

# ***Meeting Maria by Dawn M Turner***

## **Maria Short Story #1**

Published in newsletter for January 2020

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The events in this short story serial occur during the events in the novel *Keep Her*.

**Tucson, Arizona**

**Tuesday, April 10, 2012**

Cain shoved his hands into the front pockets of his slacks, feigning relaxation despite his nerves jumping erratically. He'd learned a long time ago, in his career as an investigative reporter, that a calm exterior went a long way to projecting professionalism and confidence, even if he was a nervous wreck on the inside.

Walking at his side through the barrio, Dana waved to a couple of women in a yard across the street. She moved in an easy manner as though she belonged there, seemingly oblivious to the fact she stood out in the predominantly Mexican neighborhood.

*Mexican?* Cain frowned. *That's not the politically correct term, though. Do they prefer Hispanic here, or maybe Latino?* After being chewed out by a black man back home a while back for referring to him as African-American, he'd learned that not everyone liked the politically correct terms they'd been assigned.

*It doesn't matter right now. Focus on what's important. Dana's too exposed.* Cain tried to emulate her but found himself on edge, attempting to keep an eye on their surroundings without *looking* like he was doing so, far too aware of the danger she was in. Glancing around to scan for threats, he bumped into her once, twice.

“Something wrong?” Dana asked.

“I’m concerned about you being in the open like this.” He glanced around. “This doesn’t strike me as the safest neighborhood either. You stick out rather prominently among the people here.” He reached up to finger her blond hair.

“Don’t worry. They know me. I’m as safe here as anywhere else in the city.”

“That’s less than reassuring at the moment.” The people in that neighborhood might not be a threat, but Jackson’s supposed victim had been murdered in front of the house they were headed to, quite possibly by the same people who had threatened Dana’s life. In the open, she was an easy target. *I really hope we’ll be indoors soon. Please, Lord.*

In answer to his prayer, she turned up the sidewalk to a small house on the corner a couple of blocks from where she’d parked. A padlocked gate blocked the empty driveway, but the pedestrian gate swung freely when she pushed it. A large cactus stood sentry in the yard, probably twenty feet tall with five arms reaching skyward.

The house was old but well-cared for, the thinly graveled yard clear of weeds, though a few appeared to be showing their little faces to the sun in places where the gravel was thinnest. Considering the owner was a single mother dealing with terminal cancer in her teenage son, Cain had expected more obvious neglect, at the very least in the yard.

Dana lifted a hand to knock then hesitated, her fist suspended in mid-air. She slowly lowered it. Doubt raced across her face, and she turned to him.

“What is it?”

“What am I supposed to say? Her son’s dying. How can I accuse her of lying about a murder when she has that on her plate?”

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“Let the Lord guide you, Dana. He knows what needs to be said.” He laid a hand on her shoulder, dipped his chin close to his chest, and lowered his voice to scarcely above a whisper. “Lord, You know Dana’s heart and concerns, and You know Ms. Gonzales’ heart and mind. Grant us wisdom and discernment as we talk to her. Above all else, we ask that You be glorified. Amen.”

Dana gave him a grateful smile then knocked lightly. “I never thought to pray before an interview,” she admitted sheepishly. “I’ll have to remember that.”

A Mexican woman not much older than Dana opened the door. She was shorter than Dana by a couple of inches and a bit heavier. Cain admired a beautiful face, light brown skin, and dark brown eyes that seemed bottomless. She’d pulled her hair back and secured it at her nape. When she saw Dana, her face lit up and a smile widened her mouth, revealing straight white teeth.

His breath caught.

“Miss Dana, how wonderful to see you. Please, come!” She waved them inside, closing the door behind him.

“*Buenos días, Maria.* This is Cain White, a friend of mine from Florida.”

Cain gently shook the woman’s hand, noting her gentle but firm grip. It seemed to fit the fact she appeared almost delicate in some ways, and yet, he sensed a deep strength in her.

“Señor Cain, pleasure to meet you.” Sincerity wreathed her face.

Breathe, man. Just breathe.

“Your English is improving by leaps and bounds,” Dana exclaimed.

The other woman blushed and nodded. “Juan teaches me.” She motioned for them to have a seat.

“He’s doing a fine job.” Dana took a seat on the couch.

Cain sat beside her.

“Would you like lemonade?” Maria cast Cain a sweet smile.

His heart fluttered in the oddest way. *What’s that about?*

“I would love some,” Dana replied.

I’ve never felt anything like this before. Breathe. Relax.

“Cain, lemonade?” She elbowed him lightly.

He blinked a couple of times.

“I’m sorry. What?” He’d heard the question, but... *what did she ask me?*

“Would you like lemonade?” Maria was patience personified but with a shy smile, obviously noting his stare.

He pulled his gaze away and tried to gather his thoughts. “I’d love some. Thank you.”

Dana chuckled as Maria disappeared, a smooth sheet of black hair trailing to her waist from the clip at the back of her neck.

“What?” he asked shortly, annoyed with himself. *What’s gotten into me?*

Dana’s not-well-concealed laughter said she’d definitely noticed. She shook her head.

He narrowed his eyes, but his next question was interrupted by a young man joining them.

Dana tensed. If the teenager’s gray skin tone and underweight condition hadn’t already identified him, the expression of compassion that Dana tempered to concern would have.

“Miss Dana, why didn’t Mama tell me you were here?” The boy smiled happily but weakly.

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A pang squeezed Cain's heart.

"I only just arrived. This is Cain White. He's visiting from Florida. Cain, this is Maria's son Juan."

Cain rose and offered his hand.

Juan studied Cain but kept his thoughts to himself and shook his hand.

Cain returned to his seat.

"How do you feel today?" Dana asked, not letting the silence grow.

"Tired, very tired." He shrugged. "That's to be expected." He leaned against the arm of his chair, bringing himself closer to Dana. "I read the Bible you gave me every day. I pray all the time."

"I'm glad. How's your mother responding to that?"

Cain thought her smile looked pained.

"She still doesn't believe, but I'm not giving up. If I must, when I go to the Father, I will talk to Him about her."

Dana's eyes misted suspiciously.

A knot rose in Cain's throat at the young man's love for his mother and obvious concern for her salvation.

Juan pinned Cain with an intent look. "Do you know Jesus Christ?"

"I sure do." Cain smiled, admiring the direct approach. "I met Him shortly after I finished college. He's been part of my life ever since."

"Your family is not saved?"

"My youngest sister, Jeanine, accepted Christ a few years ago. We're still working on the rest of the family."

Juan nodded with the seriousness of a much older man. "It troubles our souls deeply." His gaze was again direct.

"Yes, it does."

"Will you pray for my mama?" Juan asked. "I'll pray for your family, too."

"You have a deal," Cain replied.

Maria chose that moment to return with drinks on a small tray. She set it on the coffee table, handing a dark glass to each of her guests before turning to her son. "You should be resting," she protested gently.

"I want to visit with Miss Dana and Mr. Cain." His smile softened his words. "When they go, I'll rest. I promise."

She sighed, gave him a lovingly scolding look and nodded. "Would you like something to eat?"

His gaze resting briefly on his mother's face, he appeared to give that some thought then nodded.

His answer obviously pleased her, as a smile curved her mouth and eased the tension lines around her eyes. "Keep our guests company while I fix something."

"Yes, Mama."

*Lord, I wish there was something I could do to help. She should always smile.... What am I thinking?* He swallowed hard then raised his glass, his gaze following Maria. He took a long

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drink then stilled as instant heat set all of his taste buds on fire, setting off a fit of choking. He eyed the contents of the glass with suspicion.

Dana and Juan laughed heartily.

“What is this?” he asked hoarsely. He’d said yes to lemonade, right?

“I should’ve warned you. Maria makes *Mexican* lemonade. It’s a rather large departure from what you’re accustomed to.”

“What’s in it?”

“Several things, but the bite comes from Tabasco.”

“Are you serious?” He studied the liquid. *Tabasco. Yikes.*

“Aye, such a gringo.” Dana rolled her eyes and shared a grin with Juan.

The teenager laughed again.

She shook her head, tsk-tsking. “You eat all that Cajun food, and you think this stuff is spicy?”

“Note, that’s food. They don’t spike the drinks!” He kept his voice down, hoping not to offend Maria or hurt her feelings.

“Big baby.” Dana took a sip of her drink and winked at Juan. “You get used to it, and once you do, regular lemonade is just plain old bland.”

He gave her a dubious look. “Oh, and how often have you had it, Miss Smarty Pants?”

“Every week or two since December.”

*Oh.* He sobered. She hadn’t simply interviewed them and moved on. How many reporters stayed in contact with people they’d interviewed? He couldn’t say he had. *Of course, I’ve never interviewed anyone for the type of story Dana did in December about medical charities either.*

“What’s a gringo?” Cain sipped the drink and rolled it around in his mouth.

“A white boy.”

He shot her a dark look.

Dana cracked up laughing, and Juan joined her.

“What so funny?” Maria returned with a plate of food. She set up a TV tray with Juan’s help and put the plate in front of him.

“Just showing Juan what a gringo Cain is.”

Cain bumped her knee with his.

Dana’s smile fell when Jackson’s image flashed across the TV screen.

Maria and Juan apparently noted the change in her demeanor as readily as Cain had. They turned to look at the screen.

“I apologize.” Maria turned off the TV. “Juan encourages me to watch to help learn better English.”

Dana nodded.

“Do you know him, Miss Dana?” Juan asked, concern furrowing his brow.

“Yes, I do. He’s a good friend of mine.” Dana stared into her glass. “He saved my life several years ago.”

“Do you believe he’s guilty?”

Does he sound more tired than he did a bit ago?

She raised her gaze to his. “No. He’s innocent, but it doesn’t look good for him. At least, not

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according to the prosecution.” Her gaze shifted to Maria.

Cain switched his focus to her as well.

Maria’s dark brown eyes glistened as though she might burst into tears, compassion and... something else. Guilt?

“He could get the death penalty.”

The something else flashed to the front, becoming obvious. Definite guilt. Maria turned and almost frantically wiped a fine layer of dust from the TV.

Cain forced himself to remain seated and not surrender to the instant urge to go offer comfort. What’s with me today? I don’t know this woman, and she’s party to a lie that’s threatening a man’s life. Lord, I don’t know what’s going on with me but help me do what’s right. For all concerned.

“Are you reporting on it?” Juan asked as though unaware of his mother’s turmoil or Cain’s preoccupation.

“No, it’s too personal,” Dana said. “There are lots of other reporters that can handle it without my help.”

Some of the apparent tension in Maria’s shoulders eased, and she turned back to them, still not meeting Dana’s gaze. “You need more to drink.” She left the room.

Juan watched her go with a troubled expression. “Miss Dana?”

“Yes?”

“I believe I will go to the Father soon.”

The boy was so calm, it made Cain’s heart stumble.

“I worry about my mama when I’m gone. She’ll be alone. She still hasn’t accepted that I’m dying.”

“I know.” Tears filling her eyes, Dana leaned forward and gripped his hand in one of hers. “Know this, Juan. God loves your mother even more than you do, and He *will* take care of her, just as He’s taken care of both of you all these years. Never lose faith in that. No matter what. Okay?”

He nodded. “Will you still visit when I’m gone?” His shoulders drooped, revealing increasing weakness, even as pain became more evident in his face.

“You bet I will.”

He smiled.

His mother returned then, topping off their glasses from a mottled red, ceramic pitcher.

Dana released his hand and straightened.

Juan closed his eyes for a few moments.

Maria set the pitcher on the coffee table and moved to his side.

The fear and worry on her face made Cain’s chest tighten.

Juan opened his eyes at the light touch of her hand on his forehead and smiled, wrapping his hand around hers. “I’m sorry. Treatments take so much out of me. I have to lie down.” He rose with difficulty, unsteady.

Cain swallowed a knot that threatened to cut off his air supply at the way Maria very visibly restrained herself from reaching out to help her son. *He’s dying, and she knows it, even if she doesn’t want to acknowledge it. I can’t say I blame her.*

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Once Juan had left the room, Dana said, “I’m so glad you were able to get the medical care he needed.”

Maria nodded, her gaze flicking away, but not fast enough to hide fresh guilt reflected there.

I can only imagine how hard it must be to watch someone you love slowly waste away and die from cancer. The helplessness. The hopelessness. The desperation. Is it any wonder she may have lied about what she saw? Especially if someone is using Juan’s medical needs to put her in a corner.

Dana unexpectedly pushed to her feet, giving Cain a brief glance. “We better go. I know you probably have to work today, and we have an errand to run.”

“It was nice to meet you, Mr. Cain.”

He smiled. “It’s been a real pleasure.”

A flush coloring her cheeks, Maria looked away.

“I’ll see you soon, Maria.” Dana hugged the other woman. “Take care of yourself as well as that wonderful son of yours. Okay?”

Maria nodded.

At war with himself, Cain willed his feet to follow Dana. On the one hand, he knew Maria had lied about what she’d witnessed, and a good man could go to prison or get the death penalty as a result. On the other, her son was dying, and she was desperate. How could he or anyone fault her for grasping whatever lifeline might have been thrown to her?

Torn between the desire to provide comfort and support and the need for justice, Cain lifted his gaze to the heavens as he fell into step beside Dana.

*Lord, You know the best way to work all of this out. Give me wisdom, and Lord, please, comfort Maria and help her see what’s right. Give her the strength to do it. And, Lord? Your Word says You want none to perish, so please, use all of this... somehow... to reach her heart for You.*

Coming next Maria #2 - *The Plan*