

*Begin with a retired man. Add a single mother and a newborn not old enough to be curious about what lies ahead. Then comes a young man with hopes and dreams of his own. What could possibly bring them together? What might keep them apart?*

## **Just A Casual Acquaintance**

By Jack Coppedge

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A scenic view of a park with a winding path, trees, and a fountain. The path is paved and bordered by a low wall. The fountain is in the center, with water spraying upwards. The trees are lush and green, and the sky is a clear blue. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and serene.

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Acquaintance*

A NOVEL

JACK COPPEDGE

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What Happens Matters

# Prologue

When he'd arrived and parked his car, it was pouring as if from a bucket. He had waited as long as he could before braving the storm. He had called the people he was meeting to let them know he was just waiting for a break in the rain.

After his meeting was over, he approached the front door of the office building. He realized the rain had stopped.

He opened his briefcase to make sure he had remembered all his papers. On the way back to the car, he folded up the wet umbrella.

As he started across the quadrangle back to where he parked, he raised his head to see a young woman walking toward him.

She was the only other person in the quadrangle and she appeared to be crying. He was sure she was crying.

He was at a loss, and felt he should do something but had no idea what should be done.

He stopped and waited as the woman neared him. She was looking for something in her purse as she walked.

She was not paying attention to where she was walking. She was almost upon him before she even raised her head.

He thought to speak so as not to startle her and said, "Miss?"

In spite of his efforts, she was startled anyway. Apparently she hadn't found what she was looking for. She dropped the purse. He and she reached for it at the same time. He was the quicker of the two.

When she raised her head, he could see that her eyes were flowing with tears. Her makeup was smeared and running down her face.

She was immediately embarrassed. Her face almost matched the color of her sweater which was only slightly lighter than her pink scarf.

He had no prepared script for this sort of encounter and winged it, "Are you all right?"

It would have been immediately obvious to anyone who would have happened to see her in her current state, that she was not all right. On the other hand, it would not be obvious what, exactly, was wrong.

Now he was the startled one, for she put her face against his chest and proceeded to cry uncontrollably. She had her hands pulled together at her chest. Her height was just a few inches shorter than his own, and her head fit perfectly against his chest. Her sobbing shook both their bodies.

The fragrance of her hair was instantly ingrained in his memory.

He put his arms around her, rather awkwardly as you might imagine. He was afraid she would fall.

Having already dropped his briefcase, he reached in his back pocket for his handkerchief. He offered it to her and she took it.

Try as she might, she could not stop her crying. He waited patiently, feeling as helpless as one might expect, but probably not as helpless as she felt.

There was no bench or any other thing to sit upon, so they just stood there.

He looked around to see if anyone else was watching them. He saw no one and hoped he wouldn't.

Though he had no idea why she was crying, he found himself fighting to hold back tears of his own.

Protecting and consoling her was at the forefront of his thoughts, but protecting her from what?

It didn't matter. It was painful to see another person suffer so.

As she slowly got herself under control, she brightened up with embarrassment, becoming slightly more pink than her scarf.

He hoped she would not faint or something equally unpleasant.

She used the hanky to wipe her face, a motion only partially successful, but the best she could do at the moment.

She was a mess. Crying and blotting smeared her makeup horribly. Her effort to make things better, was a terrible failure.

Looking at the mess she had created on his jacket, she apologized. "I'm so sorry," she said with what voice she could muster.

He felt such a strong desire to protect her and help, but he couldn't imagine what he should do next. So he just stood there, with a look on his face that probably communicated everything and nothing at the same time.

"I just lost it there for a moment. I'll be all right. I'll pay to clean your blazer" she offered as she tried to disguise her discomfort by looking at the hanky and his stained jacket.

"That's not necessary," he said. "I was taking it to be cleaned anyway."

He could tell she was ready to be out of the situation, and he struggled to decide what to do next.

"Do you want me to walk you to your car? Is there something I can do to help?" he asked.

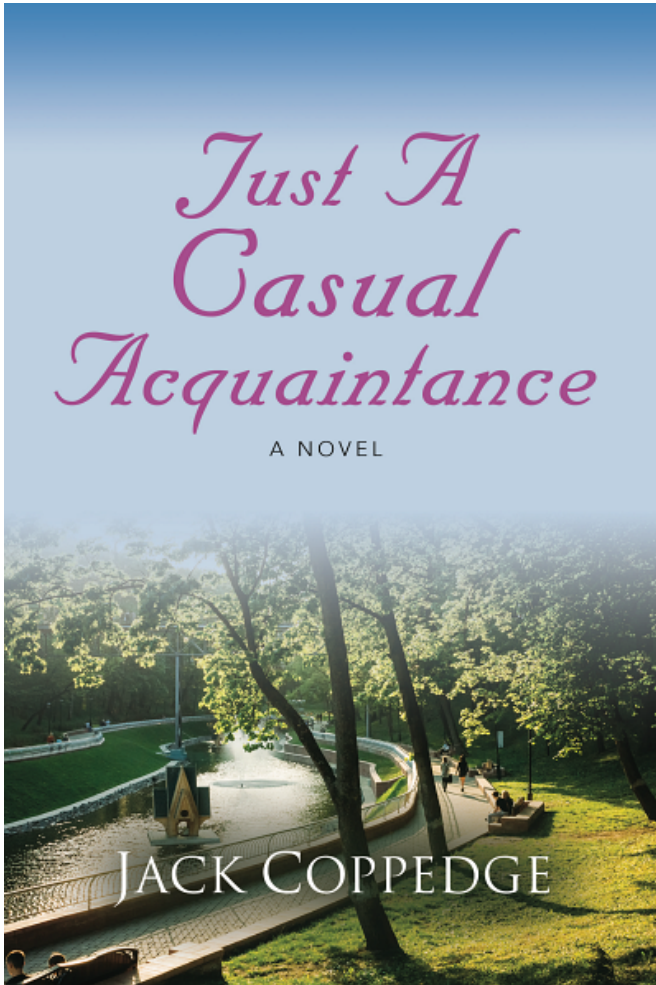
"No, please, but thank you for offering. I'm so sorry. I'll be OK."

"I'll be happy to help any way I can," he told her.

With that, she apologized again and hurriedly left, her heels making staccato clicks on the sidewalk. The sound faded as she left him standing there. He could barely hear her as she turned the corner around a building.

As he watched her walk away, he was wondering a lot of things and saying none. He slowly picked up his briefcase and his umbrella and walked back to his car.

He turned around once to see if she might come back. She didn't.



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