

GOOD LOOKIN' TOMATOES

The old man watched Alicia unpacking her treasures, placing each of her homemade, individually wrapped brownies onto the vintage cake stands at her farmer's market booth. He was about the age of her grandfather with an abundance of white hair in need of grooming. He was so thin, she thought the old guy might be in need of nourishment. He wore a faded sweatshirt and old pants and boots. The shirt looked like something an artist would wear while painting and then the colors would attach themselves to the fabric and survive many launderings.

She'd never seen him here before. He carried a canvas tote and maybe because of the clothes, she guessed he'd need to be careful with purchases. Something about his demeanor didn't match the usual crowd of well-to-do foodies who frequented this market.

This weekly convergence featuring hordes of appreciators of all things fresh and hand-made and expensive was held in a village where even the casual wear of her customers probably cost more than she made in a week. She drove here to sell baked goods to customers who were happy to pay several dollars for one treat.

At the end of her display table, she filled a basket with perfectly plump and rosy, juicy tomatoes, her own crop, which stretched this season into overabundance. She propped a "Free. Help yourself" card next to the basket.

The man admired them.

"Good lookin' tomatoes."

She felt the need to let him know they really were free. She extended her hand.

"Alicia.

"Willie."

"Hello, Willie. Please help yourself to some tomatoes."

"No. You better sell them. They're perfect."

"I have a big crop in my garden this year. I've already put up quarts of them. I've frozen as much tomato sauce as my freezer can hold, and they keep coming. I'll sell these..."

She held up one of her brownies.

"...but I'm giving away the tomatoes."

"You must be a good gardener."

She laughed.

"You think so? I think I just got lucky this year. You should see my "garden." It's a small patch in the back yard. I'd love a big garden. I have in mind everything I could grow, how to lay it out, I even worked out seasonal calendars, when to plant when to harvest, when to rest the soil, but listen to me go on. Do you garden?"

"Used to. Me and Rose, before she passed."

"I'm sorry for your loss. How are you doing?"

"I don't grow anything anymore. Since she left."

"I'm sure you will again."

"It's been twenty years."

He hadn't smiled once and she made a point of trying to change that. She picked up one of her brownies, gave him her best smile and held it out to him.

"I hope you like chocolate. My treat."

"Oh no, I'm not gonna eat up your profits."

Still no smile from him, but he changed his mind and took a bite.

"So, a good baker and a good gardener."

"You forgot checker. I work nights at the market on the square."

Abruptly he turned to leave. Evidently this was one unhappy old man who was going to stay that way.

Another week and she still had tomatoes coming in. Willie arrived with his bag. She was pleased to see he owned another sweatshirt, equally broken in, again with paint spots all over it, and this one added a tear at the elbow, but it was clean. She asked,

"What are you looking for today, Willie?"

"Apples maybe. I don't come here much. Who sells the best fruit?"

"It's all good. But those peaches over there - you really should try some."

She immediately regretted steering him to that booth. Their produce was expensive and Willie obviously didn't have money to spare. Too late, he was heading away.

"Thanks, Alicia. Maybe I'll see you again next week, if you're here. I hope you'll get to garden as much as you want to someday."

"Thank you, Willie. There's a house near here, coming up for rent next month. It's got a big yard. I could grow anything there, and it's closer to my work. A friend at the market told me about it and he said I could meet the owner tonight, see how much deposit is needed. Wish me luck."

He said, "It'll all work out, Alicia," and he took off. She called after him,

"Willie! Don't forget your tomatoes."

After she sold everything that day, she checked the address of the house she longed to rent, and saw the sign out front, confirming it would be vacant by next month.

When she arrived, an old van was in the driveway. The door opened and there stood Willie, carrying a toolbox.

"Willie! Is this where you work?"

"I do some repairs around town. Keeps me busy."

"I'm supposed to meet the owner here."

"Go on in. Look around. It's fine."

She walked straight through the cottage and outside to the yard. It was so big, she could grow just about anything. She almost burst into tears right then and there, afraid the deposit would be more than she had.

Willie asked,

"Does it suit you?"

"It's perfect."

"Let's talk about the details then."

"Before the owner comes?"

"That's me. Me and Rose. We bought up a lot of houses around here. She was the brains and I did the fixing up. Still do."

They sat down on two old chairs in the back yard and he mentioned a price that was so low for this part of town, it was almost affordable.

"You can go ahead and move in whenever you want to, if you can stand having me around while I finish some repairs."

"Would you ever have time to do some gardening with me?"

And then came the smile from Willie that she'd been waiting for. No, it was even bigger than a smile. It was a grin from ear to ear.

###