasing one myself. I love their work."

"Uh," Janelle stammered, "I painted them."

Ben turned from the painting he'd been viewing to look at her, his eyes wide. "You're J. Anders?"

"Yes. I used to enjoy painting before I was married, and I always signed them J. Anders, which was my maiden name. I hadn't done any painting for several years, but after I lost my husband I got my things back out. It's always had a calming effect on me, and it's been helpful lately; therapeutic."

"Have you ever sold any of your work?"

"No, I don't think I could do that. People wouldn't be interested in buying them. It's just something I enjoy doing."

"Oh, I think you're wrong there, Janelle. I feel your work would sell quickly."

Angie, who had been taking some notes on the house, but listening to their conversation, came over to look at the painting her brother was still studying. "Janelle, you should listen to Ben. He knows what he's talking about when it comes to art."

Janelle looked a little more closely at Ben. "Seriously? You think someone might be interested in them? Even if they were, I wouldn't have any idea how to go about selling any. Where and how would I do that?"

Angie chuckled and looked from the painting over to her new client. "Janelle, I introduced Ben as my brother, which he is, but he's also the owner of the art gallery in town. Trust me, he knows art and what will sell. Now that I've looked at this, I agree with

him. This painting is fantastic. Now that I know you painted them I want to look at all of them closer, but this is really good.”

Ben took a card from his wallet and handed it to Janelle. “I do own the gallery and I would like to have a showing of some of your work if you would be willing to sell some of it. I heard you say you’re hoping to get enough money from the sale of this house to help with your living expenses until you find employment somewhere. I firmly believe your paintings will sell, and you may have found your means of income.”

“Oh, come on. You really think my paintings would sell?”

“I do. Would you be willing to let me feature some of your work at my gallery?”

“Uh, yes, I guess so. I mean, I never considered it, but I will admit I could certainly use an income. If you think anyone would be interested in them, sure.”

“Wonderful. I’ve seen six now, and I’ve been impressed with each of them. May I ask if you have any others that are finished?”

She chuckled a bit as she headed down the hall. “I have a closet full of them. Max never wanted me to display any, so I stored all of them. You’re free to look through them and see if there are any you like.”

Ben took his time as he looked through each of the canvases. As he picked up the final one to examine, he shook his head. “I can’t believe you’ve kept this talent hidden. Janelle, you truly do have a real talent. These are all amazing. Give me a couple of days, and then I’d love to talk to you about a show. Would you be amenable to that?”

“Certainly. I’m not working, so I’m available pretty much anytime you’d like to talk.”

Angie and Ben finished taking the measurements they needed and Angie turned to Janelle. “I’ll get this ready to list and it should be active, actually for sale in a few days. I’ll be over to get

you tomorrow and we'll look at the four houses you picked out this evening."

"Thank you, Angie."

"And I'm going to talk to a few people, and if it's okay I'll give you a call in a day or two and we'll get together and talk about your show," Ben said.

"Thank you, as well, Ben. This all seems sort of surreal yet, but thank you."

"I'm glad I came along with Angie today. I hate to think I could have missed this opportunity to see some beautiful paintings. I'll call you soon."

They left and Janelle spent some time looking at her paintings again, before calling Lexi to share her good news.