

THE
MAD
HATTER'S
SON

FOR REVIEW
PURPOSES ONLY

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An Annie Collins Mystery

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The Mad Hatter's Son

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Love itself draws on a woman nearly all the bad luck in the world.

—WILLA CATHER

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 PROLOGUE

WE HAD BEEN friends for years, until we weren't. I imagined hearing about her secondhand—seeing her in the society pages or in news of a gallery opening or charity function. I imagined being jealous of her and longing to return to our early friendship when our differences seemed meaningless. I remembered her amazing talent. I never imagined her not being there. Now all I can remember is her lying on a gurney surrounded by the familiar, yet strangely discordant, sounds of a hospital ER. I remember being paralyzed by the reality of what had happened and the persistent thought that I was to blame, that I had failed her completely.

September, 2000

I STOOD IN THE doorway to my assigned dorm room and looked around. One half of the room was occupied by a small, portable easel with several bound pads of drawing paper leaning against its upright support, fishing tackle boxes stacked around its legs, one open and filled with tubes of oil paint. Leaning up against the wall were several nearly finished canvases. My new roommate was apparently in the Fine Arts program.

The small closet on her side of the room was crammed with colorful outfits, scarves, and shoes. It overflowed, and I couldn't imagine how she planned to close the door. I looked down at my medium-sized suitcase and small carry-on-sized bag and wondered how this arrangement would work out.

"Oh my gosh! I wondered when I'd meet you."

I turned to see a beautiful girl with long blond hair, ice-blue eyes, and freckles across her nose standing behind me. "Hi. Annie Collins," I said, moving into the room. I dropped my bags on the floor by the unclaimed bed.

"Libby Crowder," she replied, following me and extending a hand with short nails and cuticles stained with paint. "I hope you don't mind my taking the side near the window; I need the light for my painting. I won't be

doing a lot of that here, mostly over in the arts building, but I like to do my own work, too, not just the assigned stuff.”

“No, I just need light to read and it looks like there’s enough to do that. Fine Arts major, eh?”

“Yes. I’m so excited, they liked my portfolio, so I’m in the program. What’re you here to do?”

“Nursing.”

“Wow, that’s serious stuff.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.” I laughed.

I was worried. My family lived in Texas and I had chosen to go to college in Colorado as a chance to get away and experience something new, but there were no close friends or family nearby for support. I had chosen Nursing because there were several nurses in my family and I couldn’t think of anything else to do. The way I figured it, there are always sick people so I’d always have a job. Assuming I didn’t flunk out.

She turned out to be easy to live with, for an artist. She had periods when she was convinced she had no talent, which was ridiculous based on what I saw, and periods of almost mania when she painted at all hours. But mostly she was my friend and expanded my tiny circle of acquaintances to include other Fine Arts students. It was a mixed bag that ran the gamut from just plain weird—pathologically quiet and oddly dressed—to just plain crazy party animals who drank and smoked to excess and had egos so large it was a wonder they could get their heads through doorways. Libby and a few others settled in the middle.

The people I met in the Nursing program were far more normal; some were fun, and all worked hard. Many were oppressively sincere, totally focused on their career choice, convinced they’d been called to nursing to serve the sick. It bordered on annoying and sometimes crossed the border.

We worked our way through undergraduate school, continuing to room together even after moving out of the dorm in our second year. Libby’s talent expanded by leaps and bounds, and I loved to watch her paint. She, for the most part, was grossed out at what nurses were asked to do—sometimes I was, too—and we spent a lot of time laughing about it. She had a

number of lovers over the four years, some good and some she should have detoured around. I had a few as well, most of whom were mistakes, and relationships for me seemed an endless round of disasters. Between us we shared enough evenings crying on each other's shoulders that it felt like we'd be friends forever.

Libby planned to live a life of ease and grace so she could paint without the tedium of having a day job. I planned to graduate and get a job, tedious or otherwise. Libby went on to get a master's degree in Fine Arts, and I stayed in Colorado and went to work, going back for a master's in Nursing after a few years of practice.

Libby landed a job at the regional arts center restoring paintings, catering to the gentry and the local museum crowd, and painting on the side. I moved slowly through the hospital ranks from staff nurse in the OR to head nurse. In a fit of burnout, I returned to a staff nurse position and opted to work on a per diem basis, and they agreed to let me pick and choose when I would work. It provided me with a higher hourly wage, and I didn't have to be at the hospital's beck and call. It gave me the illusory feeling that I was in control of my life.

Neither of us was wealthy, but Libby moved in a different crowd. She had an innate sense of style that let her fit in with matrons and debutantes in spite of the fact that she didn't earn much. We maintained our friendship despite our differences, and after eleven years we were still close. Then she met Edward Matheisen when he brought in a painting to the arts center to be examined that he was considering buying. He didn't know art and he really didn't even know what he liked, but he knew enough not to get taken to the cleaners.

The effect on our friendship was something neither of us anticipated.

"Oh my god, he's such a babe in the woods." She laughed when she called to tell me about him. "The painting he brought in was atrocious, so I suggested he let me tour him through some galleries until he finds something worth purchasing. He's handsome, too, so it won't be a mercy mission. And he's a widower." Her voice was fairly vibrating she was so excited.

"Sounds like a catch, Lib, but what are you gonna do if you do catch him?"

“I’m sure I’ll figure something out.” I could almost see her rubbing her hands together.

As I discovered when I finally met him, he was handsome—tall, dark-haired, meticulously groomed. And he had the one quality that most women agree on until they fall in love with a mechanic: He was rich, the CEO of an up-and-coming IT business. He had a reputation as a ruthless businessman and difficult boss. From what I had heard via the grapevine, he was not hesitant to cut people and business associates out of his life if crossed. He personified the *nouveau riche* Libby had always made fun of, and, like them, he wanted to acquire culture. She was happy to help and not long after meeting, they were dating regularly.

Edward was older than Libby, nearing forty, and had been single for about ten years—well on his way to becoming a confirmed bachelor, unless something intervened. Personally, I didn’t take to him. I could see why he hadn’t managed to remarry; he was not socially awkward so much as just distant. I wondered from time to time if he was a high-functioning Asperger’s victim. There was no sense of connection there, and there was a hardness that worried me. When I was around, he tended to disappear or just quit talking. He was unsettling. For the life of me, I couldn’t figure out what she saw in him other than his looks and the money.

I was the only one, knowing Libby as I did, who wasn’t surprised when she waved a three-carat solitaire in my face. “Look at this!” she crowed, flapping her left hand in my face. “Can you believe how gorgeous this is?”

“It’s pretty gorgeous, all right.” I laughed; her happiness was infectious. “Do you need a sling to help you hold your arm up? I could get you one.”

“No thanks, Annie, I’ve been lifting weights,” she said, smiling like a cat with cream.

September, 2015

LIBBY MATHEISEN reappeared in my life via a voice message that was brief, clear, and typical of Libby.

“It’s Tuesday, September first. It’s Libby, please call me.” She gave me the number. “Thanks.” There was a brief pause. “Please call me, Annie, this is important.”

It had been twenty-four hours since she'd called, and I hadn't returned it. I didn't really want to because it felt so awkward. Four years and two worlds apart, I couldn't imagine what she wanted. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

The last time I'd seen her was at her wedding to Edward. Once the wedding had been announced in the society pages, friends who knew that Libby and I had been close bombarded me with questions.

"Are you going to be in the wedding?"

"I don't think so."

"Where's it going to be?"

"St. John's, and then the Denver Country Club."

"Will you take pictures and tell us all about it?"

"If I go, sure."

They finally stopped trying to pump me for details when they could see it was pointless and I wasn't going to give them much information. Honestly, I didn't have much information to give.

My friend, Chip, who worked in the ICU, finally asked, "What's wrong with you? I'd think you'd be excited; this'll be the event of the season, girl."

"It's a long story, but mostly I just don't like her husband-to-be. He's a cold fish and I can't see him and Libby together. She's changed a lot, she's out of my league, and we haven't seen each other much since she met him."

"That's no reason not to go, and I know you're thinking about doing that, don't deny it," he said as we sat down at a table in the hospital cafeteria. "My God, the food will be to die for, and it's a chance to have some fun. You might even meet someone there. They say all sorts of hook-ups happen at weddings, and they'll probably be rich ones at the DCC."

"If you want to go and hook up with somebody, I'll give you my invite."

"You are such a pain. Just do something fun for once."

I got similar advice from other friends who had difficulty understanding why I didn't want to go. My relationship, or lack of one, with Libby was impossible to explain, so I stopped trying. By the time the wedding finally occurred, people were describing Edward's courtship of Libby and

their wedding as “fairytale,” which always triggers my cynicism. There are people who would say I resent Libby’s happiness because it resulted in the loss of our friendship. That is probably true.

I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised when we began seeing less and less of each other. I was surprised at how much it bothered me and how resentful I became of each new trinket she sported and every new experience that dating Edward afforded her. It felt as if he were buying her, seducing her with what he could offer, and I was annoyed by how eager she seemed to want it. I wondered what would happen if he grew tired of her. And I often wondered if my reaction to her relationship with him was in part because I had never found anyone special or managed to navigate a successful relationship.

By the time they were married, we hadn’t seen each other in several months. I was offered and declined the chance to be in the wedding, asking instead for an invitation to attend. The offer to be in her wedding was a nice thought, but the threads that had held our friendship together had been broken. I hadn’t seen her since.

So here I was waffling about calling her. Nursing prepares people to do things they don’t really want to do, so after waiting twenty-four hours, I picked up the phone and forced myself to dial the number. The phone was answered on the second ring by a very neutral female voice.

“Matheisen residence.”

“May I speak with Libby Matheisen, please?” I asked, using my best manners.

“May I tell Mrs. Matheisen who is calling?”

“This is Anne Collins, returning her call.” *Just put her on the phone*, I thought. I wanted to get this over with.

“One moment, please.” The phone was put down on something solid, and I waited several moments before I heard Libby’s familiar voice and the click of the other handset being hung up.

“Annie?”

“Yep. Long time no see, Lib; how’ve you been?”

“Annie, could I convince you to come to the house today or tomorrow for lunch?” she asked, ignoring my lame attempt at small talk.

I looked at my watch; it was only 10:30. It annoyed me to be eager, but I had to admit I was curious now to discover what was so urgent. "I could come today, I guess. What time?"

She told me and gave me directions to the house. I'd never been to Edward's house, but I had an idea where it was. My idea turned out to be wrong, and I arrived fifteen minutes late. The place was enormous, set back on an elegant piece of property in one of Denver's wealthy old-city neighborhoods. The house was Tudor-style, the kind that had been built in the twenties and thirties in an attempt to recreate the to-the-man-or-born atmosphere of an English estate. The grounds were like Edward, meticulously groomed. A black metal fence with arrow-topped spindles surrounded the front yard, and the back yard was shielded from the masses by high brick walls covered in vines.

I approached the heavy front door and rang the bell. I could hear it echoing somewhere in the deep recesses of the house, and it was several minutes before the door was opened by a woman I presumed to be the one who had answered the phone. She looked at me as blandly as she had answered the phone. When I responded to her raised eyebrow with my name, she nodded at me and escorted me through the entry hall and up a large, wide flight of stairs.

I could see the elegant living room from the stairs, and I imagined that the kitchen was on the main floor as well, though I doubted anyone but the help used it. We, however, were going upstairs and I wasn't sure she had heard my name correctly. Most people I knew ate in the kitchen or the dining room. Maybe Libby was different now. Or maybe I'd misunderstood about lunch. I was hungry; I hoped not.

The upstairs hallway was carpeted in a deep, soft gray pile, and the walls were hung at intervals with works of art that said "Libby" all over them. In addition to her artwork, the collection in the hall was a blend of contemporary artists and the occasional impressionist. I doubted that any were reproductions. The woman in front of me stopped at a door near the end of the hall, knocked discretely, then opened it, standing aside for me to enter. I was surprised to see that it was Libby's bedroom and to see her in bed.

Edward rose from a chair at Libby's bedside and walked to me, extending his hand. "Anne, I'm so glad you could come. I'll let you two catch up on old times." It was said in a public voice and as he reached me and took my hand, he said quietly, "Have the housekeeper show you to the library when you leave, I'd like to speak with you."

I responded like I usually do when I am totally baffled: I smiled and nodded at him. I turned to watch him leave the room and heard Libby say behind me, "I was afraid you'd decided not to come."

"I got lost," I said, taking in the room and Libby as I turned and walked toward her bed. I was dumbstruck by the way she looked, pale and thinner than I remembered. I was also surprised at the number of pill bottles on the bedside table. I was about to comment when she cut me off.

"Cora, please bring our lunch up; I'm sure Annie is starving. I'll have some iced tea. What would you like, Annie?"

I asked for Diet Coke, not being much of a tea-drinker.

The phone lady disappeared and closed the door behind her.

Libby motioned for me to sit down in the chair vacated by her husband. Her hand had a fine tremor to it as she reached up and rearranged a lock of hair behind her ear, and I saw her blush when she saw I'd noticed. Her hair had lost its thick, shining mass and her skin looked dry and fragile, like someone twice her age.

"Why *am* I here, Libby?" I blurted out, unable to wait through pleasantries.

She stopped fussing with her hair and glanced nervously at the door, rubbing her fingers with her thumbs as if they felt funny. "I haven't been well. I had a miscarriage almost two months ago and since then I...haven't been well. I just don't..." She kept struggling to put it into words and then gave up. "Oh, for God's sake, Annie, look at me! Something is terribly wrong and everyone tells me it's just in my head! Look!" she cried, and ran a hand through her hair; a surprising amount came out. "My hair is falling out, my hands shake constantly, I get these pains in my hands and feet, and I don't sleep well; this can't be all in my head."

"Have you seen anyone?" I asked dumbly.

"Yes, I've seen my gynecologist and my family doctor. The GYN gave me tranquilizers and a referral to a shrink, and my GP gave me sleeping pills."

“Did you go to the shrink?”

“Yes, for a while.”

“Did it help?”

“Oh, don’t start, please! Look, I’m not crazy, I’m sick. All he offered was a script for an antidepressant, which I told him I didn’t want. I need your help.”

“To do what?” I asked uneasily.

“To help me find out what’s wrong. I’m scared; what if I’m dying?”

“If you were dying, the doctors would have told you; they wouldn’t just refer you to a shrink.” At least I didn’t think they would. Libby had always been a bit like a first-year medical or nursing student. Every minor illness or symptom was blown out of proportion. She had often used me to reassure her it wasn’t serious. I wondered if she wasn’t doing that now.

There was a discreet knock on the door and Libby motioned for me to be quiet. The door opened and the phone lady brought lunch in on a trolley. She carefully set up a bed tray with little legs where she assembled Libby’s lunch and then placed the trolley beside me and fixed mine. She was efficient and quick and in a few moments Libby and I were alone again.

I wondered how I would feel being waited on hand and foot. I might enjoy it at first, but I think I’d feel a bit bored after a while, maybe even feel as if my every move was watched, but for a while it would be fun. The thought occurred to me that perhaps this was Libby’s problem—it had ceased to be fun. Maybe the boredom had become too much, maybe the constant presence of servants had made her just a little paranoid.

“I know you think I’m nuts. You think I’ve turned into a hypochondriac, don’t you?”

“The thought crossed my mind,” I replied, looking wistfully at my lunch. I was starving, but it seemed rude to start eating while she poured her heart out to me. I had to ignore the nurse inside my head who was berating me for wanting to eat and for admitting that I thought Libby was nuts out loud. Well, I *was* hungry and I *did* think she might be a little nuts. Libby and I had been pretty straight with each other when we’d been friends. It was hard not to be now. I reached for the sandwich and took a bite while I waited for her to continue.

Libby seemed uninterested in the food. She shrugged her shoulders, picking up the glass and sipping the tea. “You’re not the only one who thinks that. But we used to be friends, and I need your help. You’re the only one I trust. Annie, please help me.”

“What do you want me to do, exactly?” I asked, taking another bite.

“Stay here for a while and take care of me, help me find out what’s wrong. I’ll pay you double whatever you’re making, and I promise if you think it’s all in my head, I’ll go back to the shrink.”

“I’ve never done private duty, Lib. I don’t think this is a good idea. I’m no detective and I’m no doctor. There’s got to be a better solution.” I had a sinking feeling in my gut and began trying to figure out how to get out of this.

“Please, what can it hurt? If it’s all in my head then you’ve just humored an old friend. If you can discover what’s wrong then you’ve helped me enormously. In the meantime, you’ve made some easy money. I don’t know what I’ll do if you don’t say yes.”

If you want a nurse to do something she absolutely knows is going to result in a lot of trouble, tell her you don’t know what you’ll do if she doesn’t help. It works like a charm.

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COLORADO NATIVE, OR nurse, and author of *The Mad Hatter's Son*, Helen Starbuck lives in Arvada, Colorado, and has written stories since junior high. She loves mysteries, thrillers, and books involving strong women. Following the adage to “write what you know,” she writes her mysteries from the perspective of Annie Collins an OR nurse.