

NOT LONELY NOW



MISTY MALONE

BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



Lynette, or Nettie to her friends, sat at her table eating a bagel and staring out the window. Today was the one day she dreaded every year. It was the day people gather with family for a fun time of what she always referred to as the four F's; food, family, fellowship, and football. Families spent the day reminiscing, recalling fun times they've shared in years past, while stuffing themselves and watching football. In theory, it all sounds wonderful to her. She loves football, and who doesn't like to eat, especially with family?

But therein was the problem. She had no family. Her parents had been killed in an accident during her first year of college, and she was an only child. Her father was also an only child, so there were no aunts and uncles or cousins on his side. Although her mother had a sister, she married a man from Australia when she was still in college, and they moved back to his home town. Nettie could remember meeting her once when she was still in elementary school, but hadn't seen her since. Therefore, for all intents and purposes, Nettie had no family.

When she was in college, she allowed friends to talk her into going home with them and celebrating Thanksgiving with their

family. It was a nice gesture, and most of the host families were polite and tried to make her feel welcome. But seeing everyone around her enjoying family, sharing fond memories, teasing each other about things they'd done years ago was difficult for her.

After she graduated and had a job and her own apartment, she no longer accepted such invitations. She had a place she could stay, and as lonely as it was, it was better than watching everyone around her having such a good time.

This year was going to be different, however. Her days of staying home and moping were over. She was going to go out and do something. She wasn't sure exactly what it was she was going to do, but she knew she wasn't staying home all day again. When she did that she spent the day feeling sorry for herself, and she wasn't going to allow that to happen again this year.

So here she sat, eating a bagel and deciding what she wanted to do with her day. She took a minute to think about a traditional Thanksgiving celebration. Ignoring all the parts involving family, that left football and a big meal. She smiled as she thought about that. She really did love watching football, and she loved turkey and all the trimmings that made up the traditional Thanksgiving meal. She just didn't like sharing that wonderful meal with a borrowed family.

A plan quickly developed in her head and she became excited about the upcoming day, for the first time in years. She would go to grocery stores and browse the aisles for fun new football snacks. No potato chips or pretzels for her! She wanted something new and different. Surely the grocery stores would have special football-shaped snacks, and she could get some new cheese and crackers she hadn't tried before. Maybe a deli would have a new vegetable dip or salad she could try.

She'd been working some overtime lately and had a little extra money, and was willing to splurge to ensure that this year the day would be special for her, too. She felt confident that if she took her time meandering through the stores she could find some inter-

esting snacks that would be new and exciting. She'd gets lots and lots of them, and then stop and pick up a big take-out meal from a restaurant to save for dinner. She could spend the afternoon watching the games, while snacking on all the luscious goodies she'd found, and then have a late dinner of turkey with all the trimmings.

She sat back and smiled, proud of the plan she'd devised. She got dressed and ready to go shopping, and actually caught herself humming, happily anticipating her day. She grabbed her purse and headed for the car. Fifteen minutes later she pulled into the empty parking lot of her favorite grocery store, dismayed at the CLOSED sign on the door.

Refusing to allow this one slight problem to ruin her day, she decided to change gears a bit. She hoped to get all her shopping done and pick up her to-go dinner shortly after noon so she could be home in time to watch the first kickoff. She would put the meal in the fridge until she was ready to reheat it for a late dinner. It occurred to her that maybe she should put an order in at a restaurant to be sure she could get a large meal like that at noon. With this new good idea in mind, she debated between three nice restaurants in town. When she decided on one, she set off to place her order. It should be ready to be picked up then by the time she was done at the grocery store.

Ten minutes later she pulled into another empty lot with another CLOSED sign on the door. Again refusing to allow it to dampen her excitement, she headed off to the next restaurant on her list.

But again she found another CLOSED sign. The third restaurant had yet another CLOSED sign. No longer able to fight the depression, she hit the steering wheel and cursed.

Temper tantrum over, she got out her phone and located other restaurants that would be acceptable, and started off again. Thirty minutes later she came to the conclusion that a couple Chinese restaurants were about the only places open today.

Once again, she refused to be beaten. She'd look at the grocery stores. Surely they'd have a good deli or food counter where she could get most if not all the foods she'd need for a big meal. Smiling again, she set off for the grocery stores. Forty minutes later she had a day old turkey sandwich from a little corner mom and pop store, which was the only thing she could find that was open.

This major setback would require some serious thinking to fix. She took her sandwich to a little park that wasn't far from where she was. She'd never been to this park, but always thought it looked like it would be a nice place to stop sometime. It was rather out of the way, and small. Just the kind of place she was looking for at the moment.

She pulled in and parked. Her eyes were starting to mist over and she didn't see the sign that read CLOSED FOR THE SEASON. She got out, taking her pathetic day-old sandwich with her, and went to a picnic table. Not wanting to deal with anyone at the moment, she sat facing the interior of the park, her back to the parking lot. She pulled out her sandwich, discovered the soggy bread on the bottom, dropped it back into the box, and broke down. Unable to stop the tears any longer, she cried. And cried. And cried. She knew she was crying for more than her soggy sandwich, or even her ruined plans for the day, but it didn't matter. She couldn't stop the tears.

She was crying so hard she didn't hear the car pull into the parking lot behind her, or the man that got out and shut his door. She didn't even hear him when he cleared his throat. Nor when he said, "Ma'am?"

Her world right then consisted of tears and self-pity, and nothing more.



RYAN WAS out patrolling the city, glad it was quiet. It normally was on Thanksgiving, and he would know. He'd volunteered to

work on Thanksgiving for the past six years. The only family he had was his brother, Ross, and Ross's wife, Sandy. The three of them had their own family tradition they followed every Thanksgiving.

Since Ross was a fireman and Ryan a police officer, the three of them always got together and celebrated a day early. Ryan bought the turkey, and Sandy made a huge meal on Wednesday. It was way more than the three of them could eat, and that's how they planned it. After the meal they split the leftovers, to be reheated the next evening.

The men both volunteered to work, allowing the married men with children to be home with their families on the holiday. After they worked, they each went home and had leftovers to heat for dinner, while they caught the last of the football games.

Ryan saw the car at the park that was closed, and stopped to check it out. There were a lot of condos around this area, and if a man and his son wanted to use the park for throwing a football around or some such thing, he certainly wasn't going to stand in their way. He'd wish them a good holiday and be on his way.

When he got out of his car, he saw the young lady at the picnic table. He glanced around, looking for a companion somewhere, but didn't see any. Watching her a little more carefully, it looked like she was crying. A young lady alone on Thanksgiving and crying was something that definitely needed checking out. He cleared his throat as he approached her, not wanting to startle her. She didn't seem to hear him, so he gently asked, "Ma'am?" She still didn't acknowledge his presence, so he tried again, a little louder. "Good morning, ma'am."

To his shock, without turning to so much as glance at him, she answered. "Like hell it is."

He tried again. "Are you okay, ma'am?"

"I'm just freakin' peachy."

Ryan certainly wasn't impressed by this young lady's attitude, but she somehow seemed familiar to him. He went closer and tried

one more time to talk to her. "Is there anything I can do for you, ma'am?"

"Yes. You can get the hell out of here and leave me alone."

As upset as he was with her demeanor, her voice sounded vaguely familiar. He walked around the table so he could see her face. "Nettie?"

Her eyes instantly raised, looking to see who could possibly know her here. She'd come here for a job after college, never dreaming she'd know anyone. This was two states away from where she'd gone to high school, and four states from college. Looking up, she saw a policeman. Not just any policeman, though, this officer was over six feet tall, obviously worked out, and was extremely handsome. He had dark brown hair with just the right amount of curl in it, and brown eyes that were very expressive. He had a strong, chiseled jaw, and a smile that was contagious.

She looked at him and saw a hint of familiarity, but couldn't place the man. He seemed to realize this and offered some help. "We went to school together until my family moved away when we were freshmen."

"Ryan Nichols?"

His smile was absolutely infectious. "How have you been, Nettie?"

She shrugged her shoulders and looked a bit apologetic. "Contrary to what it looks like right now, I've been good. How about yourself?"

"I'm good. I've had some rough times since my family moved away, but I'm doing okay."

"I'm sorry to hear about the rough times. I've had a few of my own."

Ryan sat down across from her and laid his hand over hers. "Nettie, I'm sorry to hear that. What happened?"

"I'm fine, really."

His eyebrow raised as he said, "If you're fine, Nettie, why are you sitting here alone, crying, on Thanksgiving? You should be

with your husband, or with your parents, helping your mom cook the turkey.”

The mention of her parents started tears flowing again, and she hated that. She hated crying in front of someone.

Ryan felt like a heel. He'd obviously said something wrong. Maybe she'd just recently split up with a husband. He should have been more careful, more sensitive in what he said. Patting her hand now, he tried to do what he could to rectify his blunder. “Nettie, I'm sorry. My question seems to have made things worse, and I didn't mean for that to happen. If you can trust me to tell me what happened, maybe I can help.”

Nettie struggled to gain control of her tears. Something in the way he said that made her pause. Thinking about his earlier words, she looked up at him. “You said you've had some rough times since your family moved. What happened?”

“I lost my parents. That was pretty rough.”

“Ryan, I'm really sorry to hear that. That is rough. I know, because I lost my parents, too.”

Ryan rubbed her hand gently. “Is that what the tears are from? Has it been recent?”

She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. “Not really. They were killed in an accident my freshman year of college. What happened with your parents?”

“Dad got sick during my junior year in high school. He died when I was a senior. My mom died three months later. I'm convinced she died of a broken heart. She got pneumonia, I think because she was so run down from doing everything she could for him, and she never recovered.”

“I'm so sorry,” she said very sincerely. “That had to be rough. Going through a loss like that twice in a short period of time would have been even worse than when mine both died at the same time.”

“It sounds like we've both had some rough times.”

“Yeah, it does. If you were still in high school, were you and

your brother able to stay together? You didn't have to go to a foster home or anything like that, I hope?"

"No. Ross had turned 21 the week before Mom died, so they appointed him as my guardian. It was in name only, though. He was attending a local college here so he could help take care of Dad when he was sick, and then Mom, so he was still living at home. We struggled through that first year together while I finished high school, and the next year we both went to the local college so we could live in our family home to save money. We both had part-time jobs, and we managed."

"So is your brother still living around here?"

That brought a smile to Ryan's face that Nettie could tell was sincere. "Yes. Ross and his wife of just a little over a year, Sandy, live in the family home. I have a house at the edge of town."

Tears came to her eyes again, even though he could tell she was fighting them. "I'm glad you have your brother. Are you going over there for dinner tonight after you get off work, since it's Thanksgiving?"

"Nope. The three of us celebrated last night." His big smile returned as he glanced at her discarded sandwich and had a thought. "I have a refrigerator full of leftovers, though, that I plan on having tonight. Will you join me? I'd love to get caught up on our lives."

Nettie was taken aback by the offer, and took a few moments to consider his offer. "You don't have to do that, Ryan."

"Nettie, I was serious. I'd love to get caught up. I haven't heard anything about anyone we went to school with in years, and I'd love to know what you're doing these days. All I'm offering in return for all this information is to share my leftovers with you." After a moment he patted her hand again. "And truth be told, I'd love to have some company on Thanksgiving. A little conversation would be nice. So what do you say; will you please join me?"

"It would be nice to have some company. And I certainly haven't

had any luck finding anything else to eat, so okay, if you're sure you don't mind."

"I'm positive. I get off at 5:00. How about if I pick you up on my way home, and you can help me heat everything up?"

"That sounds fantastic. Any chance we could watch a little football, too?"

His infectious smile returned as he studied her a moment. "Seriously? You wouldn't mind if we watch some football?"

She blushed a bit. "I love football."

"One more thing I have to be thankful for today." He remembered her demeanor earlier and picked up one of her hands in his and gently rubbed the back of it with his thumb. "Nettie, I'd still like to know what your earlier tears were from. If nothing else, I'd like to know what not to say again."

She hesitated a bit before answering honestly. "I guess it was mostly self-pity. I was feeling sorry for myself today, not having any family to share the holiday with. Then my plans for everything I was going to do today all went to hell."

Frowning, he shook his head. "Watch your language, Nettie. What did you want to do today and couldn't?"

She wondered about his comment, but decided to put it aside for now. She could think about that later. "I was going to go buy some snacks to munch on while I watched football all afternoon, and then buy a meal to heat up for dinner, but every grocery store and restaurant in town is closed."

"Have you lived here very long?"

"Nope. I got a job and moved here a couple months ago. Why?"

"Maybe I can help you out. I've lived here for eight years or so now. If you don't mind driving about twelve miles there's a grocery store in Middlefield, the next town over, that's open today, and they have a special section for snacks for football games. You've got to see what all they have. It's at the deli section. If you don't go today maybe I can take you over there Saturday, and we can watch football together on Sunday."

“Really? They have special snacks for football games?”

“You've got to see what all they have to believe it.”

“Sounds good. I'll go this afternoon and get us something to snack on for later tonight. Any suggestions?”

“Everything I've tried from there is delicious. They have some really good crab puffs, or little cream-filled chocolate cakes that look like a football field.”

“It's a cake?”

“More like a cupcake on steroids. It's a good amount for two or three people.”

“Sounds yummy. Thanks! I'll get us something for later.” She looked at him, and he watched her face blush again. “Uh, Ryan, I'm sorry about earlier.”

“Earlier?”

“I wasn't too friendly when you first got here.”

His frown returned momentarily. “I noticed that.” He recovered quickly, however, and was soon smiling again. “But I'll give you a freebie this time. Next time I'll burn your butt for it, though.”

She looked at him, unsure what to make of that comment. He was smiling and seemed to be happy, so she brushed it off as joking around. He told her where to find the store she was looking for, and got her address so he could pick her up later. When he spoke next it was in a very tentative voice. “Nettie, could we exchange phone numbers, please, in case anything comes up?”

“Yeah, sure, but what do you mean in case something comes up? Like what?”

“Well, I am on duty, so if something comes up and I'm going to be late getting to your place I want to at least be able to call and let you know. Or if you have car trouble or something, you can let me know.”

“Okay, sure.” They programmed each other's numbers into their phones and talked a few more minutes.

Finally, Ryan stood. “Nettie, like I said a minute ago, I am on duty at the moment, so I really should get back to work. Just so you

know, this park is closed for the season, but feel free to stay here as long as you want. You aren't hurting anything."

"It's closed?"

"Yes, technically, but if I see someone here I usually just stop to see what they're doing. Unless they're up to no good, I tell them to stay as long as they want."

She thought a few moments before responding. "But don't people pay taxes for things like parks?"

He was frowning a bit again as he answered. "Yes, they do, and the town maintains it and keeps it open during the nicer months. We've found that once it cools off, if the park's open people tend to abuse it. I'm not saying it's all intentional, although some obviously is. But the point is that things get broken, and graffiti is a real problem. So they close it during the winter, which saves the town a good deal of money they'd have to spend to repair all the damage."

She slowly nodded her head. "Okay, that makes sense." Seeing the puzzled look on his face, she tried to reassure him. "I'm sorry for questioning it, but I never understood why places did that. Now it makes sense to me. Anyway, I'm leaving so I can go get us some snacks."

"I'll walk you to your car." He helped her in and smiled as he watched her fasten her seat belt. "I'll see you around 5:15."

Ryan thought about Nettie as he drove through town. It was good seeing her again, and he was looking forward to this evening. Thinking back to their school days, he had always been one of the taller boys in school, and was very athletic. He loved all types of sports, which kept him in shape and pretty muscular. As a result, he often felt rather uncomfortable around many of the girls in school. Many of them seemed to be intent on getting himself and other guys, mostly fellow athletes, to notice them, and it was rather difficult to carry on a conversation with them, let alone get to know them.

Nettie was not like that. He had always enjoyed being around her. She was one of the few who seemed to be herself with him. As

a result, they'd had some good conversations, which he'd very much enjoyed, especially as they'd gotten into high school.

He always thought she was pretty in school, but she either didn't notice, or didn't care. Whichever it was, he found it refreshing. She was even prettier now than she had been then. Her chestnut hair was long, with enough of a wave to be really pretty. There were lighter colored streaks in her hair, which the sun seemed to catch in a way that drew your attention to them. He was pretty sure those streaks were natural. He knew they were very becoming, as were her pretty hazel eyes.

His mind kept going back to her attitude, however. It appeared she had a bit of a temper. Hopefully it wouldn't be a big problem, because a temper, attitude, and dishonesty were the three things he couldn't ignore in a woman. If tonight went well, he hoped to be able to spend more time with her. He couldn't believe she lived here now.



NETTIE FOUND herself thinking about Ryan as she drove to the store. He was extremely good looking, and she was looking forward to tonight. She couldn't quite shake his warning, though. He'd said he'd burn her butt if it happened again. There was also the time he told her to watch her language. What did he mean by either of those comments? Surely he was just joking. The more she thought about it, though, the more she thought intrigued her.

She thought back to a romance novel she'd read while she was in college. The man was very protective of his girlfriend, and resorted to actually spanking her on occasion when she did something he considered dangerous. She'd thought about that book several times.

The concept certainly got her attention, but she wasn't sure she could say exactly why. In the book it was obvious how much he cared for her. He was very attuned to what she did, and even

seemed to know what her thoughts were. The mere idea that a man would care enough about a woman to do that, and protect her like he did seemed almost like a fairy tale. The spanking itself she was sure would be awful, but the way he held her afterwards, making sure she knew how much he loved her, seemed like a dream come true. It seemed to her as though being held like that and feeling his strong, protective arms around her afterwards would make the spanking bearable.

Over all, the whole concept had been intriguing enough that it invaded her mind on several occasions since reading that novel. She always pushed the thought aside, though, mostly because she doubted that anything like that actually happened in real life. Now she found herself wondering, though, was it possible that was what he was hinting at, and he would actually spank her? Shaking her head, she decided she was probably right with her first instinct, and he was probably just joking.

She found the store Ryan told her about, and went inside. The store itself was huge, and she was in awe when she found the large selection of football snacks. She knew she couldn't get them all today, but vowed to come back and eventually try them all. For today, her eyes seemed to land on the crab puffs, which looked delicious, and she got some of them. Then she found the cake he was talking about, and put one of them in her basket. She practically drooled over the rest of the choices, but limited herself to two more, since she was going to Ryan's for dinner. She got some football-shaped crackers and some dip that looked fantastic, and a salad of sorts with assorted olives and roasted red peppers.

She'd never been in this grocery store, so she took a few minutes to roam through the different sections. If they had this nice a deli, she was eager to see what else they had. She was impressed with the selection of meats they had, along with a large seafood section. She glanced at her watch and was shocked. Without realizing it, she'd spent almost two hours in the store. She took her snacks and went to the checkout counters.

Checking her watch again, she was pretty sure she would be okay. She didn't have any time to waste, but she should make it back home before Ryan got there. There were two people ahead of her, but neither one had much, so she wasn't too concerned. Things were going fine until the lady ahead of her questioned the price of something. That forced the cashier to ask for a price check, which seemed to take forever, which caused Nettie to start to worry. Eventually, however, she made it through the checkout and out to her car. She heaved a sigh of relief, until she started her car.