Where There’s Smoke …

By Susan Page Davis

“You’ve got a group of fourth-graders coming at nine this morning,” Polly said.

“Great. I love that age.” Julie tied on her long skirt and adjusted the gathered mobcap she wore each day.

“Well, just a heads-up.” Polly straightened the fold of Julie’s shawl across her shoulder. “You may be evaluated during your presentation.”

Julie swallowed hard. “Already? I’ve only been doing this three weeks. I was hoping to get a little more comfortable before something like this came up.”

“Yes, well, the museum’s personnel director says it’s time. Get your cooking fire burning, and I’ll see you later.” Polly turned in a swirl of woolen skirts and linen petticoats and left the room.

Julie went to the fireplace and began methodically laying the fire. It would take an hour and a half for the wood to burn down into the pile of glowing red coals she needed. When the students came to bake a cake on the hearth with her, she wanted everything to be perfect. She loved her new job as a historical interpreter at the museum, and she hoped to keep it for a long time. Even working in a sweltering colonial kitchen in the middle of summer would be worth it.

She checked all her cooking utensils and ingredients and laid a stack of handouts with period recipes on the long pine table that was her work surface.
Promptly at nine, a group of fifteen energetic nine-year-olds burst into her kitchen. Two middle-aged women quieted them and brought a measure of order.

“Greetings,” Julie said with her brightest smile. “Prithee be seated. It gives me great pleasure to have so many helpers this day.”

She launched into her routine, showing the children the odd tools and kettles that had become her familiar friends, and then demonstrated the balance scale.

“Now, who will come and weigh out a pound of flour for me?”

As she scanned the group, she noticed a somber man leaning against the doorjamb, watching her with brooding dark eyes. Her heart lurched. The director had arrived.

She swallowed hard. If he wasn’t one of her bosses, she could throw him a cheerful greeting and include him in the activity. He was very attractive when it came down to it, but his watchful brown eyes kept her on edge.

She realized her smile had slipped, and quickly put it back in place, reaching out to a freckle-faced little boy. He was obviously one of the class’s mischief-makers, and Julie pulled his name off the tag he wore on his striped T-shirt.

“Ben.”

“Yeah?” His eyes gleamed with anticipation.

“Would you be kind enough to assist me, lad?”

She went on with the demonstration, calling on each of the children in turn to perform a simple task. One broke the eggs into a pottery bowl, two carefully measured her spices and sugar, and another beat the batter for her. Ben slopped the flour all over the tabletop, and a gawky little girl dropped one of the eggs on the floor. Julie managed to
keep her smile intact and assured the children that it was all part of learning to cook on the hearth. Through it all, the handsome man observed her from his post in the doorway.

She thought she saw his lips twitch when she knocked the poker over and it clattered to the slate hearth. Or maybe it was a grimace. Julie wiped her hands on her apron and cleared her throat.

“All right, children, now is the time to pull the coals out onto the hearth, where we’ll bake our cake.”

Carefully she herded the red-hot embers into a pile before the fireplace and settled the Dutch oven on it.

“What do we do next?”

Fifteen eager hands flew up.

“Katelyn?” she prompted the smallest girl.

“Pile the fire on top!”

Julie smiled. “Not the fire, but more hot coals. That’s right.” As she worked carefully, Julie told them, “Now you will all be going over to the cooper’s shop to see him work for a little while. Then you can come back here, and we’ll see how our cake tastes.”

As she turned to face them, her long skirt swished about her ankles. She waited, smiling, as the children bounced out the door, chattering and already anxious to see the next attraction. The man stood aside and let them pass, then glanced back toward her.

He smiled for the first time, and a rush of excitement ran through her, followed quickly by regret because he was one of her bosses, then anxiety because she could have done better. What would he scribble on her evaluation form? Would he realize how much it mattered to her?
He straightened suddenly and strode toward her.

“Miss—” He glanced toward her nametag. “Your dress is on fire!”

Julie gasped and jumped away from the hearth, pulling her full skirt around to where she could see the folds. Sure enough, a spark had landed on the hem, and the wool was smoldering, sending up an acrid plume of smoke. The hole grew larger and the fibers at its edges glowed red.

She beat at the fabric with one hand. Before she could think about unfastening the skirt, a cascade of cold water soaked her feet and ankles.

She jumped back. The man was staring down at the sodden mess he had made by heaving her emergency water bucket on her skirt, the wide floorboards, the hearth, and the Dutch oven.

He winced and looked at her cautiously. “Sorry. I think I drowned your coals.”

Julie shook her damp skirt and tried to smile. She hoped she could respond without breaking character. Surely that would help in the evaluation—if anything could help her after catching fire on the job. “It’s nothing, sir. There are more embers in the fireplace. I can build it up again.”

He nodded uncertainly and glanced toward the doorway. “Well, I … I’m sorry. Perhaps I was a little over-enthusiastic with the water. I hope the children’s cake isn’t ruined.”

“I’ll see to it, good sir.”

“I’d better catch up with my class.”

“Your class?” She stared at him, baffled. “I thought you were the personnel director here.”
“Me? No, I’m the principal at Smith Elementary. One of the mothers who was going to help chaperone was ill this morning, so I took her place.”

“Oh.” Julie bit her lip and looked down at the watery floor. She had broken character, but perhaps it didn’t matter. She was sure her cheeks were scarlet, and it wasn’t because of the fire. “Be careful, sir. Don’t be slipping on the wet floor.”

He hesitated, then said softly, “Look, this may be presumptuous, but I’ve been watching you for the last hour, and—”

She looked up sharply. “Yes?”

“I—well, I wondered if you’re—uh—would you be interested in going out with me?”

Julie lowered her gaze, her thoughts in a muddle.

“Sir, I know not of what thou speakest, going out. Surely I shall leave the building in a few hours.”

“No, I mean a date.”

“Date? Why, sir, ‘tis the seventh of September, 1690.”

“Okay, okay, let me put it this way. Wouldst thou dine with me this evening?” His smile was irresistible.

Julie gathered her soggy skirt and gave a little curtsy. “I should be delighted.”

THE END

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