

THOSE CRAZY BARTLETTS

By Peggy Dern

CHAPTER IV

It was strange to be here in this place that was really her home, and she knew in her heart that she would never be anything but an alien here. These strangers were her parents, her brother, her sisters. She liked Honey sincerely and admired her; she felt that she could very easily learn to love the small Susan. Pete still was an unknown, but she liked his quiet

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and good humor and she felt that they could be friends. As for her mother and father—well, she reminded herself as she tried to get herself to sleep, there was really no need for her to know them very well. Home, for her, was the handsome, spacious apartment in New York, with Aunt Judith and her friends. And she was a little surprised to realize that she had not thought of Martin Gray for several hours, nor had she wept for him as she had wept long and secretly in New York!

The color rose in Win's face, but he laughed and said, "I can imagine!" He looked down at Celia and said, his tone so warm as to be almost intimate, "Tomorrow morning when the school bus had deposited Susan at the gate, Celia greeted her so warmly that Susan's small plain face lit up with eager delight. Celia said to herself, touched, "Why, the poor mite is absolutely spoiling for a little affection and tenderness!"

"You have your lunch," she told Susan, as the small hand slid shyly into her own, "and then we'll go see the animals."

"Oh, I had my lunch at school," answered Celia promptly. "And it was good, too."

Celia laughed and said lightly, "Well, that's because you are a very unusual little girl, darling."

The child's face clouded a little and she said huskily, "Well, I guess maybe I am. Buzz and Ma Sue always seem to think maybe I don't belong to them, and Buzz said the hospital shifted babies on him, and that he was sure I wasn't his and Ma Sue's."

Celia caught her breath and dropped down on one knee beside the child and put her arms about her. She felt at the moment that she hated Buzz for such cruelty.

"Susan, surely he didn't say that to you?" she protested hotly.

"Oh, no, not to me," answered Susan. "I heard him say it to Ma Sue, and Ma Sue laughed and said, 'Oh, well, maybe she'll get prettier as she grows older!'" The small voice caught on a sob and Susan looked anxiously at Celia and asked, "Do you think I will, Celia? I hate being homely and—

and shy and -- an unusual little girl."

Celia said, as soon as she could control her voice, "Susan, dear-- you're not homely. You're attractive and very sweet and if you will stop thinking that you're not pretty, you'll stop being so shy! And being an unusual little girl is fun! People remember you when you're unusual. That means you're smarter and more intelligent than other little girls your age."

Susan hesitated a minute and -- you're so beautiful, and Honey's beautiful, too, and Ma Sue is -- why aren't I?"

"Because you're too thin, darling, and that's something we can handle by seeing to it that you eat a good hot breakfast every morning, and that you get your vegetables at school, and--" began Celia recklessly.

Susan's hand touched the undeniably frizzy curls that framed her small thin face untidily.

"Maybe I need a new permanent?" she suggested anxiously.

"Of course not, darling. Look, I don't think you ought to wear curls, do you? I don't think they're--well, becoming to your type, do you?" Celia asked, in exactly the same tone she would have used to Honey in such a situation. Susan, recognizing the little delighted wriggle, said "Oh, woman-to-woman" tone with a don't you, Celia? All the other girls in my room at school have curls!"

"Then all the more reason why you shouldn't," said Celia firmly. "That makes you even more unusual."

Susan balked a little. "We-e-ell, I'm not so awful sure I want to be unusual, Celia. I-well, it makes me feel so shy when people stare at me. That's why it scares me so when I'm late for school. You have to go into the building all alone, and it's spooky, like. All the doors closed and the halls long and shadowy and the voices of the kids coming out at you from behind the closed doors. And then when you get to your own room, all the kids stop their lessons and look at you and grin, and teacher looks mad, and her mouth gets tight and thin and her eyes sort of flash at you, and she says things like, 'Dear me, Susan, maybe you shouldn't have made the effort to come in at all today, if it interferes so much with your amusements. It seems scarcely worth while to come in for just part of the day.' And maybe you're only ten minutes late, but she acts like it was nearly time for recess! No, I think I'll wear curls, thank you, Celia."

Celia laughed and hugged her again and said, "All right, you'll wear curls! And now, how about a glass of milk and some cookies and then we'll go see the animals."

The barn and outbuildings were set back a considerable distance from the house, but before they reached the barn there was a soft scrambling sound inside of it, and a big black-and-white cat emerged from the half open door, blinking in the sudden sunlight. He saw Susan, and started toward her with an excited whine.

"Stand perfectly still, Celia!" Celia froze in her position and looked at the little girl, who was finding still, her face alight with warm, loving laughter. And then the stampede began. Cats raced from every direction -- big cats, little cats, medium-sized cats, gray and white striped cats, yellow cats, the big beautiful black and white cat with the golden eyes. Tumbling along at the rear of the stampede were half a dozen six-weeks-old kittens, fat and round and soft looking, tiny faces eager as they mewed with delight at sight of the provider of their daily food.

For a moment there was pandemonium. The cats raced toward Susan, colliding with each other, there were a few "spffts" as they brushed past each other; an angry paw flicked out to strike at a passer-by; and then they

clustered about their mistress, greeting her in every possible tone of cat language.

During the next few days Celia saw the Mallorys often. She liked them, she found them amusing company, and they were a sort of point of contact with friends she had left behind in New York. Win made no secret of his interest in her, but Celia laughed and told herself that Win would be interested in any woman he met who wasn't actually cross-eyed or past fifty. So she took his attentions as lightly as he gave them, and found Jennifer Lawrence looking more green-eyed every day.

The group of guests now at Azalea Court were ready to leave their visit finished. They admitted frankly that they were bored, by the lack of daily newspapers, by the fact that there was no radio and that the beautiful big Capehart music machine in the corner, equipped with an enormous library of records that ranged from the classics to the very latest boogie woogie, was merely for playing records and not for relating news.

Several times one of the guests had asked Celia for war news. Win would listen, resenting this intrusion from the outside world into the little sanctuary he had so carefully planned and built.

Catherine had asked Celia to ride in to the shipyard town with them, to put their guests aboard the train, and Celia had accepted eagerly. She hadn't been in town since her arrival and there were a few bits of shopping she wanted to do.

When they were leaving Azalea Court, Jennifer came down, not dressed for traveling and not carrying her bags. She wore a brief white sports frock, and carried a wide-brimmed hat in her hand.

Win said, "Well, shall we get going? It's twenty-two miles and the train's not likely to wait for anybody these days."

They all trooped out to the station wagon. Jennifer installed herself in the front seat beside the driver. When everybody was in the station wagon except Win and Celia, Win slammed the door, grinned at Catherine and said "You drive, Cath. Celia and I will follow. We'll need both cars coming back."

"That was mean," Celia told Win sharply. "You did that deliberately to humiliate her, and I think that it was rotten of you."

Win looked all injured innocence. "Now, what did I do? I said nothing about intending to drive the station wagon. She should have realized we'd need another car to get the gang back from the station. I didn't even know she was planning to stay over."

Celia, seated beside him in the luxurious sedan, said quietly, "You know that she's in love with you."

Win gave her a swift, sardonic glance. "I know that she's in love with the Mallory estate and that she'd like nothing better than to sink her little white claws into it and start fling it in all directions," he said.

Celia flushed and Win shrugged and went on. "All right, I'm a cad and a bounder -- but I've known Jennifer since she was a babe in arms! And I know that she is interested only in what a man's got, not what he is. She de-

cidated a long time ago that she'd like to be Mrs. Winship Mallory, and I haven't been able to convince her that it's no go. Is that my fault? Have you seen me encourage her one tiny bit?"

"We-e-ell, no, but it seems impossible that a girl would so far forget her pride as to pursue a man she knows is not interested in her," said Celia uncomfortably. Once more Win's grin was sardonic.

Win took his hand off the wheel and laid it on hers. "I think we could find a topic of conversation more interesting," he said. "We could talk about you."

"A very dull subject, sir," she assured him gravely.

"Nothing of the kind," Win returned. "I find it completely absorbing. Tell me about you -- what you do, what you think, what makes you tick."

She laughed and told him a little about her life in New York, the dramatic studies, the work with the barn theaters, and the one tiny "hit" she had had in a Broadway production that had lasted four performances. Deter-

minedly she kept the conversation light and gay and away from personalities. But when they reached the shipyard town, and had parked the cars beside the station platform, he held her for a moment as she alighted from the car and said, his eyes unexpectedly serious, his voice grave, "Okay, you win this time. But hereafter, don't think for a minute you're going to keep me dangling. There are things between us that have got to be said. I can wait -- a while. But I'm warning

you!"

"Win, darling! You're not threatening Celia?" protested Jennifer's sweet voice at his elbow, and she slipped a possessive hand through his arm, as she gave Celia a cutting glance.

The train finally pulled into the station and the Mallory house guests amid much shouting of goodbyes and farewell hugging, climbed aboard.

Standing there on the station platform, Celia's eyes roved along the cars. Almost every window showed the head and shoulders of a soldier, a sailor, or a marine.

"Well, what will we do while we wait for the down train?" Catherine said brightly.

"What can we do but go sit in the cars and wait? It's only an hour," said Win.

"I'd like to do a bit of shopping," suggested Celia, and to Catherine, "Won't you come with me?"

Catherine hesitated and then shrugged and said, to Jennifer's almost audible relief, "Why not?"

Across the street there was a block or two of small shops and one larger store. There was a little specialty shop in the corner, and here Celia's eye was caught by a blouse that she liked.

Catherine followed her into the store, where a middle-aged woman, with tired, dark eyes, came to meet Celia, saying politely, "What can I do for you?"

The woman moved forward, saw Catherine and stopped dead still. The color left her face and her eyes grew wider and darker and her mouth set more tightly.

Celia looked from Catherine to the woman, and then she said quietly, "You liked the blouse, didn't you, Catherine?" Catherine was a little paler than usual, but her eyes did not leave those of the middle-aged saleswoman.

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