

This vignette features Ashley Walker, the heroine in ***At First Catch***, Mysterious Ways book 1. This story takes place after ***The Preacher's Wife***, Mysterious Ways book 4.

***Walker Ranch
Mystery, Wyoming
April 2011***

A knot clogging her throat, Ashley Walker dug through the pantry in the utility room, having already checked the cupboards in the kitchen. Desperation loomed, threatening to overwhelm her. *Where are they? I know we had some!* Quart jar after quart jar, nothing. At least, not what she needed. The freezer had already proven futile. *Fruitless is more like it.* She blinked back tears. *Maybe I should check it again.*

Not that her mother-in-law, Eleanor, stored much beyond meat in the chest freezer. She canned most fruits and vegetables in quart jars, so they weren't reliant on the generator to keep the bulk of their food supply safe if the power went out, especially for an extended period.

"Honey, what are you looking for?" Eleanor's voice sounded from directly behind her.

Ashley jumped, a hand flying to her chest. Her off-kilter center of gravity nearly knocked her off her feet as she whipped around. Her heart pounded, and tears blurred her vision.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." Her mother-in-law placed a gentle but firm hand on her upper arm to steady her then drew her into a hug. "It's okay."

"No, it's not!" She pressed her lips together, realizing how hysterical she sounded.

As Eleanor released her and stepped back, her face came into watery view, concern evident even through the blur of tears in Ashley's eyes.

Aggravated at them, Ashley dashed them away with two swipes of a hand. She forced herself to take deep breaths, trying to stabilize emotions that had gone off the deep end without her permission.

"Come sit down." Eleanor led her into the kitchen and nudged her into a chair at the big table. "Now... tell me what's upset you so much."

"I can't find the peaches." It sounded so stupid, especially given how emotional she was being about the whole thing. Dropping her gaze, she ran a hand over her bulging belly. *Baby, you have no idea what a crybaby your mom can be. I'm not fit to be a mother if this is how I react to something so minor. Good moms don't do that!*

"I'm afraid we're out."

Tears welled anew and streamed down Ashley's face. Her chest heaved as she tried to stifle a sob. "We can't be!"

Worry etched Eleanor's face. "What do you need them for?"

"I want to make Trevor a peach pie... for his birthday tomorrow. It's his favorite."

Eleanor sighed and smiled. "It's no problem. We can go get some."

Why didn't I think of that before.... A sob tore free. "I'll be a horrible mother! I can't stop crying... over peaches. How can I be a good mother when I fall apart over something so stupid?" Her mom certainly hadn't. She'd even battled cancer with strength and courage. *And I'm melting down over peaches.*

To her surprise, Eleanor chuckled softly and hugged her. "Honey, them pregnancy

hormones can be beastly. That's what you're feeling right now." She eased away then grabbed a few napkins from the table and offered them to Ashley. "When I was pregnant with my boys, I'd burst into uncontrollable tears if Cord even looked at me sideways. The poor man walked on eggshells at times to keep from setting me off."

"I don't want Trevor to have to do that." Ashley wiped still-streaming eyes then blew her runny nose.

"He'll survive it, just like Cord did. Don't you worry." Eleanor reached up to tuck a strand of Ashley's hair behind one ear. Her smile eased into a warm expression. "You're going to be a *wonderful* mother. Don't worry about that either. This baby is going to know such love from you and that son of mine, it'll never doubt how much you care."

Reassured *and* chagrined, Ashley wiped away more tears and lowered her gaze to her belly. "Don't tell Trevor I acted like a crybaby over this, okay? I don't want him to feel bad since it's because I want to do something for *him*. I missed his last birthday." She hadn't even realized it until much later. Ashley sighed.

"Honey, you hadn't even *met* Trevor yet when that rolled around, so there's no need for guilt over it."

That's true.... She'd arrived at the ranch for the first time a couple of weeks later. *I guess I really can't feel guilty about that since I wasn't even here. Maybe Eleanor's right about the hormones.*

"Why don't you and I take a trip into town? Get those peaches." Eleanor gently stroked her hair.

Ashley sniffled then nodded. After a moment, she sighed and met her mother-in-law's gaze. "Then can you teach me how to make a pie?"

Her mother-in-law grinned. "Absotively posilutely." She patted Ashley's shoulder. "Now, go wash your face so no one's the wiser about those tears if they spot us leaving, and we'll head into town."

With a nod, Ashley eased to her feet and headed to the other end of the house. She rested a hand on her belly again as the humor in the situation started rising. "Baby, we'll figure everything out as we go, even if you and I end up crying together sometimes."

Watch for Ashley and Trevor's little one to make its appearance in ***From The Heavens*** (Mysterious Ways book 5), releasing in 2024!