
TEAVILLE
MORAL SOCIETY

A CHANCE AT FOREVER

Melissa Jagears



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Melissa Jagears, *A Chance at Forever*
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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jagears, Melissa, author.

Title: A chance at forever / Melissa Jagears.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2018] | Series: Teaville Moral Society

Identifiers: LCCN 2017038829 | ISBN 9780764217531 (trade paper) | ISBN 9780764231414 (hardcover)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Love stories. | Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3610.A368 C48 2018 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017038829>

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Cover design by Koechel Peterson & Associates / Minneapolis, Minnesota / Jon Godfredson

Cover mansion photo by Moments of Grace Photography

Author represented by Natasha Kern Literary Agency

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Chesley,
for wanting to be involved in my writing though
it steals time from you. Thank you for naming
my hero. I'll love you always and forever.*



1

SOUTHEAST KANSAS SPRING 1909

“I wish you luck, George.”

“It’s Aaron now. Don’t forget.” Aaron Firebrook tried not to let Mr. Gray’s slip of the tongue make him even more nervous. Having his former teacher forget to call him by his new name was understandable, but oh how he wished no one would ever call him by his given name again.

If only every day he’d spent as George could be washed away and forgotten.

“Forgive me. It’ll take me time to remember to call you that.” Harrison Gray’s footsteps echoed on the granite flooring of Aaron’s old high school as they walked toward the conference room.

The cold rock walls surrounding them stole the warmth from the sunlight streaming through the narrow windows, and the thick scent of lemon cleaner overpowered the powdery smell of the chalk dust they disturbed as they walked through sunbeams.

This place hadn’t changed at all in the past six years. Yet he’d changed so much, it was as if he were passing through this hallway for the first time.

Mr. Gray stopped in front of the conference room door and readjusted his glasses, his blue eyes small and squinty behind his lenses. “It’ll also take me a while to get used to you sporting that big bushy beard.”

Aaron forced himself not to reach up and tug on his whiskers. “I wanted my appearance to better reflect the new me.”

Mr. Gray frowned as he took in the thick, dark beard obscuring Aaron’s face. “It’s certainly . . . different. Very different.”

“Exactly.” Aaron wiped his palms against his trousers. Hopefully shaking hands with the entire school board wouldn’t prove too embarrassing. If only his hands weren’t such big, sweaty meat cleavers. “I know I’ve already told you a hundred times, but thank you for recommending me for this position. I realize how much faith that required.”

Mr. Gray clamped his hand onto Aaron’s shoulder. “I saw your potential when I had you in class. I figure you can’t have lost it.”

“Thank you, sir.” He’d forever be grateful for Mr. Gray, the only teacher who had seen past his anger when he was nothing but a fifteen-year-old bully and had focused on the hurting boy locked up inside instead.

Mr. Gray opened the door, and Aaron followed his former English teacher into a large room, where the air was thick with the smell of mildew and disuse.

“Good afternoon.” Mr. Gray stopped a few feet inside and addressed the board members sitting at even intervals behind three long tables. “I’m pleased to introduce you to Aaron Firebrook, the man I’m recommending for the high school math position.”

There was a chorus of welcomes, and Mr. Gray gave Aaron a light clap on his back before leaving.

Keeping his hands clenched tightly at his sides so he’d not tug on his collar, Aaron walked forward.

“Please be seated.” The man in the middle of the tables pointed to the solitary chair in front of them. He was dark headed, in his forties, and didn’t look familiar.

Good.

Aaron sat and took his time looking each board member in the eye. Thankfully, the tension in his body lessened with each man he didn't recognize and with each polite smile that didn't turn into a frown.

Maybe things would be all right.

Except the last member was not a man, but a woman. A blonde whose smile wasn't nearly as welcoming as the others, but then, his big size was often disquieting.

He gave her the best smile he could, considering how nervous he was. Pretty women were always a bit intimidating—especially when they held a man's future in their hands. He tore his gaze off her and faced the group.

The man in the middle consulted the paper in his hand. "Harrison says you attended school here but moved to California. What brought you back?"

Aaron quickly scanned the board members, trying once more to determine if he knew any of them. He forced himself not to pull at his tie. "Well, Mr. Gray was a good influence on me as a student. I figured if I were to teach anywhere, I would prefer to do so as his colleague. I'd love to have his advice during my first year so I might have the same impact on Teaville's children as he had on me."

He'd not mention he'd also come in hopes of righting as many of his wrongs as possible.

The men ducked their heads, consulting the copies of his application, but the woman did not. She sat still, staring directly at him, her eyebrows slightly scrunched.

He gave her a smile, but she didn't smile back.

Blond hair swept up simply, green eyes, curvy with plump cheeks. Early twenties?

He let loose a long, slow exhale and pulled his gaze away. If only he'd asked their names. But now was not the time to think through every child he'd ever known, hoping she wasn't as familiar as she seemed. If he had any hope of procuring this job, he needed to focus on giving good answers.

“So you have no teaching experience?” This from the balding man on the left. Much too old to have been in school with him.

“Correct. This would be my first year, but we all have to start somewhere.”

“Why math?”

“I wasn’t the best student, to be honest.” In more ways than one. “But math was one of the few things I enjoyed. It had structure, and in a time of chaos in my life, I could count on it to function as expected.” He’d needed what little stability he could find back then. “Though Mr. Gray was my favorite teacher, trying to interpret what some dead author wanted me to learn about life through the story of a man hunting a whale was nebulous in comparison to solving for n .”

The man in the middle looked up from the papers in front of him. “So if you weren’t the best student . . . ?”

“It’s an advantage. I can understand those who struggle better than most. I think it must be hard for teachers who excelled in school to explain over and over what they found to be easy, but that certainly isn’t true of me. I’m hoping my learning background makes me more patient, perhaps more understanding.”

“It’s not always understanding they need. Sometimes it’s discipline.” The white-haired gentleman who had to be in his eighties peered down his spectacles at him.

“Of course, sir.” He’d not bother to explain how punishment for failing to comprehend his lessons would’ve made things far worse during that period of his life.

“And how exactly would you discipline them?” The woman’s voice rang out with an undertone of suspicion. Had she realized he’d held his tongue to keep from elaborating on that last answer?

“I assume there’s a policy I’d adhere to.”

She only stared at him, her head cocked to the side.

The other board members started a list of rapid-fire questions he tried his best to answer as honestly and tactfully as possible, all the while feeling the woman’s gaze boring into him. Since she

wasn't asking questions, he forced himself not to look at her. It wouldn't matter if he figured out whether he knew her or not. If she knew him, he was as good as sunk. But if she didn't, this interview was his best chance to get the job he needed.

"I thank you for your time, Mr. Firebrook." The board president tapped his papers together, signaling the interview's end.

"The same to you." He rose, went to the right side table, and shook the first man's hand. Thankfully his hands weren't too sweaty. "I hope to work with you in the future."

The man nodded. "Dr. Freedman. Nice to meet you."

Each board member stood, gave him a quick handshake, and introduced himself. He worked his way to the woman at the other end, but when he got to her, she stayed seated, her chin tilted, her jaw tight.

Did she not think it appropriate for a man and woman to shake hands, despite her being on an all-male school board?

Or worse, had she realized who he was, though he still hadn't recognized her?

He held out his hand and she stared at it, her mouth scrunched to one side, but then she brought up her left hand to shake his right, giving him the most awkward handshake he'd ever received.

"Nice to meet you . . . ?"

"Miss McClain."

He blinked. That name . . . so familiar.

McClain . . . *Oh*.

"Mercy," he breathed, and his gut sank into the abyss.

She gave him a slight nod, and he looked down behind the table at the right hand she'd not used to shake his. Her sleeve ended a few inches past her elbow. No hand.

He'd need to start looking for a teaching position elsewhere—unless she chose to live up to the name her parents had given her.

"Mercy." He swallowed hard while keeping his gaze connected to hers. "Please."

She didn't say anything, so he backed away and excused himself from the room before he made a fool of himself.

Once in the hallway, he leaned against the wall, tilted his head back to look at the ceiling, and let out a noisy exhale. If Mercy told the others how he'd treated her years ago, he might as well wait for the meeting to adjourn. It wouldn't take more than thirty seconds of discussion before they decided against him.