

Extraordinary Ordinary Elena

Splashing fountains and white lights twinkling from the branches of miniature ficus trees lent an air of sophistication to the patio dining area of the White Hibiscus. The fragrance of gourmet coffee and filet mignon floated through the warm Miami evening, flirting with taste buds and carrying a promise of more to come. A string quartet caressed the ear, completing a feast for the senses.

Elena Townsend stared at the smiling people sipping champagne in polite clusters next to the caviar. "Darren, when I last saw these people, they'd barely gotten over acne and were choosing names for their first children. Now they're showing off pictures of their grandbabies or bragging about retirement portfolios. And I'm turning fifty in less than a month. Did we pass through a time warp?" She suppressed the urge to bite her lip; It might leave Ruby Red on her teeth and she'd look foolish. Her husband shrugged. "You miss a lot when you skip two high school reunions."

But she hadn't missed this one—organized by her classmates two years late but still their thirtieth. She had prepared herself carefully, flattening her sags and bulges with every undergarment she could find with the word "control" on the label. Her dress, creamy white and sequined, had sleeves that extended past her elbows, concealing age spots and flabby forearms. The skirt hid the middle-aged spread sliding south to her thighs.

But all her efforts hadn't kept away a growing sense of heaviness, of sadness that seemed to follow her like a thick, grey cloud. Darren wrapped his arm around her waist. "Guess we'd better socialize."

"Mmm-Hmmm."

As she and Darren approached the group by the appetizers, snatches of conversation reached Elena's ears.

"As a pediatric specialist, I'm at the top of my game."

"Sales of my latest novel have just topped eighty thousand."

"Clairol asked me to be in their newest commercial. They say fifty is the new thirty."

Elena's eyebrows drew together in an involuntary frown. Well, guess I know which is the group of overachievers. Elena craned her neck, looking around for signs of the friends she'd hung out with in high school.

A tall, slender woman with golden hair arranged in an elegant chignon approached Elena and Darren. A silver-haired man accompanied her.

The woman peered at Elena. "Elena Murphy? Is that you? I didn't think I'd recognize you after all these years, especially without those thick glasses." Elena cringed. Those glasses she'd worn throughout her entire school career had been the bane of her existence.

She strained to remember the name of the woman before her, silently berating herself for not reviewing her senior class yearbook before coming.

"H-Heidi?" And was the man by her side Terry Rimski?

The woman laughed. "No, no. Rachel Alden, now Rachel Rimski." She reached over and squeezed Terry's arm.

At least I got his name right. But Rachel's presence made Elena's heart do a little flip. Rachel had to mention the glasses. Would she also jibe her about the twenty extra pounds Elena had always carried on her frame until she'd managed to discipline herself to diet and exercise the spring they'd graduated?

"And who is this handsome thing?" Rachel motioned towards Darren and smiled like a cat who'd cornered a mouse.

Elena stepped closer to her husband. "This is Darren, my husband." She sent Darren a pointed look. "Honey, maybe we should head over to the buffet. It's probably opening soon and I'm famished."

Rachel reached towards Elena and her hand brushed Elena's wrist. "Oh don't run away. We need to catch up. What have you been doing with yourself?" Oh, you remember how much I loved history in high school?" Elena nodded. Here it came.

"I got a fellowship at Yale soon after graduation from university and I've been a professor of archeology at Flagler for the past fifteen years. Kenny is an accountant."

Poor Kenny. Having to hang out in the shadows cast by Rachel's brilliance.

"I married Darren and raised three children. Jody and her husband are teachers, Grayson graduated with a degree in computer technology and James is following in his father's footsteps—pharmaceutical research. And I am doing data entry three days a week at Jackson Memorial Hospital." She decided not to mention that she'd abandoned culinary school after three semesters to marry Darren, then stayed home to care for their children.

"Oh." Rachel's smile flattened but warmed to full brightness as she turned her attention to Darren. "So you have quite an important job. Is what's his name...your son?"

"James." Elena didn't try to keep the ice from her tone. She turned and fixed her gaze on the buffet, hoping the action would clue Darren to abbreviate his answers so they could make a quick exit.

"Yes, James. Is he working with you, Darren?"

Darren shook his head. "He's off on his own. I'm no longer in the field of research. Over the past fifteen years, I've established a chain of drugstores. Ever hear of Townsend Pharmacies?"

Rachel's face lit up even more if that was possible. "Oh, yes. Of course. That's why your last name seemed so familiar!"

Elena tucked her hand inside Darren's elbow. "Darren was also instrumental in developing Diatran, that new drug that fights Alzheimer's."

"What? I—"

Elena pulled Darren around in a quick about-face. "Come along, darling, it's time to eat. They're uncovering the chafing dishes."

Out of earshot of Rachel and Terry, Darren hissed, "Why did you tell them that?"

"What?" Elena sniffed.

"The thing about Diatran? You know the only part I had in that was to take notes during the research."

"Well, someone had to take the notes. I just wanted to let miss snooty Rachel know that we've done something with our years as well."

They approached the buffet and some of Elena's tension eased. Whether eating or cooking, food always comforted her. She filled her plate with crusty wheat rolls, roasted potatoes, tender beef, and crispy salads.

After cannolis brimming with creamy vanilla filling and dark chocolate chips, accompanied by china cups of steaming French roast, Elena and Darren wandered over to the nearest fountain and perched on its cool marble edge.

Darren scooted closer and put his arm around Elena's shoulders. "We ought to throw a big birthday celebration for you."

Elena shrugged. "Birthday parties are fine. Until you hit forty. After that, it all seems a bit useless."

"Oh, come on. A party would be fun."

Elena leaned away from Darren's arm and slipped her hand into the water, watching the bubbles, feeling them tickle her skin as they raced between her fingers. "Fifty just feels like the beginning of the end. Everything starts to sag, discolor, or develop spots. I resent the fact that someday I'll be old and sick, sitting in a nursing home discussing bowel

movements and the side effects of my latest medication." She shuddered and sat back.

Darren laughed, then gave her a quick squeeze. "Is that why you've been depressed lately? Look at your mom. She's doing great at eighty. By the way, she's got her heart set on a party for you."

"Her idea or yours?"

"Mine. What are you going to do if I go through with it? Hide my socks and replace them with your pantyhose again?"

Elena ignored his reference to her penchant for practical jokes. "Darren, you know we'd have to invite everybody." Now where did that come from?

"And by everybody, you mean your dad and Katrina?"

"Of course. That would put a damper on things for Mom."

"Would it be a damper for your mom--or for you?"

Darren's question left Elena speechless. She thought she'd forgiven Katrina years ago, stopped thinking of her as the consummate homewrecker. And she'd forgiven her father for abandoning his family for someone only a few years older than Elena.

Hadn't she?

Long moments of silence stretched between Elena and Darren. Darren finally broke the silence, "Honey, are you afraid I might leave you for someone younger?"

"You mean just like my dad did after Mom turned fifty?" Elena let out a grim chuckle. "Wow! All sorts of unexpected things seemed to be popping up from my subconscious and out through my mouth tonight. This is turning into a regular therapy session."

Elena remembered something her mother had said when Elena had insisted she'd forgiven her father and his new wife, yet behaved coldly towards them at her own wedding day. "Sometimes you don't know what your hurts really are. Or you push them down so deep you never talk about them even to the people you love the most. If you don't deal with them properly, they'll eventually find their own way out—and not when it's a convenient time for you to deal with them."

Elena swallowed against the sudden tightness in her throat and swiped at the tear that threatened to spill down her cheek. "Guess that's the reason I've been depressed lately."

Darren eased her against him so he could wrap both arms around her. He gently tucked her head under his chin. "Sweetheart, I am not your

father. When I vowed before almighty God to love only you until I die, I meant it."

"That's what my dad said on my parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Two months later, he served Mom with divorce papers."

"I know and I'm sorry about that. But the day I decide to leave this marriage is the day you know I need the people in white coats to take me away in a straightjacket. "Darren rose, helping her to her feet. "Now, let's get back to the party."

Elena groaned when the alarm woke her up the next morning. After too much food and trying to pick up where she'd left off thirty-two years before, sleep had come hard.

After a breakfast of toast and orange juice, she and Darren exchanged a quick kiss before both of them headed out the door.

At Jackson Memorial, Elena pushed her way through the double glass doors leading into the hospital's administrative offices and hurried to her cubicle. A stack of paperwork waited for her.

She'd barely settled in before Maggie Gosset poked her head around the corner of her cubicle. Elena had mentally renamed this particular co-worker Motormouth Maggie due to her well-intentioned but sometimes appalling social gaffes. Elena pulled the stack of papers from her tray and feigned an intense interest in them.

"So how was the reunion? I bet everyone looks lots older, huh? How many of you are grandparents? Has anybody died yet? Say, you're having the big five-o in a few weeks."

"The big five-o?" Elena feigned ignorance and stared at a memo as if it contained the answer to world peace.

"Yeah. You don't remember? Say, maybe you're developing early-onset dementia. You should go get checked out. Maybe...." Maggie's phone trilled. "Oh, gotta go. See ya." She disappeared down the corridor between the identical, beige dividers forming the work areas.

"Saved by the telephone," Elena muttered.

But Maggie Gosset was not finished with Elena. The morning of her last day of work three days before her birthday, Elena arrived at her work cubicle to find six black helium-filled balloons tied to her office chair swaying in the draft from the air-conditioning system. A cake covered in black frosting and shaped like a coffin sat right in the middle of her desk. The white lettering read, "Our Sympathies on Turning Fifty."

She pulled the card from the envelope beside the cake. Inside, her co-workers' scrawled signatures and birthday messages surrounded a printed greeting that said: "Hope you had a happy five decades. Do you want to be put out to pasture or taken to the geriatric ward?" And the message that told it all? "Hope you enjoy. It was my idea. You can thank me with the biggest piece of cake.—Maggie."

Three things saved Maggie's life that day. One, Elena preferred to keep her job. Two, she had no desire to spend her declining years in prison. And three, the cake was moist, dark chocolate and for that, Elena could forgive nearly anything.

Despite her husband's reassurances the night of her high school reunion, and actually managing to laugh with him over the awkward celebration at the office, Elena struggled to shake off the now familiar heaviness when she woke up the morning before her birthday.

She hid the sadness behind a bright smile and a hug and kiss for Darren as he left for work. After his car disappeared down the street, Elena went inside and retrieved her Bible. She settled into her favorite chair by the living room windows that faced their wide, landscaped front lawn.

"Lord, I don't know what to do with all my fears and insecurities. I've always been just Elena—ordinary Elena. Not all that attractive, no college degrees, average intelligence. And now I'm not twenty anymore."

"Forgive me for accepting the lie that physical beauty, career success, or being young is what makes me worthy of love or adds any real value to me as a human being"

She stilled, waiting in the silence, hoping for a sense of God speaking to her. Then the quietness seemed to take on a life of its own as understanding dawned.

"Lord Jesus, I don't know how it's taken me thirty years to realize this, but even though Dad left Mom because he thought he'd found someone he thought was better, I felt like he was rejecting me as well—even though I was practically an adult. If Mom wasn't good enough for him, maybe I wasn't either. And now, I can't believe in your or Darren's unconditional love."

I have loved you with an everlasting love. Therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness.*

The words dropped into Elena's heart like cool rain on a blazing summer day. She wiped away the tears that filled her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

Okay, God. But I still need you to help my heart believe that.

Darren left work for her birthday. He spirited her out of the house in the afternoon, explaining that friends and family needed adequate time to prepare for her birthday celebration, the elements of which would not be a surprise if she was there.

Three hours later, after a shopping trip to the mall, a pedicure, manicure, and facial at her favorite spa Elena, walked through the front door of her home to a chorus of "Happy Birthday, Elena!"

"Isn't this great, Elena?"

"Happy fiftieth, friend."

"You look great, Elena."

Elena felt her face warm with all the attention. "Thank you all so much. This is really amazing. She allowed Darren to lead her into the dining room. Recorded jazz played in the background behind the chatter of guests. The fragrance of coffee perfumed the air. And did she smell cinnamon buns?"

"Honey, this is so great," she marveled. The food table groaned with goodies; She spotted stuffed mushrooms, tortilla chips and pico de gallo, crackers and gourmet cheeses.

In the living room, the gift table likewise overflowed with brightly wrapped packages and gift bags. Someone had gathered every framed photo and photo album Elena and Darren owned and arranged them artfully on a table covered with a white linen tablecloth. The snapshots captured moments of Elena's life that spoke of love, of simple joys— of things more precious than youth or college degrees.

In both rooms, whimsical arrangements of Elena's favorite flowers graced colorful pottery vases. Mylar balloons and pastel-colored streamers added to the festive atmosphere.

"Happy birthday, Mom."

Jody, Grayson, James and Jody's husband Tyler enveloped Elena in a group hug, interrupted a few moments later by a woman's voice. "Can you all let go of her so an old woman can get a word in edgewise?"

Elena pulled herself loose from the tangle of arms. "Mom, you old schemer. This is quite a party. Thanks so much." Elena wrapped her arms around Victoria Murphy and felt the woman's strength and vitality. Eight decades and the tragic breakup of her marriage had left her mother unbowed.

"You know the saying, Elena: 'Old age is a matter of the mind. If you don't mind it, it won't matter.'"

The front door opened as Elena and Victoria released each other. Her mother recognized the newcomers before Elena had a chance to register their presence. Why hello, Charles, Katrina.”

“Hello, Victoria. Elena, you look lovely.”

No hug. No kiss. Not even a handshake.

He’s never changed. The last time we saw him was at James’s high school graduation. It’s a wonder he’s here now.

Elena noticed the slump of her father’s shoulders, the weariness in his eyes and lined face. Perhaps Charles Simmons had not fared so well with his life choices after all. She moved closer to her father, ignoring the question in his eyes, and kissed him on the cheek. She did the same to Katrina. “Thanks for coming—both of you. I’m so glad you’re here.”

Elena waited for her father to turn away in embarrassment or disgust at the unsolicited affection, but then she noticed the twinkle in his eyes. He gave Elena a crooked grin.

A smile ventured onto Katrina’s face, then spread wide. “Happy birthday, Elena. Where can we put the gift we brought?”

Elena took a deep breath, realizing the gray cloud had receded. She pointed Katrina to the living room. “You can’t miss the gift table. You might need to set yours on the floor.”

Later, when the refreshments were reduced to crumbs and every gift opened, the accolades and toasts began.

“Elena, you’re more beautiful every year.”

“Here’s to fifty years lived well.”

“Hoping you’re blessed as much as you’ve blessed others.”

Elena listened as others spoke of what she’d done for them. Her listening ear had helped one woman through a rough patch in her marriage. Her meals had nourished a cancer patient and smoothed the way for a young mother with newborn twins.

Aides from the Cedar Crest Retirement Village had brought several of the residents—only a few of the many who’d enjoyed Elena’s regular gifts of home-baked cookies. They didn’t fail to mention her faithful visits with those who had no family members to speak of.

Then Darren guided Elena to the center of the room. “Thank you all so much for celebrating with our family today. I trust you’ve all had an opportunity to express your congratulations and appreciation to my beautiful wife. I know she thinks of herself as a very ordinary person but your presence here today is a witness to the profound impact she’s had on each of our lives. Elena, you’re a gift from the Lord.”

Elena blinked back tears.

Darren continued. "I have something to say to her and I want all of you to hear it."

He turned to Elena. Her heart began to pound.

"Elena, I love you more than I did thirty years ago. And I plan to go on loving you, even when all we can do is sit in rocking chairs and hold hands."

The guests chuckled.

"Real love, like fine wine, can only get better with time. We've got lots of great years ahead of us, darling." Then he kissed her like he hadn't done in public since their wedding! Her face warmed as everyone cheered and whistled.

"There's one last gift for you, Mom."

Still breathless from the kiss, Elena turned to James and Grayson. James handed her a large manila envelope. She cast a questioning look at her son and then lifted the flap and pulled out a sheaf of official looking papers. "Student Application for Bon Appétit College of Culinary Arts?" She stared at James in astonishment then looked over at Darren.

"It's time you pursue your dreams, sweetheart."

Jody and Tyler stood and joined James and Grayson. "Well, family, we're pretty sure you'll think our gift is even better than a cooking school." The glow on the faces of her daughter and son-in-law said it all.

Elena laughed through fresh tears of joy as she looked over at Darren once again. "Sweetheart, it looks like we're going to be very young grandparents."

*Jeremiah 31:3 NASB