



The Debt

by Angela Hunt

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We have been airborne only a few minutes when I hear the high-pitched warble of the jet's telephone. Josh springs to answer it; both Abel and I look at him, waiting.

A faint look of disappointment flits across Josh's face as he hands the phone to me. I smile and accept it, knowing that Josh was probably expecting a call from one of the movers and shakers at the prayer breakfast this morning.

I bring the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"Emma Rose! Good morning!"

Celene Hughes, who serves as my administrative assistant and our director of women's ministries, wouldn't have called unless something important had come up. "Everything okay, Celene?"

"Pretty much." Despite her assurance, I hear a note of worry in her voice, and my tension level rises a few points. I sink into my seat. "What's up?"

She exhales a breath that seems to whoosh straight into my ear. "It's probably nothing, just one of our usual fruitcakes. But the young man insisted that I contact you right away. I tried to stall him, but on the off chance he really did need to talk to you, I thought I'd better call."

I shift my gaze to the window, where a quilted blanket of low clouds blocks my view of the landscape below. What'd he want?

"He says he wants to meet you privately. I told him you would be speaking at Sinai Church four times in the next month and you'd be happy to meet him after any of those services, but he said a public meeting wouldn't do. That's when my alarm bells started ringing. He said he had important news for your ears alone."

A soft groan escapes my lips. Last year I attracted a stalker, a lonely middle-aged man who watched the TV program every week and somehow convinced himself that I was his soul mate. His early letters went into the massive bins sorted by our mail department; when he began to mark them personal, they came to my office. I

ignored them at first, not wanting to encourage him, but when three or four letters began to arrive every afternoon, I showed them to Abel, who handed them off to Jon Stuckey, chief of security for the ministry.

After Jon wrote the fellow a terse warning, the personal letters stopped coming.

I put all thoughts of the man out of my mind until one July Sunday when a disheveled stranger began to walk up the center aisle. Though Abel saw him he kept preaching, assuming that the man wanted to pray at the altar. But when the fellow called my name and pulled a gun from his overcoat, Abel and half the choir hit the floor like wheat before the reaper.

For a full five seconds, I couldn't think. Half-formed thoughts stuttered through my brain as my eyes registered our minister of music inch-worming on the carpeted platform and my husband cowering behind the reinforced pulpit (bullet-proofed in the year we launched our campaign against homosexuality depicted on television). I sat frozen beside the piano, not knowing whether to crawl beneath the Steinway or slip behind my chair, as the wild-eyed man kept coming, his eyes locked on me.

Fortunately, I didn't have to waver long. Jon and his security team (who'd probably been half-hoping for an opportunity to test themselves) rushed from pews and behind pillars and charged the platform like NFL linebackers intent on victory. While several team members covered Abel and other staff members, Jon tackled my deranged Don Juan. As they hit the floor I glimpsed the black gleam of steel and heard the crack of the gun and an answering chink from one of the crystal chandeliers.

In the days to come, people often remarked on my composure. But what they took for grace under pressure was nothing more than paralyzing fear.

Within sixty seconds, it was all over. The security men hustled the man away; the choir members brushed dust from their robes and climbed back into their seats. The music director smoothed the long strands of hair atop his bald head and sat back down, though his hands trembled on the armrest.

But without so much as a tremor in his voice, Abel pulled himself erect in the pulpit and told our people that God had just protected us against a flagrant satanic attack. The congregation broke into spontaneous applause, a veritable offering of praise.

Later, after the police had interrogated the man and learned his identity, Abel drew me into his arms and asked why I hadn't crawled into the bullet-proof pulpit with him.

"It all happened so fast," I answered, surprised by the question. "I never dreamed anyone would come after me."

He promised we'd be more careful about investigating suspicious letters. "It's sad to think people can't relax when they come to church," he whispered in my ear, "but this is a different world, Em, and we're charging straight into it with our weapons drawn. We might as well be prepared for trouble."

My hand tightens around the telephone. "This guy who called—" Not wanting to alarm Abel, I lower my voice—"do you think you need to alert security?"

"I don't know." I can almost see Celene chewing her lip. "He seemed harmless, really. He kept saying he didn't want to bother you, he just wanted to leave his number and a brief message."

I close my eyes, imagining what the message might be. Abel gets lots of letters from well-meaning viewers who wake in the grips of a bad dream convinced God has chosen them to tell the Reverend that the world will end in forty-six days, or sixty-two, or on January 15th in the year two thousand five . . .

"What's the message?"

I hear the sound of shuffling paper. "He said his name is Christopher Lewis—"

The name doesn't ring a bell.

"--and he's calling about someone whose birthday is January 6, 1976."

A sudden spasm grips my heart.

Ignorant of her words' effect, Celene continues: "This is the odd part--he told me to tell you that someone wrote an address on the guy's birth certificate: 4839 Hillside Drive. He said it was important I tell you that."

A dark cloud sweeps out of the past and blocks my vision; the empty hand resting in my lap begins to tremble as the life I once locked away bursts through the dam of memory and floods my heart. I have not spoken of January 6, 1976 in decades; even my husband has no idea why that date is significant.

But I know. And the young man who called has to know why I have silently marked that anniversary for the past twenty-eight years.

My voice, oddly enough, is calm when I can speak again. "That's the only message?"

"That's all. He thought the address might mean something to you."

Might. Oceans of mercy flood that word; in it I hear the possibility of saying he's mistaken, the address and date mean nothing to me, somehow he has tracked down

the wrong Emma Rose Harbison Howard who once lived at 4839 Hillside Drive in Hudson Falls, New York.

But he has found me. Despite the sealing of the court records, despite legal promises and emotional assurances, he has gone through the challenging work of searching me out.

For an agonizing moment I can't decide if the thought terrifies or thrills me.

"Does it?" Celene's voice snaps at my nerve endings.

"What?"

"Does the address mean something?"

The corner of my mouth twitches. Though I experienced a dark and troubled adolescence, I have fond memories of the rectangular ranch house on Hillside Drive. Mercy House, the place was called in those days, and though its function did not appear on a single sign, no one in Hudson Falls mentioned Mercy House without adding a subtitle: The Home for Wayward Girls.

"I'm not sure why he would mention that address," I answer, taking care to wrap the truth in vagueness. "But save the message, okay? I'll look at it when I come in."

"Fine."

Celene's voice rings with relief and I'm touched by her concern. I know when I return to my office the pink message slip will be sitting on a stack of others, arranged on my desk with a pile of carefully-screened mail.

"Is that all you have for me?" I ask, looking across the plane at Abel. He gives me a tired smile, silently acknowledging the waning of the morning's adrenalin rush.

"That's it," Celene answers. "See you later today, then."

I click off the phone and drop it into the empty seat.

I close my eyes against a sudden spurt of tears.

How completely the world can change in the space of a moment! This morning my head had been filled with sights and sounds from the powerful world of government. I'd been a little star struck by the senator's wife sitting at my right, a little dizzied by the fact that the president of the United States wished to honor my husband.

But those memories pale in significance as other visions fill my mind. I see a reddened, squalling baby boy, pulled from my swollen belly and held aloft just long enough for a nurse to wrap in a blanket before she whisks him away.

They took him from me--at my request--but in the winding length of twenty-eight years nothing has been able to remove him from my heart.

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