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## THE PRODIGAL HEART

### CHAPTER ONE

Rachel shuddered at the prospect of being confined in this room for days, or even weeks. She shifted against the bench and tried to relax. How long had she been here? Six hours, at least. She gritted her teeth at the thought of the work she'd missed.

The prosecutor's voice droned at the woman down the row. "Mrs. Morris, have you ever been employed by a hospital?"

"No."

He moved to the next person. Rachel's heart began to race. It would be her turn soon. She prayed she would not be chosen for the jury. She wondered if it wrong to pray to be spared her responsibility. Then, again, her business depended on her presence.

The attorney moved down the row. Getting to Rachel, he smiled. "Miss Ashworth, do you have any relatives or close friends who have been treated at St. Francis hospital?"

Rachel thought. "No. I don't think so."

"Have you ever been a patient there?"

"No."

"Do you know anyone who works at St. Francis hospital?"

"Yes. I treat the Chief of Surgery's son at my learning resource center."

He nodded briefly and turned his attention to the next juror. When the final names were read, Rachel's was not among them. Relieved, she hurried from the courtroom.

It was almost five o'clock. It would be a forty-minute ride through Houston traffic to the parking lot where she had left her car. And her evening appointments began in an hour. There would be no time for dinner.

As she waited under the shelter for the bus, a young man wearing a white shirt that looked wilted from the humidity ducked in with his briefcase to wait beside her. He smiled and gestured toward the sky. The gray clouds were low. A slow drizzle began to fall.

"I'm new here. Does it rain all the time?"

She managed a weary smile. "Sometimes it seems like it does. At least, in January."

He took a step closer to make room for the people who were filling the shelter. "I'm from Albuquerque. It's a lot drier there. I feel like I'm growing mildew between my fingers here."

He smiled and she noticed the row of neat, white teeth. He was tan and well groomed. What could have brought him to a climate he disliked?

"I've lived here all my life, never had a reason to leave. What brought you here?" she asked.

"Law school. I just started this fall."

A young woman entered the shelter and his eyes wandered to long legs under a short skirt. He glanced back at Rachel. "Would you like to go to dinner?"

She shook her head. "I have to work tonight."

"How about tomorrow?"

"I have to work tomorrow night, too."

The bus arrived and the man smiled at Rachel. "Nice talking to you."

He edged closer to the woman in the skirt. The crowd boarded the bus and she noticed he'd managed a seat next to his new target. He didn't even glance her way when she passed. Good riddance.

She took a seat near the back and wondered what it would be like to have time for romance. It had been years since she'd been serious about a man. She told herself she didn't miss it. Her work was enough. It was rewarding and it filled her time.

Yet, as she watched the law student chat with the young woman, she felt a stab of loneliness. What would it be like to have someone waiting for her at home who would ask about her day? He would have to be willing to give up evening companionship for the sake of her job. Since that wasn't likely, she firmly closed the subject for the hundredth time.

She got off the bus when it reached the parking lot. With the hood of her gray all-weather coat pulled over her head, she slogged through drizzle to her old green Honda. She shivered, letting it warm up before she switched on the heater.

As she slipped into traffic, the swishing sound of tires reminded her to be careful on wet streets. She reined her instinct to hurry and concentrated on the glow of taillights, which broke into a red mosaic across the rain-splattered windshield. She stared straight ahead, peering between strokes of the wipers at the blurred shapes of cars. Her one consolation to this hectic drive at rush hour was that she hadn't gotten on the jury.

Her business partner, Terri, could have held down the fort for a day or two. Any longer, and the noose of financial pressure would have tightened around them. As it was, several appointments had to be rescheduled for Sunday afternoon.

She parked in front of her office. It was sandwiched between a shoe store and a pizza parlor in a strip mall that shared parking with a large discount center. During their dinner break, she and Terri took turns running out for fast food. Twice a week, they ordered the pizza special from the store next door. Today was to have been one of those days. Her stomach growled at the thought of hot pizza.

Her stomach would have to wait. She pulled open the door to see that Libby and her mother were already waiting. Smiling, she said, "Sorry I'm late. I had a jury summons and just got back."

The woman nodded sympathetically. "Did you get picked?"

"Fortunately, no."

"But you still had to drive back in all this rain. You must be exhausted." She turned to her daughter. "You be good today, you hear?"

Rachel smiled. "She's always good." She put her arm around the child's shoulders. "I've got everything ready. We'll start off with a game."

Libby bounced eagerly from the reception area to the cubicle where they worked. Room dividers set them apart from Terri's space and the front and back offices.

Libby had been shuffled between a number of foster homes, causing constant upheaval in her education. Now, having been adopted into a stable family, she was making rapid progress. She whizzed through a word game, flash cards, and two phonics homework papers before her session was over.

"You did great. Wait here a minute and I'll let you pick a prize."

Rachel passed Terri's instruction area on her way to get the box of plastic trinkets. Terri glanced up. "Saved you some pizza."

Rachael smiled. "Thanks."

"I need to talk to you later about something really odd."

"Okay." She sighed. What else could happen? She'd already weathered a close call at court. She hoped this wasn't about anything needing repair, time, or money.

Libby picked out a plastic bracelet and showed it to her mother. After sending her off, beaming from praise, Rachel glanced at her watch. There was ten minutes before her next appointment, just enough time for a quick snack. As soon as they cleared enough money, they were going to get a microwave. But for now, cold pizza would have to do.

She scurried to the back office which contained a small table, files, and bookshelves which housed much of their reference material. As soon as her tutoring session ended, Terri joined her. She sipped the remains of a soft drink and asked, "Do you know a Jonathon Parker?"

Rachel felt the pizza stick in her throat as she paused with the next bite touching her lips. Yes, she knew Jonathon Parker. Was there a day in the last ten years she hadn't thought of him? She nodded, a frown creasing her smooth, pale brow. "I know him. Why do you ask?"

"Because he called today. He has a kid in first grade who's having trouble at school. He wanted to talk to you about it. He insisted on an appointment at one o'clock tomorrow. I told him you might be stuck in court. You're supposed to call him after nine tonight if you can't be here tomorrow."

"Oh, am I now?" She felt her ire rising. After all this time he expected her to rearrange her schedule to accommodate him. Maybe he hadn't changed much since they'd parted. She

thought of that day when they were seniors in high school, and sweethearts since their sophomore year. He was a football star, a tight end, tall and muscular. He'd given her his letter jacket.

And they were in love. Unable to stand the thought of being parted, they'd decided to attend the same college, get part-time jobs and marry. She'd spent countless hours dreaming about their wedding. She would carry deep red roses to compliment her dark red hair. And Jonathon would wear a black tux. His broad shoulders would be straight and tall as he and Rachel walked from the church to begin a new life. It had all been so perfect.

Then, near the end of their senior year, things began to change. Jonathon's parents were going through a painful divorce that affected him deeply.

At first, he'd spent a lot of time at her house, trying to escape his home life. Then, he hung out at parties with a wild crowd who idolized him as a football star. After his parents' separation, fawning girls and drinking buddies soothed his pain in ways she was unwilling to join or compete. The closeness they had enjoyed began to evaporate. She remembered well their last conversation.

He'd had been waiting for her by her locker. "I'll give you a ride home," he offered. Her naive heart warmed. It had been two weeks since he'd called. Maybe he was tired of the wild crowd. Maybe things could go back the way they were before.

They walked in silence to his red sports car, a present on his sixteenth birthday from his dad. As he started the car, he glanced toward her. "Whatcha been doin'?"

She met his eyes and felt hopeful. It was a warm April day, flowers were blooming and there was the scent of honeysuckle in the air. It was a perfect day for making up.

"I've been looking over college packets and playing a little tennis."

He completed the two-block drive and parked in front of her house. He studied her a moment. "All you do is hang around the house and talk to your mother or play tennis with your sister. There's another world out there. One you don't even know about." His voice held a note of scorn.

"I do other things," she protested defensively. "I study and go to church activities."

He rolled his eyes. "All the things your parents want you to do. Are they going to keep you a baby all your life? When are you going to grow up and join the real world?"

"Is that what you're doing? Growing up? You used to want to be something, do something with your life. Now all you want to do is hang around the wild crowd and get drunk."

His eyes narrowed and he faced her with sudden anger. "You have a neat little life all laid out, don't you? You're going to graduate and go to college and make your mama proud. You'll teach for awhile and then get married and have two kids. Yet, things don't always work out like you plan and that includes me. You're trying to keep me on a leash and I don't like it. Loosen up or we're through."

She looked down at her hands. Her eyes filled with tears. She was gripping her books tightly, avoiding his eyes. "I don't like your new friends and I won't hang out with them."

For a long moment, neither spoke. Then he said softly, "I care about you. I really do. But I'm not going to let anybody keep me in a cage. I want to be free without feeling like you disapprove all the time."

"How can I help it? The guys you hang around with are always drunk and some of those girls have bad reputations."

He was silent a moment. She hoped he would say she was right and he would change. How naive she was.

Instead, he sighed and replied, "Then I guess we're through."

She looked into his dark eyes. They were sad, yet his jaw was clenched in a determined set. There was nothing else to say. They were through.

"I'll get your jacket," she said. Shedding her broken dreams, she ran in to retrieve it and pass it to him through the car window. Biting her lower lip, she willed it to stop trembling.

"Thanks." He took the jacket without looking at her.

She watched him drive away, knowing she lost part of her heart when she handed him the jacket.

The hurt lasted a long time. Though her family did their best to comfort her, it was to no avail. She had gone to the prom with one of his ex-friends. He hadn't even shown up. And she had never forgiven him for ruining her dreams.

She became aware of Terri's curious eyes studying her face. "Is this guy some kind of secret?"

"He's no secret. Just an old boyfriend. I cared about him a lot a long time ago, but he let me down."

"Sorry. He sounded nice on the phone, concerned about his kid. He was a little pushy about the appointment though. Are you going to see him?"

"I guess so. We could use the business. Also, I'm curious about what happened with him. I assumed he'd thrown his life away on alcohol and drugs. I wonder how he found me."

"I don't know. He didn't say."

"I guess I'll find out tomorrow."

A new student arrived and she pushed thoughts about Jonathon to a corner of her mind where they chased each other in circles. Did she want to face him again? She couldn't decide.

Later, as they closed, Terri said, "I have to be here tomorrow at three for a new math student, but I'll come a little early to hear about your friend. I'm dying of curiosity."

"I doubt there will be much to tell. I hope he's reformed from his wild years and is happily married. Anyway, all I care about is how to help his child, assuming he can afford our service."

As she spoke, she knew it was a lie. She had spent countless time wondering where he had gone and what had become of him. She never thought she would have a reason to find out.

She slept lightly, waking often until her alarm went off at seven o'clock. She slid her legs out from underneath the cover and shivered. The carpet felt cool and damp beneath her toes.

She silenced the alarm and pulled aside the blinds to see a dreary morning fog. She couldn't remember the last time she had seen anything but rain. Today promised to be more of the same.

No matter. Her schedule would require her to get a bit wet. She had to visit the teacher supply store, keep an appointment with a student's teacher and plan lessons for the day. Later, she would see Jonathon.

She stood in front of the mirror and applied a small amount of blush, and then, eye shadow. Checking her job, she saw determination in her gaze. She wasn't the sad-eyed schoolgirl he remembered. She was a professional woman and nothing that had passed between them mattered anymore.

She tucked a printed chintz blouse into her dark skirt and fastened a belt around her waist. Pausing a moment to study her reflection in the floor length mirror, she tried to remember what she looked like as a high school girl. Except for the style change of her dark red hair, now permed into wispy bangs and waves that fell to her shoulders, she looked nearly the same.



What about Jonathan? The thought made her smile. She had never really gotten over him. Perhaps this was her chance. How much would he resemble the lean and muscular football player she remembered?

He would probably be paunchy, with the sallow look of someone who has lived wild and hard. When she saw him she would be glad they had broken up and all her silly girlish memories would finally be laid to rest.

The morning went fast. She ordered the supplies and finished the conference. Glancing at her watch, she saw it was almost noon. There was a drive-thru just down the block from the school. She ordered a take-out salad and headed for her office.

Settled at her desk, she planned to spend the next hour working on lesson plans for her afternoon students. But her thoughts refused to focus. Every time a car door shut in the parking lot she jumped. Several times, she left her cubbyhole to look out the front glass.

Just before one o'clock, she tossed out the remainder of her salad and straightened the cushions on the white wicker chairs in the reception area. Moments later, a white sedan pulled in front of the building and parked. The drizzle had subsided, allowing the sun to break through. Glare on the chrome made it difficult to see the driver. Even so, she knew instinctively that he had arrived.

The door opened and a tall, well-built man in a dark blue suit stepped from the car. He reached the office door in less than five steps and her heart began to pound. This was not the broken shell of a man she had expected. This man moved with the power and purpose of a lion in his prime.

She stood beside the wicker chair and composed her face into a cool mask as she waited for him to enter. He opened the door and stood for a moment framed in the doorway. His jet-black hair was neatly groomed and the white collar of his shirt set off his sun bronzed skin. The deep brown eyes she remembered so well locked with hers and his firm jaw relaxed slightly as he smiled. "It's good to see you again. It's been a long time," he said.

He extended his hand and she reciprocated, her small pale fingers lost in his broad grip. It was as though the years had dropped away, leaving her confused. He was familiar, and yet, a stranger.

"It has been a long time," she agreed softly. "Please sit down." She gestured to the wicker chairs.

He paused a moment as though questioning whether it would hold his muscular frame, then sank slowly into the cushioned seat.

She summoned her business voice. "So, you have a child who needs tutoring. How did you know about my service?"

"There was a high school reunion last spring. You didn't go." There was a note of accusation in his voice.

She hadn't gone precisely to avoid the pain of meeting him after all these years. She ignored his tone and waited for him to continue.

"Anyway, the committee put out a booklet telling where everybody was and what they were doing. Didn't you get one?"

"No. I moved after I filled out the form. I guess the booklet never caught up with me."

"I read you'd started a tutoring service. My son came to live with me this fall. He's having trouble keeping up with his work. I thought you might be able to help him."

"I could try. How old is your son?"

"He's six."

"First grade?"

He nodded. "His teacher says he doesn't pay attention. It's really no wonder. The kid's had a rough year."

His gaze locked on her eyes. "Have you been tutoring the last ten years?"

"No. I finished college and taught for five years. Then, last year, my business partner and I opened this learning center. It keeps me busy."

A wry smile tugged at the corners of his lips. "That doesn't surprise me. I always thought you'd stick to your plans."

She bristled. "I enjoyed teaching and I love having my own business, so I guess they were good plans. What about you? What have you done since high school?"

"Not much at first. I was pretty mixed up for awhile. I'm sure you remember. After almost flunking my first year of college, I got my act straight and pulled good grades. I was accepted at law school and graduated in the top ten percent of my class. I've been with the same firm for the last two years. I've thought about you a lot over those years. Your influence prompted me to make something of myself. Do you approve?"

His gaze was direct but there was vulnerability in his eyes that belied his confident voice.

"Frankly, I am surprised. I didn't think you were on a very straight course."

"I wasn't. But I'm glad I got my life together for Ricky's sake. My wife was killed in a car accident. We were separated at the time. After the accident, I got custody of Ricky. It's been a hard adjustment for both of us. But I want him to grow up in a good home."

Feeling jolted, she nodded and uncrossed her arms. "I'm sorry. I can certainly understand how hard things have been."

When he told her he was a lawyer, she imagined him happily settled with a proper corporate wife. Instead, he was alone with a small son to raise.

She drew her attention back to the reason for his visit. "So Ricky's teacher says he has trouble paying attention?"

"Yes. I have the same problem with him at home. I have to tell him to do something ten times before he listens."

"It's hard to concentrate when you're upset. Maybe he just needs a little extra attention. I won't know until I evaluate him. Would you like me to check my schedule and see when I have an appointment for you to bring him in?"

He nodded. She could feel his eyes following her as she crossed to the desk to get the appointment book. She paused to compose herself as she scanned the page. His reformation had been such a complete surprise it had given him the advantage and caught her off-guard. The best she could hope for was to impress him with the fact she had become a successful businesswoman.

She put her finger on a four o'clock appointment and glanced up to see him watching her. He smiled. "You know, you haven't changed much since high school. It must be the result of a clean life. Ten years ago I knew you were right. I just couldn't admit it. I was bent on self-destruction."

"I'm glad you didn't succeed."

His eyes locked with hers. She felt her heartbeat quicken as she focused on his lean and handsome face. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the door open. The spell was broken as Terri walked inside. "I decided to come in early and do a little work. Don't let me interrupt."

"You're not." Rachel's assurance was a little too swift. "This is Jonathon Parker. Jonathon, this is Terri Walters, my partner."

He stood, towering above Terri as he shook her hand. "It's good to meet you."

Rachel explained. "We were just setting an appointment for testing his son. "How about tomorrow at four?"

He nodded. "I'll see that he gets here." He glanced at his watch. "I better get back to the office. There's a pile of work on my desk."

"Don't you want to know what I charge for the evaluation?" Rachel asked.

"I'm sure it's a fair price. I'm relieved you can work him in. I'll be glad to pay whatever it costs."

"It's fifty-five dollars. Due after the session."

"That's fine." He gave a short wave and stepped to the door. "It was good to meet you Terri and good to see you, Rachel. Thanks for taking on Ricky."

Memory of his kisses assailed her and she banished them quickly. "I'll let you know what he needs."

He nodded and stepped through the door. Both women watched wordlessly as he strode to the car. As he backed out of the lot, Terri said, "So that's your derelict boyfriend?"

"It turns out he became a lawyer. I was pretty surprised."

Terri seated herself on the chair. "Tell me about him."

She repeated what he had told her.

"So, he's single now and searching for you?" Terri asked.

"As a tutor for his son."

"Don't be so sure."

She tried to ignore the small flicker of excitement Terri's words put in her heart. Despite her best efforts she couldn't help looking forward to the next afternoon when she would see him again.

## CHAPTER TWO

Though she meant to stay detached, Rachel found herself curiously awaiting Ricky's appointment. He represented a part of Jonathon's history that had not been part of her life and was the reason Jonathon would be back this afternoon. Though she would not admit it, the thought made her heart beat quickly in anticipation.

When four o'clock came with no sign of Ricky, she began to watch the clock. Had Jonathon changed his mind? Had he re-entered her life only to vanish like a figment of her imagination.

She paced for awhile, and then settled nervously at the front desk, sorting the mail and looking out the window. At four-fifteen, a dark car pulled up and parked. She watched as the door swung open and the driver stepped out. The woman was short and stocky and wore a belted beige coat that bunched around her waist.

A dark-haired boy slid from the passenger side. He was small and wiry. The windbreaker he wore didn't look warm enough for such a cold afternoon. She frowned. Surely this was Ricky. Where was Jonathon?

They came through the glass doors and paused at the reception area. Rachel rose, her brow puckering, as the woman nudged the boy inside.

"Hello, I'm Nina Jenkins and this is my grandson, Ricky Parker. He is here to be tested."

"Yes. I'm expecting him. I'm Rachel Ashworth. I'll be working with him today."

"I understand this will take about an hour. I'll wait here, if it's all right."

"That will be fine." She smiled as she studied the woman whose dyed red hair and eyes too heavily lined with mascara did nothing to flatter her aging face. Wrinkles spread from

the corners of her mouth. Yet, her light blue eyes were lively. She had, no doubt, been an attractive woman in her youth.

Rachael reached out to Ricky. "You can call me Rachel. We'll be testing and playing games today. I'll show you where we'll be working."

He took her hand meekly as she led him to the cubicle. His brown eyes reminded her of Jonathon. Yet there was something lacking in his spirit. He hadn't smiled or met her eyes. He'd simply stared at the floor. Perhaps he would open up when they were alone.

She led him to a desk which faced a partition and patted one of the small chairs. "You can sit next to me."

He took a seat and she began to test him on some basic first grade concepts. It was soon apparent he was woefully behind in both math and reading skills. As they moved to a phonics game, he fidgeted in his seat.

"Choose a picture card and tell me the sound of the beginning letter. If you get it right, you move ahead. If you miss, I move ahead."

The first card was a dog. To her surprise he answered with the correct sound. Then, he asked. "Do you have a dog?"

"No. I have a cat."

"My dad says I can have a dog sometime."

Having him open up to her was a positive step. "That will be fun. What will you name your dog?"

"Wolf or maybe Tiger, something tough. When I get a dog nobody's going to hurt me 'cause my dog will bite them."

"It's your turn to draw a card. Maybe you'll get a picture of a tiger." She tried to bring his attention back to the game. But it was no use. He spent most of the last fifteen minutes of the hour describing his wished-for dog. She gave up trying to direct his attention back to the task. No need to push. They could spend the few minutes left getting to know each other.

Shortly after five, she packed up the game and led him to his grandmother. Nina delivered a charming smile. "I hope he was a good boy."

"Yes. He was fine and I have a good idea of what he needs to work on. He could benefit from a few weeks of tutoring."

"I'll tell Jonathon. He's asked me to bring Ricky as often as you think he needs to come."

She fought a twinge of disappointment. It seemed as though she was unlikely to see Jonathon again. "Once a week would be good. It's nice you can help out."

"Oh, I don't mind. I try to be available whenever I can. Jonathon's been under terrible stress. When my daughter died, I thought he would die too. I think he felt guilty for not being more patient with her. He should have been, you know. Though she was a bit flighty, everyone loved her."

Rachel's curiosity overtook her disappointment. What had Jonathon done to be less than patient with his ex-wife? He had been moody in high school, but he had certainly never been cruel.

She looked into Nina's eyes. "I'm sure she was a lovely person."

Nina nodded. "Eva was a very delicate girl, frail and sweet. I'm afraid Ricky takes more after his dad." She lifted Ricky's chin with her finger and looked into his face as he stood motionless beside her.

Rachel frowned, thinking it strange he didn't pull away as most children would have done. Nina was an odd woman and Ricky an odd child. They must have been deeply affected by Eva's death.

Nina dropped his chin and turned to Rachel. "Same time next week?"

"That will be fine. Here are some forms. I'll need a signature on the bottom of the last paper."

Nina nodded. "I'll take them to Jonathon." She reached into her purse. "He asked me to give you this."

She handed over a signed check. "Fill it out for the amount of your testing fee." Without another word, she grasped Ricky's shoulders and steered him out the door.

During the next week, Rachel waited for a call from Jonathon. She was sure he would want to know how Ricky's first session had gone. Yet, the call never came.

When the next appointment arrived, she hoped he would bring his son. Her hopes were dashed when she saw Nina pull up in her long sedan. Apparently his grandmother had

complete charge of him during the week. Determined not to show her disappointment, she smiled broadly as they entered.

"How are you today?" she asked Ricky.

"Okay," he murmured.

"He brought along some school work and a note to you from his teacher." Nina sank heavily into a wicker chair. "Ricky needs a firm hand. Tutoring wouldn't be necessary if he had a teacher who knew how to handle him. She doesn't insist he pay attention. I've offered to teach him at home, but Jonathon thinks he should stay in school. He's counting on your tutoring to help him catch up. I suppose if Jonathon wants to spend the money, it's worth a try." She let her words trail off with a sigh.

"If there's a problem at school maybe I could help. I'd be glad to talk to the teacher."

Nina shrugged. "It won't help. She's just not good with children like Ricky."

Rachel looked down at the small boy standing beside her. He didn't seem like the classroom terror. She opened the note and scanned the information. Ricky needed to work on skills in phonics and simple addition. Yet, according to his teacher, the main problem was his lack of attention.

It was a polite note, inviting her to contact the teacher if she had questions about what they were covering. She seemed quite willing to work with Ricky. Perhaps Nina was wrong about this teacher. She decided to make an appointment and find out.

Getting to business, she took Ricky to the cubicle and brought out a phonics kit.

"We're going to play games. I'll show you a card and you tell me the beginning letter for each picture."

He tried hard to concentrate on the first few cards, but soon began to squirm. "I used to have a fish, but he died."

"Really? I'm sorry. Maybe you can get another."

"I don't think so. Grandma doesn't want fish."

Try as she could, she found it impossible to keep Ricky's mind on his work. Half-way through the session, he squirmed out of his chair and stood beside her. They finished the game with Ricky bouncing near her elbow. One thing Nina was right about was that he didn't keep his mind on his work.



When the session was over, she asked Nina. "Could you ask Jonathon to give me a call? There's something I want to discuss with him."

The painted eyebrows rose. "Jonathon's out of town. London, in fact. You can talk to me."

She felt an unreasonable irritation rise. What kind of parent was Jonathon that he would abdicate the raising of his child to his late wife's mother? Like it or not, Jonathon was going to take some responsibility if she dealt with Ricky.

Forcing a sweet smile, she said, "Since Jonathon is Ricky's guardian, it would be best if I talked to him personally about how to proceed. If he calls, ask him to call me, okay?"

Though her eyebrows drew into a scowl, Nina nodded. Without a word, she took Ricky's hand and led him out the door.

The next morning, the phone rang just before Rachel's alarm clock buzzed. She answered sleepily.

"Rachel?" There was a smooth masculine voice on the other end.

"Jonathon?" Her mind jolted awake. She had asked him to call. She tried to remember why. Recovering quickly she said, "I need to talk with you about Ricky."

As she hesitated, he replied. "I just talked to Nina. She said it was urgent that I call you. I've only got a few minutes. If it's quick, you can tell me now, or wait until Friday when I get back."

She bristled at the brusqueness. "I wanted your permission to talk to Ricky's teacher. I think it will help. That's all I need from you."

"That's fine. Do whatever you think is best. I've got to go. I'll talk to you when I get back."

"Fine. You do that." She hung up the phone and muttered, "I'm not your servant Jonathon Parker and don't you forget it."

###

Rachael glanced at her watch as she strode down the hall toward Ricky's classroom. The murmur of children's voices made her feel nostalgic. She loved her work at the learning center, yet there was still a part of her that missed schoolroom teaching.

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