

CLOSE TO THE HEART

“The bus will be here in five minutes. Don’t forget your lunches!” Melissa Davis called to the four young men stomping around overhead.

They sound like a heard of elephants.

She smiled. She wouldn’t want it any other way. They were acting like normal teenage boys. Loud, active, rushing towards their day and their futures. So different from the sullen, wary teens who’d been living in the house when she’d taken over as in-residence foster mom last fall.

Part of the problem had been their backgrounds. Each had various levels of abuse, neglect and run-ins with the law. The other problem had been Todd Banyon, the man who’d previously run Westen House, and died in a horrific fire he’d started.

It had taken her a few weeks to find her way with the boys, but she had two things going for her. First, a belief that each person was worthy of respect. Respect from others and respect for themselves. Something she was learning as well with her weekly counseling sessions and meeting with other survivors of domestic abuse.

The second thing easing her into her new role was her love of baking. After making her mother’s ginger snap recipe one afternoon, two of the boys had tentatively joined her in the kitchen for an after-school snack. They talked about school, cracked jokes on each other and gave her a little look into their personalities. She’d learned something that day. Boys were more willing to talk when you fed them.

Maybe that’s where the old adage, the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, came from?

Too bad it hadn’t worked on her ex-husband, Frank Compton. Of course that adage assumed the man actually had a heart to begin with, which Melissa could attest wasn’t true of Frank. The man was a monster, incapable of loving anyone. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. He could love someone, as long as that someone was Frank Compton.

Feet pounded down the stairs. She turned to see three of her four boys hurry through the kitchen towards the counter where the sack lunches she’d packed for them sat.

“Thanks Miss. D. See ya, Shrimp,” Bryan said, patting the little girl seated at the counter, eating her waffles, on the head as he passed by.

“Love PB and J day, Miss. D,” Colt said, snatching both his lunch and a berry from Lexie’s plate with a grin.

“You ate yours already,” the little girl said with a pout.

“Still hungry, Shrimp,” he said and followed Bryan through the backdoor.

“Hey, Shrimp, you gotta eat faster,” Trent said, as he too stole a berry then grabbed his lunch. “Thanks, Ms. D. Geoff! Get a move on it! Bus is pulling up,” he yelled up the stairs and dashed for the door.

“Tell Mr. Mike to hold on a second,” Geoffrey yelled as he ran down the steps, snagged a lunch and darted out the door.

Melissa followed him onto the porch. “You going to be here for dinner tonight, Geoffrey?” she yelled as the tall, lanky brunette reached the bus just behind the others.

He turned and shrugged. “Depends on if Joe and I finish the paint job at that new quilt store in town.”

“Get a seat, Hamilton,” Mike Karkosak, the fifty-ish bus driver said to him and waved out the open bus door to Melissa. “Got six more stops yet. Can’t have you making everyone else late.”

Melissa turned from the door to find Lexie holding her head in one hand and staring at her food with her lips pressed tightly together. In the month the little girl had been living at Westen House, this was the first time Melissa had seen her angry.

Picking up her mug of hot spiced tea, she sat in the chair across from the little girl. “Did that waffle do something to make you mad at it?”

Lexie shook her head.

“So, the berries must have done something wrong?”

Again, Lexie just shook her head, this time her lips relaxing a bit.

“Well, that settles it. The milk must be the problem.”

Without lifting her head, Lexie looked up through her lashes at Melissa and shook her head, her lips fighting the urge to lift in a smile. “Food can’t make you mad.”

“Sure it can. If someone burns it, your food can make you mad.”

“No, the person who burnt it makes you mad.”

Melissa took a long drink of her tea before continuing. “What if the food is too salty or too sour to eat? That can make you mad.”

“You’re mad cause you can’t eat it. That’s the cooker’s fault, too. Not the food’s,” Lexie said as if everyone knew that, then shoved another bite of maple syrup-laden waffle in her mouth.

In the first few days caring for Lexie, Melissa had quickly realized that the little girl was smart and very mature for the age of six. Probably from learning to care for herself while living with a drug addict parent.

“Well, if it’s not your breakfast, what had you staring at your food like you were very mad?”

Lexie’s face fell as she chewed then swallowed. “The boys call me Shrimp.”

Ahh. Melissa fought her smile. It wasn’t that she thought the nickname cute or was amused at Lexie’s discomfiture over it. The fact that the little girl reacted like a normal child to a nickname she didn’t like was a good thing.

“What would you like them to call you?”

“Lexie,” she said as if there was no other need to call her anything else, then popped two blueberries in her mouth.

“Hmm,” Melissa said, pretending to give that great thought. “They could just call you that. But do you know why people give other people nicknames?”

Lexie shook her head.

“Sometimes they call people a nickname because they can’t quite remember names, like my grandmother. She knew she loved me, but she had so many granddaughters, she’d sometimes get us confused. So, she’d just call us sweetie.”

“What if you were with all your girl cousins and she said sweetie. Who would she be talking to?”

Melissa grinned. “She did that all the time. We all just figured she was talking to us personally. We never corrected her.”

A giggle escaped Lexie. “That’s silly.”

“Yes, it was.” Melissa gave her a wink. “Sometimes people giving a person a nickname and teasing them about something is a way to show they like them. Especially boys. I think that may be why all our boys call you Shrimp. They like having you here, but don’t want the others to know it. So, they tease you about being little.”

“Like a Shrimp in the ocean?”

“Something like that.”

Lexie took another bite of her breakfast and seemed to be considering all they’d discussed. Melissa hoped she’d given her a good explanation to the nickname issue. The boys always used the name in a friendly, teasing—even indulgent—way. Never mean or condescending.

Melissa was well acquainted with those kinds of names. Fatty. Lazyass. Stupid. Frank had use those often, even becoming crass when he’d had too much to drink, usually punctuating the name calling with his fists. Looking at the sweet little girl gobbling down her breakfast, Melissa prayed she’d never have to explain why people would call others—even those they supposedly swore they loved—ugly, hurtful names.

She shook off the melancholy thoughts, something she was finding easier to do each day she was further from her ex-husband’s reach, and took her mug to the sink.

“Hurry up and finish your breakfast. We have appointments in town today.”

“What’re we doing?” Lexie asked before shoving her last bite of waffle in her mouth, a much happier and excited expression on her face.

“First we have a visit with Doc Clint and Miss Harriett.”

“I love Miss Harriett,” Lexie said as she bounced out of her seat and brought her dishes to the sink.

It had taken Melissa weeks to get the boys to do this simple act when she first arrived at the half-way house, but Lexie had jumped at every chance to be helpful, even if it was just bringing her dishes from the table. It pleased Melissa and broke her heart at the same time. She believed the little girl was anxious to please because she’d had so little attention paid to her in her young life. Melissa also suspected that Lexie was afraid if she wasn’t perfect, she’d be sent away. Which was why her little bout of anger earlier was such a milestone.

Melissa was in no way a trained counselor. Heck she was so messed up, she needed one herself. But she could give Lexie a safe and loving place to find her footing. If that allowed the little girl to grow and deal with the life she’d lived for six years with her neglectful mother, then Melissa was willing to do whatever it took to keep her safe.