

Worth Her
WEIGHT

Worth Her Weight
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OTHER BOOKS BY JANET K. BROWN

*Divine Dining: 365 Devotions to Guide You to Healthier Weight
and Abundant Wellness*

Victoria and the Ghost

**REVIEWS FOR *DIVINE DINING: 365 DEVOTIONS TO GUIDE YOU TO
HEALTHIER WEIGHT AND ABUNDANT WELLNESS***

Book stores, both brick and mortar and online, are filled with devotional books, daily scripture books, and books of encouragement on just about every subject you can think of. Author Janet K. Brown's *Divine Dining* is one of the best devotional books I've read. I think you may see similarities to your life in some of the stories. I have. This would make a great gift for friends and family, especially those struggling with a difficult issue in their lives. The book will help them realize they're not alone and with God's help they will succeed in achieving their goals.

—BEVERLY STOWE MCCLURE, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *LIFE ON HOLD*

If you have trouble staying on a diet or losing weight, this is the book for us. It gives good advice coupled with examples to help you finally win the battle to lose weight and keep it off. It doesn't only apply to overeating but can apply to other kinds of addictions too.

— MARGARET DALEY, AUTHOR AND PAST PRESIDENT OF ACFW

Losing weight is a daily battle with our minds. We have to set our mind on the right track daily. This devotional helps me prepare for the daily battle of losing weight, keeping it off, and working toward my goal by starting my day with a positive mind and spirit. It's so easy to get tripped up if I go on a "diet". But if I'm making choices to protect and provide for my body each day, I'm not dieting. I'm nourishing and encouraging myself, my family, and my dreams. I love how Ms. Brown helps the reader really look at the attitudes that sabotage weight loss. The battle with weight is done in the mind, not on the scale or in the mirror.

—ANGELA BREIDENBACH, AUTHOR OF *CREATIVE COOKING FOR COLITIS*
AND *A HEALING HEART*

This author has written another great book. I keep this next to my recliner and read it every morning before I start my day. I write down the prayer and have it in my scrub top throughout the day for those rough moments, or when I just need a reminder that I can do this.

—MICHELLE SHEA

REVIEWS FOR *VICTORIA AND THE GHOST*

In full disclosure I have to say that I rarely read Young Adult Fiction but I truly enjoyed this little book. It may well have me turning over a new leaf and choosing to read more Young Adult offerings. I also believe we will be seeing much more of Janet K. Brown (I understand a sequel may be in the works.).

Brown's development of her characters, especially Victoria, often took me back in time to my own teen years, Memories--good and bad, funny and sad--have had me pulling out old yearbooks and trekking down memory lane.

—WINONA CROSS, AUTHOR OF *DIANNE'S DESTINY*

I wish to dedicate this to all the ladies and gentlemen who've attended my weekly Divine Dining Weight Controller's class in Wichita Falls, Texas. In them, I see my past and my ministry. I pray God would break down strong-holds of food addiction and emotionally heal and restore their hope.

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9

Worth Her WEIGHT

JANET K. BROWN



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CHAPTER *One*

The acid from Mom's hurtful words burned. Only a gooey, cream-filled donut could neutralize the pain. That, and maybe a couple of Snickers. *I'm not going crazy.* The phone heated Lacey's hand. She wanted to drop it to the desk, but Mom's prattle continued.

"You're going nuts like your dad." Her words sliced through Lacey like a tornado in a Texas cornfield.

Mom droned on about her visit with Katie, Lacey's kid sister. Lacey opened a desk drawer, lifting out her bottle of Prozac. She turned it over to read the directions. If she downed these pills, her disappointing life would end. Old thoughts resurfaced, bringing a longing for peace but a warning of hellfire.

Mom took a breath between words. Lacey's office was quiet except for the phone-voice of condemnation.

Reality dawned on Lacey with the bong of the office clock on the hour. She was a Christian. She was not crazy. She would conquer this weight problem.

Her mother let out a long sigh. "Lacey, are you there?"

"Yes, Mom, I'm here." Lacey increased her volume. "I'm me, not Dad, and not Katie, Me." Mom never made accusations about Katie's drug addiction. Mom didn't call her crazy. Lacey bit into her third donut.

If something happened to Lacey, Mom would miss the paycheck, the help at home. A longing for love washed over Lacey like a spring shower. She refused to take the coward's way, but maybe she should leave town.

Let Mom fend for herself. She'd soon be begging for her crazy daughter to return.

Lacey spread the tattered pamphlet across her desk once more and read, "Christian Singles Cruise." Only two more weeks before registration ended. Might be eligible men there. Hope rose in her heart, but like a blip on the screen of her monitor, it all too quickly vanished. Learning to swim at the age of six was easier than stuffing her bulk into a size triple-X swimsuit at twenty-six.

Mom's monologue escalated to a tirade while Lacey gazed out her office window. Small oak trees lifted branches to a hazy blue sky. She heard a squeak. The chirping of crows filtered inside. The front door had opened.

"I've got to go, Mom. Someone came in. See you tomorrow after you get home." Lacey hung up the phone and turned to see how she could help the lady who'd entered her office.

Standing in front of Lacey's desk, the woman held out a check.

"How are you today?" Lacey reached out to accept the woman's money. "I'll put this on your account."

As the lady opened the door to leave, Marion Ferguson from next door's insurance office passed to enter. "I want you to meet my grandson." Her eyes danced.

The four-year-old tore around the office using his arms as airplane wings. Lacey chased the small boy until he broke out in giggles.

Myrna Cutter, Lacey's boss, peered around her private office door. "When's my first patient?"

Lacey stopped flying and put on her serious expression. "Not until one."

"I need to get this boy out of here so you can work." With a pained look, Marion ushered out her grandson.

Myrna watched the boy shuffle out the door and then moved closer to the reception desk. A huge bag with a logo reading *North Texas Mental Health* swung from her shoulder. "I think I'll run some errands. If you would, call the hospital administrator and make me an appointment for tomorrow."

"Okay." Lacey gritted her teeth as she dialed the now familiar number.

Myrna left, escaping the distasteful duty.

Lacey's napkin soaked up the donut's glaze like her heart held resentment. Sweat beaded her upper lip. *Please, Mr. Haggerty, don't answer.*

He did. "Put Ms. Cutter on the phone." His response set Lacey's teeth on edge. She drew large quivery circles on her scratch pad. "She's not here now."

"Then tell her if she wants to see me tomorrow, she can call me herself. I might work her in."

Lacey's voice softened. "I'll tell her, sir." The phone slipped across her sweaty palms. After this, Myrna could do her own feuding. Lacey didn't like being the middleman. When the man disconnected, her fingers unfolded, dropping the receiver before she regained control.

She shifted her gaze to see if anyone had noticed, but she was alone. With a deep sigh, she encouraged herself with a reminder that tonight she'd be alone. Her mother would stay with her sister in Apache Falls one more evening before coming home. Let the day roll. Tonight, she would have the house to herself.

By six o'clock, Lacey was unlocking the side door of her white, thirties-style house, the boxy ones with huge front porches. She noticed the flaking paint. Her house needed attention-along with everything else in her life. Her self-worth drooped at the door.

Plopping into her green leather recliner, a romance book in one hand and a bag of peanut butter cups in the other, she breathed a sigh of contentment. Food seemed to be the only friend she had.

A fickle friend. With each bite of the smooth peanut butter, she swallowed more guilt. Toby Wheeler, her self-proclaimed conscience and good buddy, would tell her Jesus was her best friend, and Lacey didn't disagree. Yet, as her life plummeted into an abyss, Jesus was nowhere in sight. She put those dismal thoughts out of her mind for now and let the sweetness of the candy dissolve her tension.

She'd regret her actions tonight when she tossed about on her bed and couldn't sleep.

She'd regret her actions in the morning hours as she prepared for the workday with a sugar hangover.

She'd regret her actions while she worked tomorrow in a heavily-cafeinated fog.

But, for the moment, she relished the taste, threw aside a wrapper, and popped another treat.

The doorbell rang.

Great. Anxious and unsteady, she pondered her plight. She wanted to be left alone to wallow in misery. The intruder could be a Girl Scout selling cookies. That would be a good thing. Glancing over the den, she scooped the empty wrappers under the cushion and set the half-filled bag on the dining table.

She peeped around the front curtain, but couldn't see anyone in the day's lingering shadows.

A kick and shuffle from the porch pricked her curiosity.

CHAPTER *Tiva*

“Hey, Lace.”

Lacey recognized the voice of her old friend, Toby. Stuck now, she couldn't pretend to be gone. He had probably seen her car. Besides, the policeman in him wouldn't be satisfied until he determined she was okay. He would come to the back or crawl through Mom's bedroom window that she always forgot to lock.

Lacey sighed, forced a smile, and swung open the door.

Toby plunged past her into the den whistling a happy tune. “Thought you could use some company. Maybe go for a burger or something.” He pulled off his brown Stetson, showing golden hair that gleamed underneath the den's overhead light fixture. He sported a brown and blue plaid western shirt tucked into jeans, spilling his stomach over his gaudy western belt buckle. The civilian clothes told her he was off duty.

In the small town of Wharton Rock, Toby was a catch for any woman, but he was oblivious to his charm. Lacey liked that about him.

“What are you so happy about?” she snarled.

He looked at her in confusion. “Aren't you glad to see me?”

“Sure.” Lacey maneuvered a bit of excitement into her voice. “You know I always enjoy being with you.” *Just not tonight.*

How envious Sandra, their pastor's daughter, would be if she knew Toby were here. She had her sights on Toby as husband material. Fat Lacey couldn't compete with someone that slim or beautiful except maybe in an eating contest.

Lacey did cherish Toby's friendship. Ever since first grade, Lacey and Toby had been a team. "Want to watch TV with me?" she asked.

Toby fingered the hat he held in front of his chest. "But you're reading, not watching TV." His eyes seemed glued to an orange wrapper protruding from the recliner cushion.

Lacey walked to her chair, bent over, and picked up the wrapper. "It's time for that new spy show you like, and I've never watched it."

Toby strode across the room, his boots clicking on the hardwood floors, and sat in Lacey's mom's recliner. He pointed toward the dining room. "Ain't you gonna offer me one of those candies?" College hadn't driven the country out of Toby.

"Yeah, sure." Lacey went to the dining table to get the bag and held it open for him. She started to grab another for herself but decided to be righteous in front of company.

Toby picked up the remote, turned on the TV, and punched in the channel. "I think you'll like this show."

The phone rang. She took one glance at the caller ID and recognized a friend's number. Lacey's night was becoming as hectic as her day. Her shoulders drooped as she answered. Her stomach twisted in a knot because she knew what was coming. "Hey, Jo. How's it going?"

"I've got to work Saturday." Words tumbled as Joanne launched into her request. "My mother can't keep the kids until afternoon. Could you keep them that morning? Pretty please?"

Lacey's life raced out of her tight-fisted control. No big surprise there. She liked helping people and didn't want to make enemies. "Sure, what time?" She hoped her irritation didn't show in her tone.

"I'll bring them over about nine-thirty. Okay?" Her friend's breathless tone indicated she was in a hurry, probably had her husband yelling at her. Joanne may have picked a bitter herb for a husband, but Lacey still envied Joanne for her family.

"I'll see you then."

"You're the best friend ever." Joanne's voice trailed off into nothingness—much like the compliment.

"What did Joanne want this time? You to babysit?" Toby frowned and grabbed another candy. He shouldn't have sounded so gruff. With a commercial beginning, he softened his tone. "Hey, you have a soda?"

"In the fridge." Lacey stuffed three more candies into her mouth while he was gone and licked the chocolate off her fingers. When she purchased that protein powder to start a new diet next week, she had chosen the chocolate flavor, her favorite. This time, she would make it work. No more overeating for her after the weekend.

When Toby sat again, his program started, so he settled back in the red recliner. He remained quiet with an occasional cop-like comment—like "that's bogus," or "why doesn't the stupid guy pull his Glock?" During the next commercial, he brought the chair to a sitting position and leveled his gaze on Lacey. "Why do you keep helping Joanne? She should pay you to babysit if she needs help."

Like that would happen. Lacey kept her eyes glued to the commercials. "I didn't say that's what she wanted."

"But it is, isn't it?" Lacey felt Toby's glare.

"Yes." Lacey dragged out the word out into three syllables. She faced his admonishing stare. "And I can't charge her. She's my only real friend in this hick town."

Toby's strong jaw tightened. "What am I? A spare tire?"

I always say the wrong thing. "No, but you're a guy. She's my only girlfriend."

"Some friend. All she does is take advantage of you."

"That's not true. Besides, my friends are none of your business, Mr. Policeman. Stick to criminals." She went back to staring at the TV when the program resumed.

Toby watched the show and said nothing, but one foot drummed against the floor while his fingers gripped the armrests.

During the next commercial, Lacey snuck a look at her friend. "You're right. I need to learn to say no." She scooted to the edge of her seat and kept her back straight and tall. "I've made a decision about my job. I won't make calls for my boss anymore."

"That's a good start."

"I really haven't eaten dinner yet. Have you?"

He shook his head.

Lacey sighed. "How about I call Ken to bring us a pizza? Aren't you hungry?" Lacey searched through her address book for Ken's number. "I need to enjoy this weekend. I start my new diet on Monday."

Toby nodded. "Yep, I'm hungry. Good luck on the diet."

She dialed Ken Joiner's place. Joiner's Pizza Parlor was only five blocks away.

Dinner arrived as the show ended. Lacey paid Ken's son and took the pizza. Toby moved to the dining table, and Lacey joined him. The combined aroma of mozzarella, tomatoes, and pepperoni made her mouth water despite all the candy she'd eaten. Ah, food to the rescue.

Toby prayed over their food then grabbed the first slice. "Thanks for the pizza."

"I'm sorry, Toby. I shouldn't have said that, you know. You are my friend, and I know you're concerned about me." Lacey bit off the tip of her slice.

Toby sighed. "Joanne could do something for you occasionally. By George, no one should take advantage of you. Not even me, Lacey." Toby gobbled half the slice in one bite. "You need to stand up for yourself. Say no sometimes."

How would he have liked it if she'd refused to let him come in tonight? "I hate to tell my friends no unless I have to. I'm not doing anything Saturday morning, you know." She took another bite, savoring spices on her tongue. "Okay. Next time, I'll tell Joanne I'm busy when she needs a babysitter."

"Good."

"How's the job coming along?"

"My policeman thing?" He smirked.

Lacey ducked her head. "I wasn't trying to belittle your job. Honest."

"I know that. I wouldn't be your friend if I thought you would." He took a sip of his drink, then lifted his Stetson and twirled it. "I might buy me a white Stetson soon."

Lacey stared. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Toby's smile broadened. "I may be promoted to detective. I'll know in a couple weeks."

Lacey jumped up, ran around the table, and hugged him. Toby almost knocked her over when he stood. He caught her shoulders, massaging them.

"Mmmm. That feels wonderful." She rested her head against his chest.

"Turn around, and I'll give you a good back rub," he told her.

His hands kneaded her back with gusto, starting with her neck and ending at her lower back, brushing across her rolls of fat. She flinched, but didn't move away. Toby always had a way of offering comfort without judgment.

As he slowed his massage, she leaned against his chest, his strong muscles firm against her huge body.

Lacey felt safe around Toby. She had from the first day of kindergarten when her mother asked his mother to let Toby walk her to school so she wouldn't have to go alone. His mother had taught him well—Toby had watched out for her and held her hand when they crossed the street.

"Do you think I'm crazy?" Lacey used Toby's firm chest as a backrest.

He moved away from her and stuffed the last piece of pizza in his mouth. "Yeah, crazy as a bedbug."

"Toby" She stomped her feet as she regained her balance.

"I guess I should be going." He stopped by the table and picked up her bag of candy pulling out a couple of pieces. "Thanks for dinner." He sighed. "No, Lacey, I don't think you're crazy. You've just been listening to your mother again." He closed the three steps between them and grasped Lacey's shoulders. "Your mother's had lots of hurt in her life. Don't let her take it out on you. You've got a heart as big as all outside. You're okay. Do you hear me?" He pulled her close.

The beat of his heart built her courage, but she felt his stiffness and stepped away from him. She nodded.

"Maybe we can get in some fishing Saturday afternoon. I think I'll be off if I don't have a stakeout at that meth house. This could be a bad time to become a detective in Wharton Rock. I swear, Lacey, the devil has come to our town." Toby stared out the window as if he'd already left, and then he turned to ask again. "How about the fishing?" He opened the front door and paused.

"That would be great. I'll need to relax after watching Joanne's kids that morning." She walked to the door, closing it after him. She leaned against the door. Finally alone, but now it was late.

I'm trying here, Lord.

Lacey changed into pj's and snuggled in bed with the rest of the candy and her book. Soon after, she dimmed the lights, but her tumbling

stomach and erratic thoughts disturbed her sleep. A tear slipped from her eyes. Toby faced real-life devils, but food was her demon, threatening everything good and decent in her life.

Try as she would, she couldn't seem to stop it.

CHAPTER *Three*

The sun glared through Lacey's windshield the next morning on the way to work. She felt like a compact car run over by a dump truck. Her head pounded. Her stomach turned somersaults. She stopped to pick up some of Daisy's donuts for comfort.

"Want your usual dozen?" Daisy asked.

"Yes, you know Myrna likes to offer them to her patients."

Guilt hit Lacey in the gut. Those donuts were for her. Was there such a thing as a white lie?

When Lacey unlocked the office door, she dropped the bakery box on her desk, grabbing and gobbling one donut while she opened the blinds to allow the sun to filter across the reception area. The taste didn't matter so much. She was feeding her nerves. She squashed the donut box into her left-hand drawer, her hiding place from prying eyes.

Myrna arrived at ten-twenty, twenty minutes after her first patient appointment and two minutes after Lacey's fifth donut. She buzzed the intercom on Lacey's desk. "Did you make coffee?"

Lacey held down the button to talk. "Yes. Shall I bring you a cup?"

"What do you think?"

Lacey stiffened at the woman's rudeness. It didn't sit well with her upset stomach. She stomped into the small kitchen, plunked down a mug, and poured the dark brew without wiping up what she sloshed on the side. She slipped through the side door to Myrna's private office. "Here it is." Lacey set the cup on a coaster so the top of the mahogany executive desk would remain unmarred.

"Thanks." Myrna closed her eyes to savor the flavor. "Who's my first patient?"

"Ramona Miller." Lacey handed over the chart with a grimace as she looked at the clock. The second patient would be due soon. Another late start for their patient appointments—with Lacey the one who got the complaints.

Myrna sipped her coffee again as she perused the chart in front of her. "What time is my appointment with Haggerty?"

Lacey cleared her throat. "He wouldn't give me one. Said you had to call this morning."

Myrna plopped down the chart. She glared at Lacey. Her lips pursed, her eyes closed, and her hand waved Lacey from the room. "Send Ramona in."

Lacey slipped to the door, but turned back. "The commode is stopped up. Whom should I call?"

Myrna had leaned against the neck rest of her chair. As she raised her head and opened her eyes, her sigh could be heard in the waiting room. "Whoever." Her boss clapped her hands. "Get busy."

By twelve-thirty, Lacey had ushered out the last morning patient, hoping the one o'clock one wouldn't arrive early.

She locked the door and braved the cold April wind to dash to the fried chicken restaurant. The smell of chicken made her salivate while she waited for her favorite—extra crunchy.

"Hey, Lacey," a voice called from the entrance to the indoor playground. "Come out here when you get yours."

Joanne held open the door. Lacey waved. About that time, her chicken and fries were ready, so she followed her friend to where she sat watching four-year-old Beth.

Lacey eyed the width of the booth and cringed. She searched for an extra chair to put at the end. "Don't you have to work today?"

"I go in at one. I'll take Beth by Mother's first." She yelled at her daughter. "Don't climb on that." Joanne picked up one French fry. "You decided about the cruise yet?"

Lacey gobbled a chicken nugget whole. "I can't go on a cruise and wear a swimsuit. Look at me." She frowned.

"So you weigh too much. Should that keep you from having fun? Boy, you're lucky. No husband or kids to tie you down." Joanne slurped her soda. "I'd go in a minute if I wasn't saddled with Calvin and the girls."

Lacey curbed her irritation. Joanne knew Lacey had to work and take care of Mom? “I want to, but I can’t, you know.”

A loud cry came from the children’s play area. Beth had scraped her hand, and Joanne ran to console her.

Lacey munched her chicken while looking at the young mothers in the area. She was out of place. She didn’t fit anywhere. Heat spread up her neck. If she were alone, she would cry, but the busy fast food place wasn’t the place to make a scene. She swallowed her envy with a mouthful of ketchup and fries.

Grabbing her last nugget of chicken to eat in the car, Lacey called with a wave, “Gotta go, Jo. Our next patient will be there soon.”

“I’m late, too. See you Saturday.” Joanne went in the opposite direction swinging her daughter’s hand and singing.

A lump grew in Lacey’s heart. She wasn’t the lucky one—Joanne was.

Lacey’s stomach gurgled to digest the quickly-eaten chicken. Two minutes later, she parked at work, ran to wash the grease from her mouth, and added fresh lipstick.

When she returned to unlock the office’s front door, a tall man wearing a baseball cap with the lettering *Lindy’s Plumbing* was waiting for her. “I was fixin’ to leave. Thought you’d closed. Name’s Bill Lindy.” His singsong voice hypnotized Lacey.

“I told you we closed from twelve to one for lunch.” Lacey’s words had a slight edge. She put away her purse and showed Lindy to the bathroom.

The one o’clock patient, a robust man in his mid-forties was followed in by a mousy-looking woman. After verifying the patients’ names, she started transcribing Myrna’s medical notes. The constant goings and comings of the plumber disturbed her concentration. His smile warmed her, and he seemed to stop by her desk to talk every time he trod through the lobby.

The last time he walked out, the lady in the waiting room commented, “Think he likes you.”

Lacey brightened. She was thinking the same thing, and he wasn’t bad looking. When he gave her the bill, his hand held onto her shaking fingers. “You got plans Saturday night?”

“No.” She lowered her face so he couldn’t see her blush.

"Maybe we could catch some dinner and a movie. If you'd give me your number, I'd call first." Bill Lindy's eyes sparkled.

He was a stranger, but Marion Ferguson at the insurance office next door had recommended him as a plumber, said he was reliable. In Wharton Rock, no one was a stranger long. She wrote down her name and number. "Here." She held out a piece of paper and tried out her most appealing smile.

"See you then." He pocketed her note before he left.

Lacey couldn't work. Her mind fixated on a tall curly-haired guy who actually wanted to date her. Wow. And to think, she had been so depressed this morning. Now hope reared on the horizon.



Saturday afternoon after babysitting Joanne's kids, Lacey joined her mother and collapsed in the recliner moments before Toby came to the door. She motioned him into the living room.

"Hey, Lace." He nodded to Mom. "Hey, Mrs. Chandler. How are y'all?" He twisted his hat in his hands. "Ready to go fishing, Lace?"

Lacey squirmed out of her chair and went to the bedroom for her purse. "As long as we can go eat first. I'm tired and hungry. Beth and Tiffany bounced with energy all morning."

"We'll stop by that new burger place on the way to the lake." Toby held open the door.

"Sounds good. You still have my pole, don't ya?" Lacey led the way to Toby's old Suburban. He pampered it like a brand new Lexus even though it had over a hundred thousand miles by now.

Toby opened the car door for her. "Yep. Never moved it after last time."

"I could use some time lying beside the lake. It's been a crazy week."

"Me too." Toby backed out of her driveway. "And looks like I've got extra hours ahead of me."

"Where you going?" Lacey watched him turn off Main Street onto Cleveland Avenue, not the way to the lake or the hamburger place.

Toby drove into a parking spot beside the police station. "Need to double check the shifts. I always forget to do that. I think I work tomorrow." He climbed out of the truck. "I'll be right back."

The longer he was gone, the more Lacey fumed. She didn't like waiting. Her lightheadedness and rumbling tummy reminded her of the need for immediate nourishment.

A uniformed policeman exited. She waved when she realized it was the new guy, Willie Brandt. He had a grim look on his face, but upon spotting Lacey, he gave her with a big grin before continuing to a squad car parked around the corner.

A cardinal flew by Toby's windshield. Lacey smiled at the beauty, which relieved her anger for a moment. She glanced back at the door to the station. Toby knew she was starving. Her blood sugar dropped as she tapped her fingers.

Toby ran out and jumped into the driver's seat. "I have to work tomorrow. I hate Sunday work. It's slow, and I have to miss the morning church service, my favorite part of the week."

Lacey would just as soon miss Sunday service and sleep late, but others in town would think she was a heathen if she did. "Are we going to eat now?"

"Yeah, sorry." Toby drove to the highway for the new fast food place. "I've eaten here twice. It was good."

"This is my first time." Lacey climbed out of the car. The smell of beef and grease caused her stomach to growl as she entered and started scanning the menu board.

As soon as Toby had waved and spoken to everyone in the place, and they'd placed their order, Lacey launched into what she wanted to tell him. Bill Lindy. "He's soooo cute. I can't believe he asked me on a date."

Toby took off his hat and laid it in the seat beside him. "I can. I keep saying you're a catch, Lace. You've got the most beautiful black hair of anyone in town, and you're true blue. Everyone knows you can be counted on in a pinch."

"But I'm so," she tried to think of a nice way to express it, "overweight." Her chin lowered.

"So am I. Who cares? There's more to us than how we look. You care about people, really care." When their number was called, he jumped to get their order.

Lacey helped him spread out the food. "Do you know him, Toby? He's new to town, but Marion Ferguson says she's used his plumbing

services, and he did good work. He's from Apache Falls. Bought old man Gibson's shop."

"No, I've never met him. I heard of him, of course. He had to apply for a business license." Toby cut his hamburger in half and started eating.

"Are you going on that singles cruise?" Lacey couldn't quit thinking about it.

"Sandra gave me a pamphlet, but I can't get off work. You should go." He bit into the second half of his sandwich.

Lacey ate round the side of her hamburger. "I wouldn't know anyone. If you could go, maybe."

"Sandra's going. You know her." He stuffed in the last bite.

Lacey watched the comings and goings of people out the window. Like that would help. Sandra was Miss Perfect. Lacey wouldn't be caught dead in a swimsuit beside Sandra Lloyd.

When they both finished, they threw away the trash and headed to the truck. As they pulled out of the lot, Lacey spotted a couple entering the fast food place, the girl talking and smiling up at the tall man.

Lacey had never seen that skinny girl, but she had seen the man. Her spirits dropped to zero when she read *Lindy's Plumbing* on his baseball cap.

CHAPTER *Four*

Sunday morning in the Wharton Rock police station was as dead as the funeral home down the street. Toby would rather be on patrol with Willie than stuck in the office alone. He paced the black-and-white tile floor that reminded him of his grandfather's checkerboard, and he prayed.

A glance at the log hanging on the wall reminded Toby of Chief Langford's warning of extra hours coming because of the drug problem.

Lord, keep all our crew safe today.

Paperwork begged to be completed. Toby took his seat. An autopsy would be more exciting than writing up reports. He twirled a pencil, took a deep breath, and regretted having so much time to think.

Lacey was mad at him, and he had no idea why. When they left for the fast food place, she was okay—then she wasn't. The rest of the day, she had seemed mad as a bull with a burr in its behind.

A frown scrunched up his face despite the fact that no one was there to see. To her, he was just a friend, and he couldn't fix that. He couldn't fix her. He couldn't fix anything.

His jaw tightened. His shoulders squared. His legs stiffened. He refused to be a chump for anyone, even Lacey. But, he had a soft spot for her that he couldn't dent.

When he and Lacey were in high school, he had treated her awfully, so by his university days, he was eaten up with guilt. Somewhere along the way that guilt turned to . . . what?

She was the most caring person he'd ever known, denying herself to do for others. Building her up wasn't going well, but he had to try. He owed her that much.

The pencil he was holding snapped into two pieces and stabbed his hand with a sharp, wooden edge. That's what he got for not shutting off dismal thoughts and finishing paperwork.

Willie's voice crackled through the speaker. "Following a suspicious group of kids." Static from the radio almost blocked out the message.

"Okay, let me know what happens," Toby said.

The front door opened. One of Wharton Rock's well-known citizens, Ken Joiner, nodded. "Toby."

Toby stuck out his hand. "Hey, Ken, what can I do for you?"

Ken shook the extended hand. His brow furrowed. Years of bending over to pat out pizza dough had given the man to have a slight stoop, but he compensated for it with a broad smile. Now the creases around his mouth deepened. "Vandals last night. Threw stuff on the floor, busted a window."

Toby sat at his desk and pulled out a pad to write down the details.

"Probably kids bored on Saturday night." Ken banged the desk. "Used to be, when we got bored, we raced our cars down Highway 254. Now they damage other people's property!"

Toby looked up with a grimace at the outburst. "I'll have the third shift stop by on patrol. I promise we'll keep an eye on the place more at night." He went back to writing.

Ken continued to stand in front of the desk, his Joiner Pizza T-shirt lifting and lowering over his stomach with each breath, his baseball cap turning over and over in his hands.

Toby took in Ken's expression. Something wasn't right. Toby pressed his lips together and cocked his head to the right. "Anything else?"

Ken's jaw tightened. "Has my boy come in here lately?"

Toby stood and circled the desk. "Not to my knowledge. Any reason you think he would?"

Ken swatted his leg with the ball cap. "Drat it all, Sonny thinks he wants to be a police officer. But I want him to help me in the shop."

Toby ducked his head, trying to stifle a grin. He'd had a similar problem with his own parents. "We make our own choices. Sonny may think about several careers before he decides on one. He's young yet." Toby patted Ken's shoulder. Though younger, Toby's uniform lent him authority. That's one

of the things he liked about his job. “Who knows? He might try something else and then decide the pizza shop is where he wants to be. Give him a little time and space. It’ll work out.”

Ken plopped his hat back on and headed toward the door. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Thanks.”

After Ken left, Willie stopped by and poured himself a cup of Toby’s strong coffee. “I followed those three teens who were hanging out behind the old station on the highway.”

“So?”

Willie shrugged. “Looked up to no good to me.”

Toby sniffed. “They’re teenagers. They’re always up to mischief.” He answered the ringing phone. From the corner of his eye, he spotted Chief Langford. Toby glanced up at the black clock on the wall. Yep, twelve noon. Church was over. Chief couldn’t go a day without checking on things.

When Toby got off the phone, Willie and the chief were deep in discussion.

Chief lowered his Stetson over his eyes. “Sorry, man, we all have troubles, but no days off—probably for weeks.” He stomped into his office, snatched a paper, and marched back out the front door, hand raised in a wave as he left.

Willie downed his coffee in one huge gulp. “I should be going.” His face was scrunched in anger, and his tone reflected the irritation.

“Don’t chase anymore teenagers,” Toby called aiming for a lighter mood to ease the tension.

Willie turned and leaned stiff arms on the desk. The whites of his eyes seemed to pop out of his brown face. “Know where those boys ended up?”

“Hamburger Heaven?”

“Nope, church.” Willie guffawed. He walked out of the station, still laughing at his own joke.

Levity helped Toby ease through his boring Sunday shift. If only he could forget the reports they’d received about an expected crime increase. Tomorrow his rigid schedule began.

Compared to Sunday’s hushed atmosphere, the office was bustling on Monday morning. Toby rushed past the front desk, hip knocking over the fake ficus tree.

Amber, the receptionist, didn’t look happy with him, as she held the phone to her chest. “Mays, line four.”

Toby yanked the tree back onto its stand. "Sorry, Amber." He balanced it and tried to fluff out the caved-in branches. "You try so hard to spruce up this place."

"Look at the squashed top," Amber whined before she going back to the phone.

Toby stretched to straighten the top branches.

In the cubicle on the side of the room, the bookkeeper-dispatcher's right-hand fingers flew across her calculator keys. The index finger of her left hand worked the radio control. Everyone in this small office multitasked.

Beyond an open office door toward the back, the Chief reprimanded a detective. Their voices intruded into the main lobby.

Toby picked up the patrol car key from his desk and went back to the door. "Hey, Amber, I'm heading out."

She waved him off as the phone rang again.

Crossing Wharton Rock took five minutes total. It was a small town just like he preferred. He waved at the pastor of First Methodist who Toby knew was on his way to the nursing home to feed his mother.

The radio sprang to life.

"Wheeler," he answered.

Ruby, in her dispatcher role, sent him to check with the new fast food place. "Reported trouble with getting a guy to leave."

"Will do." The mention of the place reminded Toby of Lacey's weird reaction yesterday.

Toby dispatched the drunken guy who was causing the disturbance to the patrol car, and he called Amber. "I'll be back in five with my pick-up."

He punched in Lacey's number.

"Hi," her voice sounded rushed and irritated.

That's how she'd sounded Saturday on their fishing trip. He couldn't seem to do anything lately to make her happy. "Just calling to see how your date went."

"Don't ask."

He chuckled. "I already did."

"Lousy. Okay? I've gotta go. I'm busy." She disconnected.

Another knock on the head from God?

Yes, Lord? I can't fix her.

Still, he could try again tonight not to fix her, but to find out her problem.

He left the station after dropping off the drunk and drove past a convenience store on the highway. He spotted a group of teen boys standing at the back of the store facing the alley—shades of Willie’s observation. Heads down, they talked, each scanning the area from time to time. With the passing of the police car, they began to disperse.

Toby steered the car closer and rolled down the window. The stench of the dumpster engulfed him. “Hey there, what y’all doing?”

Duffy’s son looked at his feet. Another boy kept his back to Toby. A chunky boy with spiky hair, who looked familiar, watched the tallest of the four.

Wearing a blue sleeveless T-shirt and baggy jeans, the appointed leader threw something in the trash bin and walked toward the squad car. “We’re just hanging.”

Toby recognized the boy, a real troublemaker. A shiver slipped down Toby’s spine. No going to church for that one unless God had worked a miracle.

Past that boy, Toby spotted a skinny kid with pimples trying to keep his head turned from Toby. Ken Joiner’s boy. “That you, Sonny?”

Sonny turned and stepped up behind the taller boy as if using him for a protective wall. “Yes, sir.”

“Plan on buying something in the store, do you?” Toby’s gaze roved over all four boys.

“Yep, I’m wanting a Red Bull.” The troublemaker was obviously the spokesman. He turned toward the front of the store with the other three following like a pack of wolves searching for prey.

Sonny waved as Toby watched. Apprehension, like a bad taste, settled in Toby’s mouth. Have to keep an eye on that boy. He was telling his dad one thing and his friends another.

CHAPTER *Five*

Lacey's gold Cadillac wasn't in the driveway when Toby drove up that evening, but he stopped anyway.

Mrs. Chandler answered the door and motioned for him to come inside. "Lacey ran to get some screws. Our cabinet door handle came off, and she couldn't find any screws."

Toby dropped onto the sofa. "Did you enjoy your visit with Katie?"

She clasped her hands. "I wouldn't tell just anyone, but you're like family. Katie's going to leave that husband of hers. He stays gone all the time, and when he's home, he's drugged up." Her hands twisted tighter. "Lacey doesn't know it yet, but Katie plans on calling to see if she can stay with us—just till she gets on her feet again, you understand."

Toby pulled one leg across the other knee. "Family has to help each other. I'm sure Lacey will say yes."

Mrs. Chandler frowned. "I don't know. She's mad at Katie right now. Lacey's mad at everyone."

The side door opened. Mrs. Chandler put a finger across her lips to silence him.

Toby stood as Lacey entered. "Hey, Lace."

Lacey's eyes brightened when she saw him, or was that his imagination? She walked back to the kitchen but looked over her shoulder. "I've got a cabinet to fix. You have dinner yet, Toby?"

"Yeah, had a good TV dinner." He patted his ever-rounding belly and then followed her.

Lacey laid her sack on the counter beside her screw driver and pulled out a screw. "Couldn't find a stupid screw in this whole house and had

to go after some, you know.” She held the handle overhead and started screwing, but it dropped to the floor.

Toby picked it up. “Let me help.” He steadied the handle while she rotated the screw.

“Think I’ll tighten all the screws while I’m at it.” Lacey worked on another handle.

He stepped back. “Always something to do around a house.”

Lacey dropped another handle.

“Give me that.” He tugged the screw driver from her hands and got busy.

He watched Lacey and thought back to high school, remembering Lacey and skinny Joanne being humiliated by his friends, and him not doing anything to stop it. He could never forgive himself for that. He had promised to always help Lacey if he could, and he had kept that promise.

She perched on a bar stool. “I had no idea when I purchased this house from Mother, it meant I’d now have to worry over the upkeep and repairs.” Her laugh had no warmth.

“One reason I prefer renting, but one of these days I’ll have my own place, and it will be a brick on some acreage when I do.” Toby stared above her head and let his mind wander.

“You’ll do it, too,” she said.

Lacey had a smile that made him want to work at keeping it on her face. He sat beside her. “What’s up with you?”

She tilted her chin. “That Myrna is driving me crazy. Today she asked me to tell the hospital administrator she wasn’t in if he called. I told her she better leave if he called because I wasn’t going to lie.”

He wished Lacey would stand up for herself more. He patted her on the back. “Did you really tell her that?”

She shook her head. “She offered to use her hypnotic suggestion therapy on me for my weight.” Lacey popped open a soda. “Think I should do it?”

“Might as well. Can’t hurt.” Toby propped his right leg on the other stool to brace his posture. “Lacey, I gotta know. Why did you get mad at me Saturday? You barely spoke all the time we were fishing.”

Lacey’s eyes widened. “I didn’t get mad at you.”

Toby shifted. “How’d your date with Lindy go Saturday night? Aren’t you going to fill me in?”

The ticking of the clock hanging over the door got louder. Mrs. Chandler's TV reality show from the living room blared, and kids yelled outside. The smell of someone's barbeque wafting through the cracked-open kitchen window titillated his nostrils and made him hungry again.

He sat waiting, remembering again his high school days. Fear of losing his buddies' respect had immobilized him from saving fat Lacey and skinny Joanne from ridicule. To this day, his behavior still disgusted him.

Lacey's eyes had pleaded with him to help them, but he'd failed. Now he watched tears seeping from the corners of her eyes and inching down her cheeks.

She swiped at them.

He nudged his chair closer and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, now shaking under his grasp.

Lacey rested her head against his chest and cried for real, gulping and shuddering.

Toby patted and held her firmly until she calmed. "It can't be that bad." He lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes—eyes the color of the bronze paint he'd used on his cabinet a couple hours ago.

She looked at his belt buckle. "Toby, he was all over me. I guess he thought a girl like me was good for one thing. After the movie, I insisted on him bringing me home. He did, but didn't speak to me any more on the way."

"Don't you worry. He wasn't worthy of you." Toby dabbed one of her tears with his index finger. "God knows the one for you, just wait and see."

Lacey gave him that smile, only this time a bit of sadness washed across her eyes. "You're my optimist, Toby. I wish God would hurry. I'm getting older by the minute."

"Hey, I'm the same age. Remember? We'll marry when and who the Lord wants." Toby scooted back in place.

"Believing the Lord cares about me gets harder every day." Lacey blew her nose.

"Now don't talk like that. I'll be praying for you. Keep your chin up because God does care." Toby heard a shuffling behind him.

Mrs. Chandler groaned. "My arthritis is killing me. Do we have any ice cream?"

"Ice Cream and fudge sauce. That cures everything." Lacey got up to fix three bowls.

Mrs. Chandler took her bowl back to her television.

"By the way . . ." Lacey leaned against the counter. "I didn't get mad at you Saturday. I saw Bill with another woman at the burger place when we left. I was already worried before he picked me up for our date." She licked the big spoon and put it in the sink.

Toby took the bowl Lacey handed him. "I'm sorry, Lacey."

Lacey had taken her first bite of ice cream when someone knocked on the front door.

They heard Mrs. Chandler exclaim, "Katie, glad to see you. Rachel, come over here and give Grandma a kiss."

Lacey and Toby's eyes met. Lacey's forehead wrinkled. "What in the world has brought my sister and niece to Wharton Rock?"

Toby gulped a few more bites of ice cream. "I need to go check on Mom and Dad." He stood and hurried toward the front room.

"Katie, haven't seen you in ages." He hugged the younger woman.

"Hey, Rachel, let me show you something." The four-year-old inched toward Toby. He pulled a bird feather out of his pocket. "This is a genuine dove feather, and it will bring you good luck. I want you to have it. Keep it always with you always." He placed it into her tiny hands.

Rachel's fingers closed loosely over the feather. "Look what I got, Mommy." She held it out for Katie to inspect.

"That's pretty special alright, honey. Now take your doll over there and play. Show her your feather." She patted Rachel's arm as she pointed her to the corner. "I need to talk with Aunt Lacey."

"I'll see y'all around now." Toby made his exit. The three ladies waved, but none looked in his direction. Their eyes and, he imagined their thoughts had turned to the discussion at hand. He was relieved to escape.



"I have a sort of . . ." Katie crushed a throw pillow to her chest and looked up at her sister " . . . problem right now. I need your help." Her gray eyes fluttered.

Lacey dropped into her recliner and leaned back to brace herself but remained quiet. Katie's fair complexion didn't resemble Lacey's at all, but Rachel, with her dark hair and brown eyes, could've been Lacey's daughter instead of her niece.

Katie lowered her head causing a blonde wisp to fall into her eyes. "I've left Collin. I can't live with him anymore. He's too strung out. Can we stay here for awhile? I have a job in Apache Falls, so I can help with groceries after I get my first paycheck." Her eyes darted to Rachel. "We have no place to go, and Mom said it was okay with her if you approved."

Anything Katie did was okay with Mom.

But what could Lacey do? When Katie's first husband stranded her four hours away, Lacey had driven to pick up her sister. The house was small even then, and now she had Rachel, too. "Sure, we'll make out. That old sofa makes a pretty good bed as you remember." Lacey pushed up her recliner. "You used to be a pretty good hand at painting. Think you could help me paint the doors and windows outside? That would be the best payment for me."

Katie brightened. "Sure, I'll help you."

Rachel bounced over to her mother to show her how she had dressed her doll. "Look, Mommy, isn't she pretty?"

Katie mashed down the doll's lace collar. "She's beautiful, honey, just like you. Show Aunt Lacey."

The four-year-old skipped over to Lacey's recliner. "See?"

Love mixed with envy washed over Lacey's being. "That's a very pretty doll. Where did you get her?"

Rachel looked at her mother. "Collin bought her."

"How nice. We'll have to find her a bed too, won't we?" Lacey marched to her bedroom and brought back the box where she stored her boots along with a pink bathroom towel.

Rachel shadowed Lacey while she put the towel in the box and stretched out the doll. "That should work for now. Maybe we can save up and buy her a real cradle."

Rachel took over sprucing up the bed. She dashed back to where she had seen her aunt get the towel and grabbed a washcloth, forming it into a pillow. "There." She beamed.

Katie and Lacey laughed. Their mom remained absorbed in her favorite show.

"Come on in the kitchen," Lacey said to her sister. She dished up another bowl of ice cream and set it in front of Katie before she finished her own which was now half melted. "I thought you and Collin were doing okay. Mom enjoyed her visit last week."

Katie took a bite of ice cream. "Collin was gone the whole time she was there. I was grateful Mom had taken the bus home that day because Collin came in two hours later on a rampage, yelling about everything."

Lacey's spoon poised in midair. "He hit you?"

Katie nodded.

"What about Rachel?"

"No, never, I swear." Katie shook her head. "But that's why I have to leave now. Don't you see?"

Lacey was thankful to get Rachel away from an abusive living situation. "Sure. Good thing you never married." Lacey glared at her sister daring her to lie. Mom thought they had married. "Are you clean?"

"I am. I promise." Katie crossed her heart. "I'll be out on my own in no time, soon as I get a couple paychecks. I'll help you paint and buy groceries too."

Lacey started thinking about the painting job ahead. "You work Saturday?"

"Yes. I always work on Saturdays." Katie's eyes shifted away as she bit her lip. "You gonna paint then?"

"I'll call one of the boys from church. Gotta get it done before it gets too hot." Lacey put her empty bowl in the sink.

Katie sat hers there too even though she'd eaten very little. "I'm off Monday."

"Don't worry about it." Lacey couldn't hide the sharpness. "Let's get your bed made up and hit the hay." She led the way to the living room.

Mom gave Rachel some good-night sugar and retreated to her room where she could finish her program in bed.

Lacey and Katie opened up the sofa bed and prepared for nighttime. Lacey was soon drenched in sweat. Even with the AC pumping out cool air, the house heated up with four people—bound by tension and worry—in a small area.

She picked up her latest romance book and walked to her bedroom. "See you in the morning."

"Oh, you won't wake me up. I'm a heavy sleeper." Katie waved her hand. "Bedtime, Rachel."

The child curled in Lacey's recliner, the doll clasped to her side.

Lacey's heart melted like a piece of ice on a July sidewalk. After getting a blanket out of her closet, she spread it over the small figure and planted a kiss on her forehead. She couldn't have denied Rachel a home any more than she could lose a hundred pounds overnight.

Katie jumped from her bed and also kissed her daughter. "Thanks, sis, for allowing us to stay." She took the extra blanket Lacey handed to her.

A drop of sweat ran into Lacey's eyes. She brushed it away. "No problem. It will work out." Those words were meant more for her own ears. Getting money out of her sister was harder than pulling the mortgage payment out of Mom's disability check, and that wasn't easy.

CHAPTER *Six*

The next morning, a car honk hurried Betty Chandler out the front door. Glad Lacey was at work and Katie was asleep, Betty loaded paints and canvas without any explanations. She worried that the dark moods of her oldest daughter resembled those of her father. Betty couldn't take seeing one more family member hospitalized for mental illness.

She climbed into Marjorie Joiner's Buick.

"Who's driving the red Honda in your driveway?" Marjorie backed out and headed to the small studio their teacher, Connie, had set up in the middle of Wharton Rock's crafty downtown.

Betty winced as Marjorie threw on her brakes for a passing car. If only she hadn't sold her car, but her budget was tight, and driving hurt her legs. "It's Katie's."

Marjorie waited at one of the town's red lights. "Did you hear the police made a drug bust?"

The car lurched ahead. Betty braced herself with a hand on the dash. "Lacey mentioned that Toby expected long hours coming because of a meth problem."

"I worry about Sonny. He's running around with this older boy, Denny something. Ken doesn't trust him." Marjorie pulled into Connie's shop.

Favoring her right leg, Betty eased out of the car. Dizziness sent the ground whirling. She gripped the doorjamb.

Marjorie carried her art supplies around the car. "You okay, Betty?"

The earth slowed, and Betty's world righted. "Yeah, I think so." She opened the back passenger door to get her stuff.

"You don't look so good."

"My blood sugar may be low. I didn't wake up in time for breakfast." She eased away from the car.

"Stand here. I'll run to Willie's and get some donuts and orange juice." Marjorie headed across the street to the busy restaurant.

Betty watched a red Honda pass a cross street and disappear over the railroad tracks. Sure looked like Katie's car, but it couldn't be. Betty continued to stare, swallowing a sour taste.

"Here's some OJ." Marjorie came from behind her.

Betty took a couple sips.

The two women walked into the class and greeted the circle of eight women. Marjorie offered donuts to everyone and set one on a napkin in front of Betty.

"Thanks." Betty placed a canvas on an empty easel.

Their teacher stood at the front, one hand resting atop the other in front of her, her gaze drifting over her students. "Well, ladies, are you ready to paint and forget the worries of the day?" Betty couldn't keep her focus off the woman's mole just over her upper lip.

"I am," one lady commented, "what with all the talk about that drug bust."

Next to Betty, Nicole harrumphed. "Terrible thing to happen in our sleepy little town."

As Betty's worries flitted back and forth across her mind, she shaded the pinks and oranges to highlight her sunset painting. She drew a patch of bluebonnets in the foreground. For awhile, she forgot she was a helpless old woman, no longer able to care for herself. Being dependent grated on her like the screech of nails on a chalkboard.

Margie broke the silence, her thoughts obviously still on the drugs. "I worry about our teenagers."

"I worry about Katie." The words slipped out before Betty realized it. Her cheeks flamed. She touched them with cool hands and tried to shift as if it hadn't been her that had spoken.

Marjorie, sitting to her right, patted her hand. "We never quit worrying about our kids, do we?"

Betty gulped. "I guess, but Katie's clean. I'm thankful for that. She's got a job and everything." Betty stiffened her spine. "I'm lucky she kicked

that stuff, and of course, meth wasn't her problem." A quivery feeling enveloped her stomach. The jitters made her want to pace, but that would make everyone stare.

One woman looked from her own floral painting to Betty's. "I don't know if they ever kick the habit. My Robert was clean for two years."

Betty grimaced. "He had other problems though."

"True," Robert's mother said.

Connie came behind the two ladies. "Love your colors, Betty."

Betty twisted in her chair to see the teacher.

She cocked her reading glasses on her nose. "Bet you're thankful for Lacey. What would you do if she ever got married or moved away?"

Betty glared at Connie. "Lacey's bellyaching will be her undoing. Anyway, Katie would take care of me if that happened."

"Hope you're right," Robert's mom said.

Betty clamped her lips into a fine line and released the paintbrush with a plop. Then she picked it up, closed her paints, and perched on the edge of her seat waiting for Marjorie to finish.

Her creativity had dried up with the recognition of the fear she had been trying to deny. If Lacey broke down, Katie was the only daughter left to care for her mother. Betty shivered at that thought.

CHAPTER *Seven*

On Katie's first Saturday living with her family, Lacey left everyone asleep when she slipped from the house. With a tenuous grip on her temper, she drove to Golden Oaks Nursing Facility.

"Just sing to them. Get them singing along. Read a Scripture." Her pastor's wife, Virginia Lloyd had all but begged Lacey to take over the ministry.

"I can't." But even to Lacey's ears, her refusal had been weak. She was always a pushover for anyone needing help.

"What if I could get someone to share the load and do every other Saturday?" The woman knew how to get volunteers. She wouldn't take "no."

"I might do that." Lacey was busy at work when the call had come. "I've gotta go now."

"Will you plan on this Saturday?"

No. "Okay, I'll do this Saturday." Lacey's voice escalated. "But not the next one."

"You're a blessing, Lacey. Thanks. Oh, by the way, I think your taking in Katie and her daughter is a wonderful thing."

Little towns. Everyone knew everyone else's business. That had been the third compliment Lacey had received that week, and she didn't know how to handle compliments.

She parked in the lot and entered the building to a lobby overflowing with wheel chairs and walkers. Four ladies with gray hair had usurped the overstuffed flowered chairs up front. A portable oxygen tank attached to a large man was wheeled to a hard-backed chair on one end. Others filtered

in until the large room appeared small. They clustered around Lacey, a look of glee on each face.

A trickle of sweat ran from her underarms. A headache twitched just above her brows. She coughed. Another worry, another job, another concern. Would it be another failure? A few donuts might ease the tension, but it was too late for that.

The back wall clock told her it was three minutes until time to start. Her hands shook. She placed her Bible and notes on the podium near the front door. Eager faces watched as she set up a CD player. She was the latest side show for a group hungry for attention. The last time she had done anything for God was church choir. When the choir had stopped wearing robes and her size increased, Lacey quit singing.

She closed her eyes and prayed for God's touch.

Lacey cleared her throat, started up the CD, and sang "It's All About Jesus." When she stopped and turned off the CD, she led the group in "What a Friend," her all-time favorite hymn.

The text for her devotion came from 1 Peter 5:7 NIV—"Cast all your anxiety on him; because he cares for you."

Toby would approve.

Lord, take my anxiety.

Her struggle of spirit eased like a blast of oxygen. Jesus worked His magic. She was glad to be working for Him again.

After the service, several thanked her for coming.

One lady clung to her hand. "God sent you here. Might as well accept it." She begged Lacey to stay.

Wrinkled faces glowed and everyone insisted on telling Lacey their stories while she packed her stuff.

"I can't stay. I've got to go paint my house."

The lady holding her hand spoke for everyone. She had a surprisingly booming voice for her small frame. "We'll see you again next week. Right?"

"No. Someone else will come next week, but I'll be back." Lacey swatted at tears forming in the corners of her eyes. "What's your name?" She turned to the lady still swinging her hand so Lacey couldn't leave.

"The name is Pearl. I plan on requesting they send you next week." At last, she dropped Lacey's hand and walked away as if everything was settled.

If Miss Pearl had anything to say about it, Lacey might come more than she intended. She waved goodbye to the dispersing crowd and made it to her car.

On the drive home, Lacey hummed “What a Friend?” Maybe Miss Pearl was right. This was where she belonged.

As she stepped into her house, reality slapped her in the face.

CHAPTER *Fight*

As Lacey stepped into the house, Katie glanced up from the newspaper while gulping down a bowl of cereal. "You didn't make any coffee, and I couldn't find any."

Lacey's muscles immediately bunched with tension. She wanted to growl back at her sister, but she softened to the tune playing in her head. "I don't like coffee, and neither does Mom. You know that." Lacey took Katie's empty bowl to the sink. "I'll buy some today."

Katie jumped from her seat. "I forgot the time. I need to get out of here." When she came back through with her purse and car keys, she paused. "Are you going to paint today?"

Lacey sat in the dining chair, trying to remember where she'd left her peace. "Yes, when Mark gets here. He's a boy from church. I hired him to help."

"Let me know if I can help on Monday." Katie flew out the door and into a teenage boy who towered over her small frame. "You must be Mark." She sidled closer.

Mark's eyes followed the dip of Katie's low neckline. "You must be Miss Chandler's sister."

"I am." Katie clasped Mark's right bicep. "You'll be able to handle that heavy ladder with no problem." She smiled at the boy.

His ears turned scarlet.

Lacey needed to rescue the teen from the seductress. "Thanks for coming, Mark. Come out in the garage. I'll show you where the ladder and paint are stored." She turned to Katie. "See you later, sis."

Katie swayed down the driveway to her red Honda with a dent on the driver's side.

"Where did you get the dent?" Lacey called, but Katie was already inside. Lacey shrugged and turned back to Mark.

His stare followed the short skirt like a dog in heat.

Lacey caught his shoulder. "Follow me."

Mark painted for an hour before Lacey and Rachel returned from the grocery store and called him in for lunch. "I picked up rotisserie chicken. Hope you'll have lunch with us."

Mark pulled down the visor of his baseball hat. "If it's okay with you, I'll run and get a burger. Be back soon."

"Sure." Lacey grabbed the bag of baby carrot sticks to munch as she set out the food for her family. The new diet book she had purchased last week suggested no eating between meals, but if she must, only free veggies, so she had bought these carrot sticks for such an occasion.

"Would you like to say the prayer?" Lacey asked Rachel as they gathered around their dinette table.

"I don't know any prayers." Rachel's chocolate eyes sparkled.

"Repeat after me. 'God is great, God is good.'" Lacey taught her the child's prayer her mother had taught her at that age.

When Rachel finished the last word, she peeked up and then grinned. "I did it. Can I do it again?"

"One prayer's enough for this meal." Her grandmother sliced off a leg from the chicken.

"Can I help you paint?" Rachel asked.

"No, baby, but you can play outside while Aunt Lacey paints. Okay?" Lacey dipped up some ready-made mashed potatoes onto Rachel's plate. She knew they were the child's favorite. She stuck with green beans for herself but sliced some white meat off the small chicken.

Toby's voice drifted in from outside. "Hey, Mark, doing a good job there. You leaving for lunch?"

"Yes, Officer Wheeler. I'll be back to paint some more in a few minutes."

Lacey stepped to the side door. "Hey, Toby." She waved at Mark, then looked back to see the badge gleaming from Toby's pocket. "You must be on duty."

"Yep, but I get off at one. I started early. You need some more help on this painting?"

Lacey walked out on the porch. "I can't ask you to give up your afternoon."

"Why not?" I'd ask you if I needed help." He reared back to look at the side of the house. "Need to sand this side first. I could do that."

Toby stooped to Rachel's height when she opened the door. "Hi, there. Remember me? I was here when you got here a few days ago."

"I member. You gave me a feather." Rachel sounded so grown up sometime. "We're having mashed potatoes."

"Is that right?" Toby glanced up at Lacey. "I bet that tastes good."

Rachel nodded. "Is that your pen?"

Toby's face showed puzzlement, then understanding dawned in his eyes. "It's a badge. It says that I'm a real policeman." He stood again.

Rachel's eyes slid to the sky above his head. "You can arrest people?"

"Not today. Today I'm checking on people to see if everyone's okay. Are you okay, Rachel?"

She nodded.

"There you go then. Guess I've done my job." He patted her shoulder. "I'll be on my way and let you and your aunt finish eating." He started toward his squad car parked in front. "I'll be back in a little while. I'm a good painter." He shut the truck door.

"Thanks so much." Lacey waved to him.

Within an hour, she had cleaned the kitchen and changed to old sweatpants and a T-shirt, ready to start painting. Mark was back at work by then, moving the ladder to the back of her house.

"My dad sent his roller. Said I could cover more space with less paint," Mark called from the ladder.

"Your dad is a wise man. I was thinking I should've bought one of those." She picked up a brush and dipped it into the paint for the back door. "Reckon your dad is trying to help you raise money for your band trip, too."

"That's my dad. He says he can use me some at the drug store this summer. That will help, too."

Lacey shielded her eyes to look up at Mark. "You're doing a good job. Glad you sanded that first. That's what Toby said to do."

Mark hesitated. "My dad taught me to paint right, Miss Chandler."

"That he did, Mark. Good job." Toby walked around the house for a better look. "Where do you want me to start?" From the driveway, Toby grinned like hyena stalking his prey.

"If you're sure you don't mind, you can start on the front." She walked around with him. "I forgot to buy a roller."

"No problem. Brought my own." Toby opened the back hatch to Old Blue. "I was a boy scout, remember."

Laughing at her friend, Lacey began her own paint job, thinking how nice it was to have Toby for a friend. Good thing they didn't mess it all up with romance.

By seven that evening, shadows crawled over their work, making it hard to see missed spots. "Time to quit," Lacey said.

Mark and Toby gave little complaint.

"I'm buying dinner," Lacey said.

"Not for me." Mark put away the ladder.

"Me neither. I'm beat. Going home to collapse in front of my own TV with my own TV dinner." Toby reached for his hat on the front porch lawn chair. "Bye, Lace."

"Thanks, guys. We done good." Exhaustion tugged at Lacey's body. She eyed her little niece, dirt splotted all over her cheeks. Lacey straightened her weary shoulders. She had to worry about dinner and a bath before she could rest.

Mark waved and drove down the road.

Toby revved up his Suburban.

Lacey waved. She stored the paint in the garage and went inside. She needed to stow the razor blade she'd been using to scrape the paint off window panes, but with a four-year-old around, she had to be innovative. She snuck into her bathroom and slid it in at the top of the mirror frame. Yeah, good place. Rachel couldn't reach it nor budge it.

"Whatcha doing, Aunt Lacey?"

She jerked and turned. "Just washing my hands."

"I'm hungry."

Lacey prepared sandwiches for dinner. Two cookies were her reward for working hard.

Mom escaped to her room not long after she ate. Rachel's head nodded. Lacey gathered the small girl into her arms." Let's give you a bath so you can go to sleep."

"Kay."

Lacey lay the child on her bed and put bubbles in warm bath water.

Rachel clutched her dolly to her when Lacey lowered her to the bathwater.

"Let me lay Margaret Rose on the floor so she won't get wet."

"She needs a bath, too."

"Not today, sweetie." Lacey trickled the warm water over the girl's belly. The bath was over soon. Lacey towed Rachel dry and handed her back her doll. Then, she lowered her onto the sofa and covered her with a blanket.

Katie burst in the front door. "Gotta get to bed early, Rachel girl. We are going to church in the morning." She unrolled her makeshift bed and sprawled across it without any attempt at cleanliness. "I'm tired."

Lacey threw a pillow at her baby sis. "I'm glad to hear you're planning on going to church with us."

Katie rose to a sitting position and picked up the pillow. "Gotta go. Mom bribed me."

Lacey tipped her head to the left. "Mom doesn't bribe people."

"She bribed me."

CHAPTER *Nine*

Angry, Lacey crossed her arms over her chest and shifted onto one hip. She swallowed the lump in her throat and stared at her sister, trying to make sense of what she had just said. “What do you mean? She paid you to go to church?” *Even Mom wouldn’t stoop to connect going to church with money.*

Katie twisted her head from side to side. “Sort of paid me. Yeah. I’ve been wanting to go to that new ranch house buffet, and Mom said she’d buy my and Rachel’s lunch if we’d go to church.” She lowered her voice. “I know she’s bribing me but hey, it worked.”

“That’s the first I’ve heard about it. I doubt she’s paying for mine.” Lacey turned out the light in the kitchen, but she couldn’t extinguish the edge to her voice.

Katie shook her index finger as if scolding a naughty child. “Lacey Kay Chandler, you know Mom wouldn’t do that. I’m sure she intends to pay for yours, too.”

Lacey’s upper lip tightened. “She’s never offered to buy my lunch before.” Lacey could barely get rent money out of Mom and sure didn’t expect a free meal.

“I told you she’s bribing me.” Katie said over her shoulder.

“She doesn’t have to bribe me.” Lacey huffed and went to her room. “I’m a pushover.”

“Y’all make too much noise.” Rachel rose rubbing her eyes. “Momma, I thought we don’t go to church.”

“Tomorrow, we do.” Katie went to Lacey’s bathroom to brush her teeth. “See you in the morning, sis.”

“Good night.” Lacey closed her bedroom door to a night of tossing and turning in bed, her mind tumbling in turmoil.

At breakfast the next morning, she ate her low-calorie meal. She was determined to lose weight this week. Mom lingered over her juice without a word. She spun her glass this way and that, took a sip, and started all over again.

Katie waltzed into the kitchen as if she were right on time.

Lacey chewed a bite of renewed rage. Steam built up, ready to explode. She took a deep breath to put out the internal fire.

“I’m looking forward to that new buffet today especially with you paying, Mom.” Katie winked at her sister.

Lacey took her last bite. “You buying lunch today, Mom?”

She cleared her throat. “I told Katie if she’d go to church with us, I’d take her to the ranch house for lunch.”

“How nice. I haven’t gone there yet, either.” Lacey cleared the table of some dirty dishes.

“I figured you was going somewhere with Joanne or Toby. Katie can take her car.” Mom gathered her dirty plate and napkin into a heap and then slumped back into her chair.

Lacey reached to take her plate. “I have no plans. I’ll go with y’all.” That would teach her. Lacey bit her lip.

“Oh . . . sure.” Mom pushed up with her cane.

Katie could’ve passed for Garfield the cat with her silly grin.

When Mom left to dress, Katie snatched a banana. “Beat you to the bathroom now that we’ve settled that lunch business.”

“Settled? Yeah, now we’ll see if she leaves me to pay my tab.” Lacey picked up the toaster.

“Ah, sis, you see problems around every corner. For once in your life, try to see the bright side.” Katie sauntered out of the room.

“And you might try for reality.” The taste in Lacey’s mouth turned sour. Katie walked away laughing.

When Lacey entered the sanctuary, Virginia Lloyd, the pastor’s wife, headed her way. “Thanks for your ministry yesterday. They loved you at Golden Oaks. My phone hasn’t quit ringing. Now if we can get you back in the choir.” Her tone had a teasing lilt, but Lacey knew she meant business.

She could feel the pastor's wife watching. Tingles tickled Lacey's stomach. She felt like an actress on stage. This was worse than sitting in the choir without a robe to hide her bulges. She shifted to the other hip and crossed her arms over her chest. Her right fingers tapped her left arm. "I was blessed yesterday but the choir's still out."

"Even if we got choir robes again?" Sister Lloyd tilted her head.

Lacey blushed. She thought the reason she had left choir was her secret. "Maybe, if we got new choir robes." She was trapped—like Myrna's clients when they spilled needed information to their psychologist.

Sister Lloyd patted Lacey's arm. "Well, thanks again. I'll get someone for the ministry next Saturday. You'll go again the Saturday after that, right."

Lacey nodded.

Sister Lloyd turned to Lacey's mom. Her gleaming face gave away her Christian excitement over the possibility of a new soul. "Is this Katie?"

"This is my youngest daughter." Mom beamed with excitement of her own. "And my granddaughter, Rachel."

The pastor's wife extended her hand to Katie. "So nice to meet you. I've heard about you, but you've lived out of town since we've been here."

Katie shook hands, then ushered Rachel into the last pew. Lacey scooted in beside Katie, and then Mom took a seat next to her.

"Can you get on the other side, so I can sit by Katie?"

Lacey's head buzzed. Mom didn't try to hide her prejudice. "Sure." Lacey slid past Katie's protruding knees and dropped to the pew.

From behind her, a lady tapped Lacey's shoulder. "My Aunt Pearl said you came to her nursing home and held services for them."

"Yes, I think I met her."

"You'd remember if you met my Aunt Pearl." The lady whispered, giggling, and then clamping a hand over her mouth as the service began.

A vision of a bossy old woman who had been determined that Lacey return floated through her mind. This lady resembled Pearl. Her mouth curved into a smile. "You're right."

Katie fidgeted through the service.

Pastor Lloyd preached about people as the workmanship of God.

Lacey closed her eyes and inhaled God's peace. She believed the pastor's words. Look at Miss Pearl, who used her witness in an old folk's home.

Maybe I'm worth something—like Toby tells me.

Toby. She glanced to the third row where he sat, concentrating on Pastor Lloyd's words.

Thank you, Lord, for Toby.

When the service concluded, she followed her family up the aisle, ending up walking beside Toby.

"Are you as sore as I am from yesterday?" His smile was as wide as the side of the house he had painted.

Pain bunched Lacey's leg muscles into hard knots. "Mostly, my calves hurt from bending and stooping."

His hand curled the church bulletin until it was the size of a pencil. "I heard you took over the nursing home ministry. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks. I was surprised, but I really enjoyed it."

Katie turned to face them. "Don't these people know how to rush?" She noticed the man behind her sister. "That you, Toby Wheeler?" Her expression changed—less irritated, more flirty.

Toby tipped his head to her. "Hi, Katie. Good to see you here at church today."

They reached the lobby where the congregation either gathered in little groups or meandered out the door. Katie took off at a run, pushing Rachel toward the car. Lacey waved to Toby and followed.

He waved his Stetson and placed it on his head.

When Lacey moved in behind the wheel, she motioned to her mother, who climbed in beside her.

Katie finished buckling Rachel in and climbed into the backseat beside her daughter. "Hurry and get to the buffet line."

"I'm sure we'll get there in plenty of time," Lacey said as she backed out of the lot.

Katie curled her legs under her hips and rested her chin in one hand. "My, oh, my. Everyone was so slow to getting out of church. It was frustrating."

Lacey dodged other cars and drove toward the highway. "The message was good today."

A swoosh of air from Katie's massive sigh emphasized just how exciting church had been to her.

Lacey peeked at Mom. A pained look settled over her features before she put on her happy face for the world to see. Lacey pulled into the new buffet restaurant.

The four of them took a seat inside and then went—two at a time—to select their food. Mom gave thanks before they ate.

“Sis, I can’t believe you’re going to an old folks’ home nowadays.” Katie talked with her mouth full of steak, garbling her words.

“They’re sweet people. I enjoy it.” Lacey sprinkled Splenda on her salad to make it taste better. She was determined to stay on her diet.

“But, old people? You need friends your own age. Doesn’t she, Mother?”

Mom finished chewing. “Won’t find a husband there.”

Lacey cringed. In her hurry to eat, she bit the inside of her mouth. The steak’s bold flavor became salty and sour.

Katie poked another bite in her mouth. “You’re old before your time. You need to go to parties and have fun.”

Would she just drop it? “Like you, I suppose.” Lacey’s cheeks warmed. She stared at the healthy choices on her plate and longed for two kinds of pie.

“This catfish tastes wonderful.” *Mom’s aim at neutrality?*

The two sisters ate without further discussion. Rachel and Mom carried the conversation far and away from this tension-packed table.

A male voice sounded from the left. “Hey, there, Lacey.” Willie Brandt stood like a black broomstick. His shirt looked like modern art—as if paint had been splashed on a tan canvas. His arms rested on a boy, a slightly lighter shade than he, who reached to the top of Willie’s huge western belt buckle.

“This your boy?” Lacey wiped her mouth and hands.

“Yes, this is Timmy.” Willie’s face glowed like a shiny Hershey bar. “Timmy, this is a friend of Mr. Toby’s.”

Lacey held her hand to the boy. “Nice to meet you.”

Timmy kept his hands in his pockets but nodded his head.

Lacey introduced her family. Willie shook hands with Katie and Mom. Timmy took a peek at Rachel. She bounced from her seat and ran around the table to stand back to back with Timmy, measuring her height with his.

Since Willie had moved to town a few months ago, Lacey had spent little time around him. She wanted to be friendly. “This must be your day off. Bet you’re glad to visit with your son.”

“Yep, Timmy lives in Temple. We’re headed that way now to take him home to his mother.”

Lacey caught Timmy’s eye. “Do you come to Wharton Rock often?”

The boy nodded. “We’re going to watch the Cowboys when I get home.” His face lit up with anticipation. “My stepfather bought a big, big TV—bigger than my whole bedroom wall.”

“My, how nice.” Lacey glanced at Willie. She knew he was divorced, and by the look on his face, her guess would be that it hadn’t been his choice.

“We’ve gotta go. Good to see you.” Willie directed the boy by his shoulders out of the restaurant. Willie’s own shoulders slumped, and his head bowed. On second thought, he looked more like a scythe.

Mom leaned toward Lacey while the others went for dessert. “I don’t have enough money to pay for yours too.”

Big surprise. Lacey’s muscles tightened. Her lips thinned. She opened her coin purse and counted out ten dollars. “I have enough to pay for mine.”

“I didn’t expect you to come.”

“I understand.” Lacey pushed back her plate. Her stomach was churning faster than her old washer.

Katie and Rachel returned with three desserts apiece. Lacey ran for the biggest dessert she could find, and returned. The server handed Mom the ticket.

She gawked.

Lacey slapped down her ten dollar bill and scooped in a huge bite of apple pie.

“Doing some high finance over there?” Katie took a bite of carrot cake.

Mom opened her purse and frowned. “I didn’t think it would be so much. These restaurant prices keep going up every time.”

Lacey heaved a sigh. “How much can you pay?” Her voice grew in intensity.

Mom slammed the ticket and fifteen dollars on the table. “That’s the best I can do. Do you have your credit card?”

Lacey gnawed on her lip some more. Her eyes burned. She couldn’t look at Mom now, or she might say something she wished she hadn’t. “I

don't like to use my credit card." Lacey looked in her billfold again, but the ten was all she had. "Katie, do you have any cash?"

Katie shook her head. Rachel looked from her mother, to her grandmother, to her aunt.

"Fine." Lacey picked up her mother's fifteen and her ten, stuffed it in her billfold and took out her Visa. "I'll be over my limit." She wanted to throw something but plates cost money. Her eyes stung, but she would not cry.

Rachel circled the table. Her small hand slipped into Lacey's. "You look sad, Aunt Lacey. Would you like to sleep with Margaret Rose tonight?"

"No, sweetie, but thanks. Margaret Rose likes sleeping beside you." She blinked to avoid a flood and hauled herself to her feet.

Mom pushed up with her cane.

Katie took one more bite of her cake, wiped her mouth and followed them. "I'm sorry." Her eyes pleaded with her big sister.

Lacey tried to remember that lesson about her worth and God's faithfulness. All she wanted was Mom's love, but like the restaurant bill, the price was too high for Mom to pay.

CHAPTER *Ten*

“Hey, Boss, what happened to you taking me fishing at Buffalo Lake?” Willie Brandt didn’t mince words.

Toby’s gaze drifted to his sidekick. “I asked once, but you made it known you thought that was the stupidest *idée* I’d ever come up with.”

“In two weeks when Timmy comes again, let’s go fishing.”

“By George, you have a date. What brought this on?”

“I need to impress my boy.”

The words sliced Toby’s heart and left it bleeding. “You’d impress him, my friend, just by being his dad.” He tried to swallow his erupting emotions before speaking again. “If we can both get off at the same time, we’ll go fishing in two weeks. Count on it.” Toby focused on a bulletin he’d already read twice.

“Boss?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I ask you a question?”

Toby’s brow furrowed. “Shoot.”

“What’s Lacey to you? I mean”

“A good friend.” Toby kept his reply casual but curt.

“You just seem”

“Well, we’re not. We’re just friends. Got it?”

Willie’s head bowed. “Yes, sir.”

“I should go if I’m going to make Sunday night service. See you.” Toby stormed from the station before his professional stature dissolved.



The famous North Texas sunset sparkled with purple hues and shot orange and pink streaks high into the sky. Toby entered the sanctuary. He waved at Chief Langford and his wife, Jewel, sitting near the middle. Since Toby was on call, he settled himself near the back. He saw Ken Joiner enter with his wife and daughter.

Toby walked over to shake hands with Ken. "Where's Sonny tonight?"

"You know these kids. Left his homework to the last minute," Mrs. Joiner said.

Ken remained quiet.

Reverend Lloyd stepped to the pulpit. "Jeff will lead us in a couple of songs."

Sandra slipped into the pew in front of Toby, twisting around to face him. "Hello, Officer Wheeler." She blinked, showcasing her dark brown lashes. She was an accomplished singer, cook, and my, what a beauty.

His mom's words kept echoing through his mind—Sandra would make someone a lovely wife. Of course, Mom just wanted grandkids. Toby could never please his dad—he always thought Toby should work for the railroad--but finding a good wife would at least make Mom happy.

Lacey and her family were absent. Having Katie and Rachel around might be causing some difficulties.

Sandra turned again. "What was the Bible text?" Did she actually bat her eyelashes, or was it his imagination?

"It's Second Corinthians, chapter five." Toby pointed to verse seven.

"We live by faith, not by sight," Sandra's father, Pastor Lloyd, read and then dropped down to verse nine. "So we make it our goal to please him . . ."

Those verses struck Toby like a gun blast. He studied the back of Sandra's head, her soft blonde hair cascading in curls down her back. Pleasing God was the most important thing to him. Was Sandra God's choice? Shouldn't he feel some passion or something?

While listening to the rest of the sermon, Toby made two decisions—he should take things one step at a time in seeking God's guidance for a life partner, and fishing before his morning shift would be a great time to do that.



Toby drove past pump jacks and grazing cattle and pulled his Suburban into Wilderness Cove. This area drew many over the weekend, but on Monday morning, he was alone. One stop at the bait shop on the highway, and he was ready.

Boulders created a natural border to shield him from view of the parking lot. He climbed with ease to his hideaway. Water lapped against the sandy beach with a steady rhythm. The best part of fishing was the solitude—no hurrying and no demands, just peace. A flock of ducks flew back to the north in a perfect V formation. The breeze rippled the purple wildflowers, demanding their space amongst the rocks.

After he'd cast his rod into the water and had taken a seat on a rock ledge, the rippling lulled him to sleep. Small stones rained down from the boulder above, waking him.

"Sorry, Officer Wheeler, I was walking around the edge of the lake. Didn't know you were here." Sonny Joiner was poised above Toby. The teen's ears were red, his expression squeamish. He glanced around as if looking for a place to hide.

Toby sat up straight and studied the intruder. "What are you doing out of school today, Sonny?" He reached for his pole from where he'd dropped it into the water while he slept.

Sonny inched down the boulder and took a seat on the ledge, but he didn't answer Toby's question. Sonny threw a couple stones into the water. "I drove to Pine Road and came in that way, but couldn't find a good place to sit near the water. I kept climbing up and down boulders looking for a good spot. Looks like you found one."

"This is where I come to fish if I'm by myself. It's a little hard to climb down to it."

Sonny snickered. "It'd be hard for fat people." The critical attitude of his recent acquaintances seemed to be rubbing off on the teen.

Toby's jaw clenched. "That's not kind." His tone was more disciplinary, less friendly. He cleared his throat and shifted his weight. He had once brought Lacey here. Her breathing had labored like the idle of a race car. Her face had flushed. Her embarrassment had turned to anger. And that

day, he had vowed to skip Wilderness Cove and go to Bay Cove every time he brought her, and he had.

"Sorry," Sonny said with a soft voice.

When Toby lifted his pole out of the water, a catfish wiggled on the end.

With a wide grin, Sonny jumped to his feet and opened the wire fish bucket so Toby could drop in the fish.

Always the cop, Toby could not be distracted. "You didn't answer my question, Sonny."

He shrugged and kept his gaze on the water. "I didn't feel well this morning."

"But you feel well enough now to drive to the lake and hike around it?" Toby laid his pole aside and clasped his hands over his knees, trying to take one step at a time as God would have him do.

Sonny remained standing but bent to grab a handful of stones. He skipped one across the lake.

Toby took his cue, stood, and did the same. "I got four skips. Ha," he teased the teen, hoping to set him at ease,

Sonny threw again. "Eight skips. Beat that, Mister Big Guy." He laughed, shielding his green eyes from the sun.

The sound of the teen's laughter encouraged Toby. He threw again. "Only six, but I'm getting warmed up now." Back in high school, he and Lemuel loved skipping rock contests. After graduation, Lemuel had headed to Texas University at Austin. His folks moved away from Wharton Rock while he was there, and Toby never saw Lemuel again.

Why did people leave Wharton Rock? Toby loved this town, loved knowing the people and fitting in with them. Seven hundred and eighty-two warm, good-living people—except for a few odd balls. His job was to keep them safe, and he felt that weight of responsibility. With the meth problem, the weight got heavier. He looked back at Sonny.

The teen sat, and so did Toby. The quiet was interrupted only by the call of a mockingbird in a tree over their heads. Toby stared across the lake and dropped his pole into the water again.

Sonny watched, his only movement the involuntary shaking of his right leg.

Twice, Sonny helped Toby reel in a fish. "Got enough for dinner tomorrow at least," Toby told the boy. "Two more, and you can come as my guest."

Sonny grinned. "If I had my pole, I'd have six by now."

"You think so, huh?" Toby jabbed the boy in the ribs. "We'll have to come fishing together and have us a contest."

Sonny remained still.

The fish quit biting. Toby laid down his pole, took off his Stetson, and twirled it between his hands. "I hear you want to be a police officer. That right?"

Sonny eyes widened. "How did you" He turned. His voice grew louder, punched with excitement. "I know I don't want to run a pizza place the rest of my life. You've been talking to my dad?"

"Yeah." Toby moved his pole to the right near a rock peeking out of the water. Crows cawed, joining the mockingbirds overhead.

Sonny's right leg still shook. "Do you have to have a degree to be a policeman?"

"No, you don't have to, but like lots of things, it helps for advancement, and some doors are closed without a degree." Toby put on his hat, yanking the brim lower to shield his eyes. "You have to get a certificate from the state."

"Do you have a degree?" Sonny leaned back on his elbows.

"Yeah, finished it by correspondence a few months ago. Slow way to do it. At least I got the first two years in at the university in Apache Falls."

The sun dropped from center point to shine right in their eyes. Toby picked up his fishing gear. "I'm hungry. What about you? Care to go with me up to Margie's? I'm buying."

"Sure," Sonny jumped from his perch and grabbed Toby's basket of fish. "My car's about quarter mile around at the next clearing."

Toby mounted the first boulder and looked down at the boy. "How about we eat first, then I'll drive you to your car?"

The light hitting Sonny's face highlighted a wide grin and revealed pocks from recent acne. "Okay."

Margie's food was tasty—and greasy. From the parking lot, Toby's mouth watered. A thick smoke haze settled around each booth and table

like a fishing net holding its victims captive. Toby slipped into the booth nearest the door for more fresh air. Margie herself came by with menus.

"I don't need that. What's your special today?" Toby took off his Stetson and laid by his side.

"Chicken fried steak with cream gravy, mashed potatoes and green beans." The truck stop café's owner had leathery skin and a toothy grin that she bestowed on frequent customers.

Toby stared at Sonny, an unasked question in his eye. Sonny nodded. "Two specials, Margie," Toby said. "And two teas. Right, Sonny?"

Again Sonny nodded. Only his jittery right leg made any noise.

"Coming up, gentlemen." Margie headed to the kitchen tying on a greasy apron as she walked away.

"How's school coming?"

"Okay."

Teenagers and their one syllable answers. "You a senior?"

Janice, a waitress and friend to Margie, brought over their teas. "Thanks." Toby said.

"No, a junior."

Janice returned again to bring their lunch platters. Toby dug into the food. Conversation, slim as it had been, stopped.

"Hey, Toby," s highway patrolman yelled as he walked into the café side of the truck stop. "Haven't seen you around."

Toby's fork froze in mid air. "Chief's been keeping me busy. How's things with you?"

"Same old, same old." The patrolman went to the counter and requested a tea. "See you around," he said as he saluted Toby with his tea and left.

"Keep safe," Toby said to the man's retreating back.

Sonny cleaned his plate before Toby was half through his. "Sorry you didn't like it, son." His tone was lighthearted.

Sonny's shy smile caused his eyes to twinkle making him almost cute. He leaned back, his leg jarring the whole table. "Sorry." He halted his leg's movement.

"You nervous?" Toby pulled out his billfold.

"Not especially. My leg does that when I sit still. My dad's, too." Sonny slid out of the booth.

Margie came over with two full teas in disposable cups with lids. “Know how you like to take some with you for the road?”

“Thanks.” Toby scooted out, leaving payment on the table. Sonny followed him to the Suburban.

Neither said anything on the way to the Pine Road exit. Toby pulled up near Sonny’s gray Toyota Tacoma. When Sonny climbed out of the Suburban, Toby made a pointed attempt to communicate. “Remember, if you ever get caught stealing, it would ruin any chance at most career opportunities—in law enforcement and otherwise—so think carefully about who you choose for friends. You’re a great kid.”

A cloud descended on Sonny’s face, and he jumped out without further comment.

Toby had pushed too far. He drove off, kicking himself for his usual tendency to control situations.

Lord, I try to take one step at a time, but it’s hard.

Pulling into town, he stopped for the light at Main and Cleveland. Only one car crossed, but the red light kept his car in idle for several more seconds. Toby whistled and checked the clock on his dash. Four-thirty—not much time get home, shower, change, and get to the station by five. His foot tapped in time to his whistle.

Another truck pulled beside him as the light changed. Lacey sat in the truck with Bill Lindy, her hands moving with animation. When the light turned green, they flew down Cleveland, leaving Toby and his flip-flopping belly behind.

He turned down Wharton Ave and continued to his house. He’d now be starting his shift with a heaviness weighing him down like lead bullets. He had messed up everything with Sonny, and Lacey was back with that jerk after crying on his shoulder barely a week ago.

I’m not in control of anyone or anything.

One step at a time.

CHAPTER *Eleven*

“Wharton Rock is a neat town. Have you been to Buffalo Lake?” Lacey cocked her head to the right.

“That the lake to the west?” Lindy turned right.

“Yep, it’s beautiful and has good fishing. We tried the new buffet last Sunday. Sooo good.” Lacey’s heartbeat was competition for the bass notes coming from Bill Lindy’s radio. Her forehead was slick with sweat. When his truck slung her to the side, she snatched the arm rest to keep her balance. “This town is special. You won’t be sorry you moved here.”

Shut up, Lacey, you’re prattling.

The Dairyland sign caught her attention. “Oh, I’ve been wanting to come here. They have the best ice cream ever.” Her voice practically squealed, then her cheeks quickly warmed.

“Hot peanut butter and fudge sundaes coming up.” Bill pulled in beside a menu board, mashed the button on the speaker, and gave their order.

Lacey’s eyes widened. “How did you know that was my favorite?”

“I have my ways.” Bill winked. “Told you old Myrna would give in if I stopped by late in the day.”

“I’d never have gotten my nerve up to ask off early if you hadn’t asked.” Her fingers tapped a tune against the arm rest.

Bill had marched into the office at a little after four. Myrna was leaving early as usual. “How about letting my girl here leave? I’m hankering for me an ice cream before dinner.”

Lacey had stood there gawking like a child at Christmas. She had refused to go out with this man. She’d told him so. What made him call

her *his girl*? The words warmed her. She had melted like crushed ice left outside in July.

Her boss had edged up to Bill and murmured. “Well, I might. What’s in it for me?”

Bill bent down closer to her face. “Ice cream next week.”

Myrna howled. “Go ahead, Lacey. Lock this place, and go get this man some ice cream.” She winked at Bill. When had Lacey’s boss gotten so flirty?

Lacey had looked at the letter she was typing. “But, I haven’t finished—”

“It can wait until tomorrow.” Myrna headed toward the back, talking as she went. “Nothing that can’t wait.”

So why—according to Myrna a few minutes ago—did it have to be done now? Moving in a daze, Lacey locked the office and walked out the back with Bill like teenagers skipping school.

One of her favorite songs played through the Dairyland speakers, bringing her attention back to the present. The car hop brought the sundaes.

Bill slurped a bite of his sauce. “Youse want to go see a movie?”

Lacey licked her spoon and leaned her head back to savor the rich treat. Her stomach tumbled like a clothes dryer with too heavy a load. Still, the dessert forced the tension from her muscles and allowed her brain to quit whirling, her mouth to quit jabbering, her fingers to quit tapping.

This morning, at the bakery, she’d ordered a dozen peanut butter fudge squares and blew her diet, so one more treat didn’t make any difference.

Lacey cringed. He’d acted like a creep on their first date, but she’d deal with that later. This was a special occasion—a good-looking man and a delicious sundae.

“Lacey?” Bill’s mouth quirked to one side. “I asked you to go to the movie tonight.”

She came alert and quit sipping the chocolate sauce. “I can’t. I wish I could, but I promised to take my sister and niece to shop tonight, so I better get home.” She ate her maraschino cherry.

“That new romantic comedy started Friday. Are youse sure you don’t want to see it?” Bill reached to pat her leg.

She jumped and felt her face heat.

I should slap him for the familiarity. No, she couldn't do that. He might never call her again. Fat women didn't have many chances. "No, I can't. I promised." Her words quivered and shook like her famous USA flag dessert with strawberry and blueberry gelatin along with whipped topping. That's what she fixed for herself when she was being good.

"You'll be sorry." Bill pushed back his car seat and stretched his long legs. "I signed up for a singles cruise to the Caribbean leaving in a month. A friend of mine told me about it. You should come."

Should she go? What if he became aggressive away from home? "I don't think I can get off." She wouldn't want him to see her in a swimsuit anyway.

Bill licked the whipped cream. "You'll be missing a good time."

She hoped he'd suggest another date night, but he didn't.

She stole a glance. His dark lashes curled to his brows. His smooth olive complexion was so different from Toby's ruddy cheeks. She doubted he spent much time outdoors. Why had he singled her out? A one-night stand?

Her tight skirt inched up her thigh. Lindy's hot hand cupped her knee. Tingles snaked down her spine. Her stomach lurched. When she moved her legs toward her door, his hand dropped.

His brow lifted. He pushed his seat forward and started the truck. "Well, I'll take youse home then."

Lacey finished her sundae and handed him the bowl which he passed to the carhop. Then he circled the truck and pulled out onto Cleveland. He drove by the police station as he headed to Lacey's. Old Blue sat in the lot. Toby was on duty, and Wharton Rock was safe from the bad guys.

When Bill pulled into her driveway, he jumped out and waited, leaving Lacey to get out by herself. Guess he hadn't been taught manners like Toby.

As she came around the front of the vehicle, he caught her in his arms and planted a big smack on her lips. "Can I come in?"

How embarrassing! Here in front of the window with most of her family watching. "Okay, if you want. My mother wasn't home when you came last time. You could come in and meet her and my sister." She tugged herself out of his grasp.

"You live with your family?"

His judgmental tone angered her. She gripped her purse. "Actually, they live with me. Do you want to come in or not?" Her voice was loud, her words emphatic.

"Think I'll pass." He headed back into his truck. "Try taking off early another time. Makes a person feel like a cheater." He laughed as he left.

Lacey was puzzled by his parting comment. Was feeling like a cheater a good thing to him? Maybe she didn't want him as her guy. She went inside to face new drama.

"Wow, is that your new boyfriend?" Her sister sat sideways on the sofa, legs stretched out the full length. "He's a hunk."

"Yeah, he's good-looking. Not sure he's my boyfriend though." Lacey dropped her bag on the dining table with a sigh.

Mom shuffled in from her bedroom. "Katie's been waiting on you. You promised to take her to the superstore this evening."

"I know. That's why I'm here." She turned back to Katie. "We'll go in your car, and you can drop me by mine at the office on the way back."

"Maybe we should stop at the burger place on the way?" Katie yawned. "I'm hungry."

"I bought some extra frozen dinners. Why didn't you fix one of them?" Lacey shed her skirt and heels and chose elastic-waist slacks and an oversized T-shirt. Ah, she could breathe again.

"I don't like them, and Rachel won't eat them at all." Katie walked to her sister's bedroom door. "We might buy some frozen pizzas tonight. We like those."

"Whatever." Lacey grabbed her purse. "I'm ready."

Off they went to eat and shop.

Lacey's paycheck from last week disappeared for hamburgers and shorts and tops for both Katie and Rachel. Lacey eyed a Capri set in her size.

"Why don't you get it, sis?" Katie held it up to Lacey. "It's a good color for you."

Lacey looked longingly at it but stuffed it back on the rack. "Too much money. I've got a house payment due next week."

"Doesn't Mom get her disability check before that?" Katie looked around for Rachel.

"Mommy, please, please." Her daughter held up a doll that looked real enough to be a babe in arms.

Katie hugged the tike to her leg. "I don't have any money, sweetheart."

"Aunt Lacey, do you have any money?"

Four-year-olds had no inhibitions, but those upturned brown eyes made Lacey's resistance as mushy as a bowl of grits.

"Not enough, but if you'll put her back and be real good, I might put it on your birthday wish list. Somebody has a birthday soon." Lacey's voice cooed and calmed. She held out the new summer clothes she was buying for her niece. "Meanwhile, you're getting new clothes. See?"

Rachel turned around and set down the doll, her lip sagging lower than her slumping shoulders. "Still too cold to wear shorts. Mama said so." She pouted through the rest of the store and checkout line.

"Won't be long before we're in shorts." Lacey marveled they didn't need jackets outside, even at eight in the evening. Warm for late April.

When the three entered Lacey's house and dumped their packages onto the dining table, Mom was sitting there dipping a tea bag into hot water. "Did you get my chocolates?"

Lacey grimaced. "Yes, I got your chocolates, Mom. I got your blood pressure medicine too."

Rachel grabbed her two short sets and held them above her head. "Look-y, look-y, Granny?"

Granny took a sip of tea. "Was green the only color they had?" She glared at Lacey.

"Naw, Mom, but I didn't much care for the black for a four-year-old." Sarcasm coated her words, making them as heavy as the canned goods she put into the pantry. "Where's your cane, Mom?"

"Over by the door. I couldn't hold it and make tea at the same time. Y'all took a long time." She walked away from the counter weaving as she went.

Katie caught her before she fell. "Zowza, Mom. Wait for one of us to get the cane for you. You know better than to walk without it. Your dizziness could hit at any time." Katie rolled her eyes and handed her mother the carved wooden cane.

"Where would you be if you fell and broke a hip?" Lacey loaded the pizzas into the frozen section of the refrigerator. "Y'all have something for

lunch now. I don't want to hear any complaints." She snapped a glance at her sister.

Katie saw Rachel sitting in a dining chair, her head resting on the table. "Mom, don't you like Rachel's new summer clothes?"

Mom limped back to the TV while Katie carried her tea. "They're okay. Both sets have green in them, and that's not my favorite color, but they're okay. Whatever y'all like is fine."

"I wanted a pretty doll, but no one would buy it." Rachel walked past her grandmother. "Would you buy me a doll, Granny?"

"Granny doesn't have any money, honey." She eased into her chair. "Didn't you get anything?" Mom asked her youngest daughter.

Lacey threw the paper grocery sacks across the room. They hit the cereal box and knocked it off the counter with a bang.

Mom and Katie stared.

"What?" Lacey's pulse raced. She would like to throw something at her mother's head and see if it bounced. Her eyes stung. She paced the kitchen, trying to work off her frustration.

"Yes, Mom." Katie sat the cup of tea on the table beside her mother. "Lacey bought me a sundress, some denim shorts, and a couple of tops."

"That's nice." Mom picked up the remote and turned up the volume.

Lacey exited the kitchen. "That's Mom's way of saying 'quit talking.'" She faced Katie. "Here's your clothes. I'm going to my room to read. Good night."

Katie poked her daughter, and Rachel ran to grab Lacey's leg. "Thank you, Aunt Lacey."

Lacey bent down, wrapping her arms around the tiny shoulders. The girl's black hair and black lashes resembled those of her aunt—Lacey took pride in that. She might never have a child, but her niece could pass for hers. "You're welcome, sweetheart. I love you."

"I love you, too." Rachel reached up her arms.

Lacey lifted her for a kiss. "You sleep good. Night-night."

"Night-night." Rachel slid down and ran to pick up her old doll to place her in the makeshift bed.

Lacey closed the door to her bedroom. After taking off the pants that cut into her stomach and pulling on a soft gown, she opened the

nightstand drawer where she had hidden a package of peanut butter candy. She leaned back against puffy pillows as she stuffed her mouth. Sometimes she hated her mother. As the guilt of those thoughts caused perspiration, she crammed in more candy.

God, why does she like Katie better than me?

Lacey thought back to Bill's comment about cheating. With him, she was headed for misery and hurt. Why didn't God send her a good man who would love her? Tears streamed down her cheeks and soaked her candy. She swiped and nibbled, the sweetness of the snack numbing her disappointment.

Her glance roamed to her diary. She picked it up and began to write about her day. By now, the sugar had anesthetized her pain. She opened her novel. The only feelings remaining after the peanut butter candy were disgust at her actions and anger at her weaknesses. The problem was her.



Lacey rose the next morning feeling stiff and sluggish. She pushed out of bed and wandered through the dark house into the kitchen, trying not to wake anyone. She toasted a bagel and smeared it with cream cheese. Her head pounded. Her stomach rumbled. Her hands shook. Breakfast helped.

When she arrived at work, she downed two aspirin with her first diet cola of the day along with two creamfilled donuts thanks to Daisy's. After pushing the rest of the donuts into a file cabinet drawer, she typed chart notes, her fingers flying over the keys.

Myrna's first patient walked through the door at ten. She was larger than Lacey.

"Are you here for the hypnosis session?"

"Yes. It does start at ten, doesn't it?" The lady walked up to Lacey's desk and gave her name.

Lacey checked it off. "Yes, it does. Have a seat."

Forty-five minutes later, the back door slammed. By that time, the small waiting room bulged with three overweight patients. Lacey stepped into Myrna's office and closed the door behind her. "You had a ten-o'clock

hypnosis session for weight loss this morning.” She couldn’t keep the irritation from her words.

“Excellent.” Myrna stretched her legs and leaned back in her chair studying the charts in front of her. She looked up at Lacey who stood waiting. “I assume you’ll join us?”

Lacey wrung her hands. “No, not this time. I’ve got work to do, and the phone’s been busy.” She handed two messages to Myrna for emphasis.

Lacey had intended to call her insurance company about weight loss hypnosis, but she’d forgotten. She wanted see if they would pay for the laparoscopic bariatric surgery. She could get a doctor’s prescription because of her blood pressure and asthma.

“Too bad.” Myrna waved her from the room while she picked up the telephone.

Lacey entered her office again while the people waiting glowered.

“How much longer?” the lady who had arrived first asked.

“Soon.” The ringing phone jarred Lacey’s last nerve and set her teeth to grinding. Sweat broke out over her forehead. She tried to use her kindest tone when she answered, but it ended up sounding like metal rubbing against metal.

The hospital administrator’s voice blasted from the receiver. “She’s still not in?”

Lacey wished Myrna had called him first. “She arrived moments ago, Mr. Haggerty, but is already on the phone. I did give her your message.”

When the pace slowed and the patients disappeared into the inner sanctum, Lacey dialed her insurance company. An electronic voice asked her to leave a message. “I’m interested in checking benefits.” She left her number and delved into the morning’s to-do stack. Her headache pounded. Tylenol didn’t help, but donuts did.

At three that afternoon, Bill Lindy strolled in with a smile larger than the enormous candy bar he held out to her. She reached for it. “Thanks.” She wished she had the backbone to tell Bill to leave, but she again turned to grits. Or maybe with the lumps around her waist, she was more like oatmeal.

“Hey, Lace, what you up to?” Toby to the rescue—cowboy hat in hand, and badge gleaming in the florescent lighting—entered with fanfare.

"A . . . well, a" Lacey tried to think what to say.

He lifted his hand to Bill. "I'm Toby Wheeler, a friend of Lacey's."

"Bill Lindy." He took hold of Toby's outstretched hand. "I stopped by to bring Lacey a candy bar." He looked down at her and winked. "Thought she might need a break about now."

"That was thoughtful." Toby rocked back on his heels. "Yeah, mighty thoughtful."

What was Toby doing? He knew about her first disaster date with Bill. Had he heard about the kiss in front of her house? Lacey focused on the computer screen. "I've got work to do." *Go away.*

Lindy leaned his hands on her desk, cocked his head to the right, and lifted his eyebrows in questioning. "What about taking off early like yesterday?"

Her fingers typed faster, and a lump formed in her throat. "I can't do that again."

"Why not?" Lindy walked around her desk and sat on her papers forcing her to look at him.

Toby interrupted. "Lace, I was nearby and stopped to talk with you about our class social. You promised to help me plan it. Would tonight be a good time?" He stepped back a little, nonchalantly, but Lacey knew him better than that. Was he offering her an out if she wanted one?

"Sure, I'll help after dinner. We do need to get going with that. Bill, I'm sorry, this isn't a good day." She steeled her nerves and stared into his handsome face, hoping her voice wouldn't shake. It did. "Call or stop by again in a couple weeks."

Lindy tapped the candy bar that lay on her desk. "Okay. Don't say I never brought you anything." He winked again.

Lacey's face flushed. She hoped he hadn't noticed. "Thanks again."

He had already walked out the door.

Toby neared her desk. "Can you come to my house about seven?"

That made sense. Her house was full. They'd have more privacy at his place. "Sure, I'll be there."

Toby replaced his hat and walked away. "I invited Sandra Lloyd to help us."

"That's great," Lacey called out to him, but her spirits plummeted. Sandra Lloyd made her feel like an overstuffed oaf.

CHAPTER *Twelve*

Sandra was a beautiful woman. While Toby was sitting beside her at his antique Duncan Phyfe dining set, he studied her and wondered why she had never married. “I’m sorry the table looks so bad. I bought it two months ago at an estate sale in Apache Falls. I have the stuff to refinish it, but haven’t had the time.”

She ran her hand over the back of her chair. “I’ll bet it’ll be lovely when you finish it. The oak leaves on the chair tops are unique.” Her voice oozed charm and charity. “I could never do that.”

He looped his thumbs in his belt and leaned his chair back on two legs. “Do what? Refinish something?”

“Well, that, and buying something used and . . . I don’t know.” She ducked her head first then looked up at him again. “I guess it’s silly, but I want new stuff.”

He shook his head with vigor. “No character in new stuff. This will be worth a lot when I finish it.”

“I guess.” She didn’t sound convinced.

Someone knocked on the door. Toby’s gaze shifted in time to see Willie Brandt enter. His cowboy hat brushed the top of the doorframe, or so it seemed.

“Come on in.” Toby patted the seat on his other side. Though Willie didn’t go to church, Toby thought that helping him build relationships with other Christians might show Willie they weren’t weird or rule-bound. “Glad you could help us.”

"You mean I had a choice?" Willie's white teeth shone as he laughed. "I took your phone call to be a summons for duty." He sat and crossed one leg over the other.

"You better believe it," Toby said. Willie needed friendship. He needed healing. He needed Jesus. His wounds went deep, but Toby would introduce Willie to God if it cost Toby his life. "Thought if we were having a party, you were the man to plan it."

"I'm all about having fun. Yes, sir. That, I am." Willie turned his attention to Sandra. "Think I met you while back." He reached out his hand.

With her gaze on Toby, Sandra nodded, but failed to take notice of the outstretched hand. "Who else is coming?" Her tone indicated more serious discussion, less party fun.

Willie dropped his hand and caught hold of his quivering foot.

Toby gathered some blank paper in front of him. "Lacey. She's my sidekick on this project." He stood to grab a calendar. "First thing to decide is when to have the party?"

"We have a revival in three weeks. Should it be before that?" Sandra asked.

Willie's grin widened. "Yep, fun before spirituality."

Voices at the door drew Toby's attention before it opened. Lacey pulled Joanne Patrick inside the room. "I brought reinforcements."

Toby grinned at Willie. "My sentiments, too."

"Willie." Lacey looked at the other policeman. "Yep, you and Joanne can give us a fresh perspective. Toby and I aren't good at this sort of thing. Of course, Sandra there has been doing it for years." She nodded to the pastor's daughter.

Sandra perched primly on her chair, her arms resting atop her crossed legs, not a wisp of her blonde hair out of place.

Lacey, on the other hand, had her hair pulled back into a black ponytail, three bobby pins on each side. Curls escaped and crept out over her ears. Her flowered top covered the green pants underneath like an awning. Her eyes flashed with mischief. She brought life to any party.

Toby glanced back at the blonde. Sandra was wife material. He shook his head and prodded his mind back into stark reality.

"When are we doing this thing?" Lacey pulled over a seat from the den, allowing Joanne to take the extra dining room chair.

"We'd thought before the revival." Sandra sighed and twiddled her fingers. Lacey's lips pulled into a one-sided pout. "When's that?"

Toby turned the calendar around to Sandra. "Do you know the dates?"

She pulled out her cell, dialed, and spoke for a few seconds. Then she took up the calendar and a pen that lay on the table. She marked out the dates for the upcoming revival.

"That gives us two weekends before then." Toby's thoughts raced ahead to his full work schedule. "I work next weekend. Besides, we'll need a little time to get out the word."

Lacey smoothed the twisted pants under her. "Looks like the twelfth might be our date."

"Twelfth okay with everyone?" Toby looked around the circle.

Everyone nodded their heads.

"The twelfth, it is."

"Do we have a theme?" Lacey shifted again.

All five looked at the calendar on the table as if it would answer that question.

Joanne spoke for the first time since arriving. "I know I don't come much, but could we have babysitting? Pretty please. Then I can come."

"Good idea." Willie flashed his white teeth again. "I'll have Timmy that weekend, so I might come, too, if he can come." Willie's sunny smile dissolved. "It's not my regular weekend, but April has plans, so I agreed to change."

"Or we could have a party including children." Lacey said.

Grunts and groans around the table nixed that idea.

"Anyone care for a soda?" Toby stood and took orders as he headed to the kitchen. Lacey followed him to help.

"You okay?" Toby poured two glasses of tea while Lacey grabbed three sodas from the refrigerator.

"Yeah, why?" She glanced up at him.

"With Bill and everything?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." She walked a few steps then turned. "Thanks for today."

Maybe she had wanted to be saved. Maybe his jealousy was silly. Maybe he thought too much. Toby choked on her gratitude, so that his neck warmed. "Anytime."

By the time they came to the dining room, the other three had decided on a western party with hay bales and wagon wheels.

Toby grabbed his head with mock worry. "Wonder what I could wear?"

Willie guffawed. "Reckon the same thing you'd wear no matter what kind of party it was."

Laughter erupted. Even Sandra seemed to lower her intensity.

The rest of the planning went smoothly. Toby was glad to see Joanne and Willie join in even if it wasn't exactly their church. Toby and Lacey disagreed about the way Joanne took advantage of Lacey's good nature, but he would still love to see Joanne walking with the Lord. She had a lot of heartache in her marriage—maybe staying single might be the best option for him.

While they planned and joked, Toby watched Sandra. Her efficiency solved many of their problems. Again, he was reminded how lovely she was, and what a good wife she'd make. He couldn't imagine her being interested in him, despite his mother's claims. But, Sandra often sought him out at church, so obviously she didn't find him repulsive.

He scooted his chair closer to the blonde. She drew a diagram of their fellowship hall. "We need to decorate that afternoon." Her blue eyes twinkled up at Toby.

His palms got sweaty. He gulped to hide his nervousness. "Yeah, well . . ."

Lacey squirmed. She was a bigger wiggle-worm than he was.

"Decorate at two?" Lacey studied Toby.

He wiped his palms on his jeans. "Sounds good." He swatted the table for emphasis. It took a jump, and everyone flinched.

Willie was the first to stand. "Well, if this meeting's officially closed, I move to adjourn. This cowboy's tired."

Both Lacey and Joanne got to their feet and said their goodbyes. Toby showed each out the door. When he stepped to the porch, Lacey surprised him with her question. "So what's up with you and Sandra, Big Boy?"

Was he that transparent? "Just friends." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Sure. And our fair city made the top five in Texas," Lacey muttered with a smirk.

Joanne and Lacey headed to her Cadillac.

Toby walked back inside. No time like the present to follow through with his mother's suggestion. Sandra sat with legs crossed at the table.

He sat beside her and aimed for smooth. A tic in his temple gave him away. "I'm off Monday night. You want to go to Apache Falls for dinner?"

"I'd love to, Toby. Thanks for asking." Her words were soft and sincere-sounding.

Guess he had a date—first time in two years. "I'll pick you up at six-thirty. Is that okay?"

Sandra stood and surprised Toby by slipping her arm into the crook of his. "That would be wonderful." She fluttered her eyelashes. "Will you walk me to my car?"

"Of course." Arm in arm, they walked across the den and then his yard. He opened the door of her little Isuzu. "See you then. I'll call first."

She climbed in and started her small SUV. "I had a wonderful time tonight. Thanks for letting me join the group."

"You were a big help. I appreciate it." The truck door closed with a deep thud. He waved.

She drove off, leaving him with a weight in his chest. Now, why was that? He had asked a beautiful, desirable woman to go on a date, and she had accepted. *Pep up, old boy. That's a good thing.*

Back inside, his legs turned to rubber. Leaning against the closed front door, his breathing came in short shallow sips of air. He could still catch a whiff of Sandra's floral cologne, but it was Lacey's jitters that came to mind.

One step at a time. That was what the Lord asked of him. One step at a time, relying on God, not himself. Toby was a doer, a controller, one who took care of business. His desire to fix Lacey gnawed at his insides. Letting go proved more difficult than catching bad guys. He should pray.

"Lord, I turn Lacey over to you. You're the great fixer. I only get in Your way. Help me to follow Your guidance."

Toby ran to his garage, picked up his sander, and returned to the dining room. It was only nine o'clock. Plenty of time to get that Duncan Phyfe table and chairs sanded and ready for the walnut finish he had purchased. Soon his hands were working, and his mind was resting.

About eleven, Toby's phone rang. The caller ID showed the name of *W. Brandt*. Toby answered.

The voice slurred. "Stay the heck out of my life, Boss. Leave me out of your little do-good parties."

"Willie, what's wrong?"



Toby banged on the door until he thought the hinges would release.

Crash. The sound of breaking glass caused him to consider ramming through the wood, but Willie finally swung it open.

He balanced against the door. Pockets sagged under red eyes. His mouth grimaced as if he was experiencing unrelenting pain. "Go away Boss." Leaving the door open, Willie staggered back through the dark living room and into the darker bedroom.

Toby followed and flicked on the bedroom light. Ahead, he spotted the source of the earlier noise. Both brown and mirrored glass slivers covered the floor. Willie fell across his disheveled bed.

"You said you didn't drink anymore." Because of the late hour, Toby kept his voice low.

"I don't." Willie's eyes stayed closed. "I thought I had a handle on my drinking. Shoot, I thought I had a handle on my life."

The buzz of an open cell phone line proved Willie had failed to hit disconnect. Toby reached for the phone and clicked a button to turn it off. He snatched the front of Willie's shirt and glared. "You just happened to have liquor for a special occasion?" Toby let his sidekick fall back on the bed. He took off his Stetson, raked his hair, and paced the length of the bed. Anger mounted like a giant manure heap.

Willie's voice came, soft and slick. He gave his friend a subtle smirk. "I stopped at the mini-mart on the way home."

Toby squatted near where Willie's head dangled from the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry I invited you to our planning party. What did we do or say to cause this?"

"Nothing, Boss, you didn't do nothing." He sat upright. His shoulders slumped. He covered his face with shaky hands. "April called." He snatched his cell phone and threw it into the heap of glass.

Toby glared. "So?"

"So nothing." Willie waved his hands. "Get out of here. I didn't ask you to come." His words slurred, and he swayed when he stood. "I'm okay." He snickered. "Wanted to wake you up, I guess. Misery loves company."

"I'm not miserable. I'm mad." Blood rushed to his ears.

"Look, Boss, I shouldn't have called. April isn't your problem. I'm the lucky one."

Toby stopped pacing. "Willie, you're a responsible policeman in this town. We rely on you to be sober and vigilant. You'll never make detective this way."

"Who said I wanted to be a detective?" Willie fell against the wall.

"You."

Willie chuckled and rubbed his head. "I did, didn't I?"

"What happened?"

"April called. She and jerk-face are going to take Timmy out of school to go to Europe." Willie's tone sounded fake and full of drama. "Isn't that just peachy?"

"Drinking won't help." Toby twisted his Stetson. "You okay now?"

"Of course not!" Willie was shouting.

So much for keeping it quiet.

Willie shushed himself, holding a finger over his mouth. "This stinking room won't stay still."

"Let me help." Toby caught Willie's arm and eased him to the couch.

"Get your do-gooder self out of here. What do you know about how to help me?" Willie's Adam's apple bobbed. His jaw stiffened. He beat the wall with his fists. Skin broke, leaving behind streaks of blood.

Toby stared at his hat, twisting it faster. When Willie finally flopped onto the cushions, all Toby could hear was their collective breathing. "I'll pray for you?"

"What'd you say?" Willie's tone diminished.

Toby's gaze flashed from Willie to the floor and back to Willie. "I'm praying for you. I'm sorry you're hurting. I wish I could fix it, but I can't."

Willie leaned back against the couch, his long legs stretched in front of him. "Not your doing. It's my problem. How I gonna keep up with Europe? I can't even afford a big screen TV to watch the Cowboys." Tears overcame his words. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand.

Toby slid to his knees. "Lord, take the pain off this man now."

Tears coursed down Willie's face and fell to the rug. "I'll be okay. You go home now, get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

"I'm not leaving until you get in bed."

Willie hefted himself up and staggered to the bed. He pulled off his boots, his shirt, and his jeans while Toby watched. He crawled under the covers. "Satisfied?"

Toby grinned. "For now. Where's your house key?"

Willie pointed.

"I'll lock the door. See you in the morning." Toby strode out with a key in his pocket and a new burden on his mind.

CHAPTER *Thirteen*

Toby stumbled into the police station a tad late the next day. The lack of sleep had slowed his reflexes and his mental capabilities. He needed his coffee strong and the noise level, low.

Chief Langford stepped out of his office. "Come in here, Wheeler."

Toby cringed. He must be in trouble now.

"Have a seat." The chief leaned back in his chair. "I guess you saw the scores I posted this morning and know you passed the detective test."

Toby's fog lifted. His mouth flew open. He hadn't thought to check the board. "I didn't, sir. Thank you." He balanced on the edge of his seat.

"What's your goal, officer?" The chief rocked forward, probing Toby's eyes, his musk cologne itching Toby's nose.

A flush rushed to his neck, and his heart beat so fast he feared his boss could hear it over his words. "One day, I'd like to be chief. After you retire, of course."

The Chief leaned back again, a big grin framing his face. "Then I guess we're thinking along the same terms." He stood and stuck out his hand. "Congratulations, Detective Wheeler."

"Thank you, sir." He took the chief's hand in his sweaty palm.

"You've earned it, or you wouldn't get it." Chief Langford sat again. His knees squeaked louder than his chair. Toby left the office and returned to his desk.

He picked up the phone to call Lacey then stopped. He needed to get it through his head to leave her alone. She was Bill Lindy's girl now, and he had a date with Sandra. *Give God time to fix her.* Instead, he dialed his parents and shared the good news.

His mother was delighted, but of course his dad gave his usual response that made Toby feel like he was a disappointment. “‘Bout time.”

He let out an extended breath, gulped a mouthful of the police station’s stale, smoky air, and went to work.

He had stopped by Willie’s apartment to make sure he was up and dressing. His friend now shuffled over to Toby’s desk. “You look like you need coffee as much as I do.” The whites of his eyes were red and glazed. He headed toward the hall.

Toby pulled alongside and made it to the rec room first. He reached for the coffee pot and poured two cups while Willie stood watching. Both sipped without comment. Amber walked in, grabbed a cola from the fridge, and walked out again. The other detective entered, pushed past Willie with a nod, and poured his own coffee. The room got quiet, but chattering voices could be heard beyond the walls.

“You okay?” Toby grabbed a couple of cookies from a plate brought in over the weekend by a thankful community-minded lady.

“Uh-huh.” Willie sipped as he leaned his long body against the door. “Sorry about last night, Boss.”

“How about you and me fishing this Sunday afternoon? I’m off. You, too.”

“Yep, but I won’t have my boy.” Willie stood tall again.

“I don’t have a son at all, but I have a friend-you.” Toby started back to his desk. “I’ll pick you up about two Sunday. I’d say you need a good dose of Buffalo Lake.”

A smile surfaced across Willie’s face, but he squelched it and took another sip of coffee.

Toby tried to hide his smile. He was getting through to Willie. He’d bet on it.

“I’ll be ready, Boss.” Willie threw away his Styrofoam cup and walked down the hall.

Toby followed. “I’m a detective now.”

Willie reached his desk and sat. “Isn’t that something? Congratulations, Detective. Proud to be your partner.” He held out his hand to his friend.

Toby shook his hand. “Thanks. I appreciate that.” Toby figured he and Willie had lots of work ahead keeping this town safe and crushing the devil’s drug power.

CHAPTER *Fourteen*

Wheep. Wheep.

The hated alarm clock persisted until Lacey was awake.

A strange foreboding enveloped her. She shivered from the cold, snatched the cover, and snuggled into fetal position. The sun's rays streamed through her eastern window. Her limbs were too paralyzed to move, but she had no choice. A Monday morning workday waited for no man. Or woman. Birds sang from the pecan tree outside her window welcoming the day.

She stretched enough to remove the kinks and climbed out of bed.

Rachel jerked up to a sitting position on the other side of the bed. "Can I go with you, Aunt Lacey?"

Lacey lay across the bed, nestled the child's shoulders against her chest, and felt the trembling. She rubbed the tiny back and kissed Rachel's black curls.

The last two nights had been rough for Rachel. Katie had called Saturday night to tell them she was spending the weekend with friends. Lacey's body still stiffened every time she recalled Katie's assumption. "You don't mind keeping Rachel, do you? I'll be back Monday evening after work."

No, she didn't mind at all, but she'd like to have punched her sister in the face when Rachel's tears started streaming. Lacey breathed in the sweet aroma of innocence. "No, sweetie, Aunt Lacey has to go to work. You'll stay here with Grandma." She pulled away and looked into the warm brown eyes glistening like a fresh batch of chocolate cookies. "Mama will be home tonight."

"Will you be home, too?" The child wiped her nose.

"I will. Even before your mother."

Rachel clung to Lacey, her tiny arms only reaching across her front side.

"Do you want to get in bed with Grandma?"

Rachel nodded.

Lacey picked her up, opened Mom's door, and laid the girl beside her grandmother.

Mom acknowledged the presence with a quick blink and a slight wave.

Lacey headed for the kitchen and prepared a bowl of cereal. While she watched the wind bow the tree outside the window, she nibbled her breakfast and thought about the weekend.

She and Mom had taken Rachel to church again. She loved going. Lacey remembered when that was true of Katie—before the drugs drove good intentions into a ditch.

While driving to work, Lacey again felt the foreboding. Was God trying to warn her of danger? She raced by Daisy's Donut Shop holding her chin tight and resolute, refusing to look. Her latest issue of *Beauty Magazine* had displayed an article title on the cover—"Lose Twenty pounds in Ten Days." The diet sounded workable. Her kitchen was fortified with whole wheat toast, fat-free yogurt, and lots of fruit, some of which she brought to work with her for bouts of hunger through the day. This was day one of the rest of her life.

Three minutes before nine, she unlocked the door to the office. Her key wedged in the lock, taking a while to release. She ignored the trembles running up and down her spine. No big deal. Just an over-active imagination.

Her first patient arrived with enough anger to overflow the office. "Why did you send me a past due notice?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Henry, but today will complete your sessions. You owe the money now." This was her least favorite part of the job.

Clifford Henry leaned on her desk. "You know I'm good for it, Lacey. I'll have it by the end of the month. You don't have to send your tacky notices."

Lacey pulled out a small calendar. "Let me make a note of that then, so I'll know not to call. Will it be the thirtieth when you pay?"

"Well, what day is that?" the man sputtered.

"Thursday."

"I don't get my check until the third." He stood up straight and started to walk away.

Lacey flipped a page and wrote her note. "I noted the third then. You can stop by and pay."

"I resent your persistence. Wait until *you* need something." The man dropped to a chair. His face was red. He squirmed, but remained seated.

Lacey picked up a sheet to add figures on her calculator, but her fingers trembled too much and slipped off the keys. The phone rang. It was the hospital administrator calling for Myrna. Didn't he realize by now she didn't get there that early?

When the phone disconnected, Myrna buzzed her on the intercom. She was earlier than usual. Was that good or bad?

In the quiet room, Mr. Henry heard the buzz. "So Mrs. Cutter is here."

"Yes, sir." Lacey stood to go check on her boss.

"Can I go in then?"

And, he talks about persistence. "Soon." Lacey disappeared into Myrna's office.

"What is that man doing here?" Myrna's hands rested on her hips, her elbows flying like wings. "I told you I didn't want to see him again."

Lacey's body stiffened, her arms plastered to her side. "You said you'd *like* to quit seeing him, but I made this appointment at the time of his last visit, as instructed." Lacey felt like she was about to hyperventilate. She gazed at Myrna and sighed. "Do you want me to tell him we can't see him?"

Myrna started pacing. She picked up his chart and scowled. "No, no. I have to see him now that he's here." She faced Lacey again. "But never again, do you hear me?"

Lacey opened the door to leave before tears embarrassed her. She wanted to hide in the bathroom until both left. "Yes, Ma'am. I won't make him another appointment."

"Show him in," Myrna called out in a pleasant voice.

What a put-on. "Mr. Henry, you may go in now." Lacey returned to her desk and tried to focus on writing bills for the next half hour.

The sound of a feminine voice clearing her throat brought Lacey to attention.

"Hi, Lacey, you busy?"

"Sandra." Lacey jumped to her feet and smoothed her tight skirt. "What are you doing here?"

The shapely blonde literally bounced as she spoke. "Toby asked me out on a date, and I'd like to fix his favorite dessert to share afterward. No one knows him better than you." She giggled and covered her mouth to shut off the silliness. "Except his mother of course, but I didn't want to ask her what his favorite dessert was. Do you know?"

Mr. Henry strode out of the inner office and up to her desk. "Give me an appointment in two weeks."

Lacey pretended to check her schedule. "You won't need to have another appointment, Mr. Henry. I hope the therapy has been of some help." She focused again on her pastor's daughter. "Now, Sandra, what was it you wanted?"

"Do you know Toby's favorite dessert?"

"Well, let me think"

Mr. Henry leaned on her desk. His brows dipped almost to his nose. "I demand another appointment to be made. Mrs. Cutter told me to come back in two weeks."

Lacey's sweaty palm caused her to drop her pen. She fumbled for it before it hit the floor. "I'm sorry, but her instructions to me were you needed no further help. We can see how you do, and you can call if you have any more trouble."

"Does he like chocolate pie?" Sandra twisted both her body and the tissue in her hand.

Lacey's lungs gasped for air, for relief, for escape. "Sandra, I don't ever remember Toby turning down any dessert offered him. I don't think there's anything he doesn't like."

Mr. Henry slammed her desk with his fist, causing both ladies to jump. "You've not heard the end of me. You think you'll make me pay my bill by not letting me get help. You wait and see. You'll be sorry." He stormed out of the clinic.

Everything got quiet.

"So you think he'll like it if I make a chocolate pie?" Sandra's voice came soft and tentative. "It's my specialty." She trailed off to almost a whisper.

Is this woman not fazed by anything? "Yes, I think he'll love your chocolate pie." Lacey hoped the emphasis of her words dented Sandra's thick head.

The pastor's daughter's smile grew wider than the one the clown wore at the rodeo last month. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

When she, too, rushed out, Lacey reached for tissues, trying quickly to swat at her tears. She breathed in and out at a steady pace, trying calm herself. Her hands shook too much to type. When the next patient arrived and went into Myrna's office, Lacey laid her head on her desk. She glanced at the clock, thankful she could stop soon, even if lunch was just her homemade salad.

Joanne dashed in, talking as fast as she walked and almost dragging four-year-old Beth behind her. "Come with me for lunch. please, please."

"I started my diet today, so I brought my lunch." Lacey kept working.

Joanne waved a coupon in front of her. "Half-price chicken basket. How often you gonna get a chance like that? I'm treating."

That didn't happen often. The temptation gnawed at Lacey like a whole pan of fudge. "I can't. I've got to stick with my diet."

Joanne harrumphed. "You can stay on a diet tomorrow when they don't have half-price chicken. This coupon is only for today."

Beth started crying. "Let's go."

"Just a minute," Joanne told her daughter and took to wheedling Lacey again. "Please, pretty please." She put her hands in praying position.

"You can go without me," Lacey said.

Joanne read off the coupon. "Not good for one person. Must be two or more."

"But you'll have Beth with you." Lacey stood to add oomph to her words.

"Sure, Lacey." Joanne placed her hands on her hips. "Bethie's going to eat a large chicken basket. She can't finish a drumstick."

"Order two and take the rest home to Calvin."

"And let him know I went there again? He'd yell at me. You gotta come. You're my only friend." Sometimes Lacey hated the whine in her friend's voice.

"I have to wait for the patient to leave. Be at least fifteen minutes." Lacey visualized having lunch already made for tomorrow. One day wouldn't make a lot of difference. She would still lose the twenty pounds because she would finish the ten-day diet.

"We'll wait." Joanne caught her daughter's arm. "Let's sit over here."

The time whizzed—Lacey checked out the patient, said goodbye to Myrna, and she and Joanne went to lunch.

The smell of frying chicken had Lacey salivating even before she got inside the door. She savored the juicy white meat and finished the tasty wings. Catsup dribbled from her chin. The grease from the French fries saturated her hands. She reached for extra napkins. Why did food taste better when you had fasted all morning?

Joanne bought fried pies for the three of them as the finish to the meal. Lacey bought half dozen more to take back to work with her. Joanne wouldn't judge, and Lacey would start her diet tomorrow.

The afternoon passed without further incident, leaving Lacey's blood pressure down and her pulse slow by five o'clock. While she locked up and left work, she planned dinner. Sticking with grilled chicken wasn't necessary now that her diet was ruined. She started her car, headed down the road for Ken's Pizza, and stopped at the stop sign in front.

BAM. The car behind her didn't stop.

A fitting end to a tedious day.

By six, Lacey arrived home, ready to flop. Her mother sat on a chair in the kitchen, her cane propped against her.

Lacey carried in the pizza boxes and set them on the table.

Rachel clapped her hands and climbed into a chair beside her grandma.

Without a word, Mom held out a letter to Lacey.

A cold shiver shook her—the same foreboding she had sensed in the morning. "What's this?"

Her mother shrugged. "Came in today's mail."

Lacey opened it, her Mom watching as she read.

She threw the paper across the room. It bounced halfway back to her. "Well, if that doesn't take the cake." She paced, her heels clicking on the scratched and scarred kitchen tiles. The noise level grew louder when she snatched plates from the cabinet and dropped them to the table.

"Save the dishes." Mom's tone was dry, with no humor.

Something like a growl escaped Lacey's lips. "Katie makes the messes. Lacey cleans them up. Isn't that right, Mom?" She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at her mother. "Did you know about this?" Her fingers began drumming on her opposite forearm. Her jaw got so tight, it hurt.

Her mother shook her head. She glanced at Rachel.

The anger was difficult for Lacey to swallow, but she tried. "Sweetie, go wash your hands before we eat."

The child scooted a chair toward the sink.

Lacey halted her. "Go to the bathroom and use the stool there." Her voice shook from her effort at control.

Rachel looked at the pizza with longing, but she obeyed.

The pepperoni and mozzarella aroma permeated the house. Nausea churned in Lacey's stomach despite how good it smelled.

"Has Katie gone?" Mom asked with a soft tone.

In contrast, Lacey nearly yelled. "Of course, she has!"

The lines in Mom's face seemed to deepen. Her skin paled. Lacey was sure the cane was the only thing that kept Mom from falling as she coped with the pain inflicted by her favorite daughter.

The fight had gone out of Lacey. Her knees wobbled. She eased into a chair and nodded. "She wants me to have custody of Rachel. She doesn't even want her own daughter, Mom. What kind of woman walks away from her flesh and blood?"

A whimper came from the living room.

Heat rushed up Lacey's neck. She jumped up and ran, wishing she could erase her careless words.

Rachel curled into a ball on the sofa, her right thumb inserted firmly in her mouth.

"Aunt Lacey's sorry. I didn't mean what I said."

Rachel sucked harder, pulling it out momentarily to speak. "Is my mama coming to get me today?"

"No, sweetheart, not today. Maybe another day." She patted her niece's bare legs.

The sucking sound grew louder. Lacey sat on the floor patting and wondering what to say or do. A clap of thunder reminded her of the unsettled clouds. "I need to go close my car windows. I'll be right back."

She ran outside, started the car, and raised her driver's side window. Just as she got back inside, the downpour had begun.

Mom still sat at the kitchen table, her head in her hands. She rose, grabbing her cane. Red puffy eyes alerted Lacey to her mother's tears, something that seldom happened.

Compassion knocked at Lacey's heart, but she locked it out, when she realized the tears were all for Katie.

Lacey sat on the floor beside Rachel. "You ready for some pizza?" Lacey wanted kids one day, but she wanted her own with a husband by her side. She couldn't attract a man, but now she had a child to raise.

Mom plopped into her recliner. "Do you think food will fix everything?"

"Works for me." Lacey tried a teasing note. "Whenever things go wrong, food makes it better." She huffed at Mom and grimaced. "Didn't you know that?" Good thing she hadn't planned on the cruise. She crunched up the pamphlet and threw it in the trash along with a few other dreams. She'd stay fat and lonely.

What was she going to do with a four-year-old?



Later that night, Betty Chandler, reclined in her chair, staring blindly out the window. The TV hummed to an absent audience. The next door neighbor's mowing continued unseen to her. She bit her lip, straightened her back, and hardened her heart against the unbearable pain.

Her husband had let her down. Her sweetheart had deserted her, and now her youngest daughter, was gone. To keep from getting hurt, Betty had cut off her love for Lacey. But, try as she could, Betty couldn't cut off her tender feelings for little Katie. Now the only person Betty could count on was crazy Lacey. Betty cringed. The unfairness of life threatened to choke off all air. With her emotional imbalance, would Lacey survive? Would Betty?

Lacey griped about Katie, about her boss, about not having anyone to marry. Her oldest daughter ate exorbitant amounts of food. In her, Betty spotted unforgettable signs of insanity. She couldn't go through that again. She'd kick Lacey down the street if it would wake her up to the danger.

The pain in Betty's back reminded her of her handicap. Her body was failing her. She looked down with disgust. Only fifty-five years old, but disabled and dependent. Lacey should know that food couldn't dull your mind enough. The pain of life never went away. The hurts kept piling higher until a person just couldn't climb over them. Even Betty's prayers were blocked, useless, without hope.

What would they do with Rachel?

Betty gritted her teeth and grasped the arm rests before she flipped on a new TV program. She would survive. She always had—with or without Lacey.

CHAPTER *Fifteen*

Toby arrived at home to prepare for his date. The answering machine blinked with a message. He clicked the play button. “Toby. Help, I need you.” The voice tore at his heart and made him want to cancel his plans, but God seemed to be leading him to let go of Lacey and her problems so he could date Sandra.

His phone rang again. He walked toward the shower, but Lacey’s voice on the answering machine trailed after him. “Toby, call me when you get home. I need you.”

Need him? Could be. But, she didn’t *want* him.

His future might rest with Sandra.

“I can’t fix you. I deserve love in my life,” he shouted toward the phone.

The spray from the shower faucet was too hot. He jerked back his leg. Thoughts of his past failures to help Lacey whirled around his brain. She might really need him this time, although he suspected she needed a shoulder to cry on. But, by George, he needed to move on with his life.

Climbing back in under a cooler spray, he steeled his will and choked down his tendency to be Lacey’s sucker. Whatever she did was her problem. The taste of this truth was unpalatable, but he swallowed it anyway, ignoring, and denying so that he was ready for his new life.

The next voice message came from Willie.

Toby grabbed it before the message stopped. “Hey there. What you doing?”

At first there was no sound on Willie’s end of the phone.

“Willie, you there?”

"I can't go fishing Sunday." Willie cleared his throat. "April decided I needed to pick up Timmy Friday night. They're not leaving for Europe until Monday."

Toby's mind rushed ahead to plans for the weekend. "Great, we can take Timmy Saturday morning. I don't go in to work until noon. How about you?"

The response came slow, soft, serious. "It'd be cold early morning."

"Are you kidding? That's the best time. The fish bite in the cold mornings. We could light a fire and bundle up in blankets. Timmy will love it." Toby switched shoulders as he laced first one shoe and then the other.

"I guess." Toby could visualize Willie rubbing his chin and thinking. "What time?"

"I'll pick y'all up at six Saturday morning." Toby stood, grabbing a navy corduroy jacket. His mirror image looked good. He added a grin that didn't feel genuine, but he'd bet it would get better.

Willie's voice sounded hopeful. "Thanks, Boss. See you tomorrow."

With a lighter heart and a truer smile on his face, Toby drove toward his date's place a few blocks away. Sandra walked out before he rang the doorbell. "Officer Wheeler, I'm ready if you are."

He was nervous. Spasms wracked the movement of his limbs, and he seemed unable to control the volume and quantity of his words. "Me too. You look lovely tonight. Just beautiful. Sure 'nuff. Yes, sir." He opened the passenger door to his truck and swung it too wide, caught it, and pulled it back. He dusted off the seat. "Sorry." His ears burned.

"Thanks." Sandra climbed into Old Blue.

Toby sauntered back around the truck and slid into the driver's seat. "I thought we'd go to the seafood place near the mall if that's okay."

"Oh my, Officer Wheeler . . ."

"Toby, please." He left the neighborhood.

Her cheeks turned a soft pink to match her sweater. "Toby. That's a special place."

"I like it." He pulled onto the highway, heading east toward Apache Falls.

"It's rather expensive. Dad won't take us there. He says it's too much for a pastor's salary." Sandra smoothed her dress. "I don't think a pastor should be poor, do you, Offi . . . Toby?" The pink turned scarlet.

Toby's right hand reached to turn down the radio. "No, I think pastors should earn what most of their congregation do."

"Some people think that if he does without things, it's evidence of his spirituality. Some believe money corrupts a man of God." Sandra faced front and gnawed her lip.

Toby opened his window a little and tugged at his neckline. "I can't imagine people thinking that today when many Christians are prosperous." A blast of cool air revitalized him. Sandra's strong floral aroma had nearly choked off his air. Now he could breathe again.

"Toby, do you mind raising your window? The wind blows my hair."

He raised the window. At least he was near the restaurant.

She remained quiet the rest of the way. When he pulled into the restaurant parking lot, he climbed out of his truck to come around and open her door.

"You're such a gentleman, Toby." Keeping her eyes on the ground, she slid out of her seat.

The two walked to the entrance overshadowed by trees and hanging planters. Three-foot golden angels graced the lobby.

"It looks expensive." There was a touch of awe in her words.

The tables were covered with white tablecloths and sported linen napkins. A young boy brought water in crystal glasses.

After the server advised them of the specials, Toby immediately settled on a combination steak and shrimp plate. "What sounds good to you?"

"It all sounds good." She read out loud everything on the menu and vacillated between salmon and teriyaki chicken, finally choosing the chicken. When the server left, her gaze fell on the corner behind him. Her eyes widened. "The daisies, carnations, and gladiolus in that vase are fresh."

He didn't want to seem rude, so he turned, pretending to act interested. "They're probably fake."

"I know flowers." Demure was gone, her tone now dogmatic.

Toby was so glad when the server brought rolls. His hands needed something to do, and besides, he was starved. He sliced and buttered one. "You've been working for Bernice a long time now, haven't you?"

Sandra leaned closer. "She may be selling the flower shop soon. Daddy says he may help me buy it."

"That's exciting. Is that what you want to do?"

The server brought their food. The hearty aroma of the steak made Toby think of Lacey. No doubt she would have ordered steak, too. She enjoyed a good T-bone almost as much as he did. He felt his face drain of color. How much of a heel was he to take out one girl and think of another? He locked his gaze on Sandra's blue eyes and did not let them waiver.

"You okay, Toby?"

He wiped his eyes with his napkin. "I'm fine." He could've spoken more gently. He stared at Sandra with such intensity that his eyes were watering, yet still he imagined Lacey's brown eyes. Chump or not, he couldn't lasso his mind. He cleared his throat and tried to concentrate on the woman across from him.

She toyed with a bite of chicken. "Do you think it's a good idea for me?" She looked down at her food. "I'm a little scared."

Toby pierced a big bite of T-bone with his fork. "You're good at flower arranging. I've seen the ones at the front of the church. Lacey pointed them out one time. She liked them."

Sandra blushed and ate some of her chicken without further comment.

Eating quietly caused Toby to squirm. His mind rushed to think of something to say, but it was a blank whiteboard.

With Lacey, quiet was okay. He visualized her sitting there. She would be carving into her steak with angry slashes. Their thoughts would translate into words—usually him trying to convince her to either do something or not do something. As if he could control Lacey Chandler. He laughed to himself. No one could do that.

Sandra pushed back her plate with only half of the food eaten. "That was delicious."

Toby bit off the end of a jumbo shrimp. "You left a lot."

"Their portions are large." She wiped her mouth with the napkin and folded it into a nice square beside her plate. Her hands returned to her lap.

Toby couldn't imagine Lacey leaving that much on her plate unless she was sick. *Why am I thinking of Lacey?* "That was wonderful." He scooted his empty plate to the middle of the table. "I didn't like mine, either." He grinned.

Sandra glanced at the plate and then back at him like he'd lost the last piece of his mind.

For some reason, her serious side caused riotous rounds of laughter to erupt. He had trouble catching his breath.

"Have you saved room for dessert?" the server asked.

"No, I'm stuffed," Sandra answered, even though the man had looked at Toby.

Toby squelched his hilarity enough to answer a squeaky, "no." He usually ordered dessert, but so did Lacey or Willie or any of his friends. His funny bone threatened to again flip and skip and rip. When he swallowed back the new bout of mirth, a bit of saliva slipped through his lips. He covered his mouth with one hand, trying to regain his manners. He didn't want to make Sandra wait, nor did he want to be an embarrassment. What was wrong with him, anyway? "Bring the check, please."

Sandra's face sparkled with amusement. "I have something special for you when we get to my house."

He took the bill from the server, looked at it, and handed it back with his Visa. "You didn't need to get anything for me." He stood and motioned for her to leave.

While he guided Sandra past the golden angels, she commented again on what a nice place the restaurant was. "You made me feel special bringing me here. Thank you."

His neck heated. She was a nice person, and he hadn't been the best companion. The parking lot light illuminated her face. She was also a beautiful, desirable woman. He helped her into his truck and began the trip back to Wharton Rock.

When he pulled in front of her apartment, she faced him. "What's your favorite dessert, Toby?"

"Mmm, that's a hard one. I like everything sweet. I guess my favorite would be coconut cream pie."

Sandra's face clouded.

He'd said something wrong. With this woman, he seemed destined to keep climbing the boulder for which this town of Wharton Rock was named, teetering on the edge for balance. He circled the front of the truck to open her door. "May I come in for a while?" He sure hoped that was the right thing to say.

Sandra looked out from under wet lashes. “Do you want to?” He spotted a gleam in her eyes.

Bingo, he’d made her happy. “I was hoping you wouldn’t mind. I would like to hear more about your ideas for the class social.” Was his smile sliding into smirk territory? He hoped not. “You have a lot of experience at this social stuff. How in the world I ended up as chairman is beyond me.”

After they had entered Sandra’s house, and he had closed the front door, she scrambled to the kitchen and returned holding a pie. “I’m sorry. It’s chocolate. I thought it was your favorite.”

“Are you kidding? I love chocolate pie.” He took it from her and set it on her table.

She cut him a big piece.

The sweetness titillated his taste buds. He could eat the whole pie all by himself, but then he noticed her sitting across from him with a satisfied smile. “Don’t you want any?”

“Silly. Of course, I do.” She cut hers and took the rest back to the kitchen.

His empty plate cried for more. He winked. “Do I only get one piece?” His tone was light, jovial.

She paused. “Oh, Toby, it’s all yours to eat now or take home—whatever you want to do.”

Sandra was so serious. He felt bad about teasing her.

After she’d had one piece and him, two, she covered the rest of the pie. “Be sure to take this home with you.”

“Thanks, Sandra. I’ve never had anyone make me a pie before, except Mom.” He stood and surveyed his feet. “I should be going.”

After he had edged toward the door, he noticed an enormous arrangement on the piano—a vase filled with the same flowers Sandra had pointed out in the restaurant.

“Good luck on your flower shop.” He turned to say goodbye, looking down at her as she was several inches shorter than he. Gulping, he shifted his weight from one leg to the other. The shock had come when he had turned because he had expected a girl near his own height. He had expected . . . He froze. He had expected Lacey. His heart thumped in his ears. “I’ve gotta go. See you.” He squirmed and put his weight on his left leg one more time, but forced his eyes to connect with Sandra’s. His big

hands covered her tiny ones. "I really enjoyed tonight. Thanks for going with me."

Her giggle followed him down the walk, and he prayed as he drove down the street.

Lord, if Sandra is your choice, help me get my mind off Lacey. Heal her. Direct my steps.

When he got home and had changed into old clothes, he grabbed the rags and varnish. He spread the stain across his dining table with violent strokes, the original grain bleeding though and shining like the metal on his belt buckle.

Noticing the blinking light on his answering machine caused him to put more muscle into his rubbing. At midnight, he flopped into his bed exhausted, but his mind still rippled with condemnation.



At six o'clock Saturday morning, Toby turned into Willie's apartment parking lot. Willie and Timmy stood bundled in heavy coats, shivering in the dark. The two loaded themselves into Old Blue.

"Hey, Timmy, good to see you again." Toby swerved back onto the road. His eyes burned from lack of sleep, and his head pounded with pain. Not a good recipe for successful fishing. "It'll be breaking day by the time we reach the lake."

Timmy remained quiet.

Willie adjusted his seat to accommodate his long legs. "I must say this seems like the craziest notion I ever did hear—heading to the lake when it's still dark."

"You're gonna love it."

Toby had brought extra fishing gear. Thinking a fire would feel good this early, he headed to the fire pit near Wilderness Cove.

By the time the two men had unloaded the truck and guided little Timmy over the boulders and down by the lake, the blue-grey color of the east had nearly overtaken the black in the western sky. Timmy searched the area for twigs, while his dad banked the old coals in the pit. Toby set out three stools with a rod and reel beside each one, his old one for Willie and a new one he'd purchased for the boy. He spread out the bait and lures.

The fire soon warmed the area. Toby's muscles relaxed. Timmy followed Toby's instructions and was the first to catch a fish.

Willie held open the fish bucket while his son dropped it in with a grin brighter than the sun arising at their backs.

"That's my first-ever fish. Can I have my picture taken with it?"

Toby shook his head. "Sorry, I didn't think to bring a camera."

Willie pulled out his phone. "Dad to the rescue. Pick up that catch."

Timmy opened the bucket and grabbed at the squirming crappie. The fish flapped out of his grasp.

"Hold up the box. We'll get a picture with your next catch before we drop it in." Willie's tone sounded less patient, more irritated. Maybe fishing wasn't his thing.

Timmy snatched his rod, moving to a rock closer to the water. "Think they're biting better over here."

Willie and Toby made eye contact.

"I think we'll make a fisherman out of him yet," Toby said.

Willie watched his son move out of earshot and perch on a rock surrounded by the lake. "Thanks for inviting us. I was so angry at April for twisting me around. I felt like that fish in the basket, locked into any whim she had."

"You're a good dad, Willie. Timmy knows you love him. That's what counts in the long run, not fancy trips and TVs." Toby pulled out his rod and cast the line into another spot.

"I got a bite." When Willie wound in his reel, a big bass dangled from his line. He jumped to his feet for leverage.

"You got it. Keep it coming," Toby called.

Willie reeled in the fish.

"Wow!" The awe in Timmy's voice brightened his dad's smile.

About that time, Timmy caught another crappie.

Toby laid down his rod. "Give me that phone. Let me take a picture of you both with your fish."

After awhile, silence draped across the fishing spot as each fisherman watched his bobber.

Toby prayed for Willie and Timmy while relishing the beauty of God's morning. He loved this time of day. His schedule most often allowed for only afternoon fishing, but God seemed closer somehow in the morning.

A loud splash sounded from where Timmy was fishing. Toby ran for the spot.

The boy stood, struggling, and yelled for his dad. "Help!" His foot slipped. He fell into the water. "Help!"

Before Toby could act, Willie dashed past him like bullet and waded through the waist-deep water until he came to the drop-off. He gathered Timmy with one arm and swam to shore with the other.

Toby helped Willie pull Timmy in since their water-soaked clothes threatened to tug both father and son deeper again.

When they both collapsed on solid rock, Toby grabbed two comforters. "Take off your wet clothes under these blankets and wrap them around you."

Both followed his instructions and soon stood naked except for blanket, shoes, and socks.

Willie stood shaking and trembling.

Timmy started laughing and howling. He kicked out his feet, and strutted like a chicken. "First time I ever swam in a lake. Fishing and swimming, too." He bowled over with laughter until both men joined him.

Toby suspected with Willie, like with himself, the laughter sprang from the release of adrenaline because of the fear. The boy was safe and happy.

Toby declared it time to pack up and leave. Timmy had caught two small fish, Willie, one good-sized one, and Toby nothing but good feelings.

When Toby dropped the father and son home, Willie leaned back into Old Blue before getting out. "I'm calling April. Timmy's out of school Monday for a teacher training day. I'm not taking him back until Monday."

"Thought they were leaving for Europe on Monday."

"Not until two. I'll take him all the way to the Austin airport and meet them there." Willie stood tall. "'Bout time I called the shots, even if it means more driving for my old truck. I'm off Monday, so I'll take my time."

Toby squinted against the sun and caught Willie's gaze. "Sure would love to see you in church Sunday. There's a good class for Timmy."

Timmy motioned from the porch for his dad to hurry.

Willie shrugged. "I might do that. I just might." He ran to catch up with Timmy.

CHAPTER *Sixteen*

On her second nursing home visit, Lacey didn't feel so nervous because she knew what to expect, but this time, she was late. Her car's rearview mirror helped her to add earrings to her wardrobe. She tugged her Bible and notes from the back seat and ran toward the front door.

With two weeks of healthy eating under her belt, Lacey walked with head lifted, shoulders pulled back, and an easy smile on her face. Why did she let food squash her confidence and stomp on it again and again? A new wave of worry niggled at her mind—the effects of emotional eating on her mental stability.

Which came first?

The chicken, or the egg?

The effort, or the attitude for ministry?

The compulsion, or the insanity?

She opened the door to wrinkled, expectant faces, the same group as before, plus a few extras. She scanned the expressions. They'd probably waited at least thirty minutes for the original starting time in addition to the extra time due to her tardiness. A wisp of hair drooped into her eyes and made her forehead sweat. Note to self—don't be late to nursing homes.

Miss Pearl, who had clung to Lacey last time, sat directly in front of the podium. "I missed you last week. Where were you?" Her face skewed into that of a pouty four-year-old.

Lacey put her arm around the frail shoulders. She liked the old woman despite her curt replies. "I missed you, too."

"You should've come." The strident voice reverberated in Lacey's mind like a trumpet blast.

"Pearl, I'm dedicating the first song to you. What do you want me to sing?" Lacey pulled away to look squarely in the woman's eyes.

"'Old Rugged Cross'. Nobody sings 'Old Rugged Cross' anymore, and that's my favorite." Pearl snatched a hymn book and turned without looking up the page number. "270," she told everyone.

Lacey took the book and stood behind the podium to welcome everyone. "This song is dedicated to Pearl. I don't have any music, so it will be a Capella. Feel free to sing along."

Pearl's off-key singing drowned out Lacey's on the verse, and others joined on the chorus. When they finished, several called out their favorites. After singing eight requests, she stopped. "We'll sing more next time."

She read a Bible verse, gave a short devotion, and ended with prayer.

As she packed up to leave, many clustered around her once again, but it was Pearl who voiced her opinion. "You need to come next week. That other lady's no good. I'll let Sister Lloyd know to send you instead."

Lacey shook her head. "I'll be here in two weeks. Next time, I'll bring my daughter." The word sounded strange on Lacey's tongue, but it felt good. "I mean my niece."

"A little girl? How old is she? Oh, I love little girls," Pearl's words came too fast to allow time for replies. Finally, she came up for air.

"She's four," Lacey said.

"I love four-year-olds," one lady said.

Pearl pushed aside the intruder. "Bring her next week."

Lacey glared and strove for more intimidation, less congeniality. "In two weeks."

Pearl shuffled along with Lacey toward her Cadillac. She whispered in her ear as if sharing a secret, but her voice carried across the lot. "Honey, have you heard about the twelve step programs?"

"Yes, I've heard of them." That old woman would say anything and never be embarrassed. Lacey climbed into her car and started the ignition. She couldn't leave fast enough.

Pearl held fast to the driver's door and kept it from closing. "Nicole Johnson joined that new twelve-step program, and she's lost forty pounds. Do you know Nicole?"

"I know who she is. Thanks for telling me." This woman wouldn't stop. Lacey tugged on the door.

That frail body could be blown away in a strong wind, but her grip on the door was solid. Finally, Pearl heaved a sigh and closed it.

Lacey offered a smile as a vote of gratitude. She drove away, leaving the old woman waving so hard Lacey feared she might lose her balance and tip over.

She should call Nicole to see how she had lost the weight, but Lacey's latest diet was going well, so she didn't believe she needed help. Still, she might call. Nicole was the biggest woman in Wharton Rock, outweighing Lacey by two hundred pounds.

The next day was Sunday. Lacey slumped in the pew with what she termed "mother's fatigue." The last six days answering the constant questions of a four-year-old threatened to push Lacey over the edge to insanity as Mom had anticipated. Then, her niece's upset stomach had kept Lacey awake the previous night.

Now Mom's piney cologne was nauseating Lacey. Her temple throbbed. As she longed to close her eyes, she hoped she wasn't getting sick, too.

"Turn to 1 Corinthians 3:16." Rev. Lloyd started his sermon.

Lacey straightened and turned the pages in her Bible.

Her mother muttered, "Where did he say?"

Lacey pointed to the text, gritting back her irritation. Mom had caused them to be late. Lacey hated being late. The only empty places left had been on row two. Mom couldn't keep up with the pastor and interrupted with whispering—and everyone was watching. Lacey's cheeks flamed, and she sunk lower into the seat.

Rev. Lloyd read, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple."

The taste in Lacey's mouth was bitter. Her purple dress stretched tautly across thighs the size of small trees, and her stomach resembled an inflated parachute. Her body wasn't a good temple, and she couldn't possibly sink any lower physically or mentally.

Closing her eyes so tightly that her temple pain worsened, she prayed for strength. When her gaze rose from the page, it roved toward the left of the pulpit, and she locked eyes with Toby.

He broke into a sunny smile that was all Toby—sweet and sincere, honest and hilarious. Then why had he never returned her phone calls?

He must have grown tired of her. A man like Toby couldn't spend too much time on the friendship of a bloated loser. Not when he had a city to save, a detective badge to win, and beautiful Sandra more than halfway in love.

Lacey's eyes blurred, the sanctuary lights dimmed, the taste on her tongue turned from bitter to sour. Mom squirmed and her cologne wafted toward Lacey, making her cough. She slid to an upright position, but her shoulders drooped. She couldn't lose Toby. She just couldn't.

"Let's bow our heads in prayer," the pastor said.

With bowed head, Lacey closed her eyes and captured her wayward thinking. When she said "amen" along with everyone else, she stood, ready to face others. She wound her way out of the sanctuary and down the hall to Rachel's classroom.

"Lacey, Lacey, look what I did." Rachel held up a picture with pride. It was multicolored circles.

"That's beautiful." Lacey felt the child's forehead. "How do you feel?" Rachel seemed clammy, but not feverish.

She jumped up and down like a baby kangaroo. "I'm fine. Can I come to Vacation Bible School? My teacher said we'd have it soon."

"We'll see. Depends on whether it's in the daytime or at night. Where's your sweater?" Lacey searched and found it and led the four-year-old to her car where her mother sat in the passenger seat, pouting.

"Took you long enough," she complained when Lacey opened the back door.

Rachel climbed into the car-seat, a now permanent fixture in Lacey's Cadillac.

Lacey hooked the catch, patted Rachel's head, and came around to sit in the driver's seat.

"Are you taking us out to eat?" Mom asked.

Lacey sighed. "I don't have any money, Mom."

She drove home, and her mother remained quiet.

Once inside the house, Lacey stared at Mom. She was going to have to help. Lacey couldn't do it all herself. "Sit and look at your granddaughter's picture and visit with her while I cook dinner."

Mom glanced at Rachel's picture. "Nice." Could the woman not drum up a little excitement?

Rachel ran to Lacey, tugging on her tight purple dress. "Can I draw another one?"

"Do you have some crayons?"

Rachel shook her head.

After Lacey had changed into old clothes, she pulled out notebook paper and a pen and set it on the table beside Mom. "When Aunt Lacey gets paid next week, we'll buy some crayons."

"And the baby doll?" Rachel glowed with anticipation.

Lacey pushed back the black curl off her niece's forehead. "Not yet, sweetheart."

Rachel bowed over her paper.

Lacey headed for the kitchen, and soon the spicy aroma of pork sausage filled the house.

Leaning on her cane, Mom shuffled to the kitchen table. "Did you find anyone to babysit?" She spread out the Sunday newspaper.

Lacey's hands quivered and shook trying to break eggs to fry. "No, Mom. Guess you have it for another week. I'm sorry." Lacey glanced at Rachel. "I know you don't feel like it, but what are we going to do? I put an ad in the paper. See if you can find it there."

Her mother turned to the classified. "Yeah, it's here. Maybe someone will call today." She read while Lacey got their breakfast-style Sunday dinner on the table. Even the aroma of the canned biscuits was making Lacey hungrier by the minute. Diets were God's curse on the wicked. She took a bite of a sausage and set it on her plate to finish later.

When they were seated, Rachel bobbed up and down in her chair. "I learned our blessing." She repeated that three times in a singsong chant. "Can I say it? Can I?"

"Sure, you can, Rachel." Lacey bowed her head.

"God is great, God is good." Rachel paused. She sighed.

Lacey took a peek.

The girl held one finger to her mouth.

"Let us thank" Lacey said.

"Let us thank him for our food." Rachel ended with a loud "amen" and looked up with a glow in her eyes, a cock to her head, and a smile that said I'm grown up now.

"Thank you. That was very good." Lacey took a bite of sausage and eggs.

Rachel gazed at her aunt, her confidence gone. "I forgot part of it."

"That's okay. That's how we learn." Lacey offered the plate of biscuits to Rachel, and her mother took one for herself.

Rachel nibbled the egg. "Can I play with Beth and Tiff . . . any today?" Lacey's niece and Joanne's daughters were already best friends. Joanne said she was thankful to have a girl down the street.

"We'll walk down to their house later, but Aunt Lacey needs a nap first." She took another bite and looked at her mother. "Don't let Rachel go to Joanne's house, Mom, unless you go, too."

She glanced at Rachel. The child must have learned a new song at church. She sang while stirring her scrambled eggs.

Lacey leaned toward Mom and whispered. "I love Jo to death, but she lets them go in the front yard without anyone watching. Toby says he's driven by, and Beth will run out in the street to wave. She could be hit or picked up, Toby says."

Rachel's eyes widened. "Is Beth going to be hit?"

Lacey's body tensed. No secrets around a big-eared four-year-old. "No, sweetie, Beth is fine." She stood. "Are you through eating?"

Rachel nodded. Her mouth opened, but she didn't speak.

Lacey wiped the child's face. "Go finish your picture."

Rachel skipped into the living room.

Mom picked up her cane. "Well, I can't walk down there with her, so she'll have to play inside until you hire a babysitter." She maneuvered out of the kitchen.

Lacey gazed out the window to the willow tree in the backyard, bent over from the wind. Her shoulders drooped. Mom never thanked her for dinner or for any of the work she did. Lacey sighed, finished her sausage, and then ate the rest of Rachel's food.

Her stomach growled. She must've overfilled it, even if she'd chosen light pork sausage. Portions did count. She jumped to her feet to start the

cleanup. The sink overlooked the base of the willow. Jonquils around the tree trunk lit up the backyard with blooms. Everything else was dead.

A tug on her shirt from small hands.

“Rachel?” After Lacey hung up the dish towel, she hugged her niece. “Let’s fix up your baby’s bed so we can all take a nap.”

Rachel scrunched her face into a frown. “I don’t want a nap.”

“Well, I do, so you’ve got to take one, too.”

Rachel started crying. “I don’t want to go to sleep. I want to play with Beth.”

“Finish your picture.”

“I don’t want to finish it.” The girl ripped up the paper. “I want to see Beth.” She stomped her feet and crossed her arms.

Lacey sauntered toward her bedroom. The longer she paid Rachel no attention, the louder her screams got.

Mom yelled from her easy chair. “Can’t you get that child to quit crying?”

Lacey needed candy—lots of it. Dieting was impossible for mothers.

CHAPTER *Seventeen*

Teardrops slipped from Lacey's eyes. Her hands shook. Her stomach flipped.

I didn't ask for this.

All Lacey wanted was to be taken care of instead of being the caretaker. She loved children, but she wanted her own with a husband who loved them. She swiped her eyes, but the tears continued.

"Shut up, Rachel." Lacey stood with clenched fists staring at the child. Her tone was mean, not kind.

Rachel sat in stunned silence.

"I'm sorry." Lacey knelt beside the child and hugged her. "I didn't mean to yell. Aunt Lacey's tired."

Rachel sobbed, her tears saturating her aunt's shirt.

Lacey's body trembled. She tightened the hold she had on Rachel as if she could never let go, never love her less, never quit being her mom. "You didn't ask for this either, did you?" She pulled the girl away to gaze into her eyes. "We're in this together, you and me. We're partners. Okay?" She reached out a hand to shake.

A small hand clasped Lacey's. She noticed the child's hand shook, too. Tears glistened on her eyelashes. "Parners."

"If you'll let Aunt Lacey sleep for an hour, we'll walk and see if Beth and Tiffany can play. How's that?"

Rachel nodded. "I'll put my dolly to bed." She skipped to the corner of the room.

"Rachel, lie down on the sofa near Grandma. I'll go to my bed."

Rachel looked over at her grandmother, then at her dolly. "I think Margaret Rose and I will sleep in your bed."

Anger gone, and humor rekindled, Lacey chuckled. "Come on then."

The nap added some zip to her. When she awoke, she looked at the precious little girl with a black tuft of hair sticking straight up on her pillow and a plastic doll with a yellow dress clutched under one arm. Rachel's soft breaths sounded loud in the quiet. What ordeals this young child had endured. Love and compassion flowed out of Lacey like hot fudge sauce onto an ice cream sundae.

With everything in her, she vowed to keep Rachel safe and secure from now until forever.

Lacey picked up her diary to write, something she hadn't done since Rachel had come. In the last eleven days, Lacey had often used the phrase "before Rachel."

The child mumbled, her mouth still moving, her eyes closed.

Lacey finished her writing and picked up her romance book to read. Soon after, a soft touch disturbed the heroine's plight. Lacey smelled sweet baby powder.

Little Rachel leaned against her shoulder, thumb stuck in her mouth and a grin sliding to the side of the thumb. "Can we go see Beth and Tiffany now?"

"We'll walk down the street and see if they're home." Lacey climbed off the bed.

Rachel bounced up and down, squealing.

Lacey smoothed the wrinkles from her clothes and grabbed her keys. Her mother was asleep in the recliner, so Lacey left a note and she and Rachel went out the front door to the porch.

The fragrance of roses wafted over Lacey. She loved roses and had planted red, pink, yellow, and white ones to the side of the entrance. Each color blossomed except the white. She bent to inhale. The pink smelled the best.

Taking Rachel's hand, she started down the street. The day was hot for May. Sweat trickled from her Lacey's underarms and dampened her side. Joanne lived one block down and across the street. Lacey should've driven.

She knocked on the door and tried the doorbell, but no one came. "Sorry, baby, they don't seem to be home."

Rachel put her hands on her hips in grown-up fashion. "We should've come before our nap."

"Sweetie, they might have been gone all day. We can't know. We'll try tomorrow evening when I get home from work." She reached for Rachel's hand, but Rachel refused, walking ahead of her instead. Lacey trudged down the sidewalk, misery her only companion.

A car honked. Using her hand as a visor, she looked toward the sound.

A patrol car stopped at the curb. "Looks like someone could use a ride," Toby shouted.

Lacey rushed to the driver's side and tried to hug Toby, but it was awkward with him behind the wheel. She beat him over the head with her sweater, laughing and chiding him. "Where you been, you old coot?"

Toby laughed.

Rachel's mouth dropped. She stared at the Wharton Rock Police Department sign on the side. Her big eyes filled with fear.

Toby parked and climbed out of the car. "Would you like to sit on the hood?" he asked Rachel.

She slowly shook her head, her mouth still open. "I didn't know you were a policeman."

"Remember my badge." Toby pointed to it.

The girl quit backing up and faced Toby. She blinked. "Mommy said not to talk to policemen."

"Now, why do you think that was?" Toby studied the fingernails on his loosely-balled up right fist.

Lacey kept quiet watching Toby work his magic.

He soon had Rachel convinced that Wharton Rock policemen were friendly, and Rachel convinced Lacey that they should take a ride in the squad car. "He said we could." Her eyes pleaded.

Lacey moved closer. "I swear, Officer Wheeler, how you do charm the ladies." She exaggerated her Texas drawl.

Toby went for the trunk. "I always keep a car seat handy, just in case I meet a nice young lady like Rachel."

Lacey covered her mouth and choked down her giggles. She took Rachel's hand, walked her around the car, and buckled her into the seat.

Toby got behind the wheel and sat staring straight ahead. Even when Lacey slid in the passenger side, he didn't start the engine. "The name's *Detective Wheeler* now."

She swatted him one more time with her sweater. "That's wonderful, Toby. When did you find that out?"

"Couple weeks ago." The motor roared to life.

"And you didn't call me? You rat." Lacey pursed her lips.

Toby wheeled the car down the street. "We've both been busy. Did you ever check with your insurance company about that surgery?"

Everyone worried about her weight. She cringed, but decided to let it go. "I left word, but they haven't called. I should try them again tomorrow."

Toby caught Rachel's eye in the rearview mirror and winked. "Think this here policeman needs to check out the ice cream store. You think so, partner?"

"Lacey's my parner." Rachel tilted her head. "But I think ice cream is good." She folded her small arms.

Toby laughed and drove to Dairyland.

The last time Lacey had gone to the drive-in restaurant was with Bill.

Toby's gaze cut toward her, his expression tinged with concern. Why was that?

His humor returning, he licked his cone and turned to Rachel. "Lacey got that old rocky road ice cream with lumps in it. Eeew."

"Eeew." Rachel turned up her nose as if rocky road was nauseating.

Lacey watched him. He was a natural with kids—and much more fun than Bill.

"We like the smooth stuff." Toby's tongue swished around the side of his ice cream like a street sweeper.

Rachel followed his example. "I don't like bumps."

"I like smooth orange." Toby lifted his in salute. He slid his orange up next to Rachel's chocolate. "Oops. You got chocolate on my orange."

Rachel giggled.

Toby's radio sounded. He answered "I gotta go, gals. I'll take you home. Some of us have to work for a living." He stretched back and tickled Rachel.

She burst into gales of childish laughter.

When he delivered Lacey and Rachel to their home, Rachel bounded out of the car, all disappointment from Beth not being home now forgotten. She ran to tell her grandma what had happened.

Lacey yelled to her. "Rachel what do you say to Officer, ah . . . Detective Wheeler?"

The four-year-old turned with quizzical eyes and a scrunched-up nose. Lacey could see Rachel had never been asked that.

"I've got to go," Toby called.

"Just a minute," she told him. "Rachel, thank the detective for the ride and the ice cream."

Rachel ran back and stared at Toby with wide eyes. "Thank you, Dective." And she was off again.

Toby reached across and caught Lacey's arm. "I really must go, but I need to talk to you. I'll be back in a little while, okay?"

"Sure." Lacey said. When she entered the house, Rachel was telling Grandma all about Wharton Rock policemen.

"I can talk to them. It's okay." Rachel bounced on the couch. "They buy ice cream."

Mom raised her chair to the upright position. "Why didn't you bring me some?"

Rachel ducked her head and sucked her thumb. "I forgot." She ran into Lacey's room to pick up the dolly she had dropped earlier in her excitement to leave.

The three of them went out on the porch to enjoy the smell of the roses and the warmth of the spring day.

Not too long afterward, Toby arrived. He let out a "Yahoo" when he stepped out of Old Blue.

Rachel giggled.

Lacey pushed her hair from her eyes. "Toby's a detective now, Mom."

"That's nice. I take it that's a good promotion?" Mom rocked in her woven vinyl chair.

He slapped his leg with his Stetson. "Yes, ma'am, it's a great promotion. I've been working on it for two years now."

"Have a seat." Lacey stood to open another lawn chair. "You said you needed to tell me something?"

"Yeah, could we go inside?" Toby's forehead wrinkled, and his jaw tightened.

Not a good sign. "Sure." She turned to Rachel. "You stay here with Grandma. We'll be back in a minute."

The little girl remained sitting on the step, but the fear in her eyes made Lacey want to cry. So many changes had come into the young life. How Lacey wished she could erase all the girl's fears. She was going to try. She stepped inside, Toby behind her.

He moved away from the door after closing it. "Do you plan on applying for legal custody of Rachel?"

She glared at him. "I hadn't thought about it. I know Katie may not be back for a long time, maybe never. I left you a message. I wanted to explain."

"I heard. I've been busy, and probably gonna get busier. Sorry I didn't call you back." He sounded funny. His ears turned red.

She knew him well and would bet he was lying, but didn't know why he would. Best to level with him. Lying or not, she could trust Toby. "Katie sent me letter asking me to take Rachel. Some mother, huh?"

"She's in jail. Possession of drugs." Toby spoke quietly. "And she has a new boyfriend. That's the drift I get, so if she comes back, it won't be a good thing for that little girl. She needs some stability in her life."

Lacey sat on the sofa. "I plan on keeping her. I'll look after her. If Katie comes back and tries to take her, she'll have a fight from me."

Toby paced. "The thing is, Lace, if she comes back, and she's clean, she could take her. The courts would back her up. She's her mother. But if you applied now for legal custody, with her in jail, you'd win. Then if she comes back, she can't take her without a real court battle, and still might lose if you can prove how Rachel thrived under your care." He paused. "Which I know she will."

Clutching her stomach, Lacey winced at the loud churning and rumbling coming from her middle. She rubbed harder and clamped her upper lip over her lower. "I guess you're right. I'll call a lawyer tomorrow."

Toby put his hand on her shoulder. "If you need a character witness, call me. Okay?"

Lacey nodded.

Rachel peeped in the door. "When are y'all coming back?"

"Right now." Toby ran toward her and scooped her onto his broad shoulders. "You need to get Aunt Lacey out here to play some ball while the weather's nice."

"Can we, Aunt Lacey? Do you have a ball?" Rachel about wore Lacey out with all her bouncing.

Lacey stuck out her tongue at Toby. "See what you started?" She looked at her niece. "I can tell when I get paid. I've got a long list of things to buy. First, crayons and coloring book and now, a ball."

Toby opened Old Blue's door. "Hey, Lace, every child should have a ball. I'll bring mine over later this evening. You won't have to buy that." He winked. "Playing ball with Rachel might help you lose some weight. Extra benefit." He climbed in and drove off down the street.

Her churning stomach was making her sick. She was more than a fat woman. Couldn't Toby see that? He came and dumped a load of problems in her lap and then nagged her about her weight. How dare he?

Detective Wheeler might help solve her problem with Rachel, but he couldn't fix her weight problem. She went inside and delved into the cookie jar to find her fickle friend.

CHAPTER *Eighteen*

“That’s not fair.” Toby punched one fist into another. He hadn’t stopped pacing since Lacey had told him her insurance wouldn’t pay for bariatric surgery. “You need it. That’s just stupid.”

She stopped pacing alongside him, placed her hands on her hips, and laid into Toby like he was the enemy. “Will you just shut up? It’s my insurance, my problem, my life.”

Heat worked its way up his neck. He was the stupid one. He’d ignored God’s leading and had taken to stopping by again to *fix* Lacey. She had the right to kick him in the seat. After plopping into a dining room chair, he leaned over his knees, and twisted his Stetson with shaky fingers.

Lacey, her mother, and Rachel stared.

“I’m sorry. You’re right.” The heat didn’t stop but continued to rise until it burned his ears while he tried to think of a plan of escape.

Lacey wrung her hands and sat in her recliner. “I’m sorry, too.” Her voice had lost its power. “I need to lose weight. It’s not your fault that I don’t know how. I’ve been thinking about that weight loss club that meets weekly. We could do it together. What do you think? Stupid?”

An escape hatch had opened, and he jumped through it. His neck cooled. “By George, I need to lose weight, too.” His tummy protruded over his belt. That might be a good idea. “I don’t know if”

Mom harrumphed. “Sounds like a great idea. You two could encourage each other and buy the same food and split things. Yep, good idea.” She turned back to the shopping channel.

The TV voices cut off further talking. Lacey motioned him to the kitchen table.

Rachel came along with them. Her brown eyes looked at first Lacey, then Toby. "What's a wait club?"

Lacey ruffled her niece's black locks. "Aunt Lacey is fat, and a diet club would help me lose weight, which means I won't be fat anymore."

Rachel nodded then decided coloring was more fun than adult conversation. She headed to the dining table, laden with her new coloring book and crayons.

Lacey flipped on the light for her and went back to the kitchen where Toby waited. She grimaced. "Do you know how many diets I've started? I never stick with them. I have no willpower. There's too much stress in my life."

He straddled a dining chair and laid his hat on the table. He raked his fingers through his hair. "I heard this was easy. You can eat anything as long as you count it. Besides, it would help if we're both doing it." Warmth was again creeping up his neck.

She rested with her elbows on the counter and slumped her chin in to the cradle of her hands. "How often do we eat together? Not much."

"Just try it for once. You have lots to give, and being heavy slows you down. I know it does."

Her back stiffened. Her hands went back to her hips. "But I don't have lots to give if I'm fat, is that it?" Her words were punched with angry sarcasm.

He patted her arm. "That's not what I mean, but you'd have more energy if you lost a little and ate less." He sighed. "Lace, I'm your biggest fan. I know you can do it."

She lifted her chin. Rebellion glinted in her eyes. "Okay, but I'm not starting this weekend. We have the class social tomorrow night."

"How well I know it." He stood, reared back, and patted his stomach. "Anyway, the meetings are on Tuesday nights in the back room of the insurance company near your office. I won't start until then either."

She scrunched her mouth. "Okay, we'll go Tuesday night and start Wednesday."

"See you at two tomorrow to decorate for the party?" Toby started for the front door.

She followed. "Guess so. Joanne and I are bringing our kids to help decorate, but we have a sitter for tomorrow night."

He turned on a smile he hoped enveloped her like a comfy, warm sleeping bag. "You like the idea of saying 'your kid', don't you?"

She sniffed. "It's growing on me."

He cupped her chin. "See you tomorrow." He waved to Lacey's mother and hugged Rachel before he left.

His boots clicked down the steps and sidewalk to Old Blue. He kicked the running board. He'd made another effort to help Lacey that he needed God to bless. Would he ever learn?



Decorating day dawned. Old Murphy had donated hay bales, and Toby and Willie hauled them into the church's family center. Rachel and Joanne's girls wanted to help decorate, so Sandra delegated to them the tasks of filling decanters with sweeteners of different varieties and pulling salt and pepper shakers from the cabinet. Joanne and Lacey laid red bandana tablecloths on each table while Sandra arranged flowers in several ceramic boots to use as centerpieces.

Sandra knew how to throw a party. Lacey was more failure, less winner at that job, so her full-time job was covering up her envy of Sandra. The sodas supplied by Toby and the cake brought by Sandra kept them all on a sugar high which was bound to drop about time the social started.

Lacey bottomed an hour before the party. She nibbled candy while she waited for the police receptionist's daughter, Courtney, to arrive at Joanne's house to babysit. The girl had agreed to watch all three girls during the party.

The phone rang. "Come on down," Joanne said.

Rachel clapped her hands. Lacey grabbed her purse to leave.

By the time she had delivered Rachel and she and Joanne came back outside, Old Blue was waiting at the curb for them. Toby bowed with a flourish of his hat. "Get in, ladies. Your chariot awaits."

A quiver of pleasure ran through Lacey. The fact that he had picked them up and not Sandra fostered a glint of so-there that she'd like to share

in timely fashion with the blonde perfectionist. But by the time she had settled in Toby's passenger seat, her gloating had turned to shame, her arrogance, to humiliation.

The smell of barbeque permeated Toby's vehicle all the way to the church.

When they entered the center, Sandra shifted from her work to face Toby. Her cheeks pinked. Her eyes danced. Blonde curls bounced like the spiral noodles in the salad she held.

"Hey there," Toby called to her. "Where shall I put this tray of meat?"

Sandra set down her dish and made room for Toby's tray.

The party was soon in full swing. Lacey watched from the serving window.

"Come on out and mingle," Joanne said.

"Naw, I'm fine."

Joanne cocked her head. "How are you going to catch a husband when you won't even talk to men?"

"I don't see much in the way of eligible bachelors." Like barbecue sauce saturating the meat, Lacey's tone was coated with sarcasm. "Besides, everyone has a job. I don't know anything I can do."

Toby dipped the beef, Sandra scooped beans, Joanne was coming back to replenish the potato salad and relish tray. Two other ladies poured tea and helped a few with their trays. Lacey felt helpless. She darted to the sink. The only containers to wash were the big ones that held second helpings.

When she couldn't hide any longer, she strolled back into the big room and spoke to the youth minister's wife. "Hello, Abby."

"Lacey, y'all did a great job. Everyone's enjoying the party."

Abby took a bite of cobbler. "This is wonderful."

"Sandra made it. She's a great cook." Lacey picked up a bowl for herself. "Yummm. You're right. This is delicious."

"Okay, folks, time for a game." Sandra clapped her hands and started organizing the group.

Jeff, who stood nearby, held his bowl out to Lacey. "Where can I throw this away?"

"I'll take it. You go join the game." She walked to the kitchen to dispose of the bowl.

Toby came in behind her and grabbed her waist in mock line-dance form. "You should come out and join the festivities."

"I'm not much one for games." She jerked away and took another bite of her cobbler. "This is absolutely the best cobbler I've ever tasted. I can see why you want to date Sandra."

"Guess I'll go and grab some of the dirty dishes." He started out the door, but turned. "Who said I was dating Sandra?"

"Toby, you of all people should know this is a small town. Everyone knows everything." She busied herself with cleaning wishing it was as easy to wash the red from her face as it was to rinse the food off the plates.

"Humph." Toby turned and walked back to the party with a loud, "Yah-hah."

Lacey dipped another serving of cobbler and took a bite.

Abby walked in with a stack of dirty bowls. "I ate too much dessert tonight."

While Lacey wiped her lips free of cobbler, she glanced at Abby's twenty-three-inch waist and wanted to gag. "Me, too." Lacey shifted her hips to hide her cobbler.

"When are you going to get back in choir?" Abby dumped the bowls in the trash. "You have a beautiful voice. We miss you."

Lacey shrugged. "I dunno."

Abby sighed. "Guess I better go. Josh is waiting by the door. Thanks again." She waved.

Lacey scooped the remaining cobbler into her mouth after the youth minister's wife left. Stuffed and miserable, she perched on a bar stool in the corner to watch the others leave. She waved or called out when someone passed.

Sandra and Toby spoke to all the class members as they left. Several people had brought visitors thanks to the good publicity that Sandra had initiated with assistance from Toby and Joanne. Joanne scooped up the remaining plates and ran to the kitchen.

Feeling dispensable, Lacey hauled her heavy body off the stool. Joanne worked in the kitchen, so Lacey joined her. Toby and Sandra and two other helpers pitched in with the cleaning.

The party was over, and the five rclyrf to the parking lot. Sandra locked the door while Toby waited and held the stuff that Sandra was taking home.

Lacey settled into Old Blue and watched. Why was he driving her and Joanne home? He volunteered, but he should've driven Sandra home. That was a good way to lose a beautiful girlfriend. Lacey fought the sense of comeuppance. She wanted the best for Toby. She really did.

Toby dropped behind the wheel of his truck. "Are y'all as tired as I am?"

"I'm exhausted," Joanne said.

"Me, too," Lacey said.

While taking a deep breath, Toby laid his head back and sat for awhile. After Sandra drove away, he turned the key in his ignition. Guess he was waiting until his girlfriend left.

He drove down the street and stopped in front of Joanne's house. Joanne and Lacey waved when they got out of the truck.

When she came back out with Rachel, Toby was still there with his truck running.

"You didn't have to wait for me?" Lacey asked.

"Not safe for y'all to walk home at this late hour. I'll drop you off."

She buckled Rachel in the car seat and climbed into the front seat beside Toby. "How come Willie didn't come tonight? He helped plan this thing."

Toby drove down the street. "Said he wanted to spend his time with Timmy."

"I understand that."

"Me, too. I just want to find a way to reach him for Christ. He said he might come to church tomorrow. We'll see."

Rachel fell asleep on the short distance home. After circling his to her side and opening the door, he cuddled the child to his chest and carried her inside. Lacey led Toby to her bed and pulled back the covers. He laid down the sleeping child.

Rachel opened her eyes and reached for Margaret Rose. "Thanks, Dective." She curled up on one side. Toby tucked the blanket around her and walked out of the room.

Lacey closed the door.

Toby's eyes shone. "She's so precious. Think I'm falling in love."

If Lacey didn't know him better, she'd say Toby had tears in his eyes. Her mouth dried up, and she found swallowing impossible to ease the drought. "Rachel is special, and when I think what's she's been through—"

He held Lacey to his chest while rubbing her back. "I know, I know."

The room was filled with unbidden tears, unspoken complaints, unrevealed feelings, and tons of silence.

Finally, he stepped away and headed for the front door. "Thanks for your help."

All the warmth drained from the room. Lacey shivered and squinted her eyes. "Yeah, I'm a great dishwasher."

"We all pitched in and did our part. You did more than wash dishes."

Lacey sensed a self-imposed pity party beginning. She already hated herself because of it. "If we had two Sandras, that's all we'd need. She's amazing." She tossed a knit coaster from the table into the air and missed it on the way down.

Toby reached out to catch it. "What about me? Old stick-his-foot-in-his-mouth Wheeler? But we're all needed. We all did different things, and we all made the party possible." He reached for Lacey's chin and tipped it. "Thank you."

She nodded.

Toby left.

Tears welled in her eyes. Mentally, she listed her short-comings—fumbling for something to say to Abby, sounding harsh when complimenting Sandra, sitting in the corner while everyone else played the get-acquainted game, all the while taunting Joanne for not taking part. The video played over and over in her mind, clouding her brain cells, destroying her self-esteem, posting failure signs she couldn't forget.

She marched to the kitchen, picked up a spoon, and dug into the peanut butter jar. Her tears salted the flavor. She pumped air into her dreams of weight loss starting next week, but those dreams deflated faster than she could blow air.

The kitchen clock ticked loudly. The refrigerator kicked on with a noisy roar. A car tore down the street, burning rubber.

Sobs erupted from deep inside.

Self-pity ripped her to shreds.

Sorrow flushed all her dreams.

That's when she realized, she had surely succumbed to being crazy with no cure in sight.

CHAPTER *Nineteen*

Alone in the rec room at work, Toby couldn't resist posing for the mirror. His biceps bulged with newfound mass. He smiled at himself. Going to the gym—besides attending the weekly weight loss club—had slimmed down his belly and hardened his muscles. After five weeks, the results showed.

Willie whistled. "Looking good, Detective Wheeler, looking good." He slapped his friend on the shoulder.

Embarrassed, he snapped his shoulders to attention, but he couldn't wipe off the grin. "Starving myself." He sounded like he regretted it, but he didn't. "Well, I need to get to work."

Willie followed.

When Toby reached his desk, he picked up a fax message.

After reading it, he handed it to Willie, who rolled his big eyes. "Gonna be a looong night."

Willie didn't make detective, but because he had a sharp eye for detail, Toby had requested Willie's help with the drug problem. "Load 'em up, partner. No dozin." Toby tossed a few supplies into a duffle bag. This would be their third night watching a suspected meth house. So far, no break in the case. He headed toward the door.

"Let's pick up some snacks." Willie hefted his gear and trailed after Toby.

"Okay, we'll stop by Brook Street Market." Toby flexed his biceps again. "But only pretzels, fruit, and carrot sticks."

Willie slumped. "You're no fun since you started on this diet."

Toby laughed. "But I sure feel a lot better."

Willie slid into the passenger seat of the unmarked car. “How much has Lacey lost?”

Toby clicked his seatbelt and started the engine. “Unfortunately, she’s lost and gained several times. I think she’s only lost two or three pounds total.” He parked in front of the grocery store.

The two cops argued over snacks, but compromised—a little low fat, a little high fat—and returned to their car, teasing and taunting each other like a couple of teens.

Toby turned to the east side of Wharton Rock. Houses in this neighborhood sported peeled paint, tossed-out appliances, and crumpling steps. Two side-by-side houses tilted toward each other. In a vacant lot, a ballgame was in the progress. The kids were dressed in shorts and holey T-shirts despite the spring chill.

A house with a refrigerator blocking the front door was their target. Toby nodded to Willie and hid the car around the corner where a tree draped over the broken sidewalk. From there, they could see the side entrance.

Willie shoved back his seat to accommodate his long skinny legs. “How’s Lacey taking your success at that diet thing?”

“She’s mad at me, mad at the diet plan, and mad at everyone in the room on Tuesday nights.” Toby bit into a large Granny Smith apple to disguise the growl in his voice. His attempt to control Lacey had met with the customary defeat.

Willie opened the pretzels and tossed a handful into his mouth.

A silence descended into the car’s interior, interrupted only by pretzel crunching and apple chomping.

“This drug case has kept me busy.” Toby was almost thankful. He couldn’t have helped Lacey, even if he went for a visit.

“How’s that other girl?”

Toby’s brow furrowed. “You mean Sandra?”

“Yep.”

Toby shrugged. “She makes a good chocolate pie.” He turned to Willie with a smirk. “Guess I better stay away from her, huh?”

“Sounds better than being with Lacey with her mad at you.”

Willie squirmed. Police cars weren’t made for his tall frame.

"Lacey just doesn't understand it when I don't stop by every few days, especially since I lost weight, and she hasn't." Toby's stomach churned. He tried to make light of the problem, but that girl never fully left his thoughts. She was his heroine, taking care of her family, her boss, her friends, and still finding time to minister to old people. He should be so good. So what if she was overweight?

"Hey, she can't be mad at you for doing your job."

Toby shifted positions and let out a sigh.

Someone came out the side door of the house. Toby quieted and came fully alert. "You recognize him?" he whispered.

Willie shook his head. He snapped a picture of the suspect.

The man's brown skin was a shade lighter than Willie's, and he had long, black hair braided down his back. Toby guessed him to be about thirty.

Shadows lengthened. The suspect tinkered with something under the hood of an old truck in the driveway. There was no sign of the two teenagers that had made a stop at the house the night before.

Darkness plunged the police car into invisibility. The street light on the corner brightened. The man got in the truck and left.

A tall boy parked, waved at the man as he drove off, and went toward the house.

Toby's jaw clenched. "I saw that boy hanging out behind the convenience store with Sonny Joiner a few weeks ago." He needed to talk with Sonny again. Maybe he should talk with Sonny's dad. "Oh, no." Toby slammed his binoculars on the steering wheel.

Willie jerked. "What happened?"

Toby motioned with his head. "Sonny Joiner."

Willie whistled. "He's a friend of yours, isn't he? The pizza guy's son?"

Apprehension washed over Toby like acid. With a slow, methodical voice, Toby talked to the boy who couldn't hear him. "Don't do it, Sonny. Don't go in there." He prayed with his eyes open, but he couldn't stop the trembles. "Lord, protect Sonny. Keep him safe."

He never expected an immediate answer to his prayer, but God was listening.

The tall boy shoved Sonny to the ground and stomped into the house. Sonny lugged himself back to a standing position, brushing the grass

from his hair. Before he could move, the house exploded knocking Sonny halfway across the street.

Toby jumped and ran. "Are you okay?" He lifted the boy's blackened face.

Sonny's eyes opened. He grabbed for his bleeding arm. "It hurts."

Willie slipped in with the first aid kit and applied pressure to the arm. "Probably pierced by flying shrapnel."

Sonny watched the policeman treat the wound and looked back at Toby. "What happened?"

"My prayer was answered, and you didn't go into that house. That's what happened." Toby brushed Sonny's hair from his forehead. "Let me get you some water." He ran for the car returning with a bottle. "I called for an ambulance. We need to make sure you're okay."

Sonny tried to stand when Willie finished. "I'm fine." His legs buckled.

Toby caught him. "Sure, you're just dandy."

An ambulance pulled up to the curb. Billy Reynolds and another EMT loaded Sonny onto a stretcher.

Toby climbed into the ambulance beside Sonny. "I'll ride with Sonny. You follow," he told Willie.

Billy, who was an old buddy from school, closed the back doors to the vehicle.

Sonny moaned. His eyes seemed lost in his head.

Every muscle in Toby tensed, and his stomach rolled. "We'll get you fixed up." Toby rubbed the boy's forehead again. He silently thanked the Lord this was an ambulance and not a hearse. He wished it was neither.

The siren began, and the vehicle picked up speed. In no time, the bright lights of the hospital loomed.

By midnight, Toby and Willie had left the hospital, and Ken and Marjorie Joiner took over the vigil on Sonny.

Willie drove back to Wharton Rock. Toby sat in the passenger seat, his tense muscles beginning to relax, melting like ice.

"What now, Boss?" Willie asked. "Don't need to keep a watch on that house anymore."

A cold sweat swept over Toby, causing him to shiver. "Wonder how many people were in there when it blew?"

"One we know of."

Toby reached for the radio to call in their report and get an update from the office. "God spared Sonny. He may have something special in store for him." Toby leaned back against his headrest. "Head over to the new burger place on the highway. Been a complaint there."

"Sure thing."

Toby glanced at his friend. Bad things happening was hard on mature Christians. How could people stand it without God?

Willie drove, his hand dangling over the steering wheel, as if he hadn't a care in the world. Toby knew better.

The rest of the night went by without incident. They left the burger place and circled the town. Toby took notes on anything suggesting a tie-in with what they'd witnessed that night. The eastern sky had been a light gray when they had driven out to Buffalo Lake, but when they returned to Wharton Rock, the rising sun blinded them. Willie pulled into the police station. The day crew was coming in when Toby and Willie left.

Shoulders hunched, Toby made his way to Old Blue, feeling much like a worn-out spare tire. The extra hours had eaten up any time for relaxation. Between the drug problem and the department being shorthanded due to Mays's gallbladder surgery, Toby spent more time on duty than off.

Old Blue roared to life. Fatigue weighed on Toby. He would be so glad to climb into his bed.



Tuesday was usually Toby's day off, but now it meant he worked a half day. The sun streamed from his western window, waking him for dinner. He hadn't seen Lacey since the weight loss meeting last Tuesday, and then he'd weighed in and left for work. He decided to see if she could go to dinner with him before their class.

Her phone rang three times before she picked up. "What do you want?" Her tone had a cutting edge. When he suggested dinner, she exploded. "Are you crazy? I'm not going to eat before I weigh."

He should've guessed. Lacey was funny that way. "I always do. It's too late afterward."

"Not for me, it isn't. We can eat afterward."

"I have to be at work by eight, so we'd have to leave before the meeting ends."

"I need those meetings to encourage me. You don't need them like I do." Now, she sounded whiny. "Whatever happened to this doing it together, Toby?"

The tips of Toby's fingers turned cold, while his palms got sweaty. He gritted his teeth. "I'm sorry, but with my schedule, I've got to quit the meetings."

"Quit? You're the one that talked me into this thing."

His palms got so damp they slid off the steering wheel. "I accomplished my goal. I'm eating healthier, and I lost some weight." Perspiration slinked down his temple. He wiped it away and heaved a sigh. "Sorry, but I can't help it." He listened to see if her voice brightened.

It didn't.

Later at the meeting, he came in after the speaker had already started talking and sat beside Lacey. "How'd you do?" he whispered.

"Stayed the same. You?"

Toby hated to be honest with her. "I lost."

She rolled her eyes and made a face. "Lost how much? Probably three pounds." Did he detect sarcasm?

His eyes locked on the speaker. Without turning, he answered. "Three and a half."

A flash of anger shot from her eyes before she sighed and concentrated on the speaker.

"Going to the gym has helped, I think."

She stuck a piece of gum into her mouth, but didn't offer him one.

"You'll probably lose big next week," he tried again.

Even from the side of her face, he could tell she was rolling her eyes again, but she didn't speak.

"I've got to slip out and get to work."

Nothing.

He left without so much as a nod from his friend.

This was ridiculous. She was disappointed, so she took it out on her old buddy. His jaw tightened. His fists balled. Though he was mad, all he wanted to do was hold her until her hurt disappeared. He was a chump.

CHAPTER *Twenty*

Lacey sprawled on her front steps.

Joanne sat in a lawn chair on the porch.

The three girls played a furious game of keep-away.

"I may quit my job." Lacey's voice was soft, brittle.

Joanne's eyes filled with questions. Her mouth hung open. "Are you crazy? There's not many jobs in Wharton Rock, not good ones anyway. Believe me, I know."

"I can't take all the lying and deceit. Yesterday, Myrna stood in front of my desk while I tried to word a message to the hospital administrator. I clasped the receiver and turned around with my back to her and said I didn't see her in the office. Is that a lie?"

Rachel and Beth tugged the ball between them.

Lacey called out to them. "Rachel, it's Beth's turn. You threw it last."

Joanne jumped between the girls, gave them an evil Momma Bear eye, and then headed back to the porch. "Oh, big deal, so you lie a little. It's not really you lying. It's Myrna. Do you want to drive to Apache every day to work? Your gas bill would sop up your pay in no time."

The girls' squabble resumed.

Lacey's every limb sagged with weariness. She didn't want to yank her body from the chair. This parenting business was rough sometimes. "Rachel, did you hear me?"

Joanne saved Lacey. She took the ball from the feuding friends. "Probably time for us to leave. Calvin will be home soon and expecting supper." She handed the ball to Lacey. "Think about it though. You can

handle a little irritation to keep a nice job. You could work at Willie's like me and only get twenty hours a week. Won't pay many bills, I tell you."

"You have a husband though, so you don't have to pay all the bills." Lacey huffed. "But, you're right, I do have lots of bills and very little help." Willfulness tinged her tone. Oh, Jiminy, she was all the way wistful, wishful, whiny, and needing to grow-up. She heaved her heavy body from its perch.

Joanne glanced at the front door where the blare of the TV infringed on the quiet. "Doesn't your mom get a disability check?"

"Yeah, Mom gives me enough for half the house payment every month, but I've increased responsibility with Rachel here—my bills are more." Lacey sighed. When her mother had to quit work because of her health, Lacey had purchased the house to provide Mom a place to live without the total expense.

Lacey didn't regret it, but she couldn't help but long for relief.

She couldn't help but long for more money.

She couldn't help but long for a husband.

But an overweight, crazy woman with a child was less a catch, more a mission impossible.

"Boy, how well I know how expensive kids are. Calvin's a jerk, but I couldn't leave him. We barely make it, even with his overtime at the electric plant." Joanne turned to Beth. "Run and get your sister in the backyard. We need to go."

Beth obeyed, kind of. She didn't run, but she yelled for her sister.

Joanne glared. "I could've done that."

Tiffany came around the side of the house with a grin on her face, leaves and stems sticking out of her socks and hair. Joanne put her hands on her hips. "Have you been climbing that oak tree again?"

Tiffany's grin disappeared. "Yeah."

"That's dangerous. How many times I gotta tell you?" Joanne faced Lacey. "See you later, and keep that job." She ushered her two girls down the street.

Calvin's pickup pulled into Joanne's drive about the time she and the girls walked into the yard. It must be wonderful to have someone come

home to you. "Let's go inside," she called to her niece. "The mosquitoes are beginning to bite."

Rachel headed the wrong direction. "Can I draw a hopscotch on the driveway?"

"Not tonight. We need to go in. Come on. Let's have some ice cream. Okay?" Lacey held the door open for her niece.

Rachel raced up the steps. "Can I have chocolate syrup?"

"Sure can." Lacey picked up the ball to take inside.

After ice cream and baths were out of the way, she settled down to read.

"Can I sit beside you?" Rachel asked.

Lacey patted the other side of her bed. "Come on up." She picked up a children's book she had purchased for Rachel when she bought the coloring book. She winked. "We'll read for a few minutes and then turn out the light."

Rachel climbed on the bed and hugged her aunt. "I love you, Aunt Lacey."

Lacey's eyes burned. She squinted, but a few tears still crept down the side of her jaw. A blanket covered her legs, but all the warmth she needed was from the sweet girl's words. "I love you, too. You know what we need to do on Saturday?"

Rachel looked up and shook her head.

"We need to find you a bed." Lacey bounced to her feet to grab the newspaper off the dresser. "Let me see if there's any advertised at a garage sale or something." Lacey looked over the ads. Rachel played like she did, too.

Lacey surveyed her bedroom. "Mmm, we couldn't possibly put more than a twin bed in here. Maybe I should sell my double bed and get two twins." Giving up her big bed would cramp her tossing around at night.

Rachel's eyes grew big as silver dollars and every bit as shiny.

Lacey let out an extended breath. "A twin would fit extra in the room. We don't walk around in here, anyway.

Rachel clapped her hands.

Lacey measured the width of her room. "We could do it if we slammed the beds together in the corner." Lacey thought about it. "You could climb in from the foot."

"You mean I can really have my own bed?" Rachel's brown eyes danced a tango. "Can I pick out my bedspread?"

For the second time, tears escaped Lacey's eyes when she considered Rachel's life, moving from place to place with only a doll and a few clothes to call her own. "What color would you like?"

"Could I have a Winnie the Pooh?" She loved the whimsical bear.

"We'll see what we can find." Lacey sat and picked up her book. Rachel leaned against her, holding Margaret Rose.

Soon drowsiness overtook Lacey's concentration. Rachel was already asleep. Lacey lifted the child and eased her over further to her side and flipped out the light. For once, Lacey slept well.

The next morning, during her workday, she was thankful for the restful night. Myrna piled on the charts to type and letters to send. Patients came in droves. Demands mounted. Lacey longed to tell her boss that things needed to change. *Or else?*

When Lacey went to her boss's office, Myrna jumped to close the door behind her and leaned against it. "Did you call Mr. Haggerty back?"

Sweat popped from every pore of Lacey's body. Some streamed down her temple. She was going to be trapped into lying again, but if she couldn't quit . . . "No, I'll do that now." She picked up her boss's phone.

Myrna paced. Her ongoing feud with the hospital administrator over her husband's last hospitalization had lasted for six weeks now and showed no signs of weakening.

The ring tone blasted Lacey's ear, but he didn't answer.

Yes!

When Lacey tried to leave, Myrna remained in her way. "Call my lawyer."

By now, Lacey's top was damp with perspiration. She called the lawyer. When his secretary put him on the line, she motioned to Myrna to take the receiver, and Lacey escaped.

But not for long. Myrna marched in and sat in the chair facing Lacey's desk. "Take a letter."

Lacey scrambled for a pen and scratch pad. "You could use the Dictaphone." Her words might have sounded courageous, but her voice quivered.

"No, this is fine."

The letter her boss dictated was filled with hateful comments.

Lacey cleaned it up when she typed it. Myrna would never know. By the time Lacey left the office, an ache settled between her shoulder blades, and her lungs cried for air. Counting her blessings might ease the overdose of tension.

She had her paycheck in her purse, her house payment was paid, and this weekend she would find a bed and bedspread for Rachel. Lacey was glad Joanne had talked her out of quitting her job. Maybe Joanne would go shopping with her. Toby would be too busy.

A wave of irritation suddenly marred her good mood, but she brushed it aside. She might make a cake tomorrow. Hadn't she been watching her weight now for five weeks? Though she hadn't lost much, she'd been sacrificing. The diet restrictions made her cranky and jittery. A cake sounded like just the thing.

She hummed along to the radio while she steered her Cadillac home. When she arrived, her good mood overflowed to the rest of the family. "How about going to the Burger Haven for dinner tonight?"

Mom's eyes brightened. "That sounds good. I haven't had a hamburger in weeks."

Rachel jumped up and down. That kid was like a kangaroo. "Will I get a toy with mine?"

"I'll bet you do." Lacey changed into comfortable clothes while her mother got ready. "Wash your face and hands, Rachel."

The four-year-old stood on tippy-toe to reach the sink, but Lacey had to help.

Then the threesome was off, singing as they went, or at least Lacey and Rachel were singing, but Mom looked pleased—a major step for her.

Rachel bounced on her seat, waiting for her hamburger. "Beth came here to eat last night."

Lacey looked at her mother. "Did Beth come down to play today?"

Mom ducked her head. "Well, now don't be mad." Her face reddened. "I let Rachel go there." She flinched.

Lacey bit her lip. Her fingers tightened around the bottom of her chair. "You what? After I specifically told you not to let her go there unless you went with her?"

Mom defended herself with offense. "Joanne is your best friend."

"I love Joanne, Mom. You know that." She glanced at Rachel, who was busy drawing on a napkin. "But she doesn't watch her girls. I guess she gets occupied with her knitting or her soap operas, but she lets them go out front by themselves. I don't want Rachel doing that. It isn't safe."

Burger Haven called their number. Lacey picked up their order and trounced back to the table. "I can't believe you let her go when I said not to." She slung out the burgers and fries and dropped down the tray with a crash. "You beat all, Mom."

"Don't talk to me that way, Miss High and Mighty. You're not the one stuck every day trying to fill the hours." Mom glanced at her granddaughter. "Rachel and Beth are good friends." She patted the child's head.

Lacey understood the point her mother was making. She shut up. Children had big ears and even bigger mouths. The taste of the savory burger relaxed Lacey, and the smell of the fries teased her nose. She picked up one and nibbled. They had a special spice, and Lacey hadn't eaten fries for almost six weeks. Her muscles loosened, her good mood returned.

"We'll forget about it for now," she said. "Rachel, would you go get Aunt Lacey a napkin."

She watched the four-year-old go to the counter, reaching high for the napkin holder. Lacey turned to her mother. "I talked with Courtney, Amber's daughter, and I think she's going to start keeping Rachel every day during the summer."

"That would be great. I have no business keeping up with that young of a child." Mom took a bite of her burger.

Lacey saw Rachel heading back their way. "Just promise you won't let her go to Joanne's anymore while you're keeping her."

"Why not?" a course voice said from behind.

Lacey turned to find Joanne and Calvin. The girls weren't with them. "Oh hi, guys. Where's the kiddos?" Lacey cheeks burned.

Joanne's expression was scrunched up, all wrinkles and furrows, sadness and ire. "Why can't Rachel come to my house anymore? Are my girls not good enough for her?"

"Oh, no, it's not that, Jo. It's just that" Lacey stammered trying to think how she could make it sound okay. "I don't want Rachel crossing the street alone." Her smile was obliging.

"Your mother watched her walk across today, and I was watching, too, until she got into my yard." Joanne's eyes flitted to Mom for confirmation.

"Oh, that's good. That's good." Lacey took a bite of fries with a slurp of embarrassment. "Hey why don't you guys sit with us?"

Joanne caught Calvin's hand and started in the opposite direction. "This is our date night. Besides, I might contaminate Rachel." Her nose tilted toward the ceiling. "See you later."

Lacey wilted like her roses in July. She bit her lip, but couldn't remove the sting. Her big fat mouth might've cost her a friend. The fries ceased to taste as good.

Rachel cocked her head. "Is Beth's momma mad at you?"

Lacey started bawling before she could dig a tissue from her purse.

Mom patted Rachel's hand. "I think she is, honey. Eat your hamburger. It'll be okay."

At least, Mom had salvaged Rachel's feelings.

Lacey was eager to leave Burger Haven, to get inside her home, to pour out her humiliation on paper.

Before she turned out the light that night, she wrote in her diary.

Dear Diary,

I have to be all things to all people, and I'm tired of it. Mother sits and watches TV all day and does little to help. When I ask her to do one thing—watch Rachel and make sure she doesn't go outside—she gripes and grouches. She lets her go to Joanne's house to play when I specifically said no and now Joanne's mad at me because I spoke angry words. Joanne says I cry all the time. What about her? She's always moaning and griping about that worthless husband of hers. My boss tries to make me into a liar. Toby's looking good and has a girlfriend. He doesn't need me anymore.

I hate myself. If I was thin, people would like me and not use me. But I can't lose weight. Once again, I've tried and it's not working. My life is miserable. No one cares about me. I wish I could run away from home. I wish I were dead.

I'll go get peanut butter candy tomorrow. Might as well enjoy my Saturday. At least I control my food intake.

CHAPTER *Twenty-One*

By Friday evening, fatigue had slowed Toby's movements and dulled his thinking. One more night, and he'd have a day off.

When Toby entered the station, Willie seemed hard at work. Toby paused and rapped his knuckles on the desk. "Hope this night is slow."

"Me too, brotha." Willie's Stetson hid his eyes, but his voice pitch popped with mirth.

Toby was hot and cranky. He waved his hat like a fan. "This office is stifling."

"Guess we'll just have to go fishing."

Toby stopped fanning. "You're in a good mood. You must've gotten Timmy home from Europe?"

"Yeah, I left him with my landlady for the night." Willie sounded like he had just gotten a joke that Toby hadn't.

A coconut cream pie sat on Toby's desk, still warm to the touch. "Who brought this?"

Willie took a sudden interest in the papers on his desk. "Miss Sandra, your new girlfriend." Chuckles slipped through his pressed lips.

"Well, I don't want it." Toby picked up the pie, took it to the recreation room, and set it on the counter.

Amber was reaching in the fridge for a soda. "Mmmm, that looks delicious." She sniffed. "Smells good too."

"Cooked by the best cook in the county, but if I take it home, I'll eat the whole thing by myself, so help me out here, will you?" Toby started to walk away.

Amber tapped his shoulder. "Probably should leave a note on it, or everyone will think they shouldn't touch it."

"Good idea." Toby reached into his pocket for his trusty pad and pen.

Amber gave him a friendly shove. "I'll write it. No telling what you'd say."

"Thanks." He headed back to the front. "I left my file in the car," he yelled at Willie and walked on to the door, almost running into Sonny Joiner coming in with a chocolate cake balanced against his body.

Toby caught the cake before it fell and put his other arm around the boy. "How you feeling?"

"I'm fine except need to keep the arm still." He motioned to the sling. "Mom wanted to say thank you for saving me that night. She baked this cake for you."

Toby sighed and took the cake to his desk. "She didn't have to do that. Anyway, I didn't really save you. You're the one who stayed outside." He waved the boy to his desk. "Thanks for coming in. Have a seat."

Sonny shuffled along, head down. He eased into the offered chair, one leg stretched forward, one clutched to his body and tapping a tune. He studied the floor tiles.

"You were smart, and you were dumb." Toby scanned the boy's face. That acne medicine worked magic despite Sonny's tendency to hide the results.

"I know. I shouldn't have been there in the first place, but Denny said there was a party." Sonny shook his head as if trying to get the marbles there balanced in the middle.

Toby thumped his pen. "Do you know the guy who ran that meth house?"

Sonny shook his head.

"You sure?"

"I met him once when we were hanging out at the lake, but I don't know his name or anything."

He was hiding something. Toby pressed. "Have you ever taken meth?"

"No." Sonny jerked his head upright. He was being honest. What was he not saying?

The boy slouched in the chair. His fingers snapped with a nonchalance that didn't show in his face.

"I'm your friend, Sonny. If there's ever anything I can do, or something you need to tell me, here's my cell number. Call." Toby handed him his card. "It doesn't matter if I'm on duty or not. I'm first your friend, then a cop. Okay?"

Sonny jumped up, yanking up his low-riding pants at each hip. He clasped the card in his hand. "I'll do that, Officer Wheeler. Anyway, thanks again for being there and getting me help." He grinned for the first time and strode across the office and out the door like a fish set free from a net.

"I never saw a boy so glad to be rid of you, Boss." Willie laughed.

Toby glared. "Well, guess I have a cake to add to the rec room. What's it with me and desserts today?" He picked up the cake and took it back. He added "and cake" to the note that Amber had left beside the pie. Someone had already helped himself to a piece.

As he walked by Chief Langford's office, Toby noticed the chief leaning against the back of his chair, a smudge of cream pie dotting his mouth. Toby leaned in. "Good pie, Chief."

"Yeah, thanks for bringing it."

"I didn't. Sandra Lloyd did." He patted the door frame.

"Write that girl a thank you note," the chief's voice echoed as Toby went back to his desk.

He didn't write notes, but he should call her. He picked up the phone.

"Bernice's Flowers," the soft voice answered.

"Sandra, it's Toby."

"Oh, hi there. How are you?" Her voice softened, the lilt of her tone changed. He could feel her smile across the line.

"Thank you for the pie. You shouldn't have made a second one. I already devoured the chocolate one you gave me."

"But you said coconut cream was your favorite."

"I'm not complaining." He leaned forward and cupped his hand. Willie's ear was tuned—maybe Amber's too. "I finally get a day off tomorrow. You want to go to the movies tomorrow night?" It was the least he could do.

"Oh, that would be lovely. What do you want to see?"

"Pick one out and see when it starts. I'll call you tomorrow afternoon."

"I will. Thanks, Toby. I so look forward to it. You're such a sweet man."

Sweet man. Yuck. That was the last thing he wanted to be called. Not that he wanted to be mean, but sweet? "Goodbye." He hung up the phone.

Rehashing those words kept his mind occupied through the long, unproductive night of traversing the town. He couldn't wait to sleep. The end of a long shift finally came with the lightening of the sky.

When they arrived back at the station, Willie hesitated before climbing out of the patrol car. "Good not being with you tonight, Boss."

Toby sat behind the wheel and stared. "What?" He looked up at his friend.

Willie pushed back his Stetson. "Your body was here, but your mind was long gone. Thinking of that beautiful blonde who makes you pies?"

"Trying to decide what God wants me to do in life. It's hard when it goes against what you want." Toby slapped the steering wheel.

"Can't control everything. Just relax and let God. That's what you told me." Willie climbed out and closed the car door.

So did Toby. "How'd you get so smart so fast?"

"Been taking lessons from you." Willie walked in, unloaded his gear, and logged out. "See you Sunday."

"I hate Sunday work. At least we're off tonight. Huh buddy?" Toby waved. He sat in his desk chair and stared at the facts of the case, looking for a new angle. His thoughts kept drifting to Sandra. Was she what God wanted for him? If so, why didn't he feel better about the choice? Was that his effort at controlling the situation and not allowing God to lead him? He'd pray again tonight. Detective Mays walked in. Time to go home and sleep.

When Toby awoke, the clock read two in the afternoon. A car sped by his house. Neighbors' voices drifted to his ears. He called Sandra to set the time and movie for the night. Then he showered, dressed, and headed for Lacey's.

He hadn't seen her since the weight loss club last Tuesday night, and it had been three weeks since he'd been to her house. He mashed the accelerator. Old Blue lurched down the street.

Toby's upper lip broke out in perspiration. Was it right to visit her and date Sandra? Lacey was just a friend. He pulled behind her Cadillac and went to the front door, nearly bumping into her as she came out.

"Where you headed?" Toby could see Lacey had her bag on her shoulder.

"We're going to McCoy's to see if they have a bed." Lacey patted Rachel's head. "It's about time this little one had one of her own. We tried garage sales this morning, but found nothing. Maybe McCoy's will have a good buy."

"My Suburban's behind your car. How about I take you? We can visit while we drive." Toby shifted his weight to his left leg.

"It might take too much of your valuable time, Detective." Lacey's voice had a raw edge to it. She walked past him, nose in the air.

Rachel stopped to hug his leg.

Toby hugged her back and took last place in the parade. He marched ahead, opened the door for the little girl, and helped her into a carseat. Lacey walked around Old Blue. Her step had quickened.

While driving, Toby talked to Rachel's mirrored image. "Bet you're excited to be getting your own bed, huh?"

"Yes, and Aunt Lacey says I can have a Winnie the Pooh bedspread."

Toby whistled. "Wow, that Lacey is really something, isn't she?" He glanced to his right and offered a smile that confirmed his words.

A gleam leaped into Lacey's eye, a pretty flush to her cheeks. "It's about time Rachel settled in. This is home."

"Yes, it is. It's home." He nodded his head as he spoke. Lacey's smile tugged his heart. Her happiness meant more than pie and cake. She was a good mother, and Rachel had so far been shortchanged in that department. He settled into an afternoon of tranquility, far from drug addicts and thieves.

Mother and daughter searched through McCoy's assortment of twin beds. They loved the big bookcase version, but settled on the plain frame and mattress. "Then we can get a small chest of drawers to store your shirts and stuff," Lacey said.

"I like this one." Rachel pointed out a yellow chest with red, blue, and green knobs.

Lacey picked up the price tag. "No, we might have to check the Supercenter."

"And find a Winnie the Pooh bedspread. Right, Lacey?" The child wouldn't forget that.

Toby and the salesman loaded the mattress set and frame into his Suburban while Lacey waited for her card to be approved. When she and

Rachel came out, Toby leaned against the truck, arms crossed. "Guess we're headed to the Supercenter, right?"

Lacey climbed in beside him. "If you have time. You can take us home, and we can come back if you're in a rush. Really, Toby, I wouldn't be mad." She lowered her head, and that flush appeared again. "I understand. Really, I do. I just get . . . lonely without you." Her voice seemed hesitant, uncertain, shy.

"Nonsense. I don't have any plans until seven tonight." Toby reached for her hand and squeezed. "I miss you, too." He pulled onto the access road. "So, it's off to find Winnie the Pooh and a chest of drawers."

Loaded with not only what they went for plus some extras, the threesome headed to Burger Haven at about five.

Lacey ordered a salad and pulled out a packet of fat-free dressing from her bag. "Always prepared." She grinned until he joined her.

"I can tell you've lost some weight." He remembered her high school beauty before she gained extra pounds. Not that she wasn't beautiful without the weight loss. Her long black hair glistened, and those piercing brown eyes of hers had stolen his heart when he was thirteen and had never let go. "I'm proud of the way you've stuck with this, Lacey."

She blushed and fiddled with the napkin, rolling it into a ball and letting it go.

He told her about the desserts brought to his office. "I had to leave them at the station. If I took them home, I'd eat all of it."

She grimaced. "I don't know if I could have done it. I'm not as strong as you are."

"Nonsense. You're the strongest woman I know. So don't give me any of that self-pity junk." He took a big bite of his hamburger. "Did you hear about Nicole Johnson?"

"Pearl told me. I haven't seen her." Lacey speared a bite of chicken with her fork.

Rachel played with the Sponge Bob toy which came with her meal. She made swishing sounds when he skated across the table.

Toby washed down his burger with a cola. "Becoming a mom to this sweet little one here takes courage." He reached out a finger to collide with the SpongeBob skateboard.

Rachel giggled. "My mommy's gone." Her face darkened.

"I know that, sweetheart," Toby said. "But Lacey makes a good mom right now." He glanced at his friend.

"I love Aunt Lacey. She bought me a new bed and a Winnie the Pooh bedspread." Rachel slid her toy across the table again.

"I'm sure glad they had a bedspread with Winnie the Pooh on it." Lacey finished her salad. "Toby, could you help me get that bed into the house?"

He took the last bite and slid from the booth. "I intend to."



When they reached Lacey's house, Toby first helped her in with the Supercenter sacks. Afraid he might ruin his shirt, which he planned on wearing to the movie with Sandra, he stripped to his T-shirt and took off his Stetson. "I'll get the mattress and frame if Miss Rachel here will hold the door open."

The girl rushed to her post. "I will."

"I'll help." Lacey followed Toby to the truck.

"I can get it. You get the sheets and bedspread." His muscles heaved as he lifted the mattress set and marched into the house and across to the bedroom. He went back for the frame. With instructions from Lacey as to where she wanted it, he had the frame together and the mattress resting on it in short time.

He grabbed for his plaid shirt and buttoned it. He tucked it in and re-buckled his belt, then placed his hat back on his head. "I'm fixed up and ready to go." He spread his hands as if asking for compliments.

Lacey had a strange transfixed look. When he moved to leave, she jerked to attention. "Why don't you stay and watch TV with us tonight, or sit outside and talk."

"Can't. I've got a date to see a movie with Sandra in fifteen minutes. How do I look?" He lifted his hat once again.

"You look good, Detective," Rachel said.

Lacey looked like she was near tears. What was going on with that woman? "I'm sorry I held you up. I didn't know you had a date."

If he didn't know her better, he'd think she was disappointed he was going out with Sandra. No, he shook his head. He was seeing things that weren't there, things he only dreamed about, things that would never be.

CHAPTER *Twenty-Two*

Tears stung Lacey's eyes. The lump in her throat seemed permanent. She sprung to her feet. She had to get out of here before Mom or Rachel asked what was wrong. "I'm going to check the garage to see if that old nightstand is still there." Lacey headed toward the side door.

"Think we sold it at a garage sale," her mother yelled after her.

"I'll see." The breeze freshened her face and dried her eyes. What was wrong with her? She would love to see Toby find someone like Sandra for a wife. He deserved it. Then, why could she not stop up the tears? Why was her body trembling like the leaves on her oak tree?

She opened the garage and leaned her head against the inside door. The pungent odor of leftover paint assaulted her nostrils. The wood on the door felt cool on her forehead. She looked out the small window to the left and watched the sun stream through the branches of that oak, but all she could see was Toby. When he lifted the mattress onto the frame, his arm muscles had bulged. His taut stomach testified to the effects of his strength-building exercises. When he positioned the bed, his eyes had turned up to her with a gleam. She had not realized how deep blue they were—what her old art teacher would have called cobalt.

"What you doing, Lacey?" Rachel peeped around at her new mom.

Lacey smiled and swiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Daydreaming, baby."

"Did you find it?" Rachel picked up an old ice chest and opened it, her lips puckered.

Lacey looked toward the back of the garage, pulling away an old bike and the treadmill she had so faithfully used for awhile. “No, I think Mom was right. We sold it.” She took the ice chest from Rachel and caught her hand. That gave her an idea. “Let’s plan a picnic next Saturday. We’ll pack drinks in this ice chest and stop for chicken to take with us to the lake.”

Rachel bounced like her ball. “Can we invite Dective?”

“I’d like to.” Lacey hesitated, her smile lost for a moment. “Yes, I’ll call and ask. It would be more fun with him along, wouldn’t it?”

Rachel shook her head with vigor and skipped ahead to the house.



Lacey’s good mood extended through Sunday morning. The evangelist spoke to her heart, so she decided to go Sunday night, too. Toby would be there for the night service. Her heart lurched ahead of common sense. What could be so exciting about seeing old Toby?

Seeing his newly-formed muscles again?

“Stop it,” she told herself. “That’s crazy thinking.” She stared at her image in the mirror, still as fat as ever. Was it crazy, or was she having new feelings she didn’t understand and couldn’t explain?

That night, Rev. Bennett, who was holding the Wharton Rock Community Church revival, gave his text. “The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame . . . Isaiah 58:11.”

Lacey’s muscles tensed. Her lips thinned. Her brow furrowed. Met needs was something God hadn’t given her—not from her mother, her sister, or her boss. Even her best friend, Joanne, created more strife than assistance. But God gave her Toby.

Her gaze took in the slump of his shoulders three rows ahead. He had worked all day and was probably tired. Sandra sat alone in the front row. Was that Toby’s choice or hers?

Realizing the service had neared the end, she focused on the rest of the message, guilt gnawing her insides. She’d turned off her listener after the text.

Beside her, Rachel drew pictures. Mom had stayed home.

When the sermon ended, Toby headed for the altar. Many in the congregation headed to the back door.

Rachel tugged at her sleeve. "Can we go now?"

Lacey bent down to whisper. "We'll leave in a few minutes. I need to pray awhile." She knelt and bowed her head, asking for God's guidance.

Raising her head, she looked around the almost empty sanctuary. Toby was still at the altar. The evangelist prayed with him.

Rachel tugged her sleeve again.

Sandra moved forward to pray for Toby.

"Yes, it's time we left." Lacey and her niece walked down the aisle and out the door. With each step, Lacey squelched her silly case of jealousy.

She needed a reminder.

She asked for it.

She got her wish.

Toby was just her friend.

He had someone who cared for him and would be a good wife.

Fat Lacey had a daughter to love.

Rachel skipped ahead, oblivious to her aunt's turmoil.

CHAPTER *Twenty-Three*

By Sunday night, Toby needed God. He went to church straight from work. By halfway through the sermon, Toby's stomach churned enough to produce a pound of butter. His left leg rocked. He shifted positions. Would the man ever quit preaching?

When the last word was delivered, Toby raced to the altar. After praying, he lifted his head. The weight he carried had lightened. Few people remained in the sanctuary, but Toby could care less. He strolled down the aisle with the evangelist. "Thanks for praying with me."

"The Lord is not content to ride along, son. You should get in the passenger seat and let God drive."

Toby laughed. The sound echoed through the empty church. "I'll admit, I hate turning over the wheel of my patrol car to my assistant. Controlling is an issue for me."

Rev. Bennett's brow wrinkled. He ducked his head. "Don't feel like you're alone. When God called me to leave my home and go traveling for him, I resisted for months. I finally said 'Lord, even if I run out of the money I've saved and go back home in rags, I'm going to preach for you,' and you know what?"

Toby shook his head.

"That hasn't happened. The Lord's been leading me for three years without me going through all the money provided." The evangelist opened the door.

Toby walked ahead. "Thank you, sir."

Reverend Barnett gave a quick nod.

Pastor Lloyd and his family encircled the men and started chatting. Sandra cocked her head to the right and gave Toby a bashful smile.

He took a deep breath, waved, and headed home.

That night, he lay in bed watching his smoke alarm light flash off and on in the ceiling. He hoped he could continue to let the Lord drive, but he didn't know. If Sonny or some other teen was in danger, or if Lacey needed help, he might take the wheel back from God. Toby wanted to do right, but it was so stinking hard. He knew in his heart he'd do anything to make Lacey's life better. What he didn't know was God's desire where she was concerned.



"Chief wants to see you," Amber advised Toby when he walked into the station Monday morning.

Following behind him, Willie asked. "What'd you do now, Boss?" His long legs surged ahead toward his desk.

"I don't know," Toby scanned a file. Something was gnawing at him about the case. He sighed and dug his teeth into his lower lip. "Might as well go see the chief." He dropped the file and turned to the back office, but first hesitated. "Cowboy, check the last entry in that file for me, will you?" He motioned to Willie.

"Will do," Willie said.

Toby went down the hall and stepped into Chief Langford's office. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes, Detective Wheeler. Close the door and have a seat." The chief leaned back in his executive chair. "You need some coffee first?" He picked up his own Starbucks cup, sniffing. The bold aroma filled the room.

"No, I'm good for now. Had a cup on the way." Toby eased into the straight-backed chair. A tingle skipped between his shoulder blades. He had a hard time sitting still when there was so much work to be done. "Just Lester's convenience store coffee, not as high priced as your cup." He tried out a bit of a grin, but it didn't change the serious expression on his boss's face.

"Well, we all have our vices." Chief Langford sipped from the cup then leaned forward. "Toby, I've decided to retire."

Toby's mouth pursed. "I thought you'd be here another year at least. When will you leave?"

The older policeman took another sip with his eyes closed. "Effective August first."

Toby sprang from the chair. "Only a month away?" His words came with not enough breath to formulate them right. What would they do without the chief's guidance? What would Toby do? Who could replace his mentor? "We'll sure miss you, sir. I'll miss you." Chief Langford had given Toby a chance when he was a naïve boy still in college. Chief had seen something in Toby he'd not seen in himself. He had to ask. "You're not sick, are you?"

"No." Chief drew out that word as if it had three syllables.

Toby cleared his throat and sat. "Who will . . ."

"You." The chief took another sip. One eyebrow quirked. A wistful smile overtook his intense stare. "I gave the city council notice a couple months ago. I suggested you for the position. Today, they let me know they concurred with my opinion—if you agree."

Toby's voice wouldn't cooperate, his lips remained immobile. His hands trembled. He caught the edge of the desk. "But . . . but . . ." he stuttered almost as bad as he had in junior high. "Mays would . . ."

"Mays wants to slow down, actually cut back on hours—he told me so. You're ready, Wheeler. You've learned what to do from the bottom up. I'd stake my life on your being a good chief." He grinned. "I guess that's what I'm doing, isn't it?"

Toby's head was slowing its dizzy spell, and his tongue finally loosened. "Thank you, sir. It's all I've ever wanted to do. I'll do the best I can. I promise."

Chief Langford stood. "Have you met the new patrolman, Jinks?"

"Yes, he came by yesterday and introduced himself. Glad to get another patrolman on board."

Langford tipped his cup to get the last sip. "Seems like a good kid, eager. Like someone else I remember. I think he'll make you a good cop. Since this is all to be your ballgame soon, I wanted to ask your advice on moving Willie Brandt to detective. You've been working with him now for a while. What do you think?"

Toby's brow furrowed. "He passed his test?"

"Yep." The chief sat and picked up a paper. "Here's his test score."

Toby whistled. "He never told me he'd passed last time. I told everyone in town."

"Well, as you can see, his score was lower than yours. You had the seniority, and we only had room for one new detective." Chief took the test back from Toby. "It's your call. We can go outside the department if you want."

"No, sir. I'd love having Willie for a detective. He's dependable and likeable which makes up for any shortfall in experience. He'd do a good job. If you approve, we'll tell him together." Realizing he was slouching, Toby straightened.

"Go call him now."

Toby poked his head out and called. "Cowboy."

Willie inched in and closed the door, his eyes, wide, bright, and full of questions.

With a nod from the chief, Toby stretched forth his hand with a smile as wide as his Stetson. "Detective Brandt."

Willie stared at him. "You mean it?" As if for confirmation, he turned toward Chief Langford.

The chief nodded and stood again. "Congratulations, Brandt. You'll do a fine job."

"Thank you, sir."

Toby kept his head bowed. "I'll be the new chief as of August first. I'll need your support."

Willie's face glowed. "You got it, Boss . . . ah chief."

"I know I can count on you." Toby looked him in the eye. "Keep up the good work."

"That will be all," Chief Langford said.

When Willie left, the chief strode toward Toby and pointed to his executive chair. "Have a seat. See how it feels. I'll call an all-department meeting tomorrow morning and make the announcement. Right now, I've got some errands." He walked out, leaving Toby alone with the chair, a case of nerves, and a fulfilled dream.

He settled into the chief's chair, swiveling around to see all angles, then closed his eyes and thanked God.

Ruby walked down the hall, glancing through the open doorway. She gave Toby a strange, what-are-you-doing look, but walked on without comment.

Toby chuckled. Ruby would know tomorrow. By George, in this small town, everyone in town would know this evening.

In thinking about God answering his prayer, he thought of Lacey. He wasn't Lacey's keeper. That was God's job. All he had to do was be a friend to her and help the people of Wharton Rock as God led him. Everything felt simpler when God was in control. Why did he always fight that?

After departing the room, Toby went to his desk and grabbed his file. "Did you see that note with the list of descriptions the neighbors gave me?" he asked Willie.

"I saw it, Boss."

That word, **boss**, and the new significance it had blasted Toby with a wave of anxiety. Soon not only this case but everything that happened in town would be his responsibility. His muscles tightened until they hurt.

Willie sidled over to Toby. "How about I look through the mug shots from prior drug deals in the area?"

"That would be helpful. I'll go talk with the neighbors in person." Toby left the station.

Though he worked hard all day, Toby's mind drifted, and he couldn't stop smiling.

When he pulled into the church parking lot that night for the revival service, he spotted Reverend Bennett on the sidewalk. Toby rushed to catch him. "I wanted to tell you that God is answering my prayers in ways I can't believe."

"That's wonderful." The preacher put his hand on Toby's shoulder. "And your need to control your friend?"

"I have peace about that, also. It may be one day at a time, but I'm willing to let the Lord drive."

"Wonderful, wonderful. Remember Psalm 37:4-5. 'Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will do this.'" The evangelist cocked his head with a smile. "That's my text tonight."

Since Toby was on duty, he sat near the back with his cell phone on. During the service, he watched for Lacey. She didn't come. Nothing could hamper his mood. He bathed in the blessings, knowing God would guide Lacey.

After leaving church, Toby drove toward Lacey's house, but something stopped him—or someone. Let her call him this time. He turned the other way and left her to God, something he should've done all along.

CHAPTER *Twenty-Four*

Dear Diary,

My life is in shambles. I try to take care of everyone and everything. Who takes care of me? No one. I've tried to follow this diet, but it's hard. Toby did well with it. He looks good. Why not me?

The movement of Lacey's pen stopped. She thought of Toby's muscles when he had lifted the bed, the kindness in his eyes, and his walk to the altar on Sunday night. Slushy thoughts. What was wrong with her? She wrote again.

Toby is my friend. He's always been my friend, but he likes Sandra. Probably they'll get married. Who wouldn't want her for a wife? She is perfect, beautiful, a good cook and organizer, loyal, creative, a good Christian; everything I'm not.

The kitchen clock told her it was after ten. Tomorrow might be a showdown with Myrna—Lacey's version of the gunfight at OK Corral. She had decided that if the hospital guy, Mr. Haggerty, called, she would put him through to Myrna without asking. If her boss complained, as she would, Lacey would give two weeks' notice.

At dinner, Mom didn't keep her opinion to herself. "Thou shalt not lie." That was all she said, but Lacey got the point.

When she asked her mother what to do, her mother had said, "For goodness sake, can't you keep from lying and do your job and come home. You, as well as I, know that's what you have to do."

What would tomorrow bring?

Lacey took up her pen and diary again.

There's no excitement in my life. I work, work, work. There's nothing to look forward to except more drudgery. I wish I could run away from home. Maybe I'll sleep all day tomorrow. I don't want to go to work, but I have to. I always have to do things I don't want to do. Life's full of glum, useless details.

Lacey slapped the book closed and put it in the back of the utensil cabinet, her new hiding place. If she didn't get to bed, she wouldn't be able to handle tomorrow at all. Unlike her sister, Lacey must face the bad tomorrows of life, and one was about to start in seven hours.

When Lacey opened the office the next day, Joanne's words echoed in her brain. *You're crazy if you give up that good job close to home.*

Well, Mom thought Lacey was crazy. Perhaps it was time to prove it. Insanity might run in her family, but lying wasn't worth the stress.

Lacey plopped into her chair, opened the big bottom drawer of her desk, and stuffed all her belongings in it—her purse, her sweater, her extra pair of shoes, and a dozen donuts. The phone rang. "Is Myrna there?"

Myrna was in her office, and Lacey had not yet shown in the first patient. So the test began. "Myrna, line one."

The intercom came back to her. "Who is it?"

Lacey gripped the phone tighter. "Mr. Haggerty for you."

"Come into my office, now."

Lacey stood, straightened her shoulders, and turned the doorknob. Her legs trembled. She caught hold of a chair. "Yes, ma'am."

"Close the door."

Myrna waved her hands over her head. "I told you I don't want to talk to him anymore. My lawyer will handle it. What part of that do you not understand?" The sound sliced through Lacey's confidence, chopping it in half.

"Myrna, I can't talk to him. If I tell him that, he'll explode on me, and it's not my doing. You tell him that." Lacey's voice might be weak, but she hoped her courage didn't fail. Her eyes circled the room, taking in the diplomas, certificates, and expensive furniture. Who was she to refuse her boss's request? She grabbed the edge of the desk to steady her shaky fingers.

"Lacey Chandler, I hired you to handle things. If you can't relay my message to someone on the phone, then I may need to find someone who can." Myrna's jaw tightened. The telephone light blinked like a warning signal of doom.

Tears pooled in Lacey's eyes. She squeezed them together, trying to stop them, but it was too late. They rolled down her cheeks. She shuddered, but stiffened. "Then should I give you my two weeks' notice? Or, do you want me to l—l—leave right now?" The sobs convulsed her whole body. She grabbed for a tissue from Myrna's desk.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Lacey, I can't believe you'd cry over a simple thing like talking with Jeff Haggerty. Forget it. Leave." Myrna picked up the phone and changed her tone from angry and antagonistic to sweet and sassy. "Jeff, and how are you today?"

Lacey walked out and headed to the bathroom. Before she got there, the other line rang.

She hesitated. A chill swept her shoulders.

Myrna's ten o'clock patient called from the waiting room. "How much longer will it be?"

"Not long." Lacey swayed and slammed into the door frame.

"Are you okay?" The woman stood and moved toward Lacey.

The phone quit ringing.

"I'm fine." Lacey ducked into the bathroom and locked the door. Her mirror image looked like a red-streaked bowling ball teetering on hunched shoulders.

Going back to her desk with puffy eyes and swollen cheeks took all the courage she could muster. As soon as Myrna took the patient into her office, the hidden donuts came to Lacey's rescue. Savoring the sweetness brought a well-needed calm. She wouldn't go back to the weight loss club. Again, she faced failure.

That afternoon, Myrna left without saying anything more, leaving Lacey wondering if she still had a job.



In the evening, Lacey, Mom, and Rachel sat around the dining table, feasting on a pot of spaghetti. The aroma of garlic and oregano floated across the kitchen. Lacey twirled her fork in the pasta. "I guess I'll go in tomorrow as usual and keep going until she tells me different."

Mom remained silent. As soon as she finished eating, she retreated to her recliner. One of her favorite shows was beginning.

Lacey sulked in silence.

Rachel nibbled her bread. "Did you ask Dective to come on our picnic?"

"No, I forgot. This might not be a good weekend to do a picnic. I'm too tired." Lacey stared out the window, watching her neighbor.

"But, you said—"

Lacey's neighbor's grill delivered smoke and good smells.

"I said we might, but we're not, so I don't want to hear anymore about it."

"Beth and Tiffany had a picnic one time. They said it was fun."

Lacey tramped to the sink with her plate. "I said be quiet about it. We're not going."

Rachel ran to her new bed, crying.

"Go ahead and cry," Lacey yelled. "We're not going and that's that." Sitting in her recliner all weekend with candy and pizza sounded like heaven. She could look forward to Saturday that way. With or without a job.

All week, Lacey and Myrna kept up the cold war with no words spoken except as pertaining to the job. On Friday, the office was busy, and Myrna left without further discussion.

Then came Saturday. The sweetness of candy sedated Lacey at first. She sat in her recliner, and made Rachel play in the house. All Lacey's problems evaporated as she ate more and more.

Rachel whimpered.

Sweet turned sour. Guilt settled like one of Toby's dumbbells on Lacey's chest. Instead of being mad at Myrna or Mom, Lacey berated her failure to diet and stewed over the insanity diagnosis hanging over her head.

Mom muted the TV. “Rachel looks forward to your taking her outside on the weekends. You could get off your seat and take her on a walk.”

“Who asked you? I don’t feel like walking.” Lacey bit off a piece of meat-lover’s pizza. “Besides, Courtney will be here Monday to start babysitting every afternoon. She’s young and active, so she can take her to the park.” Lacey devoured the rest of the pizza.

Rachel scooted beside Lacey’s feet. “Can I go outside, Aunt Lacey?”

“No.” Lacey’s tone scared even her.

The child burst into tears and ran for her bed.

Lacey used her best wheedling voice. “Aren’t you hungry? Don’t you want some pizza?”

Her answer was the accelerated volume of Rachel’s tantrum.

“I’ve got your favorite candy.” Lacey’s tone was as sickeningly sweet as the Snickers bars.

“No!” Rachel yelled.

Lacey let out a sigh of release. “Okay, let’s go to Dairyland for an ice cream.”

The tears disappeared, and while they were gone, Rachel seemed happy, but as soon as they returned, the emotional tug-of-war resumed.

By nighttime, Lacey felt like a first-class, certified, bonus-award-winning jerk, but she couldn’t move her body from the recliner because of a sugar-induced stupor. She paid for the day’s choices by enduring a night with a churning stomach and a fuzzy head. Finding a comfortable spot was impossible.

Sunday morning—feeling drugged, defeated, and devastated—she prepared for church.

As she took her seat, she passed Toby standing by Sandra’s pew visiting. Yep, she’d lost him. Who cared? The service didn’t help at all, but only heaped regret on her already-burdened shoulders. She wanted to leave, and she did so as soon as she could rustle up her family.

By Monday morning, Lacey hated herself. She had refused to even take her niece to the lake, and regardless of what excuse she’d given Rachel, Lacey had promised. Before she could back out, she dialed the station to invite Toby for a picnic the next weekend. Would he go?

CHAPTER *Twenty-Five*

Sun baked Lacey's head. The day would be a scorcher, but Rachel's excitement was contagious. While they loaded Toby's truck, the child ran back and forth, thinking of things to take on her picnic.

Old Blue pulled onto the highway by ten-thirty. Fifteen minutes later, the truck scooted across the North Texas plains.

"What's that?" Rachel pointed to a mound in the midst of flat land.

Toby caught her eye in the rearview mirror. "That, my love, is where our town gets its name and its history. That's Wharton Rock."

"Weron Rock? It's high. Can you climb it, Aunt Lacey?"

"No one can climb that. It's too steep." Lacey sighed. "Oh, look at all the horses."

"I climbed Wharton Rock when I was in high school." Toby's voice was soft with a hint of machismo. He made a sharp turn to the left, heading down a gravel road.

"Whee." Rachel's car seat bounced harder than was safe.

"Toby Wheeler, where are you going?" Lacey crossed her arms and huffed. "This isn't the way to Buffalo Lake."

Both Toby's hands gripped the wheel on the bumpy road until he stopped with a screeching halt. "Thought we should give our girl back there a tour of our most famous landmark."

Though not high, the sheer rock shot into the sky in an almost vertical line.

Rachel sat unusually quiet in the back, her eyes wide. The rock grew larger.

Toby jumped out and opened her door. "Come on, I'll show you where I climbed this thing."

Lacey got out and walked around the edge. The exertion caused labored breathing. "You never climbed this rock."

Toby ignored her. He led Rachel by the hand to the back side and pointed out to her and her aunt a less rigid incline. "Lem and I dared each other one evening. We used his dad's repelling tools and climbed here. I slipped about halfway and got scared. Lem made it a little further, but without me to keep the line taut, he gave up, too. We agreed to never tell anyone we tried and failed." Toby chuckled.

Lacey looked up at the fifteen hundred feet of slick rock. "Wow, that's not failure. I never knew you even tried. It would scare me to death."

Toby scanned the wide expanse of land.

Lacey's gaze followed his. "You can see for miles." The town spread out in a crescent moon image just east of them. Wharton Rock, the highest spot for a hundred miles, stood like a fortress to protect the residents.

Toby had to speak louder to be heard over the rushing wind. "The old rancher, Wharton, would've never imagined what happened to the little place near this rock that he called home."

Rachel spoke for the first time since they turned down the road, but all she said was "Wow."

Toby threw her over his shoulder, tickled her side, and headed back to the car.

Lacey brought up the rear, her admiration of Toby reaching catastrophic size, her disappointment in not seeing him as husband material years ago escalating.

By the time they pulled onto Pine Road, the sun beamed vertical stripes to the ground. Toby lifted the cooler out of the back of Old Blue. "This is the best swimming spot I know on the lake."

Rachel ran to the edge of the water.

"Wait up, honey. Let's get your swim suit on," Lacey called.

Rachel ran back and let her aunt help her undress.

"Don't get in the water unless Toby or I is there watching." Lacey grabbed her blanket and raced after the child.

After dropping off the cooler, Toby went back to the truck for their chairs. He balanced one in a flat area for Lacey.

When she took a seat, his face loomed inches from hers. Her heart did a cartwheel. He smelled of musk cologne, suntan oil, perspiration, and male mystique. What was she thinking? This was her old buddy, Toby. Then why did her mouth go dry and her fingers itch to run down his smooth jaw?

Despite warnings, Rachel barreled into the water.

Lacey tiptoed after her. The rocks cut into her feet and in one spot, her feet buried in sand. With one more step, Lacey hit a point that threw her off balance. She reached out, but there was nothing to grab. Her body heaved back and forth, ultimately tilting too far to the right, and over she went, splashing into the chilly water like a beached whale.

Rachel giggled.

Toby guffawed.

Lacey sloshed and wiggled, unable to get out of the water.

Toby waded out, eased his arms around her waist, and tugged. He held on until he lowered her safely into a lawn chair, her shorts, shirt, and hair dripping wet.

Heat crept across Lacey's face, the pain of hitting a rock fading in comparison to the embarrassment. "Stupid, stupid."

Toby and Rachel seemed to be taking turns breaking out in laughter, keeping the cycle going.

Lacey huffed and puffed, her face wrinkling into a frown, her body crunching into a ball. "Shut up," she yelled. "It's not funny. I could've been hurt, but y'all don't care." She darted a look at Toby. "You can get in the lake and help her, Mr. Hero."

Rachel sat cross-legged in the water, splashing with delight. "She's doing fine." He sat in the other chair and threw Rachel a toy boat.

"Brr . . ." Rachel made motorboat roars when she pushed the small toy.

The only other sound was the loud caw of a crow and the lapping of the water.

Lacey's body relaxed. She stopped pouting.

"I think Rachel has the right idea. It's hot out here." He removed his jeans, boots, and shirt, exposing his Hawaiian-flowered swim trunks. He

plopped beside Rachel with legs sprawled in front of him and lay back in the water. "This is more like it. You're wet anyway. You should climb in," he called to Lacey.

She stuck out her tongue. "I've swum enough. Thank you." She did move from the chair, though, to unload lunch from the cooler. A covered bowl of fried chicken made her hungry. The cantaloupe looked tender and sweet. She took out three paper plates and napkins from her bag. After she'd opened a can of pork and beans and a bag of potato chips, she yelled, "Come and get it."

Toby stood, water dripping like fountains from his arms, legs, and suit. He grabbed Rachel and climbed over the rocks to the boulder that served as a dining table.

Rachel wiggled out of Toby's arms. "I want a drumstick."

"I'll take any piece." Toby sat on the corner of the blanket with Rachel beside him.

Lacey picked out a chicken breast and sat in her chair with the potato chip bag propped by her side. By the time she got to the chocolate cake, half-melted in the sun, she was enjoying life.

Toby and Rachel poked and tickled each other while they ate.

He was good with children.

If Toby and Sandra married and Lacey was gone, they could adopt Rachel. They'd make wonderful parents. Not for the first time, Lacey contemplated suicide as her best solution. That afternoon, as she watched him and Rachel together, the thought rooted and grew into a plan.

"You're sure quiet. Are you okay?" Toby asked.

"Yeah. Just thinking what I'll do after I'm fired." Lacey picked up the trash from their meal.

He halted her movement with a firm hand on her arm. "Whoa, what happened?"

She explained the situation.

"By George, that Myrna should be horse-whipped. Pay her no mind, Lacey. She couldn't make it without you, and she knows it."

Lacey shook her head. "I'm not so sure."

Toby eased the child back into the water, sat at the water's edge, and cast his fishing line out away from the shore.

Lacey perched on a rock near him, but didn't pick up a fishing pole. "That's not all." She kept her voice low so the girl couldn't hear. "I love Rachel more than anything, but I'm a terrible single mom."

Toby patted Lacey's knee. "That's not true. Rachel loves you."

Lacey's eyes stung with unshed tears. Her attraction to Toby made life even harder. The sedation from good food had worn off and left her limp. "I yell at her." Lacey's voice was shaky, her words broken.

His usual deep tone became more dogmatic. "Stop that."

"Stop what?" Lacey asked

"Stop putting yourself down. Most aunts wouldn't have even taken that girl in much less showed her love like you do. All parents yell sometimes. Give yourself permission to be human."

Could she do that? Was that all it took? Lacey squared her shoulders and lifted her chin.

"Nothing biting today. Too much sloshing near here." Toby eyed Rachel, and grinned.

Lacey inched down the ledge and sat in a sandy spot. Cool water lapped over her legs. "I've already got my shorts wet so guess it doesn't matter."

"That's the spirit." After putting his pole aside, he lay back on the blanket.

Rachel splashed her aunt, making Lacey laugh.

With a scoop of water, she cooled her red nose and scorching arms.

Rachel jumped the waves that were growing larger as the afternoon shadows lengthened. "Count, Aunt Lacey."

Lacey counted every wave until she was so tired she couldn't remember the next number. "We need to dry off before we leave. Come sit out for a few minutes." By the time Lacey climbed the bank to her chair, she was out of breath.

Toby looked up at her with sleepy eyes and a sheepish smile. "Sorry, I flaked out on you. Haven't been sleeping much lately." He stretched his legs out in front of him. "Fish don't bite much in the heat of the day anyway."

Lacey's chair almost turned over when she plopped. "We did okay. You needed your sleep."

"I got some good news," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "As of August 1, I'll be Wharton Rock's new chief of police."

So he could afford a family. Lacey gulped and brightened her expression. "That's wonderful. When did you find that out?"

"Couple weeks ago."

Lacey punched his bicep. No give there. "Why didn't you call? We should celebrate."

"That's what we're doing today." Toby's smile was wider than his Stetson that he once again donned. "With the case, and us short-handed, I haven't had time off. It's getting better now." He turned to look at her. "I sure was glad you called me to come today." His voice lowered. "I needed this."

That man's smile and approval could flip her stomach frontwards and backwards and heat up her entire body. "I'm glad I did, too."

Rachel was in the water again, jumping waves and counting for herself with a few skipped numbers. "I promised Rachel last weekend and didn't feel like it. She was mad at me."

"It all works out. I couldn't have come last Saturday." He stood. "We probably should get that girl out of the sun. She'll turn into a red lobster. It's been several hours." He pulled on his jeans and shirt.

"Come on out of the water," Lacey yelled at her charge. When she did, Lacey wrapped Rachel in a big towel.

After Toby tugged on his boots, he loaded up the cooler. Soon they were ready to head back to town.

Rachel fell asleep before they reached the highway.

While they drove, Lacey stared out her window. "Any ideas where I can get a job if Myrna fires me?"

"How long has it been since your ultimatum?"

"Two weeks."

"I think Myrna Cutter knows a good thing when she's got it. I don't think she'll let you go."

Lacey turned to him with a slight smile, weaker, less affirming. "My proverbial optimist."

Toby dropped them by their house. "See you tomorrow at church."

"See you," Lacey called after him. She might not go to church. Seeing him with Sandra was beginning to hurt. The reason escaped her, but she figured it had something to do with her world revolving around Toby.

The night was quiet, peaceful. Rachel was tired. Mom watched TV. Lacey mulled over thoughts of suicide and wondered if that proved she had her dad's insanity gene.

She wanted to save the people she loved.

Rachel.

Mom.

Toby. *Love? Well, yeah, like a friend*

That night, the benefits of suicide grew in proportion to the food she devoured.

CHAPTER *Twenty-Six*

Chunks of ice tumbled through Betty Chandler's veins. Her gaze followed the dented red Honda crossing the intersection. On her first attempt to grab the armrest, her hand slid off because of intense tremors.

"Wasn't that your daughter?" Marjorie hit the accelerator when the light turned green. "Looked like her driving."

Betty squeezed the paint jars in her lap until her fingers hurt. "I doubt it. She's at work in Apache Falls. Lots of Hondas nowadays." The offhand words didn't match the tone of her voice.

Marjorie turned into a parking space in front of Connie's class.

Betty straightened her fingers out and rubbed them to renew the circulation. "How's Sonny's arm?"

"Oh, he's doing fine. Be out of the cast in a couple of weeks. Thanks to young Toby. Without him, we might have lost our son." Marjorie climbed out of her side.

Betty stared down the street. She'd lost a husband, a mother, a lover. How could she face losing a child? *Man was born of woman and lived a few years full of trouble.*

When the two entered the class, their teacher wandered the room, giving the assignment. "We'll be starting with a blank canvas today. I want you to paint heartache."

Heartache?

The white expanse of Betty's canvas challenged her. Katie waltzed through her mind and ate up all her oxygen. Heaven knew, Betty loved

Katie, but was love enough? A form evolved on the canvas—a woman with a brown ponytail, grey eyes, and a winsome smile. Katie.

In the bottom right corner, Betty drew Lacey with dark hair and skin, a kind smile, and a hundred pounds of extra weight. Her bouts of self-pity and depression scared the peace out of Betty's salvation. Lacey didn't like to be compared to the insanity of her dad, but Betty saw signs that worried her. She worried about Lacey, scolded her, and tried to thwart her downward spiral. Would Betty have to institutionalize her daughter like she'd done with Marty?

"I like that." Her teacher, Connie, came up behind Betty, causing her to jump. "Why does that represent heartache to you?"

Betty pursed her lips and clenched her paintbrush. "It's my daughters."

Connie swung around to face Betty. "And your daughters represent heartache, not pleasure?"

Betty examined her painting and tried to form an answer that made sense. Her stomach churned and tumbled. Chunks of ice retraced their movement through her veins. She remained quiet, pensive.

Considering Katie's lifestyle, the idea of losing her was possible, probable, presumed. Betty inhaled warm air with hopes of melting the frost in her soul. She could count on Lacey.

Unless the self-pity drove her to insanity.

Betty closed her mouth, shut down her thoughts, and tore up the picture.

"Now why did you do that?" Marjorie asked.

Bile rushed into Betty's throat leaving an acrid taste. Her mouth was parched, and her stomach continued to flip.

"Betty, are you okay?" Marjorie leaned over to peer into her friend's eyes.

Not sure, Betty gave a slow nod.

The teacher eased back toward them. "I hate you tore up your picture. I never realized you were so good at drawing people."

Betty sat still and lifeless, like the carved, wooden man at the front of Willie's Restaurant across the street. The weight she carried seemed too heavy to bear, and she hadn't tried praying in years.

"Ready to go?" Marjorie asked.

Betty walked from the room.

Marjorie carried the conversation on the way home.

When she pulled into Betty's drive, Marjorie slid the stick to neutral and looked over at her friend. "You've sure been quiet."

The bad taste in her mouth and the nausea had lessened. Betty pulled out a tissue and blew her nose. Katie wasn't her only daughter. Betty's life might depend on God helping Lacey. "Maybe I should pray for Lacey. She's got lots of problems."

Marjorie reached across to pat Betty's hand. "I'll agree in prayer with you now."

Betty crumpled.

Marjorie spread her arm around Betty's heaving shoulders.

Both bowed their heads, and Marjorie prayed out loud.

When they finished, Betty swiped her eyes with shaky hands. "Thank you."

Slow to move, Betty opened the door, and expelled a deep breath before she stood.

"Help me pray for Sonny, too." A worried look crossed Marjorie's face. "He survived this time, but what about next time? Seems God's telling us to intercede for our kids."

"Amen and amen." Betty brightened. Her smile enlarged. "Maybe that's why God keeps me alive."

Her pace picked up and her back straightened when she walked inside. The heaviness was gone, but her purpose in life was still blurred.

CHAPTER *Twenty-Seven*

Monday morning dawned with Lacey's mind drugged and unresponsive. That's what she got for eating that bag of candy the night before instead of going to church. For the last time, she opened the office. Myrna would ask her to turn in her keys. Lacey was sure of it. Her two weeks ultimatum was over.

Joanne bounced in, ponytail and yellow ribbon flying behind her. "Guess what?"

Lacey shrugged.

"I'm waitress of the year down at Willie's. It's a contest he started last year." Joanne's smile brightened the room.

"Congratulations." Lacey strove for enthusiasm, but her tone sounded flat. She wished Joanne would leave. Lacey wasn't in the mood for chit-chat. "Is there a prize that goes with that?"

"Sure is. A gift certificate for the Superstore, and my picture will be in the paper and in our window display." Joanne waved her knuckles in front of her mouth and blew on them. "I'm famous."

"At least in Wharton Rock, you are." Lacey moved charts to the edge of her desk to begin filing.

Joanne sashayed around the room like a crowing rooster. "Nothing but Wharton Rock counts."

Marion Ferguson stuck her head in the front door. "Hi, y'all. Congrats Joanne. Heard your good news." Marion ran her own grapevine service.

"Thanks." Joanne moved toward Marion. "It's so exciting. I think it was that one guy who came in and had a heart attack while eating. I called emergency for him and did CPR. I think that's why I won."

"That was sure something over and above your duties." Marion spoke louder toward Lacey. "You okay today?"

Lacey kept frowning, a frown on her face, a glaze over her eyes, and a head that hurt like she'd been sucker-punched. "Yeah, I'm just dandy."

Marion and Joanne looped arms to leave and called goodbye. Lacey reached into her big drawer for a donut. Donuts soothed her headache, but did nothing for her mood. She struggled through the day, tiptoeing around her boss.

When the last patient had left, Myrna stormed into the lobby, stopped in front of Lacey's desk, crossed her arms, and glared. Her fingers beat an invisible drum on each upper arm. Her mouth twisted into a question mark. After a few moments, she heaved a deep sigh and marched out of the room.

On Tuesday, the same thing happened.

Wednesday, Myrna stayed in her office and never spoke except to say "I'm leaving" at four.

By Thursday, Lacey's world swayed on the precipice of Grand Canyon. She gulped and reached to open the door to Myrna's office. Her hands slipped. Her pulse sounding in her ears drowned out the sound of the telephone ringing. She twisted the knob one more time with success.

Myrna glowered over the rims of her reading glasses. "Aren't you going to get the phone?"

Lacey flinched, but reached for the phone. "Myrna Cutter's office." Lacey paused. "Appointment? I can set that up for you." While Lacey handled the caller, Myrna waved and left. Lacey threw the first thing she grabbed. Her boss's favorite Eiffel Tower paperweight shattered against the wall. Lacey was a goner now, for sure.

The next day, Lacey was as skittish as a shy child on the first day of school. Myrna was later than usual. Their first patient had been waiting in the lobby for an hour when the back door squeaked open.

Lacey stood. A shiver snaked down her spine, and her heart pumped harder. The walls closed in on her. She searched for her backbone, but it seemed to have shattered with the Eiffel Tower. She couldn't breathe. She gulped and entered Myrna's lair.

She was reading the patient's file notes. When she glanced up, the smirk on her face unnerved Lacey.

She licked her lips and clasped one hand over the other in front of her chest. "Shall I call an employment service?"

The smirk seemed cemented. "Why?" She never mentioned the paperweight.

Glued to the inside of the door, Lacey's mouth gaped and refused to form words. The phone rang.

"Answer the phone."

Lacey swallowed, opened the door, and ran to catch a call from Mr. Haggerty. With a stiff upper lip, she beeped her boss to answer.

"Who is it?" Myrna asked.

Lacey held down the button to speak. "Your favorite hospital administrator."

The line quit blinking. Myrna had answered it without further argument.

Does that mean she agrees with me?

The phone's ringing almost knocked Lacey off her seat. She sighed, trying to dredge up her professional tone. "Myrna Cutter's office."

"Is that you, Lacey?" A small voice sounded.

"This is Lacey. Who is this?" She ran a video of possibilities in her mind.

"This is Pearl."

Pearl? Did she know—"Oh, Pearl from the nursing home?"

The small voice escalated. "That's right. You haven't been here in forever." She softened again. "Did I make you mad?"

I should have called them.

"I'm sorry. I've been very busy." Lame, even to Lacey's ears. Virginia Lloyd had someone who wanted to do the ministry. Lacey wasn't good at it anyway. "Someone else has taken over the Saturday service, but I would like to come by sometime and see you. Would that be okay?"

"Listen to me, Lacey Chandler." Pearl's tone was harsh and authoritative. "You should do this service. The other lady is nice, but she's not you. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Ma'am, but"

Myrna stepped to her door. "Lacey, come into my office."

"Pearl, I've got to go. My boss is calling."

"You do what I say. Okay?" The voice was still strong, but had developed a begging quality.

Someone wanted Lacey, liked her, believed she wasn't a failure. "I'll pray about it. I really will."

When she hung up, the comfort was gone. Sweat drenched her torso, even with air conditioning running. It was time to face the music even if she didn't feel like dancing.

Lacey's sweaty palms slipped off the knob to Myrna's office three times before she could close the door. She straightened. Here it came.

Myrna stopped writing. "Has anyone seen Jane's office notes?" Her off-hand and very normal question threw Lacey into a jumble of confusion.

Jane Beasley sat in the chair across from Myrna.

Lacey had forgotten Jane hadn't left. "No, ma'am. No one, but me."

"Have you ever discussed Jane's problems with anyone? Your mother, your friends?" Myrna continued her inquisition.

Lacey brushed the perspiration from her forehead before it had a chance of dripping to her nose. "No, ma'am. I wouldn't do that." Lacey focused on Jane. "I understand about confidentiality."

"Thank you. You may go back to your desk." Myrna stood, dismissing Lacey.

When Lacey plopped into her own chair, her body was trembling. Had Jane accused Lacey of talking out of turn? With her job on the line, that's all Lacey needed.

When Jane stopped by her desk, her smile was weak, but Jane seldom smiled.

"Are you okay?" Lacey asked.

"Fine. Give me an appointment next week."

When Lacey finished with Jane, Myrna was gone. Lacey locked up the office. Yet another weekend and she wasn't in the mood to be a parent.



Rachel barreled into Lacey's arms before she could set down her purse. "Lacey," she squealed.

Courtney followed close behind Rachel. "I took her to the park. We had an awesome time, didn't we Rach?" Courtney had her blonde hair swept up into a ponytail with barrettes on each side, but wisps still fell around her face. She walked to the table and grabbed her backpack. "Guess I'll be off. Don't worry, Miss Chandler." She looked up at Lacey. "I won't

charge extra today. I'm running late getting back since I ran into friends at the park."

"Oh, yeah." Lacey forgot she was late. "That's okay."

Rachel swung Lacey's hand. "Brittany pushed me in the swing."

Courtney grinned. "Yeah, that's one of my friends. I gotta go. See you tomorrow, Rach." Courtney dashed out the front door. She was a hit with Rachel, which was good. The child quickly tired of two old women with no energy.

Rachel needed parents like Toby and Sandra, not a broken-down single mom like Lacey.

After dinner, she settled Rachel into Mom's bedroom with a movie. Rachel had grown bored with her grandmother's TV shows. That rescued Lacey from having to play dolls or catch balls outside with her niece. She retreated to her own room to read. But first, she wrote in her diary again.

Dear Diary,

I feel so empty. Nothing interests me. Nothing excites me. I mess up everything I try. I thought I did well at the nursing home, but you moved someone else into that. Guess you knew I'd mess it up, Lord. Pearl's mad at me for deserting her. She might be the only one who cares. The pastor's wife was excited to get another volunteer.

I don't know if I have a job or not. Myrna's acting weird. I don't know what to think. Even Joanne has done something worthy of praise, and she's excited about it.

Rachel loves Courtney. I understand why. She needs someone besides me. My energy level is nil.

I'm a failure at life. I can't stop eating. I can't fix anything. Even Toby rarely comes over. Who wants to be with me anymore?

If I were gone, everything would be better for everyone concerned.

Her tears dripped on the page. Heaving her heavy body from her bed, she shuffled to the den, watching her mother's show from behind the red recliner.

Her mother muted it during commercial. "Katie called today. Said she might get out soon and come for Rachel." She glanced up at her oldest daughter.

Rage rose in Lacey's throat and erupted over the room like lava. "She can't have her. I won't stand for it. If she comes while I'm at work, you call me." Lacey clutched the back of the chair to still her trembling. She might not be great for Rachel, but Katie was worse.

Mom tightened her jaw. "I told her she could visit, but she couldn't take Rachel."

Lacey's tears started again, along with the trembling and the heat. She crumpled into the green recliner. "Thanks, Mom. I appreciate that. That child doesn't need Katie's instability. I've been thinking Toby and Sandra would make great parents for Rachel, when they get married."

Mom's voice rose to the volume of an eruption all her own. "Who says they're getting married? I always got the impression Toby was sweet on you."

"Naw, Toby and Sandra have been dating. I'm sure it's only a matter of time. They're perfect for each other." Lacey moved up to sit on the edge of her recliner, but her stomach was rolling more than the credits on Mom's TV show.

Mom pursed her lips. "They're not family. Rachel stays with us. Period."

Lacey shook her head while twisting her hands. "I don't know if I can do this anymore. I'm a lousy single mom."

"Then don't stay single. Lose some weight. Meet some guys. Get some help." Mom dismissed her by facing the TV and turning up the volume.

Lacey stood. "Everyone would be better off if I was gone." She turned and marched into her bathroom. In the confined area, Lacey's floral cologne mingled with Irish Spring.

She latched the door, sat on the closed commode, and debated her options.

Her eyes lighted on the single blade left from painting. It was slipped under the top of her mirror frame. One slice across her wrist could solve the problem. Mom would have insurance money for living expenses. Toby

would help Mom with Rachel—he was that kind of friend. If Rachel fell asleep in her mother's room, Mom might go to bed and not find Lacey until morning. By then, she would've bled too much to survive. Her dark moods would no longer bother those she loved.

She should write a note first. She opened the door, reached for her pad and pen, and locked herself back in the bathroom without Mom or her niece noticing. She penned a note to her mother.

Dear Mom,

I love you, and I love Rachel. I know I'm a disappointment to you, and you worry about my sanity. The best way to fix the situation is to kill myself. Mom, all my savings goes to you, along with the house and my life insurance. Hire someone to help you, or have a friend move in with you.

Toby, I feel you'll be marrying Sandra soon. I want y'all to adopt Rachel legally, but of course, give Mom and Katie time to visit as much as they want. She's a precious child, and she deserves the very best parents. This is all I know to do to fix things. Sorry if you feel any sorrow by my decision.

Love, Lacey

She folded the note and laid it on the dressing table counter, then picked up the razor blade. Holding it in front of her, she sat looking at the sharp edge, trying to build her nerve. One slash would be enough. She stood and ran hot water across the blade like she did with a needle to get out a splinter. The mirror fogged with steam.

Lacey pulled out the hand towel and wiped down the mirror. The blade shook in her hand. Quivering layers of fat rolls showed up in the image. Her red face poured sweat. "Lord, help me."

In the mirror, flames crackled and shot over her head. She jerked her head around, but nothing was there except her old robe hanging from a hook. When she looked at the mirror again, flames blazed behind her. Her pulse reached a crescendo. The steam choked off her air. She put down the blade and clung to the counter. She kept gulping and spitting, heaving and blowing. The flames diminished. A voice spoke to her over the beat in her ears.

If you kill yourself, you'll go to hell.

Through her churchgoing years, she'd heard many 'fire and brimstone' sermons. Back in Sunday school as a child, she had memorized Scripture. Hell was as real as heaven.

Lacey sat back on the commode. She couldn't think of another solution.

Her mother pounded on the bathroom door. "Lacey, are you okay?"

She didn't have a watch or a clock to see how long she'd been in the bathroom, but she wasn't ready to face her mom. She held her breath until the knocking stopped.

After waiting a bit longer and hearing nothing, Lacey stood again. She flattened her mouth and snatched the blade. Her right hand hovered above her left wrist. The tip struck a tendon and bounced to the side. A sliver of blood oozed to the surface. Her hands shook so she couldn't control the weapon. She angrily threw aside the blade and pressed toilet paper to her wound.

Killing herself might ruin Rachel's life or cause Toby to be riddled with guilt. Besides, roasting in hell for eternity was reserved for sinners, and suicide was a sin.

"I can't do it, Lord, so you've got to help me." Tears scalded her already-burning cheeks. She reached for a tissue to blow her nose, clasped her knees to her chest, and slid down the side of a cabinet. Faint from roller-coaster decisions, she wilted to the floor, bereft of energy, bereft of emotion, bereft, and she slept.

The bathroom door blasted open. Chief of Police Toby Wheeler stood in the doorway, eyes ablaze.

CHAPTER *Twenty-Eight*

The razor blade with blood on the tip caught Toby's attention first. A cold sweat broke across the back of his neck. "No, no." Prickles made their way up his spine. There was a note. His heart rushed to his throat. "Lacey, no." In the confines of the small room, his words echoed. Then he noticed a toe jutting from behind the door.

Lacey crawled out on all fours. "Not so loud. My head hurts."

"Oh, Lacey, thank God." His big hand reached for one of hers and tugged her upright. He clutched her to his chest and buried his face in her shoulder. "Don't you ever do that again." His voice was shill, and way too harsh.

Flushed with a mixture of anger and worry, he took a step back, feeling like a fool. His weren't manly actions, let alone professional ones. He lifted up her arms, examining each wrist. His rough fingers brushed the spot where the skin was broken.

"Just superficial," Lacey whispered. "I couldn't do it."

Toby hugged her again. "By George, am I ever thankful." His body stiffened, and he pulled away from her. Heat rose up his neck to burn his ears. He longed to punch something—or someone. "What in tarnation were you thinking? This is crazy."

Color returned to Lacey's pale face. A glint of anger sparked in her eyes but was soon replaced by moisture pooling in the corners. "I'm not crazy. I'm not."

His arms went around her. He patted her back. "I didn't mean that. I'm sorry. Don't cry."

Her mother peered around his arm. "You scared me to death, Lacey Kay."

Rachel ran into Lacey's arms. "Are you okay, Aunt Lacey?"

"I'm fine." Lacey pushed the child's hair off her face. "I fell asleep in the bathroom. I'm sorry I woke you." When she tried to move out of the bathroom, she stumbled.

Toby's grip on her arm tightened. "Careful there."

"I'm a bit dizzy."

He eased her into the living room and lay her down on the sofa, and then he paced.

The older Mrs. Chandler slumped into her chair like a used-up dust rag.

Rachel climbed up and snuggled against her aunt.

When he tired of pacing, Toby sat upright in Lacey's recliner, his legs bouncing up and down. He didn't know how these people could stay calm. His breathing came in short, shallow gasps, and his pulse hadn't returned to normal. He kept blinking because his tears wanted to flow, but he refused to allow it.

Lacey tugged a toss pillow under her head. "What time is it?"

He glanced at the wall clock. "Two in the morning." Not used to being awake at this hour, Lacey and her mother were tired. He didn't like it either, but he had only been home a few minutes when Mrs. Chandler had called.

Rachel had again fallen asleep.

"Why did you break down my bathroom door?" Lacey grimaced. "No telling how much that will cost to fix."

Toby looked down. Camouflage pajama bottoms didn't exactly go with his plaid work shirt. Definitely not a proper uniform for the police chief of Wharton Rock. "I'm sorry. I'll pay for it." His tone hadn't gotten any kinder. He was still mad. "Your mother couldn't rouse you. The door was locked. You didn't answer me when I called. What else was I to do?" His jaw got tighter.

Her mother frowned. "It's my fault. I was scared, so I called Toby. What else could I do?"

Lacey's eyes widened. "You were worried?"

Mrs. Chandler pulled the ties on her robe tighter, shuffled her bare feet on the rug, and crossed her arms. "Mm Hmmm."

Lacey glanced at Toby and chuckled. "Love the rubber slides. They go so well with your pj bottoms."

He couldn't help but laugh.

After a while, even a tired Mrs. Chandler joined the mirth.

"I don't see anything funny." Rachel sat up and rubbed her eyes.

Lacey rose and picked up the sleepy girl. "We're happy, sweetie. Now let's get you into your bed. The middle of the night is no time to keep waking you."

With a quick movement, Toby took the girl from Lacey. "You okay to walk now?" His brow furrowed when he glanced at Lacey. The laughter had improved his tone of voice and even his anxiety.

"Sure."

"Then lead the way."

Toby slipped the girl's feet under the covers. He brushed hair from Rachel's face. "You sleep good, now, you hear me?"

"Will you be here when I wake up, Detective?"

His big hand gave an extra stroke to her forehead. He blinked again. His emotions were fragile tonight and hard to control. "No, but your aunt and your grandma will be. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Okay." She sounded content.

A lump settled in the middle of Toby's chest and wouldn't dissolve. He thought he might choke. This whole night was almost too much for even a hardened cop, and no one had ever accused him of not being tender-hearted.

Rachel's black eyelashes closed over her eyes. Her black hair sprayed across the pillow. He couldn't think of a sweeter child. Would he ever have one of his own? He gulped, but the lump was lodged tight and wouldn't release. Straightening, he tiptoed from the room and returned to the living room, while Lacey said good night to her niece and closed the door.

"Okay, young lady, you owe us an explanation." Toby's eyes locked on Lacey. He flipped on the dining room light and sat in a chair.

Leaning heavier on her cane than usual, Lacey's mother limped to the dining room.

With her arms crossed in front of her, Lacey pulled on her elbows. She took a seat. "You were right, Mom. I locked the door intending to kill myself."

"But why? We all love you. You have everything to live for." The edge was coming back into Toby's voice. Maybe he should've saved this for another day.

Lacey twisted her mouth and bit her lip. "I love you, too." She looked at her mother and then Toby. "I love all of you. That's why I thought I had to do it, but at the last minute, I got scared and couldn't."

"Well, I'm glad you got scared, you stupid girl." Lacey's mom sounded bitter.

Toby hated the angry tone. He reached for Lacey's hand. "Suicide never solves anything."

"I'll never try it again. God has to help me now. I'm out of options." Lacey nibbled on her thumbnail. "I guess you're right, Mom. I'm going insane like my dad." Her shoulders slumped, her head dipped.

Toby's hands on the table balled into fists on the table. He spoke through stiff lips. "Now you listen to me, Lacey Kay Chandler. According to my mother, your dad was strung out on drugs. It was the drugs that made him crazy. You barely take an aspirin, so don't tell me you're like your father."

His words were aimed more at Mrs. Chandler and it had the desired effect. Her body went rigid. A tick pulsed in her cheek. She gripped the arms of the chair until her knuckles turned white.

Lacey's brows lifted. She looked at her mother. "You never told me he took drugs, just that he whined and complained until he lost it altogether and had to be committed. Was it drugs that drove Daddy to act crazy?" The expectant tone in Lacey's voice broke Toby's heart.

Mrs. Chandler gave a slow nod. "I guess so." Her words were soft, but not submissive.

"Why didn't you tell me that?" Lacey was breathing hard.

Her mother lifted her shoulders and dropped them again then repeated the gesture. She loosened her grip on the chair. Toby thought for a minute she was leaving, but then she sunk back, dropped her arms to her sides, and heaved a sigh. "Don't know. What did it matter? He was filled with self-pity, whining all the time about his terrible life. So he took drugs. What difference does that make?" Some fight had come back into her, but Toby didn't feel sorry for her.

Sobs wracked Lacey's shoulders. "It mattered to me. I thought insanity was in my genes. So when he died, was it an overdose?" She swiped back the tears with both hands.

"Yep. He broke into a drug cabinet at the hospital and got some drugs. They found him in his room three hours later."

Lacey gasped.

Toby reached to cover her hand when she rested it on the table.

Her eyes widened. "How long was that after he went to the state hospital?"

Toby stood and draped his arm around Lacey's shoulders.

"Three months," her mother said.

Lacey stared at the table and her tears flowed without restraint.

Toby handed her a tissue. "I told you—you're not like your dad."

Her face reddened. She turned on Toby. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I . . . ah . . . it wasn't my place." He glanced at Mrs. Chandler. "Besides, I thought you knew about the drugs."

Lacey stood. Her nostrils flared. Now she was the one pacing. "I kind of knew he had a problem, but I never knew about the . . . Mom, you deceived me on purpose." With her fast movements, he feared she'd trip on the rug.

"I didn't." Mrs. Chandler pursed her mouth. "Oh, doggone it, which came first, the drugs or the insanity? I think the whining drove him to drugs." Her body remained rigid and tight.

Lacey stopped. She looked confused.

While Toby rubbed her back, he felt her breathing ease and her pulse slow. She crumpled against his chest.

Mrs. Chandler leaped to her feet. "Well, I'm going to bed. This old heart of mine can't take much more of this." She marched to her bedroom and slammed the door.

Toby stepped back, and Lacey turned to him. He touched her outstretched fingers with his pudgy ones and felt the pull that only Lacey would ever have on him. Her warm eyes beckoned like hot chocolate. He cleared his throat and tried to clear his mind. "I've been praying for you. God may have saved your life tonight."

Lacey nodded. "I prayed, too." She told him about seeing the flames. "I think you're right. I believe God wants me to live. He has a plan for my life. Now if he'll let me in on the plan." She dropped to her chair.

Toby squatted before her. "I'll go home now. Get some sleep in your bed. I'll check on you tomorrow after work."

Her smile grew weaker.

Fatigue finally chased away the excitement. His adrenaline was gone. He slipped out with her still sitting there.

Then, angst made him reopen the door. "You won't try that anymore, will you?"



The next day, caffeine jolted Toby into high gear. Near the end of his shift, Sonny Joiner showed up. Toby had spotted him outside the station, pacing, so he decided to approach him. "Hey, Sonny, how you doing?"

Sonny looked up as if surprised to see Toby even though Sonny was right in front of the police station. He stuck both hands in his jean pockets, and ducked his head so much it looked like he was trying to escape into his shirt. "I'm okay."

Toby put his hat on his head for shade. "It's hot out here. Why don't we walk down to Willie's and get dinner. You hungry?"

Sonny kicked a pebble off the walk. "I can always eat." He grinned, revealing a broken front tooth.

Toby cracked open the police station door. "Hey, Willie, if anyone's looking for me, I'll be having dinner down at Willie's Restaurant."

"You mean down at my place?" Willie lifted his head. It was his standard joke since both he and the restaurant's owner shared the same name.

"Yep." Toby closed the door and motioned to Sonny with his head. "How you feeling?" He fell into stride with the teenager.

"Oh, you know, the arm still aches some, but I'm okay."

Toby opened the door to the restaurant and motioned Sonny inside first. The smell of grease and cinnamon revved up Toby's appetite. He considered the plank wood tables and straight back chairs, but decided on one of the three maroon-covered booths. Two men sat on stools near the cash register. A smiling cat clock with a moving tail told him it was five minutes passed five. Marion and Ted Ferguson were the only ones seated in the dining room.

Toby stopped at their table to discuss the weather. When he turned to take a seat in the booth, Sonny had disappeared.

"Anyone see where Sonny Joiner went?"

Ted motioned to the door with his head. "He hightailed it out of here when you stopped by our table."

"Hey, Detective Wheeler, good to see you in here." Joanne brought out two ice waters. "Did you see my picture?"

"No, I missed it. Show me."

She pointed. "Look at the cash register."

Toby turned and sure enough, there was a good likeness of Joanne with her big, toothy smile. He walked toward it. "Why, Joanne, that's a good picture. I heard about you winning. Congratulations."

"Good for business, that girl is." Willie Conroy took steaks to the Fergusons.

Joanne pulled out her pad. "What you having, Detective Wheeler?"

"Give me some of Willie's chicken-fried steak. I haven't indulged in that since I started at this weight loss club two months ago. I think I need fortification." He walked to his booth, sat, and sipped his water.

"Where's your friend?" Joanne looked at the opposite side of the booth.

"Left me, I think." That boy was as jumpy as a cricket. Toby was convinced Sonny had something he needed to unload. "Hey, could I have some sweet tea with that steak?"

"One tea coming up, and I'll take that other glass of water back." Joanne scurried behind the counter.

The cat clock said five-forty when Toby paid his bill and left Willie's. He walked back to his squad car and drove to Ken's Pizza.

The little bell over the door rang when he walked inside. "Ken, you seen Sonny around?"

Ken backed away from his huge ovens. "He in trouble?"

Toby leaned on the counter. "Naw, I need to ask him about someone is all."

"Never know where that boy might be on his night off." He turned to yell at his wife, Marjorie, coming out of the freezer. "You know where Sonny is?"

She shrugged. "Probably hanging out with some of his friends." She looked up at Toby. "He's been chumming some with Mark Duffy from

church. Sometimes he goes to Buffalo Lake. Sonny likes to be by himself. He's like Ken, that-a-way." She glanced at her husband with a smile.

"Thanks." Toby waved and walked out to his car again. After driving back to the station and climbing into Old Blue, Toby ran to his house first to change to shorts and athletic shoes and drove to the lake.

The sun blinded him until he turned south onto the lake road. He might be making the wrong call, but coming here sounded right if Sonny was weighed with a heavy decision.

First, Toby drove to the spot where he let Sonny out the one day they fished together. No sign of him. Nor was he at the swimming hole where Toby had taken Lacey and Rachel. He tried his favorite fishing spot next. His newly-formed leg muscles helped him climb the rocky hills. He wasn't even winded from the exertion. Yep, that diet and that gym had definitely improved his health.

Sure enough, Sonny stood on the bank, chucking rocks like he'd done when he sat with Toby.

"I counted six skips. Bet I can do seven." Toby picked out some flat rocks.

Toby's sideways pitch caused four skips to the rock before dropping into the lake. Sonny grinned, squinting at the sun. "Guess you're not as good as you thought." Sonny threw again. Five skips.

Toby's turn. Five skips. "I'm getting better." He sat on a nearby boulder. "You ran out on me. I'm sorry, Sonny. With you not wanting to be seen talking with a policeman, that wasn't a smart move on my part." He leaned back against another rock, bending his right knee in front of him.

Sonny sat opposite him and cleared his throat.

Toby didn't intend to make this easy. The boy needed to face up to the law, if he had something to say.

Sonny kept his eyes on the lake. "You said to tell you if I ever found out anything about what happened at the meth house."

"That's right."

"Well, I told you Denny invited me there." Sonny glanced up. "You saw him go in that night."

Toby leaned forward, his arms propped on his thighs. "Is that the tall boy with the shaggy blonde hair you was talking to?"

Sonny nodded.

"Yep, I remember him, but he went in, got himself killed."

Sonny's eyes seemed hazy, befuddled. "That's right."

"I'm sorry. I know he was a friend of yours." Toby shifted and waited.

"Nate and I met him last year. He was a leader, you know?" Sonny watched his shoe as he kicked a rock.

In Toby's mind, Denny had led Sonny smack into trouble.

"We bummed around together all year. Nate said he met Denny working at Dairyland. Denny had lived in town a couple months when I met him."

"By Nate, you mean Nathan Jones?"

Sonny looked up again. "Yeah, that's right. I've known Nate since ninth grade when he moved to town with his folks."

Toby stared. "But Denny wasn't a good influence, was he?"

"No, but one day, Nate was flying high and didn't want anything to eat. After days of that, I questioned him." Sonny threw another rock. It skipped six times, but neither said anything. "Found out Denny lived with an older guy. They invited me to come over. Nate dared me. I gave in."

Toby examined the boy's expression. "That was the night we found you?"

"Yeah. Only I couldn't go in. Something scared me about it." Sonny turned his back to Toby, ashamed.

"Was Nate inside the house that night?" A black crow cawed. Toby located it perched in a spindly tree growing out of the rocks.

Sonny shook his head. "He's fine, but he's still strung out. He commented the other day that he needed supplies to cook."

"You think he's taken over the methamphetamine operation in Wharton Rock?" Toby stood, stretching his back.

Sonny nodded.

Toby inhaled a deep breath of fresh air. He needed it to rid himself of the dirtiness of life. "I appreciate your heads-up. Don't guess you know where Nate might be doing this?"

Sonny shook his head. "His aunt has a place near that old meth house—does massages there—but I don't know if she'd allow anything like that."

Toby reached out to pat Sonny's shoulder. "Thanks for the help. That took courage. I'm proud of you."

"If you talk with Nate, you won't let on it come from me?"

“Your secret is safe.” Toby peered into his eyes. “Sonny, you clean?” His voice quivered as he waited for the answer and prayed it wouldn’t disappoint.

Sonny put his hands palms up. “I’m clean now. I promise.”

Toby hesitated, catching the “now” in his phrase. Deciding not to pursue it, he started up the rock ledge.

“There’s one other thing, Detective Wheeler.” Sonny’s eyes sought Toby’s, though the sun blinded him.

Toby halted.

“Mark Duffy’s been hanging with us some. I don’t know anything, for sure—Nate doesn’t talk to me much anymore since I’m clean—but I can’t help but wonder what with Mark working in his dad’s drug store some this summer, you know, and them needing supplies. Well” He shrugged.

CHAPTER *Twenty-Nine*

Sunday morning at church, Lacey sagged into a pew in the third row. Since she had given up on suicide, her body felt limp as a trampled violet, and her mind was blank. Whatever Pastor Lloyd had to say, she needed to hear. She meant it when she told Toby God would have to do it for her now. No more diets for Lacey, no more fixing people, no more self-motivating solutions.

The pastor read his text. “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. 2 Timothy 1:8 NIV”

Through Sunday’s roast dinner with Rachel and Mom, those words repeated over and over in Lacey’s thoughts. While she washed dishes, she watched the neighbors next door out her back window, still pondering the sermon. While she sat on the back steps and watched Rachel in the swing that Toby had hung from the tree last week, she felt God offering her power, love, and self-discipline just like the Scripture had promised. For the first time, she was hopeful. Her head swam. She clutched the porch post, dizzy and disoriented.

Rachel’s swing swerved out of control. Lacey ran and snatched the ropes. Giggling in spurts, the child clung to Lacey’s neck. Joanne’s kids would love that swing, too. Guilt pricked Lacey’s conscience over the tension between her and her friend. “Lord, heal our relationship,” she whispered in prayer.

“Phone for you,” Mom called.

Lacey carried her niece to the back porch and took the phone.

“Hi, Lacey. Don’t be mad at Toby, but he mentioned I might call you.

This is Nicole Johnson. I met you once when you came into our office. I work for the attorney, Nathan Gunn. He helped you with your custody case.”

“Yes, I remember.” This was the lady Pearl had recommended. Nicole had lost a lot of weight. That day in the lawyer’s office, Lacey knew the woman had looked slimmer.

“We have a group that meets at the Church of Christ fellowship hall on Monday nights. We ask God’s help in dealing with emotional distress and food compulsions. If I picked you up tomorrow night, would you go with me?”

Lacey held tight to the banister and eased down onto the top step. Rachel twisted away and ran back to the swing. “I could meet you. I’ll have to find a babysitter, though. Can I call you?”

There was no sound over the phone except breathing.

“Nicole, are you there?”

“I’m here. Uh . . . Toby said . . . He told me to tell you he’d be there to keep Rachel by six-thirty. Our meeting starts at seven.”

Sometimes Lacey would like to throw a rock and knock off Toby’s superiority complex that he wore like his other badge. “Toby has planned everything, hasn’t he?” Sarcasm dripped like maple syrup from her words. *He has a right. I woke him in the middle of the night trying to kill myself.* “I’ll meet you there at seven.”

“I’ll wait for you outside so you can find me. I’m smaller than I used to be, so look for a lady in jeans and a red shirt. Okay?”

“Got it. Thanks.” Lacey hung up before pulling herself off the step. Her joints cracked.

Rachel had thrown up the swing, and it was caught on a limb. She stared at the tree. “Can we get it down?”

“Let me get our hoe.” Lacey went into the garage and came back with her arms loaded with tools. She poked and prodded the live oak branches, knocking to the ground many leaves, a ball they had forgotten about, and finally the swing bench. “Don’t throw it again. Just swing.” Lacey made a mock angry face before she returned the hoe and broom to the garage.

Rachel came running, crippling her for a moment with a leg hug.

Lacey patted the small, black head. “Tomorrow after work, I’ve got a meeting. Toby will come over and stay with you while I’m gone.”

Rachel jumped up and down. "Yeah. I like Dective."

"He likes you, too. I think he'll have as much fun as you will." Lacey spoke the truth, plain and without frills. It would do him good to get his mind off police work. And Sandra. Lacey shuddered.

Toby arrived late on Monday night, all apologies and explanations. Lacey dashed to her car with a wave, blowing kisses at Rachel.

And to Toby, too.

She should be ashamed. Toby was practically engaged.

The long, rectangular building jutted away from the sanctuary outlining a porch where Lacey spotted a woman wearing jeans and a red, tucked-in shirt. Lacey gasped. That couldn't be Nicole Johnson. Even in the lawyer's office two months ago, she'd seemed heavier, but she'd been behind a desk. Perhaps, burdened with her own problems, Lacey simply hadn't noticed. Nicole had weighed three hundred pounds at her graduation a few years before Lacey's, but now she looked half that size.

The woman waved, so Lacey parked in that direction and walked that way. She stepped on the porch. "I can't believe it's you."

Nicole embraced her. "It's me, all right." She preened a bit and put an arm around Lacey's shoulder, motioning her into the building. "I'm so glad you could come." She led the way down a hall and into a square room.

A long, wooden table surrounded by slatted wooden chairs filled the small space. Lacey sat on the side that Nicole indicated. One man leafed through his Bible. Two women sat opposite them and yelled greetings to Nicole then nodded to Lacey.

Lacey recognized a man on the other end as the man who ran the Dairyland. His name was Ty Holden. He spoke first. "Hi, Lacey. Haven't seen you here before."

Lacey's pulse kick-started. She didn't like being the ice cream flavor of the week. Everyone stared. "It's my first time."

"Welcome," noth ladies said to Lacey.

Others filed in and took seats. The last to arrive was Mom's friend, Marjorie Joiner, and her son, Sonny. What brought them here? Neither had weight to lose.

At seven o'clock, the man with his head buried in his Bible looked up as if on cue. "Welcome to Life Recovery. Can we say the serenity prayer together?"

Everyone followed his lead. Lacey had heard it before and made an effort to follow the words. The leader introduced himself as Chad and asked Marjorie to introduce her guest.

“This is my son. We call him Sonny. He wanted to visit tonight.”

Sonny’s face turned scarlet. He shifted and slumped. His pimples were plumper than he was.

Nicole spoke up next. “Say welcome to my guest, Lacey. This is her first time.”

Lacey squirmed and hid behind the black tendrils covering her downturned face. She had that one advantage over Sonny, but her face was every bit as red. She could feel it.

Nicole whispered, “We don’t use last names. In a small town like ours, most of us know each other anyway, but we still strive for anonymity.”

As if adding an anecdote to Nicole’s words, the leader’s voice was loud enough to carry down the hall. “Welcome. A word to our guests and a reminder to all here—what is said here stays here.”

The woman to the leader’s left cleared her throat. “Hello, I’m Vesta, and I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hi, Vesta,” several spoke at once.

The woman slid her ring up and down her finger. “I’ve been sober six months. Today, I faced my ex-husband for the first time.” Her voice broke, faltered, and almost failed. She cleared her throat again. “I lost my temper like in the old days.”

Two people nodded as if they understood.

She coughed and swallowed. “I wanted a drink so bad.”

The same two nodded again.

“But I didn’t have one. I called Paige.” Vesta’s face crumpled into a mass of wrinkles. Tears coursed her face leaving it blotchy and red. She glanced at a woman to Marjorie’s left.

That woman reached across and patted Vesta’s hand.

An understanding giggled at Lacey’s mind. She didn’t drink, but she understood the problem Vesta faced, only Lacey would’ve wanted candy. Was she the same as an alcoholic?

Paige spoke then, with a voice louder and more distinct than her friends. “My old pusher called me this week. I told him where he could

go.” She giggled. “And it sure weren’t heaven.” Her laughter was nervous and high-pitched. “A few years ago that’s all it would’ve taken to make me a goner.” She lifted a hand and juttied her chin. “But for God. I defy the devil to try to make me stumble. God will fight my battles, and He’s the one with the strength. It sure ain’t me.”

The testimonies and confessions shattered Lacey’s view of the world. Numbness spread through her mind. She was stunned, shocked, and awed. It was a feeling of coming home. The tightness in her muscles gave way. She wasn’t the only one powerless and incapable, inept and insane. God plus submission made the difference.

When asked if she had anything to share, Lacey scanned the room. Tears formed in her eyes and choked off her words. She shook her head and looked down at the rolls of fat that testified to her addiction.

On either side of her, Nicole and Chad put hands on her shoulders.

Paige spoke around Chad. “We’re just glad you came. Aren’t we?”

Together, several said, “Yes.”

More tears trickled down Lacey’s cheeks. A lady across the table slid over a box of tissues, and Lacey took one with a mumbled thanks. Scripture was read and also words from what was called “the Big Book” which was the Alcoholics Anonymous textbook.

As the meeting drew to a close, everyone around the circle clasped hands and bowed heads, so Lacey did, too. A few minutes later when she raised her head, all the participants chanted together. “Keep coming back.” Afterward, several left, but others stayed.

Lacey hurried out the door. She felt fragile. One touch, and she’d shatter.

Nicole caught up with Lacey on the porch and clasped her hand. “I know this is somewhat overwhelming at first, but promise you’ll come back. God has saved my life and my sanity.”

Lacey sniffed and dropped Nicole’s hand. “I’ll be back.” She ran for her car and drove off to entertain and celebrate the new thoughts rattling around in her brain.

When she drove into her driveway, she sat there a moment, praying for wisdom and direction. “What are you doing in my life, Lord? I am powerless over food. Help me tonight and tomorrow.”

After her prayer, she went in to face her family and Toby.

Toby walked in from the kitchen with Rachel precariously balanced on his broad shoulders. "Well, what did you think? He looked as if held his breath.

"It was good," Lacey murmured. "How'd y'all do?"

Toby threw Rachel to the sofa. "I got to go, squirt." He pinched the girl's chin. "I'm tired." He patted Lacey's shoulder as he walked out of the house.

At the sound of the closing door, Rachel dove against her aunt's legs. "We had fun. We played ball, and I swung in the back yard."

Lacey raised her nostrils like she sniffed something stinky. "Phew, we need to get you in the bath tub."

Rachel burst into a ton of giggles.

Mom flipped off the TV. "Glad you decided to come home. Hope you don't plan on doing this all the time."

"Doing what?" Lacey undressed Rachel.

"Leaving me with Toby and Rachel both. You might've asked."

"I thought you'd be glad I asked Toby to help with Rachel while I was gone." Lacey went in the bathroom and started up the water.

Mom remained in her recliner and yelled, "You didn't answer my question."

Lacey stuck in her head in the room. "Sorry, what was the question?"

Mom stood, leaning on her cane. "I said do you plan on going to that dog-gone meeting all the time and leaving me with Toby and Rachel. Because if you do, I can't take it. I might have to find somewhere else to go."

Nothing had changed because Lacey had been given some hope. She stared at her mother. Didn't she want her daughter to get help? She gave a loud "humph" and turned to finish Rachel's bath.

The next evening after Rachel's bath, Lacey broached the subject. "Mom, do you not want me to go to the Monday night meetings?"

Mom didn't hear, or else she ignored her.

Lacey put Rachel to bed. She marched around her mother's chair with her hands on her hips. She planted her feet in front of the TV screen. "I need an answer."

Mom pursed her mouth but remained silent.

"I need an answer now."

"I don't care what you do. Now let me watch my program." Mom held out her cane to nudge her daughter's leg.

Lacey stayed where she was. "You don't mind if I go?"

Her mother glared at her. "Do whatever you like. I don't care."

Lacey took a step forward. "You didn't mind when I went to the diet club. Is it having Toby here you don't like?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, move. I don't care. I don't care."

"Then why complain about it?" Lacey moved.

Mom stared at the TV.

"Fine." Lacey meandered toward her room. "I'll go, and you can keep Rachel. I'll tell Toby not to come. She wore him out anyway."

Lacey slammed the bedroom door.



On the next Monday morning, Lacey was rushing to type up chart notes. She didn't sense someone approaching her desk.

Bill Lindy held his arm over her computer keyboard. "Like it?"

She jumped, knocking over her container of pens and pencils. "Like what?" She looked into his handsome face, trying not to melt.

His forehead wrinkled. His eyebrows lifted. "My new tattoo. I thought you'd appreciate it since you were a fisherwoman."

Lacey stood and studied the tattoo on Bill's upper arm. It was about three inches square—a boy with a fishing pole in a squiggle of water. "That's real cute, but weren't you afraid to have that done?"

"What's a little tattoo? You should see the ones on my back." He started to lift his shirt.

"No, thanks." Lacey held her arms up with palms outward. "This is a professional office, and I've got work to do." She again faced the computer.

He walked to the side of her desk where she couldn't avoid him. "I came by to see if we could slip off early today. Youse game?"

"I can't. Sorry." She focused on her page.

"Can't or won't?" He propped his hands on top of her keyboard, his face inches from hers.

An uneasy zip tickled her insides. She jerked in an effort to rid herself of the sensation. "Bill, you're a nice man, and you make me laugh . . ."

"Here comes the but." He straightened.

Lacey put hands on her hips. “But,” she dragged out the word, “we don’t fit for dating each other. I like you, but I don’t want you as a boyfriend. I’m sorry.” Though it took all the steel God provided her, she looked him squarely in the eyes and didn’t flinch.

Questions flitted across his brown eyes, and then his mouth slowly curved into a smile. “Got it. I’ll stop by once in a while to say hi to a friend if that’s okay.” He leaned closer. “But,” he emphasized the word, “if you change your mind, you know how to find me.” He snapped his fingers in her face and walked out of the office, snapping as he went.

Lacey wilted into her chair. She had never turned a man down in her life. She expected to feel sad, but instead she felt relief—and something akin to pride. Fat Lacey could’ve had a boyfriend, but she had told him no. She was worth more than that.

She felt good.

She felt energized.

She felt powerful.

She remembered the words from the twelve-step program. With God in control, she had power. A smile crinkled the corners of her mouth.

Her smile lasted until she arrived home. Lacey rushed to get dinner since she planned on going to the meeting. A horn honked. Her mother grabbed her purse and cane. “I’ll be gone for a while. See you later.”

Lacey glanced up from the macaroni and cheese she was stirring. “You didn’t tell me you were leaving. I have my meeting tonight.”

“Sorry.” Mom closed the front door and left Lacey with no options, no hope, and lots of tears.

CHAPTER *Thirty*

Betty Chandler dialed Marjorie's number. The answering machine clicked on and suggested leaving a message.

Betty's eyes stung. Her voice shook worse than her hands, but she needed help, she needed hope, she needed, for the hundredth time, her oldest daughter. "Lacey didn't come home last night." There it was for all the world to hear. Betty's nightmare, come true. For all the fear of losing Katie, the worst that could happen would be to lose Lacey. Betty hated it, but that was the truth, raw and exposed.

Pain struck in her legs, her side, and the back of her head. Her teeth clamped down on her lip until it hurt. A wave of guilt lodged in her mind as sweat popped out on her forehead, but she shoved it aside like last night's garbage. The night before, she had left the house, left Lacey with no way to leave Rachel and go to her meeting, left on purpose because she was angry—angry that people took her for granted because she was disabled. When she felt helpless, she got mad. Not a pretty picture for a Christian, but there it was. Even with her sweating, she shivered and chilled.

She tramped to the front porch and dropped into a lawn chair. The early morning air was cool. In a couple hours, the heat would be oppressive.

Sweet, responsible Lacey wouldn't leave without a word. Were she and Rachel safe? Had something terrible happened to Betty's daughter and granddaughter?

She bowed her head in prayer and then called Toby.

Amber answered the police phone and offered to get him.

"Hey, Mrs. Chandler, what can I do for you?" His rushed tone reminded her of what Lacey had said about Toby dealing with drug dealers in Wharton Rock.

Betty breathed in, hoping to steady her voice. "When I got home last night, Lacey and Rachel were gone. They didn't come home all night."

"Hey, Willie, when you get your coffee, come in here." Toby's voice was muffled, off-line. Then he spoke more directly to Betty. "I wouldn't worry. Lacey probably decided to scare you."

That didn't sound like Lacey. "Have you heard from her?"

"Ah, well, not since last night. She dropped Rachel here at the station. I kept an eye on her. Lacey caught the last part of her meeting and then picked up Rachel."

"Where was she going?"

"Yeah, that's it. Check it first." Toby was off-line again.

Betty's jaw tightened. She lifted her chin, prepared to tell him to forget it. But he came back to her again.

"As I said, Mrs. Chandler, I don't think you should worry yet. If she doesn't come home tonight, I'll investigate. Okay?" He paused. "Sorry, but I've got to go now."

"Bye." She disconnected and slammed the cell phone against the table so hard she worried it'd broken.

Did Toby know more than he let on? In the past, when she and Lacey had tangled, Lacey would buy a bag of candy and shut herself in her room until she got over being mad. Work? Betty should check with Myrna Cutter.

Betty's phone rang before she could make another call. Marjorie's voice sounded agitated. "Hey, Betty, what do you mean? Did Lacey take Rachel?"

Betty sighed. "Yep."

"Where would she go with a little girl? She was gone when we got back last night, wasn't she?"

"Yep."

"We were only gone about an hour."

"Yeah, I know. You commented on Lacey's car not being here. I thought she had taken Rachel to her meeting with her, but they never came back." Betty got up from the porch chair and went back to her recliner inside.

"Did you call Toby?" Marjorie sounded in a hurry.

"Yep, he says not to worry yet."

"Well, he's most likely right. Lacey's steady."

And, predictable. But, not this time. "It's ten until eight. After eight, I'll call her work number."

Betty heard voices from Marjorie's side and then Marjorie sounded louder again. "I'll pray for you, Betty. She'll turn up."

"Thanks." Betty put down the phone. She watched the seconds tick by on the wall clock. No one called. Then she remembered what she had forgotten to tell Marjorie. She dialed back. "Marge, I can't go to art class this morning. I'm too torn up over Lacey being missing, and I didn't get any sleep."

"I understand, Betty. Hope you find her soon."

Betty hung up again. The clock said four minutes until eight. She drummed her fingers. When she found Lacey, Betty was going to ring that girl's neck for worrying her mother like this. Those meetings were supposed to help her, not put crazy ideas in her head. She stopped herself and decided to pray. Someone might have broken in and kidnapped her loved ones—someone bad—so she needed to pray for them.

One minute to eight. No reason to call early. Lacey always said Myrna came in late.

About the time, the clock flicked to eight, the phone rang. "Lacey?"

"It's Toby, Mrs. Chandler. I take it you haven't heard from her yet?" Toby sounded more worried than he had the first time she called. Had he heard something?

"No. I'm fixing to call her office."

"Great. Let me know if she's there." The next sound she heard was the dial tone.

Betty held her breath and dialed. Her trembling fingers caused her to hit the wrong keys, and she had to start over twice.

A bright voice answered. "Myrna Cutter's office."

Betty expelled a pent-up breath. "I'm gonna kill you, Lacey Chandler. Where have you been all night?"

"Sorry, Mom. I was so mad at you for leaving. That meeting helped me a lot last week. I know I need to go to them every week. When you left,

I couldn't go. I'd told Toby not to come, and you sure can't take kids to meetings. I was trapped."

"You didn't have to disappear. Are you okay?" Betty hoped she didn't sound whiny. She hated whiny people.

"I'm fine, Mom. Rachel and I had a fun night in an Apache Falls hotel. I took her to Courtney's house this morning and came to work." Betty could hear her welcoming someone to the office.

Betty bit down hard, catching the side of her cheek. "Glad you had so much fun. You might have asked me if I'd like to go."

"You'd left, remember? I thought I was leaving Rachel with you and going to a meeting. I must get to work, Mom. See you tonight." Betty had never before heard that domineering tone in her oldest.

She disconnected and laid down the phone. Though she huffed and puffed, there was no one to hear. When she calmed, she called Toby and Marjorie, then went to bed, but her anger and guilt kept her mind churning and sleep was impossible.



The circle of people judged Lacey's comment with gaping mouths and widened eyes. "I'm glad I worried my mother. She deserves it."

The leader for the night, a small, balding man spoke with soft, but no less intense, words. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

A fire ignited in Lacey's cheeks, one she couldn't extinguish. Whatever had gotten into her? She had always been thoughtful of others' feelings. Her hands grasped the table edge. "I could've drowned my sorrow in a bag of candy—that's what I usually do." Her sweaty palms lost their grip. "I usually think of others first, but then I eat. That's how I got here in the first place."

Nicole reached over to cover Lacey's hand. "What did you do first when you realized your mother had left you with no babysitter?"

Lacey's lips formed a flat line. "I prayed. Then I thought of asking Toby to watch Rachel for a few minutes while I came to the meeting, even though I'd be late."

“So far, so good,” said the balding man. “How did that line of thinking get to staying gone all night without calling?”

“The meeting had filled my mind with freedom. When I picked up my niece, the idea of a celebration came to me. Like a gift from heaven.”

“Makes sense to me,” Sonny Joiner mumbled.

“But,” his mother pegged him with a stare, “not without calling your mother.”

Lacey let out her held breaths. Her fight was all gone. She had been wrong. “I should’ve called.”

After class, Nicole walked with Lacey to her car. “Your testimony helped me. Thanks for coming and sharing.”

“Sharing brings freedom, doesn’t it?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“Sure does, and I’d say handling that situation without breaking your abstinence is a miracle.”

“Thank you. I think so, too, but I was wrong about not calling.”

“God is working on that stubborn anger of yours.” Nicole chuckled.

Laughter erupted from Lacey.

“You and I both need the meetings,” Nicole said.

Lacey knew in her heart that God had led her to the answer. “Yes.” She drove off, hoping the confirmation continued through the night with Mom and Rachel, and through the next day with Myrna back from a business trip.

The next day drew to a close with no comment from Myrna until “Come in a moment, Lacey. We need to talk.”

Lacey’s body tensed. Her pulse kicked into gear and sprinted ahead of her. How she had dreaded this talk. Now, when she thought life might be good to her, she was going to be fired. She prayed and walked into her boss’s office, ready to handle the next challenge.

At Myrna’s door, Lacey cleared her throat to announce her presence.

CHAPTER *Thirty-One*

Toby opened one eye. Something had awakened him. “What?”

“Not looking like anything’s happening tonight, Boss.”

“Huh.” Toby rubbed sleep-filled eyes. “My shift?”

Willie leaned against the car’s neck rest and pulled his Stetson over his eyes. “‘Fraid so.”

Fingers of gray shot across the dark eastern sky. Duffy’s Drug remained quiet and dark. Willie was right. Nothing going on, and soon it would be light. Toby held his watch up to the light cast by the street lamp and read four-thirty. “I’ll watch until seven. Then we’ll head back to the station.”

Willie’s answer was a soft snore.

Toby’s eyes burned and blurred then widened. He straightened to battle alert. Menacing prickles meandered down his spine. Mark Duffy’s light blue Ford pickup pulled to the side of the store. The white stripe across its side reflected the neon in the window, momentarily blinding Toby. Mark approached the back entrance.

In the squad car a block down, Toby used binoculars to observe Mark unlock the door—but he didn’t enter. He jumped back into his truck and left. Toby’s watch now said five-oh-five. The store, all the corner, was quiet.

Toby slumped back into his seat and ran his mind over possible scenarios and explanations. His dad could’ve asked the boy to open early for an employee who didn’t have a key. No, Duffy was a hard-nose. He wouldn’t allow his store to remain open for two seconds without him there. Toby rubbed the back of his neck. His shift would end soon, and day would begin. He had no new answers, only more questions.

At five twenty-nine, a black Lexus sedan pulled into the place vacated by Mark's truck. Toby's binoculars highlighted a man with a military haircut and brownish fatigues. He entered the back door of the drug store.

Toby touched his partner's shoulder. "Willie."

Willie came to attention. "Yeah, man."

"May be fixing to go down." Toby pointed to the Lexus.

Willie cocked his gun. They waited. A car went by, but drove on down Main. With the windows rolled down, they heard a rooster waking sleepy Wharton Rock. The pharmacy door reopened. The man looked both ways. He held a box.

Toby started his vehicle and whirled in beside the black car.

Willie jumped out and leveled his 9MM at the man. "Set it down and put up your hands."

Military Guy put the box on the hood of the patrol car and followed instructions. "What's this all about, officer?"

Toby came around the front of the car. He opened the box. "Let's see . . . Sudafed, Actifed, diet pills, hydrogen peroxide. You tell me."

"I arranged with the pharmacy to pick up stuff. That's why it was all boxed for me." Military Guy glared at Toby. "They knew I'd be picking it up to take to a pharmacy in Apache Falls."

"Which pharmacy?" Toby asked. "We'll check it out."

The thief stared hard at him, but kept his mouth shut.

Willie escorted him to the back door of the patrol car, ushered him inside, and Toby drove to the station.

When the trio paraded through the station, everyone turned to watch. Willie took his prisoner to the conference room for questioning. Toby stopped at his desk to write up the incident. In a week and a half, he'd be changing desks. Chief Langford had already taken out a few boxes of his stuff.

After finishing his report, Toby glanced at his watch. Seven o'clock. The pharmacy wouldn't open for another hour. He went back to check on Willie.

"What next, Boss?"

Toby replaced his hat. "We need to question our prisoner now. If we don't, someone could have him free by the time we deliver him to Apache

Falls. After we do, I'll go see Duffy. One on one might be easier when I talk with him."

"Nothing's going to ease the pain of your own son ripping you off." Willie tapped a desk to confirm.

So right. But it had to be explained and questions had to be asked. It was part of the job. Not the good part.

"Hey, Chief Wheeler, you want me to patrol the highway this morning?" The new man, Jinks, had a high-pitched voice, but he was a wiry, rough and rowdy rodeo rider. Since he had learned two days after joining the Wharton Rock police force about Toby being named chief, he had already started calling him by the new title.

"That's Detective Wheeler for ten more days. Yes, take the other squad car, though. I need to search the one I was driving last night." Toby headed to see Chief Langford, filled him in, and asked for advice.

The chief leaned back in his leather chair. His bald head glistened in the fluorescent lighting overhead. "You question the neighbors around that meth house?"

"Shortly after the explosion." Toby's lips pursed. "Maybe we should do it again."

Langford nodded. "And find that aunt. Question her."

Toby clicked his tongue. "Got a prisoner to question first. Then, we'll need someone to escort him to the county jail." He started out of the chief's office.

"Got lots to work on." Langford gave a sympathetic smile. "Might have to skip your Sunday off. By the way, I need to travel to Apache Falls myself, so I can take your prisoner." He winked. "When you're ready."

"Thanks." Toby stroked his chin. "Sure would like to wrap this up before you leave us."

The chief's smile broadened. He stood and walked across the office to place an arm around his replacement. "Be thorough, son, not fast. When these guys are caught, someone else will take their place. Your job will always be to catch the bad guys."

Toby took off his hat. "You're right." He gave a submissive smile and shook his head. "What am I going to do without you, Chief?"

"You'll do fine. Besides, I'll be around." Langford walked back to his chair. "I'll expect a visit now and then to catch me up, so I won't feel left out of things." His forehead lifted as he went back to work. "Remember, slow and thorough. Be smarter than the criminals." He started writing on the page before him.

Toby rejoined Willie in the conference room where he kept watch over the prisoner. "You ask the questions. I'll watch"

Willie's casual manner softened Military Guy before asking the first question. "Address?"

"44514 Texas St."

That was the house across from the meth house that exploded. Interesting.

"Name of the pharmacy in Apache Falls?" Willie asked.

"Franklin Pharmacy." Military Guy reddened.

He had slipped. That was a small, independent store next door to Dairyland in Wharton Rock. Good information they could use.

When Willie and Toby left the room, Toby reached up to pat his six-foot-one comrade's shoulder. "Good work, Brandt. Chief will take the prisoner to the county jail. So, go home now and get some sleep. We've got a long weekend ahead of us."

"Sure 'nuff," Willie doffed his Stetson.

Toby locked the door to the conference room and stopped at Chief Langford's door. "The prisoner is ready, sir."

After yelling at Amber where he was going, the chief headed off,

"See you later," Toby called. "Amber, I'm going over to Duffy's Pharmacy, then I'll head home to sleep."

"Got it." Amber grabbed the ringing phone.

Did she live with a receiver in her ear at home? Toby chuckled at the vision.

The bell rang when Toby entered the pharmacy. No customers, but Chester Duffy shuffled back and forth behind the high back counter.

Toby waited until Chester repositioned himself by the register. His brow furrowed and thick, brown glasses exaggerated his intense concentration. "What can I do for you, Detective?"

"I'm afraid I have some bad news. Was your back door unlocked this morning?" At waist-level, Toby twisted his Stetson.

"No, everything was fine. There's a black Lexus parked in back, though. Don't know who it belongs to. Why do you ask?" Chester pushed his glasses up on his nose.

Mark must have come back by and locked the door again after Toby and Willie had left with their prisoner. "Ask your son." Toby peered out the pharmacy window, running over details in his mind.

Chester came around the display. "What do you mean by that crack? Oh, hello, Mrs. Smith." Chester stopped to wait on a customer. "I have your prescription right here."

A small woman bent with osteoporosis took the sack from Chester's hand and left the store.

"Count your supplies and see what shortfall you have. We'll see if it compares to what's in the box I have at the station." Toby's tone was curt but professional. He patted Duffy's shoulder and started out the door. "I'll be in touch."

"Wait a minute. Don't you dare prance in here, insinuating my son is a thief! I don't believe it." Chester took off his glasses. His eyes were like laser beams. "You don't have any proof Mark did anything wrong."

Toby twisted his hat again and pressed it into his chest. "I saw him."

"You saw him enter the store." Chester pounded the counter. "I gave him a key. It's not unusual for him to do that when we're closed."

Toby's jaw tensed. "How do you think the man who drives the Lexus got in when he showed up?"

"Maybe Mark loaned some medications to another pharmacy. Maybe the man broke the lock. There are lots of possible explanations. I'll talk with my son, but I will not have Mark falsely accused. One word of this to anyone before we learn the real answers, and I'll have your job, Wheeler."

Toby's fingers curled into fists, his knuckles white, squeezing his Stetson. His heart beat faster. "Very well. Bring Mark into the station tomorrow morning. I'll do nothing until then. But Mr. Duffy . . . " Toby glared at the older man. "He's in your custody until morning. If he disappears, I'll lock you up in his place." He stomped out of the store, the bell on the door clanging as it swung shut.

Toby breathed in the hot air outside. He loosened his grip on his hat and plopped it back on his head, swallowing his anger, and trying to think

how he might have felt in Duffy's shoes. Would his first reaction have been to believe the person bearing bad news? His heartbeat slowed, and his irritation abated.

He understood. The problem was that Toby knew Mark had broken the law, and Toby knew he would have to be the one to prove it—and break Chester Duffy's heart. Time to head home. He was too tired to think anymore.

Even with air conditioning pumping out cold air, Toby's house was too warm to sleep. There was too many voices outside. A clanging garbage trucks. A screeching brake. Then, when he had finally fell asleep, the Friday tornado testing siren blasted him out of bed again.

After that, this case kept him awake and thinking until he finally gave up on sleep, cleaned up, and ate. While he gazed out his back window, he prayed, throwing in praises to God and an extra plea that He would soften the blow to Duffy and save Mark in the process. He dressed and drove to the station. He might be able to get some work done before nightfall. Thieves and drug dealers never slept, so policemen got little themselves.

Even in my little town.

CHAPTER *Thirty-Two*

The hard-backed chair ground into Lacey's back. She crossed her right leg over her left. Her heart rate wouldn't slow, but continued to beat faster, louder, unrulier.

Myrna's large leather chair embraced her with authority and swaddled her in comfort. "A few weeks ago you asked if you should give notice. Do you still want to quit?" Her tone was flippant.

Lacey uncrossed her legs and scooted to the edge of the chair. "I don't want to quit, but I thought you wanted me to." She squirmed and this time crossed the left leg over the right. A pulled thread on her slacks stuck out, ugly and uncontrollable. She pushed it to her leg, but when she removed the pressure, it popped up again, an unsightly flaw. She shuddered under Myrna's uninterrupted glare.

"Because I wanted you to shield me from Jeff's calls and you refused to do it, you thought I wanted to fire you?"

Just get it over with. Lacey was tired of the foreplay. She uncrossed her legs, crossing her arms instead. "Yes, ma'am." She tapped her fingers against her upper arms and heaved a loud sigh.

"Is that how you still feel?" Myrna's perfectly groomed hair and understated elegance made her seem a formidable foe.

The phone rang. Lacey stood.

"Let the answering service pick it up," Myrna said.

Lacey took her seat, cleared her throat. Now where did she leave that backbone? "I like working here, and I don't want to quit, but I shouldn't be asked to arbitrate the argument between Mr. Haggerty and you, taking

verbal abuse each of you intends for the other.” She stared at the wall behind her boss.

“I agree.” Myrna rocked back in her executive chair. “It took guts to stand up and speak your opinion even if it might have cost your job. I admire that.” She leaned toward her desk. “Give yourself a three hundred a month raise.”

Lacey reeled, nonplussed. This was far from what she had expected. Should she leave? Her legs might be too weak.

“You can close up the office now. I’ll be leaving in a minute. Have a good weekend.” Myrna dismissed her.

With shaky legs and anesthetized muscles, Lacey floated around the office, turning off the computer and preparing to close.

While she drove home, she slipped her cell phone from her purse and hit Toby’s home number. His machine answered, so she left a message. She couldn’t remember his work schedule. She tried the office.

“He went home to sleep, but . . . wait a minute. He just walked in. Hold on a minute.” Amber put her on hold.

“Hi, Lacey. What’s up?” His familiar baritone had the capacity to soothe her senses like a bonfire on a cold day.

“I didn’t get fired. I got a raise.” The last word was punctuated with a squeal.

“Congratulations. I’m so proud of you. What happened?”

Lacey explained. “I was nervous. Who would have thought? She said she respected me for standing up to her. Can you believe that?”

“Lacey, I’ve always—”

“I know, you always tell me I’m worth more than I think.” A tickle of pleasure settled in her stomach. “You’re always my biggest fan. What’s up with you?”

“Oooh, you wouldn’t believe the work load I’ve had. Forget sleep.” Toby let out a sigh.

“I’ll pray for you tonight. You’re usually the one praying for me, but sounds like you need it.” Lacey pulled into her driveway. “I’m home. Got to go.”

“Okay. Thanks for your prayers. Congrats, again.”

Lacey parked and bounded into the house.

Rachel was riding Courtney's back like a horse. "Mommy, look at me," she cried out.

Lacey's heart flooded with joy at being called Mommy. "Poor Courtney." She turned to her mother. "Mom, I'm not fired. Myrna gave me a raise. Whatcha think about that?"

"I'm glad that's over. You were worrying me, talking about quitting and driving into Apache Falls to work every day." Grabbing her cane, Mom stood and shuffled to the bathroom.

Lacey changed to shorts and T-shirt and went to the kitchen to start dinner. She pulled out some veggies to chop into a big salad.

"I'm leaving, Miss Chandler," Courtney yelled from the front door.

"See you tomorrow," Lacey said.

Rachel tugged on Courtney's arm.

Lacey went back to the living room. "Rachel, let her go."

Rachel's bottom lip bulged over her top one. "But I want her to stay."

"Courtney has to go to her house. She'll be back tomorrow." Lacey looked up at Courtney. "She's going to miss you when you go back to school, but I think I've found someone to keep her then. We'll see."

"I'm glad." Courtney closed the door, trying not to catch the four-year-old's fingers.

Rachel marched to the kitchen and pulled up a chair. "I wanna help." The girl was as stubborn as Lacey.

She moved away the knife and set Rachel to stirring up the ingredients as she cut them. "I have a special friend I'm going to go see tomorrow. She wants to meet you."

Rachel's stirring slowed. "What's her name?"

"Her name's Pearl, and she loves little girls."



The next day, Lacey and Rachel swung hands in front of Golden Oaks assisted living home. Lacey remembered envying Joanne and Beth's mother-daughter relationship, but Lacey's prayer for children had been answered, even if in an unforeseen manner.

When she dropped Rachel's hand, Lacey brushed the young girl's black curls from her face. Lacey's pride must've shown. She ushered Rachel down the hall, looking for room 112 and knocking on the door when they found it.

Two beady eyes peeked around the door and brightened when they saw who was there. "Lacey, I didn't believe you'd come. And this must be your daughter." She opened the door wider. The hump on her back bent her at the middle, so she was just the right height to gaze directly into Rachel's eyes.

Lacey nudged the child onto a small stool while she took a high back chair, guessing Pearl's spot was the recliner in the middle of the room. "I've wanted to come for weeks, but something always hindered me. I told Rachel today I would introduce her to my new friend."

"Rachel." Pearl clasped her hands to her chin. "Like in the Bible. You're a pretty little thing. How old are you?"

Rachel held up four fingers.

Lacey leaned against the tufted, flowered chair back. "I thought you might like to know that I've gone a couple of times to that weight loss program where Nicole Johnson goes."

Pearl's gaze turned from Rachel to Lacey. "And?"

Lacey's eyes stung. Her voice quivered. "It's good stuff." She stood and wandered the room. Every surface overflowed with knickknacks and floral arrangements. "I met your niece." She pointed to a picture. "She goes to my church."

Pearl banged a pen on her lamp table. "Are you going back?"

Lacey jumped. "Going back where?"

Rachel ran to grab her aunt's legs.

"To the twelve-step weight loss program, of course." Pearl harrumphed.

Why did Lacey feel like she could use a good, satisfying crying jag? She patted Rachel in assurance. "Yes."

"That's Frieda. She's my niece." Pearl rested her head on the back of the recliner, looking at the picture near Lacey. "But she's like a daughter to me."

Lacey nodded. "She seems to care for you."

Pearl's eyes misted, and her voice softened. "Don't know what I'd do without Frieda. She comes several times a week. I have another niece in Apache Falls. Don't see her much." Pearl clasped her hands, and her voice trumpeted so loud her next-door neighbor could've heard her. "Will you come back and do our service again? That other woman isn't any good."

Rachel laid her head against Lacey's knee.

"I can't just take over, but I'll ask my pastor's wife if the other lady is happy in this ministry. If she would like to give it up, I'll do it."

"Promise?" Pearl held her hands to her chin in a praying motion.

Lacey broke into a wide smile. It was nice to be wanted. "I promise."

Now Pearl wished to discuss her family and hear about Lacey's. Rachel tugged Lacey's hand toward the door. An hour had gone by quickly.

When Pearl discussed the children in Niger, Rachel sat back on her stool and listened. Lacey enjoyed hearing about Pearl's days as a missionary.

"The younger children played a game called 'Walking Across Africa.'" Pearl explained the rules and the chant.

Lacey glanced at Rachel. "That sounds like the game you play on Wednesday night at church sometimes."

Rachel nodded. "Cat and mouse." She looked back at Miss Pearl. "Are they black?"

"What?" Pearl's forehead wrinkled.

"The kids in Nee . . . whatever you said."

Pearl chuckled. "Niger. Yes, the kids there have black skin, but they love games and chants like you who have white skin."

"My skin isn't white."

Pearl sighed and pointed at the little girl. "No, I guess we'd call that arm beige."

Rachel held up her arm for inspection then looked at Lacey.

Lacey covered her mouth with her hand to keep her laugh inside. "Sounds right to me." The laugh escaped. She stood. "Rachel and I will come back again. Won't we?" She looked at Rachel, who nodded.

"Remember to check on doing this ministry. You promised."

Lacey nodded in agreement. She and Rachel left the woman waving with all her might.



By the next Saturday, Lacey was preparing to give a devotion to the old and disabled. Volunteering lit up her life like the huge chandelier lit up Golden Oaks's lobby. According to her pastor's wife, Lacey was an answer to prayer. Imagine that. The other woman had quit, and the church had planned to cancel the ministry.

A floral wing chair overwhelmed Pearl's small frame as she sat front and center, smiling, as if she had personally manufactured the situation. And so she had.

Lacey led them in "The Old Rugged Cross," knowing she'd have help from Pearl.

A new man joined their group. "Heard this was the group to visit," he whispered to Lacey after the service.

"Who told you that?"

He glanced toward Pearl who was seriously studying the ceiling. Lacey had her hands full with that one.

When she loaded her stuff to leave, Pearl found her voice again. "Bring that little girl of yours next time."

This woman was infuriating, but Lacey couldn't stop laughing. "Who's in charge of this meeting anyway?"

"God." Pearl sat with her hands primly folded in her lap and an ever-so-sweet smile glowing on her face.

"I can't top that one."

CHAPTER *Thirty-Three*

August first landed on a Wednesday. Chief Langford packed up the last box to take to his car then came back inside the station and called everyone to the front.

Tingles sneaked along Toby's spine. Sweat trickled down his temples. He stood to one side balanced firmly on both legs, his arms crossed in front of his chest, and his mind wandering in anticipation.

"It's been a pleasure to be your chief all these years. You've helped me keep this town safe. I know you'll continue to help Chief Wheeler." He paused then looked at Toby. "I apologize for leaving at a time when you've got a fight coming from the drug lords, but I'm confident Chief Wheeler will know how to handle it." He scanned the small crew assembled. "Do what he says, help him, be willing to go the second mile to serve and protect. Thank you." He bowed and walked out to applause and tears.

Toby straightened and moved into the small circle of policemen. He cleared his throat, trying to keep his voice from cracking. Chief Langford had not only been a mentor, he'd been a second dad. "Listen up, guys, we've got lots to do with this drug ring. We'll have some long hours." Toby paused, surveying the crew before him—some country hicks, some city-bred, but all dedicated cops. "Now get back to work."

While moving his files into the chief's office, Toby, with his back to the door, was surprised by Mark Duffy. Toby jumped at the sound of the teen's deep voice. He'd make a good bass if he ever took up singing.

"You said to come by and sign a confession about Shane."

"Yes. Thanks for coming." Toby called out to Willie. "Do you have that form for Mark to sign?"

"Sure 'nuff, Boss." Willie brought it over.

Toby motioned Mark to have a seat in front of the desk and pressed the paper out in front of him. "Read it over. See if that's an accurate description of what happened. If it is, sign it. Of course, I need your father's signature also since you're under eighteen. Is he at the pharmacy?"

Mark nodded and started reading.

"No, he isn't. I'm right here." A voice sounded from the open office door. "Don't sign that, Mark, until I read it." He snatched it from his son's hand.

Chester Duffy read the statement.

Toby sat and waited. Here in a small office, he was separated from the station's activity. He wasn't sure how he felt about that, but he would adjust.

Chester pointed to the paper. "Here where it says Mark came by at six in the morning. You need to add that he came by to pick up a delivery. It sounds as if he opened the door and left again without going inside."

"That's exactly what happened," said Toby. "Detective Brandt and I were watching."

"Well, it has to be changed somehow. This sounds as if he did it on purpose. You didn't do that, did you Mark?" Chester sought his son's cooperation.

Mark stared at his feet while shaking his head.

Chester threw down the paper. "Correct it, please, and then we'll sign it. And be sure Patterson goes to jail." He marched out of the room. With hunched shoulders, Mark quickly followed. The sound of the slamming front door reverberated down the hall.

Willie leaned around Toby's door, grinning. "Welcome to Chief Wheeler's world."

Toby put on his Stetson. "I'm stopping by to see Lacey and get a bite to eat," he told Amber. He stomped out, but was careful not to do any slamming.



When Lacey hung up the office phone, Toby saluted.

Her heart skipped a couple of beats. "What brings you here?"

"Just wanted to say hi."

"Did I tell you my neighbor with the new baby will babysit Rachel for me?"

"Great." His tone sounded tense and strained.

Lacey's frowned. "You don't sound so great."

Toby's head shook. He ran his fingers over the corner of the desk and stared at the floor. "I've always looked forward to being police chief—you know that—but the job hasn't started as I had hoped."

Lacey stood, intending to put an arm around Toby and lend her support.

He let out a wolf whistle. "Wow! You're looking good, girl."

Lacey's cheeks flooded with heat. She loved her new skirt, the first clothes she'd bought in three years. She curled a wisp of hair over her left ear. "I can't believe it, Toby. I'm losing weight without really trying. I'll drive by Daisy's Donuts thinking I'll get my usual, but then I drive right on by, not wanting to stop." Her words expressed the thrill with life she'd felt the last few days. Getting the sugar out of her system had been like unveiling the sun.

Toby's beautiful eyes locked on hers. "That's a God thing, Lace."

"I think so, too. I couldn't do it by myself." God had replaced food. God had given her peace. When food tempted, she cried to God for help, and He worked miracles. "Thank you again for never giving up on me. I know that lately, you'd like to have forgotten you ever knew me."

Toby kicked at the rug sticking out from under Lacey's desk. "I could never give up on you."

Silence. Lacey sensed vibrations from Toby that confused her. She'd never move in on Sandra's boyfriend even if he was her best friend.

The whine of the front door opening broke the spell.

"Well, I need to get going. This drug case is overwhelming." Toby moved away a little. "But with God's help, we'll conquer it." He marched out, waving.

Lacey waved back, glad to see him looking a bit brighter. The rest of the day, thoughts of him and Sandra gnawed at her mind and made her sick to her stomach.



As autumn crept into summer's wake, the weather painted the oak in Lacey's back yard a brilliant red-orange. One Sunday toward the end

of September, Lacey and her little family walked through the archway of multi-colored tallow trees bordering the church's walkway to enter the building.

Toby and Sandra entered together, but he took a seat toward the back while Sandra walked on to the front.

Could they have had a fight?

The idea Toby might no longer be dating Sandra delighted Lacey and set her stomach to somersaulting. She should be ashamed. She did wish Toby love and happiness. So what was wrong with her? He had probably seated himself near the back because he needed to leave early.

When church was over, Toby moved toward Old Blue without speaking to Sandra. A nagging sense of joy vied with Lacey's guilty conscience. Toby was overwhelmed at work, and now he might lose his girlfriend. She should be praying for him, and she would.

CHAPTER *Thirty-Four*

Toby signed the paper and handed it to Chester Duffy. The difficult man sat straight and rigid while he read the court's opinion. Mark slouched in the chair beside his father, a scowl deeply ingrained on his young face. Chester yanked off his glasses and wiped them with a handkerchief.

Toby shifted in his chair and plopped his elbow on the arm rest. "Glad this worked out for your boy." He looked Chester in the eye, daring him to argue.

Chester Duffy had dragged his feet and hampered the police investigation. Without his dad's interference, Mark would have turned state's evidence long ago, and Toby could've settled this case.

"And that Patterson fellow still goes to prison, right?" Chester crossed his arms.

"Probably. With Mark's testimony, we at least get him off the streets for a while." Toby raised his arms to stretch.

The three men stood.

Toby turned to Mark. "You like fishing, son?"

"Sure." He looked at his dad. "Don't go much though."

"You'll have to go over to Buffalo Lake with me some Saturday afternoon. We'll have a contest on who catches the biggest bass." Toby glanced at the drugstore owner. "You should go along, Chester. Nothing better for a man's soul than the fresh air of a Texas fall." *And, it might save your son.*

"Humph." Chester started out the door, ignoring Toby's outstretched hand.

Mark took a step toward Toby. "Uh, Chief, will Nate . . . uh will . . ."

"Nate will get the help he needs, but he will do jail time."

Mark gave a sideways grin. "Thanks."

Toby smiled and waved back. He needed to get that boy away and spend some one on one with him. Mark craved companionship, someone to care. His eyes lifted in silent supplication. Toby shivered with the onslaught of understanding. This boy's mom was dead, he was an only child, and if his dad didn't start spending time talking with and listening to his son, Mark would seek out someone who would. Like this time, it might not be a person who influenced him positively.

"Ah shucks, I'm going fishing now." Toby yelled to Amber. He turned and locked his office door. "It's too pretty a day to stay inside." He walked over to Willie's desk. "Will you finish up the paper work on that case this afternoon?"

"Sure, Boss." Lines of worry—long with new responsibilities—had crinkled Willie's forehead. "Guess it comes with all the increased pay I'm getting." Willie snickered.

"I'm working on it, Assistant Chief Brandt. I'm working on it." Toby strode out the door.

Robins sang from the pear trees lining the street, but a single dove called louder than them all from the rooftop of the feed store. Toby whistled a tune. The change of colors overhead soothed and relaxed him. He hopped in Old Blue and drove home to change from his work clothes.

He pulled into Wilderness Cove where he could spend the rest of the afternoon in isolated fishing. After he had loaded his gear and climbed over the steep ridge and down to the water, he opened a lawn chair and spread everything out. The trees here boasted more yellow and orange than those in town, and it was much more peaceful. Not as many birds here, which was strange, but the quiet soothed Toby's tempestuous emotions.

The last month had been hard. Being chief wasn't all glory and glamour. Sweat tickled from his underarms—autumn didn't always mean cooler weather in Texas. The light breeze coming over the lake felt good. He threw in his fishing line and sat back to think.

He'd realigned the force at the same time he had been fighting drug dealers. Some of the staff's fly-off-the-handle attitudes didn't help matters. He was thankful he could pray without going to church because he'd

been too busy to attend, but he couldn't have survived the month without the Lord.

Toby's tension flowed out through his line, drifting away on the waves. He thought about Lacey. They had spent little time together lately, but despite that, he couldn't help but notice the peace surrounding her and even her mother and niece. He grinned.

I'm not doing it. God is.

He spoke a word of gratitude. Why, Lacey had even lost some weight. He was so proud of her. Now she'd be looking for a man for real, and she wouldn't need him. Though the weather hadn't gotten any cooler, a chill stole over his body.

"Lord, shield me from the pain when she finds Mister Right."

Lacey deserved happiness. God would send someone when the time was right. Toby was trying with all his power, to follow the evangelist's suggestion of letting God drive while he rode in the back seat, but it sure wasn't easy.

A voice floated down from the top of the ridge behind him. "Hey, Chief Wheeler."

Toby twisted his torso in time to see Sonny Joiner race down the rocky slope and into the water with a splash. "Sorry."

Toby stuck out his hand with a grin. "I hadn't caught any fish anyways, but your splashing sure scared their nibbles away."

Sonny shook Toby's hand. "Thought you'd be working."

"I've been working too much. I needed a break. What about you? Don't have to work today?" Toby pulled in his line and readjusted his bait.

Sonny sat on the ground near the water's edge. "Nope, Dad gave me a day off. I was glad 'cause it's too purty to be trapped in a hot kitchen."

Toby slapped Sonny's shoulder. "My thoughts exactly. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay." He squinted against the sun to look at Toby. "Nate's going to jail, ain't he?"

"No choice. He was not only using, but he was dealing, too. Tried to sell to some kids in elementary school." Toby cast his line once more. "You have your fishing gear?"

"Yep, up there." Sonny pointed up the ridge. "Okay if I join you?"

"I'd like that." Toby's line tightened. He roped in a bass about twelve inches long and squealed, "You're good luck."

"Hope I'm good luck for myself." Sonny dropped his pole to grab Toby's fish bucket, opening it for Toby to drop in his catch. "That's a great start for you." After handing the bucket to Toby, Sonny cast his line into the water. "Chief Wheeler, what happened to the others?"

"Mark testified against Shane Patterson, which guarantees several year prison time for Patterson. It wasn't his first rodeo. He'll also get time for contributing to the delinquency of a juvenile. His girlfriend got caught on that one too."

A flock of crows landed in the nearby treetops, making enough racket to assure no good fishing for a while. Toby's cell rang, blending in with the birds.

"Hello."

"Toby, this is Sandra. Are you on the job?" Her voice was breaking up. Reception at the lake was never good.

"No, I'm fishing at Buffalo Lake." He'd lost her.

The birds settled into the trees. "I hate those birds." Sonny looked over at Toby. "What about Mark?"

Toby baited his hook with a wiggling worm one more time. "He's fine. His dad didn't press charges for theft, and he got off since it was his first time—plus he helped the prosecution with his testimony against Patterson." As if given a signal, the birds took off all at once across the lake. "Good riddance to that noise."

Sonny agreed with a nod about the same time a fish tugged his line, and the two men enjoyed the thrill of another catch.

Soon a red ball of sun gleamed across the lake, pink and orange streaks reflecting on the water. "That sun's blinding me. I'm gonna quit," Sonny said. He pulled his line out of the water and packed up his tackle and pole.

"You're right. It'll be dark as soon as that old sun drops all the way." Toby pulled in his pole. "With that big cat you caught, you have enough for dinner."

"Mom usually freezes them until she can have a big fish fry one night and invite people over." Sonny trudged up the ridge.

Toby followed. "Hey, I enjoyed our afternoon."

“Me too.” Sonny waved as he climbed behind the wheel of his pickup and drove toward the darkening sky.

An evening chill dropped the temperature while Toby loaded Old Blue. Nothing like fishing to calm a person, and nothing like encouraging a young man to fulfill his life’s dreams.

As Toby drove away from the woods, he remembered Sandra’s call. He was curious because she’d never called him before, so he decided to call her back.

CHAPTER *Thirty-Five*

Saturday morning after breakfast, Lacey wrote in her diary.

“Humph,” Mom turned up her nose, taunting her daughter.

Lacey pursed her lips. “This helps me eat right, Mom.” Lacey poured out her negative vibes on paper, ridding herself of the poison. According to Nicole, God erased everything written. All Lacey knew was after she wrote it, she didn’t worry about it so much.

“If you say so.” Mom shook open the newspaper.

Lacey went to her bedroom and hid the book under her pillow since little Rachel sometimes rummaged through dresser drawers. The child slept in a fetal position, her small form curled around Margaret Rose. Not a sign of the traumatic talk and fitful slumber from last night. Katie’s call might’ve eased her conscience, but it had thrown Rachel into a fit of tears, leaving Lacey to ease the wounds.

Lacey walked toward the kitchen, her bag on her shoulder. “Mom, I’m running to the store. Be right back. Rachel’s still asleep.”

“Get me some donuts.” Her mother popped the paper for emphasis.

Lacey halted. “Mom, I can’t resist donuts. What about something else?”

Mom’s forehead crinkled as if she were doing some heavy thinking. “Cinnamon rolls?”

“That’s better.” Lacey walked out and got into her car.

Fifteen minutes later, she returned with cinnamon rolls, plums, nectarines, grape tomatoes, and fat-free milk. She wasn’t a big vegetable eater, but she was striving for nutrition—thus the tomatoes. God needed her healthy to face her responsibilities.

“Did you get me some candy?” With some good night’s sleep, Rachel’s boundless energy had recharged.

Lacey pulled out a candy lipstick from her sack. “Who put this thing in here?” She used her best silly voice, grinned, and handed it to Rachel. “Eat your cereal first, though.” Lacey propped up her feet and ate a nectarine while Rachel sat on the sofa, a TV tray in front of her, and devoured her cereal.

The child ran to the front door before Lacey finished her fruit. “Can I go outside? Please?” Rachel tugged the doorknob.

“Wait until I can go with you. It’s not safe to go by yourself.” Lacey took a swig of diet cola and pushed down into her recliner to read more of the book Nicole had recommended. The sound of Mom’s labored breathing could be heard from the kitchen. Lacey jotted down a note, “Time for Mom’s annual appointment with the lung doctor.”

Rachel jumped up and down, begging, “Hurry, Aunt Lacey,” with all the patience of a four-year-old.

Lacey read the last line on the book’s page. “You’re worth it.” Not long ago, she would’ve laid down her reading because Rachel was crying, but resentment would’ve sprouted and caused Lacey to overeat. “You’re worth it,” she read again.

After placing a bookmark where she had stopped, she clasped her hands between her legs and grinned at the impatient child. “Okay, little gal, go outside, I’m right behind you.” She rose to throw away her soda can.

The door shut. Rachel squealed. Lacey hurried. She grabbed a jacket for herself and a sweater for Rachel since there was a cold wind. Already, Lacey could hear the ball bouncing on the front porch and then on the driveway. Always feeling anxious where Rachel was concerned, Lacey yelled out the front door. “Stay on the porch. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Okay,” the girl called.

Lacey ran to the bathroom. The sun streamed through the window. She needed to do better at turning everything in her life over to God—not only food. Turning over Rachel and Toby was also difficult. The thumping outside sounded first from the driveway and then from the side of the house. Lacey peeked out the side window. “Don’t hit the house with the ball. It’ll mess up our new paint job.”

Rachel caught the rebound with a nod and bounced down the driveway again.

"And go back to the porch." Lacey washed her hands. Uncomfortable with Rachel outside by herself even for a few moments, she at last opened the door to leave.

Her mother hobbled to her recliner. "Bring my cinnamon roll and a coke to the den. I can't manage it with my cane, and I'm not feeling too steady today."

Lacey huffed and scurried back inside. She picked up Mom's dish and can. She no longer heard the thumping sound. A car gunned and squealed down the street. Lacey cringed. Probably Joanne's husband. He loved his fast cars, but a street where his own kids played wasn't the proper place.

After setting the treats on the table between their recliners, Lacey explained to her mom, "I'm going outside to watch Rachel. I won't be going to Joanne's, though. She's mad at me because I didn't let Rachel come last Saturday."

"Serves you right. If Joanne's your friend, you should allow your niece to go play with her daughters. Didn't I tell you that?" Her mother lowered herself into the recliner with a sharp release of air.

Why was the ball not bouncing anymore? What was that girl doing now? Oh, for the energy of a child. "Gotta go." Lacey opened the door.

"So she's not perfect like you. Boohoo." Her mother's words followed Lacey outside.

Lacey could never win an argument with Mom. Maybe she was overprotective, but bad things did happen. Look at Katie. Mom should understand that. All the inspirational words Lacey had soaked up with her diet coke this morning spilled at her feet.

Standing on the front porch, she didn't spot Rachel. A tremble bolted down her spine. "Rachel," she called. She plodded down the steps and past her rose bushes.

"Rachel," Lacey called again. She hesitated, listening. Nothing. "Rachel." Her volume escalated. Her heart beat faster. Where was that girl? She ran to the side of the house where moments before Rachel had bounced the ball. She wasn't there. She ran to the back. The swing hung empty, neglected. The leaves on the tree were thinning—its branches revealed no

climbing child. The garage door was kept locked, but she tried it just in case. Nope, locked. Holly bushes poked into Lacey's back and clawed at her side when she searched behind them.

Exhausting every option in her own yard, she went back into the house. "Rachel didn't come through here, did she?"

"No."

Not fully trusting her Mom since her sole focus was the TV, Lacey searched the house, looking in every closet and cabinet where the small girl might hide.

Back outside, she ran to Janie's house. Could Rachel have decided to visit her new babysitter? No one answered the door. Lacey ran to their backyard and looked in every tree and behind every bush.

By now, her heart hammered against her ribs until her chest ached. She couldn't breathe, but that didn't keep her from racing to Joanne's house. *Lord, let her be there.*

Her friend answered the door. Her eyes flashed. "And what can I do for you?" Her voice had a sharp edge.

Lacey ducked her head and felt a rivulet running down her cheek. She swatted at it. "I can't find Rachel." The tears coursed. "Have you seen her?"

Tiffany and Beth circled their mom. Joanne glanced at her oldest.

"No," six-year-old Tiffany said.

"I'll help you look. Kids love to hide." Joanne and Lacey searched every corner of Joanne's house, even though both girls denied having seen her. They examined their unlocked garage. The girls searched behind shrubs and in their playhouse.

Joanne hugged her friend, tears in her own eyes. "Don't worry. She'll turn up. I know it."

"I need to get home."

"Be careful."

Lacey's feet tripped over a water hose. Her bottom hit the concrete walk and pain shot through every joint.

"I'm going with you." Joanne tugged on Lacey's arm.

Lacey stood on shaky legs.

Joanne held tight to friend's arm. "Tiff, turn the lock, and you girls come with us." The caravan crossed the road.

A car sped down the road, catching Lacey's attention. She remembered hearing a squealing vehicle earlier. "Did Calvin leave a few minutes ago?"

Joanne's brow furrowed. "Calvin's been at work since early this morning. Why?"

A chill enveloped Lacey's body. She shivered and swayed.

Joanne's grip tightened. "Are you okay?"

No, she wasn't okay. She took a deep breath, broke away from Joanne, and flew down the sidewalk. Her unsteady legs caused her to weave as she ran—into yards then down to the curb. She brushed a rose bush, and thorns punctured her bare legs. She couldn't breathe, but still she pushed.

Joanne and her girls raced after her, calling her name.

Lacey couldn't stop. She needed her phone. She needed Toby. She needed peace. But the turmoil tore at her insides, shredded her joy, shattered her calm, scared her to within an inch of her life. Her vision blurred. She tripped again but caught herself before falling. Her panting increased, but she couldn't stop. She held her side. Stabbing pains shot across her diaphragm. The sun disappeared leaving a yellow-gray hue in the air. Every shadow looked menacing.

When she reached the steps, Joanne took Lacey's hand to help her up to the porch.

Mom's initial grimace turned into a questioning look. "What's wrong?"

Lacey bit her lip. Blood soured her mouth. She smelled her own sweat and wiped her brow so her eyes could focus again. Guilt and fear vied for her attention. She dove for the phone on the table.

She tried Toby's home phone, but slammed the disconnect button when his machine answered. She dialed the police station.

"Jinks here." Lacey forgot it was Saturday. She had met the new policeman once.

"Is Toby or ah . . . Chief Wheeler there?"

"No. Is this Lacey?"

"Yeah. I'll try his cell." She started to hang up, but Jinks's voice interrupted.

"He called and said his cell was giving him problems. For now, let me give you a number where he can be reached." He read off a local number.

Lacey dialed.

"Hello." A soft spoken woman answered. She sounded familiar.

"My name is Lacey Chandler. Is Chief Wheeler there?"

"Lacey. This is Sandra Lloyd. He's here. Hold on one minute—I'll take the phone to him. Are you okay?"

Sandra. "No, I need to talk with Toby. Now." She mustered all the strength she had, but her hands still shook uncontrollably. She dropped the receiver and fumbled to pick it up. "I'm sorry. I . . ."

"Lace, what's wrong?" A deep baritone spoke up on the other end.

Her head swam. The darkness closed in on her. The last thing she remembered was her head crashing against the floor.

CHAPTER *Thirty-Six*

“Lace, come on back.” Toby sounded worried. He tapped her cheeks with the back of his hand. “I need you, girl. We’ll find her. Come on, Lace.”

Joanne came up behind him. “It’s going to be okay, Lacey.”

Lacey’s shoulders heaved with spasms, and she sat upright. “Rachel . . . oh, Toby” Her eyes widened. She surveyed the room.

Beth and Tiffany fought over the last can of cola, their voices rising in volume.

Toby fastened his gaze on Joanne. “Would you—”

“I’ll take them home, but . . .” she touched Toby’s arm, “if Lacey needs me, call. I’ll figure something out. She’s my best friend.”

Toby stood. Sandra had insisted on following him when he’d received the call. She waited silently by the door.

Joanne flung herself at him. “Find her, Toby.”

Beth, Joanne’s youngest, clung to her mom’s leg and cried. “I don’t want Rachel to be gone.”

Toby took Joanne by the upper arms and pulled her away. His jaw tightened. “I’ll find her.” He took a deep breath. “Thanks for being here when Lacey needed you.”

Joanne nodded then ushered her noisy girls out the front door.

Toby squatted in front of Lacey.

Her eyes had a glassy stare.

“I need to know everything that happened.” He brushed back sweaty wisps of hair from her cheek. His hand trembled. His heart squeezed with fear. He expected it to split open at any time and the blood to flow.

Mr. Barnett from next door knocked on the door.

Toby waved him inside.

"Is everything okay? I saw Fat . . . ah . . . Miss Chandler there running down the sidewalk like she was being chased."

Toby jerked to his feet and glared at the old man. He deserved a punch in the nose, and Toby was just the man to oblige. "Little Rachel has disappeared." His words were stilted, formal, angry. "Have you seen her?"

"No." The man swatted his leg with his open palm. "These kids run up and down the street all the time. Can't keep up with all of them."

"Then, please excuse me. I need to carry on a police investigation." He rubbed the back of his neck, straightened his spine, and tried to sound professional.

The man left.

Tension eased its grip on Toby's throat. He kneeled again. "Sandra could you get Lacey a glass of water?"

"Sure." She ran to do so and brought it to him.

"Thank you." He was thankful Sandra had done what he asked and hadn't intruded. He offered the water to Lacey.

She took it, following his unspoken order. The water sloshed to the edge of the glass and onto her clothes.

Toby steadied her hand.

After drinking a few sips, her blurry gaze cleared to focus on him. "Did you find Rachel?" Her voice shook worse than her hands.

He cleared his throat. "How long was Rachel outside before you discovered her missing?"

Mrs. Chandler thumped her cane on the floor. "Lacey's always blaming everyone for letting their kids go outside without supervision, but she fiddled around in her bedroom while that child bounced her ball on the drive," the woman huffed.

"Rachel!" Lacey screamed. She clutched Toby's shirt and yanked. "You have to find her. She's just a little girl. I hurried. I really hurried." She dissolved into sobs.

Toby embraced Lacey. Her mother never ceased to amaze him. She had the uncanny ability to reach deep into Lacey and rip her heart out. "I'll find her. Now tell me exactly what happened." His words were soft.

"She'd been begging to go outside. I made her wait until I finished my devotional reading." Her gaze focused on Toby. "That's something I have to do every morning to help me turn over my weight problem to God." Her gaze swept the ceiling.

He waited, making notes with his pad and pen.

"When I finished, I told her she could go to the porch. I told her I'd be right out. I got each of us a jacket and ran to the door. She was bouncing the ball on the drive. You know, the ball you gave her?"

He nodded.

"I decided I needed to use the bathroom, so I called to tell her to come back to the porch. While I was in the bathroom, she started hitting the side of the house with her ball. I called out the window for her to stop." Lacey gulped, and her eyes again clouded with tears.

He pulled her to him. Her heart thumped against his chest. He patted her back. "Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

"I opened the front door to leave, and Mom asked me to go get her rolls and Coke." She grimaced in her mother's direction.

Toby eased away from Lacey and glanced at the older woman.

Mrs. Chandler sniffed. "I needed help." Her lips were flat and colorless.

Lacey continued as if in a trance. "The ball stopped bouncing. A car gunned down the street. I brought Mom her snack and went outside." Her words and her movements were on auto-pilot. "I couldn't find Rachel anywhere." Lacey reached toward her tennis shoes. "Oh my, I'll fall with these things untied."

Toby rose. He was chief of police, but he couldn't separate his job from his friendship. Words wouldn't come. He grabbed his hat from the table and plopped it on his head. The hat put things in a proper perspective. He choked back the lump one more time. "Tell me everywhere you looked, and everyone you told." He cringed, his tone now too severe.

"You shouldn't have let Rachel out by herself." Mrs. Chandler was never bashful about giving her viewpoint. "As mad as you were at me that time and at Joanne, I can't believe you did it."

"That will be quite enough, Mrs. Chandler." Toby was taking charge, and he was doing it right now. Lacey's mother laying guilt on her daughter did nothing to help the situation—nothing to find Rachel.

Lacey jerked to her feet. "You're right. I'm a terrible mother." Her voice rising though tears made the words choppy. She was up now, pacing a path in front of the sofa.

Lacey's mother shook her head and jutted her chin. "She let Rachel go outside by herself, and now she's disappeared," she spat out condemnation.

The phone rang. Mrs. Chandler answered. "It's for you, Toby."

He reached for the phone. "Chief Wheeler."

"You said call if I thought of anything," Joanne said. "Beth told me she remembers seeing a black car."

"I'll be right there."

"No need, I'm heading your way."

The threesome entered once again.

Toby dropped one arm from Lacey and clasped little Beth's hand. "Did you see a black car at Rachel's house today?"

Beth whimpered but nodded.

Joanne rubbed her daughter's shoulders. "Speak up, sweetie."

"Yes," the child said.

"Did you see anybody get out?"

"No, sir."

"Tell me what you saw, okay? It might help me find Rachel."

The girl's words erupted as if she'd unstopped the fear. "Rachel was bouncing her ball down the walk. I was going to ask Mama if I could go to Rachel's house, but a black car came. When it left, Rachel wasn't there anymore."

"Think now, Beth. Did you see anyone get out of the car?" A tic pulsed in his neck. Sweat poured from his forehead. He waited for a burst of magic—or a miracle.

"No, sir."

"Thank you, sweetheart," Toby said. "If I showed you cars, do you think you might be able to tell me which one?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Thank you." He looked up at Joanne. "If it's okay, I'd like to show Beth some pictures of cars. I'll pick up you and the girls a little later."

"Sure, we'll be home." Once again, she herded her girls out the door.

Toby stretched his arm around Lacey's shoulders. "This may be our first break in the case. We'll get her back."

Sandra moved forward. "Is there anything I can do? Make calls? Tack up flyers?"

He felt Lacey stiffen.

He patted Lacey's hands but directed his words to Sandra. She really shouldn't have come. "I know Lacey appreciates your concern. Right now, it's a police matter. We'll gather facts. Rachel could be hiding. If we need you, I'll call. I guess you're going home?"

Sandra nodded. "I suppose I should." She touched Toby's arm and left.

After plopping on the sofa, Lacey busied herself retying her shoes. "I just can't keep these things right."

"Well, I need to get to the station and start an Amber alert. If you think of anything else, call." He directed his comments to both women.

Lacey looked up at him. "Will we find her? Do you think we can?" Her eyes brightened. For the first time, he spotted hope.

"We're getting a quick jump on it. That's always a good thing." He stared into her eyes. "I'll come back later."

She twisted the hem of her shirt into a knot. "It's all my fault."

He stopped her hand's movement. "No, it's not."

"I should be whipped for not watching her. If I hadn't been reading my devotional, I could have gone out with her sooner."

"Lacey, listen to me." He squeezed her hand and squatted again. "This won't help. Guilt solves nothing. You learned that in your meetings. Give yourself permission to make mistakes. We all do. Try to think. Where would Rachel have gone? Who might have kidnapped her? An old boyfriend of Katie's? Who?" He stood, slipping his notebook into the pocket of his shirt. "Mrs. Chandler, try to think of any possibilities. Make me a list."

Tears burst from Lacey. "I can't believe I let Rachel go outside by herself." She grabbed a tissue.

Her mother hauled herself from the chair and onto the sofa. She placed her hand on Lacey's shoulder. "You're not perfect. None of us are. You got mad at me for letting Rachel go to Joanne's. You were right. I shouldn't have done that. But I'm not perfect, either. Thankfully, my mistake turned

out okay. Yours didn't." She used her cane to push up from the sofa, and she limped back to her recliner.

Lacey's eyes widened. She opened her mouth to speak but no words came.

Maybe there was hope for Mrs. Chandler yet. He opened the front door. "Remember, think of options and call me. I'll be back."

CHAPTER *Thirty-Seven*

Lacey grabbed another tissue. Mom's forgiveness—of sorts—had left her stunned. She sighed and unlaced her tennis shoes. "My feet are hot."

"Do you think it was Collin?" Mom seemed sedated. Being nice might've anesthetized her cranky disposition. Even the TV was mute.

Lacey's numbness had evaporated, leaving her exhausted "Could be, but why?"

"Maybe he's mad Katie left him." Mom pushed the red recliner back as far as it would go.

Lacey rubbed her nose and laid back her head. "You'd think he'd know Katie was in jail so how would that help anything? She can't get him any money or drugs." Her brow furrowed. "It could be Wayne."

"I don't think Katie's heard from that worthless husband in years."

Old Barnett was out mowing. That man gave Lacey the creeps. "But Wayne is Rachel's dad. Maybe he decided she should be with him. I don't know. I'm just thinking of possibilities, you know?"

Her mother jerked her recliner back to upright. "We should contact Katie. Rachel is her daughter."

Lacey winced but choked down envy. Finding Rachel was the main thing. "Yeah, she might have some ideas who might've taken her." Lacey picked up her cell.

"I know you went to court and got that temporary thing with Rachel. How binding is that?"

Lacey cringed. "Katie couldn't get her from me, at least not legally." Lacey searched through her contacts for the jail number.

“What about Rachel’s dad?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. I think he gave up custody long ago.”

“I don’t think he signed anything—just left again after Rachel was born.”

Lacey ignored that comment. She had enough to worry about. She placed her call and asked to talk with prisoner Katie Smith regarding an emergency with her daughter.

Katie came to the phone.

Lacey gulped and plowed ahead. “Rachel’s disappeared. We think she may have been kidnapped.”

“What? I leave her with you, and you lose her?” Katie’s voice screeched over the phone.

“I’m sorry. Do you know who . . .”

“When I get out of here, I’ll find my girl, and you’ll never see her again. Do you understand me? Never.” Lacey could hear someone in the background, telling her to calm down.

Lacey tried again. “Do you have any idea who might have—?”

“I’ll bet it was Raoul. Before I was arrested, he called me asking for money. I’ll kill him.”

Lacey heard two other voices in the background and then a click. Either Katie or someone else hung up the phone. Well, Lacey had done what she should do—she’d notified her sister and had gotten her ideas. She wrote down Raoul’s name and last known address and what Katie had said. Lacey could give that to Toby. She listed Collin and his address, along with Wayne’s.

“How’d she take it?” Mom asked.

“Not well. Not well at all.” Lacey walked around to her recliner and sat. “I’d like to start looking, but Toby said to stay here.” Exhaustion tugged at her every limb. It took effort to hold her head up, so she rested it against the chair’s back.

God, help me.

Mom turned on the TV.



Toby stomped across the police station. His grim face told his story. Cops parted, giving him ample room.

"Turn in an AMBER Alert," he said.

Willie nodded. "Sure, Boss."

When Toby had attended university and worked for Chief Langford part time, the department had searched for a missing child taken from the park near Willie's house. Toby had never forgotten it. He'd prayed to never have to face that again.

First thing Toby did was call Chief Langford.

The ex-chief whistled. "Wow, what a case to cut your teeth on."

"How did you locate the Fletcher child that time? I didn't do much on that case, and I don't remember." Toby crossed one leg over the other and shook his foot with vigor.

Prayer would remain on his lips until Rachel was found. How else would he survive this?

"First thing, contact the police department in every known locale where possible suspects might have lived. I'll be there in ten minutes. Don't go anywhere."

Toby exhaled—it was a relief to know his mentor would help. "Thanks, Chief. I appreciate it."

"If a concerned citizen like me doesn't help, who will?" Chief Langford disconnected.

Willie entered Toby's office. "Listen, Boss. I love Timmy. I couldn't stand it if something happened to him. I know Miss Lacey loves that little girl. I'm betting you do, too." He pulled off his hat. "Anything I can do, anytime I can help, you call."

Toby's eyes stung at the thought of Willie and his son sitting on the church pew singing last Sunday. Toby blinked hard. "That means a lot to me. Thank you." He stood. "Start by canvassing Lacey's neighborhood. If Beth Patrick saw a car, maybe someone else spotted something helpful, too."

"I'm on it, Boss." He turned to go.

Others on the force stopped by—even if not on duty—pledging their support and extra hours. Soon, Chief Langford arrived and sat with Toby to help him plan his strategy. Toby soon had a first, second, and third step down on paper.

He issued orders to his staff, while the old chief called the Apache Falls police department. Toby donned his Stetson and headed back to Lacey's.

Everyone was searching for Rachel. He hoped the criminals didn't learn how thin they were stretched.

Before Toby could knock, Lacey bounded to open the door.

"Have you found her?" Her voice sounded so hopeful that his heart broke into a hundred pieces.

He shook his head and took her hands. "I've got the whole department working. Even Chief Langford is helping. He was calling other police departments when I left." He shook her hands to punctuate his words. "We will find her. His arm circled Lacey's waist. Despite the trauma, he had noticed her smaller size when he hugged her. "You're losing weight."

She flinched. "If I hadn't been taking care of myself, I might've taken better care of Rachel."

"That's not true. If you don't take care of yourself, you can't take care of anyone else."

"But—"

He placed a finger across of her lips. "No 'but'. It's not your fault."

Her body wilted against the sofa. As big as she still was, she reminded him of the passion flower growing in his back yard—fragile and delicate and needing protection.

He took off his hat and threw it to the sofa. "Okay, did either of you come up with suggestions?" He let his glance flit over both women.

Mrs. Chandler moaned. "Not much."

"But, a little" Lacey held up a finger as if she intended to name each person and count them.

Toby took out his trusty pad and pen. "Shoot."

"I wrote down the last addresses we have for Katie's ex, an old boyfriend in between, and her last boyfriend, Cullen." Lacey handed him a piece of paper.

Toby went into high-alert. What was it about Lacey? They weren't joined at the hip, but he knew something had happened. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

He took her hand. "We're doing all we can. It's not your fault."

"That's not what Katie thinks." Lacey's tone was defeatist, deflated, depressed.

His thumb ran circles on top of her hand. He rubbed her opposite shoulder with his other hand. Her shoulders dropped, her head drooped, her breathing eased.

She suddenly looked up, swatting his hand from hers. "I just remembered this hoodlum Katie used to date. When she turned him in, he swore vengeance." She looked to her mother for help. "Was that Raoul?"

Mrs. Chandler shrugged. "Maybe."

"Yeah, that's it—Raoul Mendoza. He was a mean guy." Lacey's face contorted.

Toby noted that on his list. "We'll check everything." He rose. "I'm going to pick up Joanne and her girls. Beth saw the car, so we'll go car hunting. Call if you think of anything else. As Mom always says, 'leave no stone unturned.'" He put on his Stetson and strode out the door. He stopped. His eyes pinned Lacey. "Katie isn't a judge of right and wrong. You did nothing wrong. Bad things happened, and we will find Rachel." *Or I'll die trying.*

CHAPTER *Thirty-Fight*

Betty survived Saturday night in her usual manner—denial. She watched TV, refusing to go anywhere in case someone called with news of Rachel. Her eyes stung with lack of sleep, but her restless mind and painful body kept sleep as distant as Rachel's kidnappers.

Church bells from the downtown Methodist church rang their invitation to services. Lacey stood in the middle of the living room as if struggling with what to do next.

"Go ahead to church. I'll man the phone." Betty turned up the volume of her media medication.

Lacey slipped an arm around her mother's shoulders. "Thanks, Mom. I'll be praying, but I could use your prayers, too."

Betty bit her lip. Being strong had turned her into a hardened old woman. Maybe that's why her children struggled with depending on Jesus. They had a lousy example. "I'll try."

Lacey left.

The morning hours dragged by for Betty. Even the TV couldn't calm her jitters. Every time the phone rang, her heart jumped. She appreciated caring friends but . . . She spoke to God, hoping He would listen.

When Lacey returned from church, she prepared a big salad for their Sunday dinner. She and Betty ate in deafening silence. Old Barnett was out mowing again. He didn't have anything else to keep him busy, so he mowed.

After dinner, Betty heaved up her tired body, balancing with her cane, and shuffled from the kitchen. She crumpled into her recliner like

a discarded rag and stared at the TV. She didn't hear what it said—and didn't care.

Lacey bustled around the kitchen with the clean-up. All was quiet except her dish-clanging.

Though Rachel brought noise to their household, she had also brought life, and hope—the little girl had made them a family. Rachel represented a second chance with Katie, and maybe even a second chance to love Lacey.

Heat flushed Betty's cheeks. Loving Lacey shouldn't be so hard for Betty. She had given birth to Lacey, but it had been at a time when she was pining over losing Dale. What kind of woman was she? Deplorable? Uncaring? Definitely, exhausted. She straightened. She needed a purpose and a plan. Thoughts of what might be happening to sweet little Rachel whirled in her head, and she slumped deeper into her chair.

The phone rang for the fiftieth time that day.

Lacey answered. Her face mirrored her terror.



The voice was accented and muffled. Fear snaked through her veins. It sounded like a woman, but Lacey couldn't tell for sure. Her fingers fumbled with the disconnect button. Giving up, she threw the phone across the room. Her fists opened and closed, opened and closed.

"Who was it on the phone?" Mom leaned back, her hands clasped over her tummy.

"They want forty thousand dollars to bring Rachel back."

Mom gasped.

Lacey tossed off her fuzzy house shoes. "I can't stand shoes. They make my feet hot." She stomped to where she had thrown the phone to silence the irritating dial tone. She punched in Toby's cell number. It went directly to voice mail. She dialed the station.

"Jinks here."

It took both hands for her to hold the receiver still. "Can I speak with Toby?"

"Why, sure, Miss Lacey. I'm so sorry to hear about that niece of yours. Hold on now." His southern drawl was accentuated over the phone.

Toby's voice sounded hopeful. "Did you think of something else?"

"No, but I heard from the kidnappers." Lacey told him about the phone call. "I don't have that kind of money."

The lilt in his voice disappeared. "With ransom involved, I'll need to call in the FBI, but that's not a bad thing, Lacey. They have resources I don't have. I'll need to station someone at your house until FBI takes over the case—you could get another call."

This was quickly racing out of her control. She shivered. Her stomach churned, making her nauseous. "Can you come yourself?"

Lacey heard Toby taking charge like the police chief he was, and she was proud of him. "Willie can help Jinks with some of this paper work. I should be at your house within a half hour. Call if anything else happens. Anything. I'm using Jinks's cell while he runs to get mine fixed." He gave her the number.

Minutes ticked by. The living room was like a funeral parlor, Lacey and her mother taking quick glances at each other, at the phone, and at the door.

Mom pushed the land line closer to Lacey. "I'm not answering that thing."

This had been the longest half hour in Lacey's life. Finally, she heard Toby's reassuring voice from the front porch.

He stepped inside and squatted before Lacey. "So if we do this drop and try to catch the kidnapper, how much money can you come up with?"

The facts of her finances brought a new wave of fear for Rachel. "Maybe two thousand?" Her voice quivered. "If I didn't pay the mortgage, that would give me a thousand more." She shook her head and buried it in her hands. "I'm not rich, Toby."

His warm hands clasped hers. He tipped up her chin with one finger. "I've been saving for a home. I have maybe eighteen thousand."

"I can't take—"

"It's mine to do with as I wish. I want to get Rachel back."

"But it's still not enough." Lacey shivered.

"We'll put it in smaller bills." He glanced at Mom. "Do you have any to add?" "Five thousand."

Lacey jerked her head in her mother's direction. "I never—"

Mom glowered. "I need that. It's my retirement fund."

Tension gripped Lacey's already tight muscles. "If Toby can give his savings—"

"Toby is young," Mom cut her daughter's comment short.

"So am I, and I'll take care of you." Filing fingernails didn't sound any more shrill or sharp than Lacey's words.

The harrumph from Mom indicated what she thought about that. "Fine—I'll draw out the money."

Toby stood. "That gives us close to the forty thousand."

Lacey's brow furrowed. "Do you think it will work?"

He smiled, but his eyes looked worried. "It's got to." He started pacing. "We want to get back the money and get Rachel."

A knock sounded at the door. When Toby answered it, two FBI agents entered and introduced themselves.

"Special Agent-in-Charge, L. S. Bradshaw." He stuck out his hand. He wasn't your typical TV brand of federal agent. He looked like he'd been ridden hard for forty years. His stomach pooched, and his hair was thinning. After he shook hands with Toby, the man motioned to his comrade. "This is Special Agent, Staci Alvarez."

Toby nodded to her. "Come in. Have a seat."

Bradshaw stopped just inside the door. "I'll stand if you don't mind." He nodded to Lacey. "And you're the lady whose daughter's been kidnapped?"

Lacey's face flamed. "My niece." Her voice quivered. "This is my mother, the child's grandmother."

Both agents shook hands with Lacey and her mother.

"I want the story in your words, ma'am." He nodded to Lacey.

Tears choked off her words before she finished telling the story again. Every time she did, she relived the events, and the pain was like a sledgehammer to the gut.

"Mmm-hmm." Special Agent-in-Charge Bradshaw affirmed his understanding. He straightened, but his stomach refused to deflate. "Special Agent Alvarez will remain at this house at all times," he said. "You and I need to head to your office, Chief Wheeler." Bradshaw turned back to Lacey. "A crew will be here soon to put a tap on your phone." He gave a sideways smile. "Standard procedure in a kidnapping."

Lacey yearned to throw her arms around Toby and yell, “Don’t leave,” but she couldn’t do that to him. Every groove in his face, every tic in his neck, every rise and fall of his Adam’s apple told her he strove to hold on to detachment. He cared, and that was the only measure of peace she had in this nightmare.

Toby stood straight and rigid, his neck scarlet. The drop of his head told her he hated this. “I’ve got to go.” He shook her hand and made eye contact. “You need me on the job more than you need me as a friend right now. Agent Alvarez can help here.”

Special Agent Alvarez moved closer and put her arm around Lacey’s shoulder. “Come and sit while we wait for the rest of our team. We can get acquainted.”

“Remember, Lace.” Toby’s face flickered with torn emotions. “I’m only a phone call away.” He motioned to Agent Bradshaw, and they trod out of the Chandler house.

CHAPTER *Thirty-Nine*

Toby's head fell off the hand he had it propped up on, and that woke him. Fatigue weighed him. Time for more coffee. Passing several cops—more than usual on an early Sunday morning—he trod to the rec room for stimulant.

Detective Mays handed a cup to his boss. “Go home, Chief. Get some sleep. You're no good to us now. Jinks and I can handle things here.”

Toby's eyes burned. He'd worked for twenty-four hours straight, had taken a catnap in his office, and had started again. “Thanks.”

His legs wobbled. He caught hold of the doorframe.

Bradshaw had left at nine last evening. The FBI tap had been in place for six hours. Toby was following his own ideas, but his hard drive was busted and out of commission.

“FBI special agent Bradshaw brought Collin in for questioning this morning in Apache Falls. That's what I was coming to tell you,” Mays said.

Toby's body tensed. His mind became alert. “Did they find out anything?” He stiffened his legs, willing them to hold his weight, and began to pace.

Mays shook his head. “Bradshaw and Murphy are heading back to the jail in Apache Falls to interview Katie again.”

“Maybe I should go see Collin myself.” Toby snatched a stack of notes from his desk and poked them into the Rachel case file. “Have they found Wayne Smith?”

Mays waited at the door to Toby's office and again shook his head. “Brandt will be on again at seven in the morning. You two can start fresh. Go home,” Mays emphasized as he walked back to his desk.

Toby stretched, rubbing his weary eyes. "I've got to find that little girl. I'm okay now." He ambled over to Mays's desk in the main room. "Brent, I'll check that house Bradshaw uncovered. They haven't gone out there yet, have they?" He was desperate for a lead.

"No, but it's still dark . . . hard to see anything. I'm telling you, Chief. You'd be more productive in the morning. Start early. Wait for Brandt"

"Yeah, Chief Wheeler, go get some shut-eye. Y'all look worn to a frazzle," Jinks said. "Shucks, nothing's going to happen till morning, and we got this covered."

Mays laid his hand on Toby's shoulder. "We want to find that little girl, too. You'll be a better help to the case if you sleep."

Toby sighed. "You're right. Try to call the Enid, Oklahoma police again. Detective Harrison from there was going to trace Smith after he left the address we had, and he said to try back tonight. Do you mind?"

"A kidnapped four-year-old? Are you kidding? I don't mind—whatever I need to do." Mays had a six-year-old granddaughter.

Toby knew Mays and Jinks were right. He needed rest. "Okay, then, I'll sleep." Toby headed to his office.

"I thought" Mays rubbed the back of his neck.

"I'm not going home if that's what you thought. Let's get this straight—until that baby is home, I will not enjoy the comfort of *my* home." His voice increased in volume but then softened. "The cot will work for a couple hours."

In his office, he loosened his belt, laid his Stetson on the desk, and pulled off his alligator boots. When he stretched the length of the small cot, his feet dangled at one end, and his fingertips touched the floor. He went to sleep immediately and knew nothing else until the room lightened with the sunrise.

Pink streaks escaped through the open blinds. A shout from the hallway jarred him to consciousness. He grabbed a granola bar from his desk to tame his growling stomach and dashed off to find—and hopefully rescue—a missing child.



Lacey's bedcovers were twisted in a knot. All night, her pillow and blanket had played the role of the monster who kidnapped Rachel. She

punched and fought but never won. The tabletop clock read five. Her bedroom was still dark. Her defenseless child remained in ruthless hands. How could she ever sleep again? Was Rachel alive? Was she being abused?

Lacey dashed to the kitchen. She needed to keep busy. Cinnamon rolls sounded good. She mixed a batch of dough, rolled it out, and spread a thick layer of butter, cinnamon, and sugar. Her hands flew through the task in a disparate attempt to forget her anguish.

FBI Special Agent Alvarez rose from the couch and neared the source of light. "You didn't hear anything, did you?" Her words slurred with sleepiness.

Lacey cringed. She had forgotten about the home-based cop. "No. Just can't sleep." Lacey's tone was curt. She walked toward the woman, struggling for calm. Lacey had no call to be hateful.

Alvarez returned to the couch and buried her face in the pillow.

Lacey was envious. No doubt, the woman slept through lots of people's crises.

Lacey placed the rolls in the oven and grabbed a banana. Sitting in a dining chair, she devoured the fruit while staring out the west window. The sweet and spicy aroma coming from the oven made her mouth water. Her stomach growled. She was hungry. Her friends in the twelve-step program warned her against letting herself get too hungry. If she did, she wouldn't hear God's instructions.

She jumped to her feet, grabbed her container of ricotta cheese and the bowl of pineapple from the fridge, and fixed her favorite low-fat breakfast. She ate and prayed. "Lord, bring Rachel back and help me to get through this with my focus on You, not food."

Her timer beeped. She took out the cinnamon rolls and laid them across the burner. She licked her lips. "Please, Lord."

"Ma'am."

The FBI agent again. Did God send her? Lacey actually chuckled.

"The tap team leader needs you. He and his team are outside. I told him your phone hadn't rung. It hasn't, has it?"

"No, not since they set up the tap." Lacey glanced at the rolls.

FBI Special Agent Alvarez inhaled and moved closer. "Mmm, those smell good."

Lacey's hand shook. She looked from the rolls to the cop and back to the rolls. "Ask the team to come in. I made plenty."

"You mind?"

Lacey shook her head.

Alvarez pulled off a roll and took a bite. Cinnamon sugar pooled at the corner of her mouth. Her tongue licked it off. While she ran to call her crew, Lacey hear the word, "delicious," come out as six syllables.

Mom hobbled into the kitchen, her old pink robe tattered and stained. "'Bout time you made something good." She picked up a roll. "I'm tired of ricotta cheese and fiber-rich cereal.

"Jim, Walter, got homemade cinnamon rolls in here," Alvarez yelled out the front door.

Lacey set out the rolls, and a few plates and poured glasses of orange juice. She left the crowd in the kitchen and went to the formal dining room, numb and somewhat relieved. "Thank you, Lord, for protecting me from overeating." The sour taste of ricotta cheese blended well with the sweetness of pineapple.

The front door stood open. Darkness dispersed as the sun stretched across the neighbor's back grass, brown from the unrelenting Texas heat over summer. Lacey tapped Myrna's number on her phone. "I can't work today."

"What? I thought we"

"Rachel is gone."

"Gone? what do you mean gone?"

"Kidnapped." The word slipped uncomfortably from Lacey's throat.

Silence on the phone. Then Myrna, the mean boss, actually became human. "I'm so sorry, Lacey. They'll find her. Keep me posted." She hung up.

Lacey disconnected and stared at her cell.

The kitchen phone jarred her. She reached to pick it up, but Special Agent Alvarez suddenly materialized beside her, motioning her to wait.

Jim and Walter ran for the door and down the walk.

Alvarez spoke with a soft voice, "One, two, three" With a nod of her head, she pointed toward the ringing phone.

"Hello," Lacey said.

A monotone, muffled voice—different from before—spoke. "Listen closely. Bring the money to Electra Park near the bridge over the river. Drop it in the trash can and leave. Got that?"

Lacey repeated the instructions. "When?"

"Ask to speak with Rachel," Alvarez whispered.

The voice continued, but Lacey interrupted. "I don't have that kind of money."

"Get it, or the girl dies."

"Let me speak with Rachel."

"Look at your cell phone."

Lacey fished the phone from her purse. A vision popped to the screen. Lacey's knees buckled. Her vision blurred. "Please . . ."

"Ten tomorrow morning, and no police, or the girl dies." The line went dead.

Agent Alvarez steadied Lacey. "Are you okay?"

Lacey held out her cell phone to show the short video. A little girl's head lolled back, one eye was open, the other swollen shut. A man's hand lifted the child's head. She moaned. Her head fell back listlessly.

Tears burst from Lacey's eyes. She wrung her hands and covered her face. Would she ever see Rachel again?

"It will be okay." The agent heaved a long sigh. "We didn't get the tap." She called Bradshaw to give him the latest news.

Lacey slumped in her chair, dreading the trip to Electra Park. Would she get Rachel back alive, or lose her and Mom's savings along with Toby's? All the activity, all the drama. Would it help anything? Never had she felt so helpless. Then she remembered her escape from overeating. *I am powerless, but You are mighty.*

The neighbor's back door opened. The elderly man shuffled toward the alley to drop off trash. Dark clouds swirled to cover the sun. Rain was coming from the west, a perfect match to her dismal mood.

Mom's voice intruded on Lacey's sadness.

"Could I have some scrambled eggs?" Mom's cane clomped across kitchen tiles. "The phone?" She looked at her daughter with hope.

"They set up a meeting in Apache Falls." Lacey got up, went to the kitchen, and pulled out her small skillet. "You want some eggs, Agent Alvarez?"

The FBI agent listened on her cell, but shook her head. "Coffee." She went back to her conversation.

Lacey stared at the skillet. The smallest chore took more effort than she possessed in her pinkie finger.

Someone pounded on her side door. Toby held up two coffee cups in front of the window. Was that man psychic? When she opened the door, the smell of pine after shave preceded him.



Toby's eyes misted. When Lacey had first spotted him through the window, hope sprang into her eyes but then quickly disappeared. She had aged ten years since yesterday. Her face was colorless, her shoulders hunched, her movements listless. He longed to ease her load, but all he could do was bring coffee and a smile.

He handed one coffee cup to Agent Alvarez and started drinking the other himself. "Cops need caffeine, and I know the ladies in this house aren't coffee drinkers. I already gave your two comrades a cup."

The FBI lady snapped her cell phone shut. "I need it. Thanks. Agent Bradshaw wants you to call when you get to the station. I told him you'd just walked in."

Dealing with FBI never made a local cop look good. "Sure thing." He strode across the kitchen to where Lacey faced the stove. Setting his cup on the counter, he began to knead her shoulders and neck, feeling the muscles relax under his massage. "We'll find her. God's on our side," he whispered in her ear. "Oh, I almost forgot." He pulled a diet Dr. Pepper out of his pocket and placed it beside the stove.

"Thank you." Lacey nodded as she stirred the eggs, staring at them as if she wondered how they had gotten in her skillet. She popped the drink and took a swig.

Toby ambled toward the chair where Mrs. Chandler sat thumping her cane. "You okay?" He patted the older lady's arm.

Her red-rimmed eyes lifted. The last time Toby could remember Mrs. Chandler crying was the first time he and Chief Langford had given her the news that Katie had been picked up for possession of drugs. Being a policeman in a small town meant you took part in everyone's nightmares.

The woman's wrinkled, red hand clutched his shirt sleeve. "She must be scared. Find her."

"We will. We'll find her." He prayed he wasn't lying. "I've got to get on to the station. We've got lots of good leads. I think it's all coming together.

We'll have her by morning." He scanned the room and saw three doubtful faces. No one believed him. He had missed something.

Tears streamed down Lacey's cheeks. "I had another call." She held out her cell phone.

CHAPTER *Forty*

Studying his feet on the way into the station, Toby crashed into Willie, but his thoughts on the case weren't interrupted. "Do we know who Wayne's friends or suppliers had been before we lost him?"

"Sanchez was his supplier, I think." Willie broke into a brilliant smile. "Hello to you, too, Bossman."

Toby winced. "Sorry, man. Can't think of anything but Rachel."

Willie opened the door, ducking under the metal spring at the top.

Toby entered behind Willie, but his friend's long stride beat Toby to the notes he'd left on his desk last night. "Yep, I was right. I'll find him, Boss."

"Thanks, Willie." The sound of coffee perking came from the break room, and the aroma filled the room.

Amber came from the back and took her daytime seat.

Toby saluted her. He headed to Mays's desk, thinking he was already gone, but Mays came up behind Toby about the time he picked up the file on the corner. No one was in a hurry to quit looking for a little girl. Concentrating on the notes from the night, Toby squinted up at Mays. "Anything new?"

The detective picked up his hat. "Harrison in Enid located Wayne Smith. He still lives near there. Norman, I think. I put the address in the file. Probably trying to supply the college crowd at Oklahoma University." He curled his hat in his hands and shifted positions.

Toby's brow creased. "Do we know he's dealing?"

"Picked up on charges last year. Nothing since then." Mays clasped his car keys. "I'll be taking off now, Chief. Oh yeah, nothing from Bradshaw last night. Might want to try him this morning."

"Yeah, I stopped by Lacey's, and he'd told Alvarez to have me call first thing." Toby frowned as he pulled out the address on Smith. He might try Harrison first and see if he was still on duty. "Thanks, Brent."

"Sure thing. I'll be back again tonight to help. We've got to find this child soon." Mays sauntered out, the click of his heels echoing behind him.

Toby phoned Harrison.

The officer sounded a bit irritated. "I'm off duty, but I filled your man, Mays, in on all I know."

Looking at the paper that listed no apartment number, Toby asked, "Have you been to this address for Wayne Smith?"

"No. Want me to canvas the area for you?"

"Sure would help before I send someone up there." Toby sipped his coffee.

"Consider it done. I'll call after I have a look-see." Harrison disconnected.

Next, Toby dialed the FBI number.

"Special Agent Bradshaw here."

Toby leaned back in his chair. "Heard you wanted me to call. Did you get anything out of Collin?"

"Nothing. Hope Katie will be more forthcoming this morning. She knows something. Did you realize she's getting out next week?" Bradshaw's voice was soft for FBI.

Toby sprang from his chair, feeling a need to pace. "No. I thought she had a year yet."

"She didn't say anything yesterday, but her PO says next week."

Toby whistled. "That's interesting."

"Think she might have something to do with the kidnapping?" Bradshaw asked.

"Could be." If it was her, Toby doubted she'd hurt her daughter, so that would be encouraging news. "Did you ask her about Smith?" Toby sat and tried to decipher how Katie's getting out might be connected to the kidnapping—if it was at all.

"Yeah. Her exact words were 'I haven't heard from that worthless jerk since Rachel was born.'"

"Maybe, maybe not."

"Yeah, Katie thinks it's Raoul, but we contacted him."

"And?"

“Prison.”

Toby drained his coffee cup, trying to fit together all the new pieces to the puzzle.

Bradshaw replied to someone in the background then directed his comments to Toby again. “What’s your plan of attack today?”

Toby stared at the ceiling, his mind firing possibilities faster than his revolver fired bullets. “Not sure yet. Talk to you later.” Toby hung up the phone.

Willie walked into the office. “Funny thing. In searching for an address for Sanchez, I came up with a previous address that’s local.”

“Where?”

Willie leaned against the door. “South of highway 240.”

Toby’s eyes met Willie’s, their thoughts aligned. “Let’s go. Tell Amber. I’ll call Jinks.”



Clouds were building, growing blacker with each moment. The calming touch of Toby’s massage lingered though Lacey still stared out the window. The aroma of pine and furniture polish, so much a part of Toby, clung to the air. Suddenly, she smelled something burning. She came alert and grabbed the skillet. “Mom, your scrambled eggs are ready.” She scooped them onto a plate and dropped a couple pieces of burnt toast beside them.

Mom shuffled to the table. Before eating, she bowed her head to pray.

How unusual for Mom. Lacey was always the one who prayed. “Hope the eggs aren’t burnt.”

“They are, but I’ll eat them anyway.” Mom’s tone was soft but full, like her throat was swollen.

“Rachel loved scrambled eggs,” Lacey whispered.

Mom’s bite went down the wrong way. Struggling to breathe again, she reached for her juice and got relief. “Yes, she did.”

Just when Lacey thought she had no tears left, her eyes pooled with moisture. She rushed to her bedroom to blow her nose then remained to seek an elusive peace. After turning on her glass table lamp, she propped her pillow against the bed’s headboard and read her Bible. She

chose Scripture verses of encouragement. Her favorite was, "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline." 2 Timothy 1:8 NIV

Nothing was too hard for God.

Peace, like her down comforter, draped across her body. She dozed.

Mom's CD of "Amazing Grace" woke her to hope. When the song ended, children's voices rose from outdoor play. A siren signaled that other police business continued along with looking for Rachel.

Mom opened the bedroom door. Extra lines creased under her eyes. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. You?"

"I'll be okay when they find my granddaughter." Mom closed the door. Privacy from policemen was hard to come by and desperately needed.

To the left of the doorframe hung a picture of Toby and Lacey, each holding one end of a big bass caught at Buffalo Lake. The local newspaper had printed the picture. Toby completed Lacey's life. Without him, she was a list of ingredients that never became a cinnamon roll. Her heart jumped as if struck by lightning. Outside, a clap of thunder echoed the storm within her. The strike on her heart had happened years ago, but she'd only now felt the jolt.

She loved Toby Wheeler.

Why now? When Toby and Sandra were all but engaged.

He didn't sit with her at church.

Was there still a chance? Lacey had been blind, deaf, dumb, and stupid. She vowed to keep her secret. Toby and Sandra would never know how Lacey felt. He deserved happiness. He deserved a Godly mate. He deserved more than a recovering food addict.

Tears trickled down Lacey's cheeks. Memories crushed her newfound love. When Lacey had searched for Toby to tell him about Rachel, she had found him at Sandra's house. That explained it all.

Tears came in torrents now as she sat in the middle of her bed wondering if the show of emotion was for Rachel or for herself. Losing her daughter and giving up her chance for love reminded Lacey of the many blessings she'd taken for granted. She refused to make that mistake again. Time to show love to Mom, even if it weren't reciprocated.

CHAPTER *Forty-One*

Double tracks wound toward the home where Sanchez used to live.

Summer foliage had almost overtaken the path. “This has to be it,” Toby said. “Did you try Bradshaw again to tell him where we were going?”

Willie slapped a branch out of his face. “Yeah. Goes to voice mail. They might be in the jail interviewing Katie.”

“This has to be the address. It’s the only spot in the block with trees.” Tall weeds and dry earth had covered both of their boots in dust.

Just as they were about to give up, the small trees opened to circle a farm house with two barns, all looking as if they might fall down in a strong Texas wind. One barn was red, but the house and the other barn peeled their white paint. Roof shingles flapped in time to the breeze. The whole area looked neglected, deserted, forsaken. The perfect place for a criminal hideout.

They crept toward the house, guns drawn. The only sound was that of trees rustling in the breeze and geese honking overhead. Toby circled right. He could no longer see his comrade. He moved with light steps so as not to warn anyone that might be inside.

About twenty feet away, a hissing sound came from the house. Tiny hairs stood erect on Toby’s neck. Shivers crept down his spine. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

Lord, please.

A gust of wind cooled his damp brow.

Boom. The house exploded. Toby’s feet left the ground. The blast propelled him toward the tree line. A brittle mesquite tree stopped his backward progression, its thorns buried in his back.

With quick pants to stabilize his breathing, he pulled away from the painful tree, bent over, and breathed in the deep, life-giving breeze. A chemical smell burned his nostrils.

“Willie!”

The tall black man, his face powdered with white, neared Toby’s position. “I’m here. You okay, Boss?” Willie’s voice sounded faraway like he was talking through cotton.

Toby swatted the white powder from his jeans with his Stetson. “Yep, just can’t hear, and that smell makes me sneeze.” The dilapidated house was now a heap of smoldering wood and twisted metal. “Are you okay?”

“Just dandy.”

Toby reached to brush off Willie’s face. “Hey, man, you trying to paint your face so they can’t tell us apart?”

They broke into laughter. Spit flew. Tension evaporated. Fear departed.

“That’d never happen, Boss. Everyone knows I’m the handsome one.” Willie slowed down his chuckles and assessed the situation. “I’m getting tired of watching explosions. Now this clue to finding Rachel is a dead end.”

“Not completely. I’m not leaving till I know something. I can’t hear worth a hoot. Call Bradshaw again. If you don’t get him, try Alvarez. The FBI will want to process this scene.” Toby reached into his pocket to find his comb. “Meanwhile, we have to search it ourselves before anything gets trampled.” He bent to his knees and used his comb to search the ground.

“Don’t think you’ll want to use that comb on your hair anymore.”

Toby shrugged. “Combs are cheap. This is the best way to keep from missing anything.”

Willie made his call. “I got Alvarez. They’ll be here soon, and they want us to secure the crime scene.”

“Just what I intend to do.”

“Ah, Boss, do I really have to crawl this whole area?”

The sun streamed from the east through the gap in trees. Toby squinted and smirked. “What do you think?”

Willie circled what used to be the house and got on all fours. “Let it be stated that this is under protest.”

“Duly noted.”

The work occupied Toby's mind until his knees began to ache. He glanced at his comrade and realized the sun now hit his shoulders from directly overhead. "That FBI sure doesn't see any urgency."

"Or they're lost." Willie snickered.

With the birds settled for the day, the place was quiet as death.

"Hey, Boss, I found a body."

Toby stood and stretched to get his legs functioning. He strode around the mess to where Willie, still on his knees, waited.

A charred form sprawled in what used to be the kitchen by the looks of a twisted metal sink beside the body and a burnt stove to the left.

"Wait here," Toby said. "I'll go get some tape from the truck to mark the body."

"At least this is an adult. Not a child."

"Praise God for that." Toby's eyes grew wide. His neck hairs rose again.

"You okay, Boss? You're as white as my shirt."

Nausea churned Toby's gut. An acrid taste filled his mouth. He tried to choke down the awfulness, but his eyes wouldn't shut. "We know Rachel was here." His voice squeaked through frozen vocal cords. A raggedy doll lay ten feet away. It was missing legs, and one side of the toy was blackened. Toby moved to get it. His fingers trembled. So did his voice. "Margaret Rose."



The sun cast rays to the ground and outlined dark images. A clap of thunder rattled the old house. Lacey remained in her bedroom, studying the cloud formations out her window. Streaks of lightning lashed out on the right. She shuffled to the living room in time to spot Toby walking across the front yard.

He stopped by the white van and knocked. The guy Lacey knew as Walter—who could eat lots of cinnamon rolls—opened the door and stepped out with a scowl. Toby's jaw clenched. The other guy's hands flew. Toby held a sack in one hand. The other man pointed to it. Toby jerked it behind him. His chin lifted, and the lines of his face grew tighter.

Mom muted her TV. "Wonder what's going on. Can't hear, but they look mad."

Lacey's breath escaped in small puffs. The FBI guy stomped toward his vehicle. Toby strode toward the house.

When she opened the door, Toby pulled off his hat and embraced her with the hand holding his hat. She felt the trembling of his body.

He pulled back. "Don't give up hope." He swallowed and stiffened. "I have both bad and good news."

A shudder shook her shoulders. She wanted to put her hands over her ears, to run away, to escape the bad. One word slipped through shaky lips. "No."

"We haven't found Rachel," he rushed to say. He held up the other hand. The burned and disfigured remnant of Rachel's doll bobbed in his grasp.

Lacey clasped it to her face. No whiff of the little girl's scent Lacey had grown to love remained, only the odor of burnt fabric.

Time stopped.

Mom sat with eyes and mouth wide open.

Clutching the front of Toby's shirt, Lacey cried, "Where?"

"We had another meth house explosion. I found this in the ashes." He escorted Lacey to the couch and sat with her. His grip around her waist tightened. "Willie and I looked over every scrap of wood, every piece of shrapnel. We couldn't find anything else that suggested Rachel had been in that blast. Just her doll."

"That's good, isn't it?" She blinked away the stinging in her eyes.

"She was taken away before the blast happened. That's hopeful." He waited.

Kind, gentle Toby gave her time to process, time to breathe a prayer, and that, she did.

A small grandfather-type clock dinged on the hour. Mom pulled up her recliner and shifted positions.

Toby stood. "Bradshaw didn't think I should tell you, but I can't be around you and not share something like that. The good news is not finding anything that looked like . . . ah . . . human remains . . . of a child. Of course, the crime scene group will give it a thorough going over and tell us for sure by tomorrow.

Toby squatted before Lacey and covered her free hand. "We both feel you should go through with the drop-off in the morning since the kidnappers might not know about the blast. Okay?"

Lacey nodded. She tried to speak, but it was as if a cherry tomato had lodged in her throat—words would not come.

Toby patted her hand and rose. “Don’t give up, and don’t quit praying.” Toby’s mouth twisted to one side, and his gaze rose to the ceiling. “I refuse to believe Rachel’s gone.”

“She’s not gone.” Lacey’s voice finally engaged. “I know she’s not gone.” She had to make Toby believe it. “You’ll find her. I know you will.”

Toby’s long, brown eyelashes were damp. “I want to believe, but I feel so weak and powerless.”

Lacey had never seen Toby like this before. She jumped to her feet “God has all power. He makes us weak so that he might be strong.” She clutched Toby’s hand to her waist.

His smile lit up his eyes. “You’re right, Lacey. I’m weak, but God has all power.” He stood. “Thanks for reminding me.”

“How many times have you told me that when I was down?”

“You’re a perfect example of God’s unlimited mercy, Lacey. How could I forget?” He nodded to Mom and plopped on his Stetson. “I’ll be here to take you to Electra Park at nine-thirty in the morning.”

Lacey gasped. “But they said no police.”

“Look at me. Do I look like police if I don’t wear a badge?” He grinned and winked. “I’m a friend that’s driving you, that’s all.”

“I’ll be ready.”

CHAPTER *Forty-Two*

At nine-thirty Tuesday morning, Lacey climbed into Old Blue. Her stomach flipped, flopped, and floundered. She couldn't have taken it easy if the doctor had supplied a muscle relaxer. Remembering to inhale and exhale at regular intervals was difficult enough.

Toby, dressed in his usual western gear minus a badge, placed a bag of money in the console between them. "Here's the package." He gunned the accelerator and headed for the highway. "How you doing?"

Her tension mounted. "Okay." Each mile took her closer to her destiny with degenerates—the people who had taken a helpless four-year-old and held her safety over Lacey's head like an anvil ready to drop.

In the bustling city of Apache Falls, Toby exited, turned onto a main road, and entered Electra Park. Lacey rolled down her window seeking air to help her breathe.

Birds flitted from tree to tree. Mums shared their gold and purple colors with butterflies and birds. Roses lifted weary blooms to bathe in autumn sunshine. How could evil exist in such a place of beauty? Toby moved down a lane toward the trash receptacle, Lacey's destination.

BLAM.

Lacey caught her breath and jerked to see where the sound had originated. About the length of half a football field away, the SUV driving ahead of Old Blue had collided with a green car. The car had looped the lot and had run into the other vehicle. The drivers got out to compare information, leaving no room for Toby to slide around them.

Toby's fingers drummed a steady beat on the steering wheel. He lifted his shoulders, plopping them again into place with a sigh. Forcing herself to breathe with more regularity than came naturally, Lacey searched every tree, every pathway for any indication that someone was there besides them and the two cars in the wreck.

She looked at her watch. Two minutes after ten. Would the kidnappers wait? Was the FBI in place and watching the drop site? The only sound came from the voices in front and the heavy breathing coming from Old Blue's cab.

Finally, the drivers parted, the green car left the park, and the man in the SUV directed them to pass him. Without another word, Toby pulled up to the bridge specified by the caller. He picked up the packet of cash, putting it in Lacey's hands. He winked then opened his door and climbed out of his side.

When she opened her door, she dropped the packet on the ground.

Toby arrived in time to pick it up again. His eyes locked with hers. Arms crossed over his chest, he leaned against his Suburban. "I'm just a friend who drove you here. No police."

She moved one foot forward, grabbing the truck door to keep from falling. The other hand clasped the packet to her chest. She scanned the bridge and surrounding area. To her left, she spotted a jogger who looked familiar. Her pulse pounded in her ears so loudly that she could hear nothing else, not even the birds chirping or the traffic on the highway. She inched forward, stopping to look around every few seconds. Her mouth was dry as dust.

The jogger passed with a wave. Lacey recognized Agent Alvarez. The trash can where Lacey was to leave the money was just ahead. A row of elms and hackberry trees bordered her target. If the kidnapper hid there, he might recognize the FBI agent. The presence of cops could cost Rachel her life. But what else could Lacey do?

A few more steps, and she stood in front of the can. Her sweaty palms caused her to drop the packet on the ground again. She bent over to pick it up, glancing all around her. The trash can overflowed with bottles, wrappers, and food bits. The stench almost drove her away, but she forced herself to move closer. She positioned the zippered packet of money on

top of the trash. Then she bolted toward the Suburban, climbed in, and sat in the passenger seat, afraid to look back at the trash can. If she didn't look, nothing bad would happen.

Whistling a happy tune, Toby sauntered around Old Blue.

Would he hurry? The kidnapper wouldn't come until they drove away.

After what seemed long enough to finish a football game on Friday night, Toby got in, started up, and drove out of the park. He maneuvered to a side street and parked where they could spot anyone leaving. When he turned off the ignition, the static from his police scanner blasted. Then voices—

"Nothing yet." She heard that twice.

Then—"On the run."

Static blocked out the next words.

"I see him. Murphy, you there?"

"There." More static.

"He's headed your way, Alvarez."

"Duck. I said duck." Gun shots.

"Agent down. Repeat. Agent—"

Static blended with the next word.

"Running, can't see"

"Stay with Alvarez. I'm on the perp. Brendiman, where are you? I need you to close . . . static . . . the other side."

"Don't see him."

More static.

"Lost."

"He's gone, man. I'll double back to the falls. Maybe we lost him there."

Lacey's hope sank like a boat with a hole trying to cross Buffalo Lake. Her shoulders drooped. Her muscles ached. She felt sick to her stomach.

Toby's cell rang. "Wheeler." He listened recapped the update for Lacey. "A man climbed up from the river and grabbed the packet. He ran across the bridge, shooting as he went. He nicked Agent Alvarez in the shoulder, but she's going to be okay. Bradshaw and another agent gave chase while Murphy checked on Alvarez and called for medical. So far, they haven't located the kidnapper, but they're still looking." Toby ended on a hopeful note.

Lacey gritted her teeth. "So he got our money, and we didn't get Rachel." Toby reached over to rub her left shoulder. "We will."

Despair chased away Lacey's built-up confidence. All her energy drained to the floor of the truck along with her hope.

Toby and Lacey waited until the FBI gave up on their search and called it.

"We might as well head for home," Toby said.

Lacey's body wilted. She nodded agreement.

Toby dropped off Lacey at her house. "I'll be back later. Don't give up. We'll get her."

Who was he trying to convince—her or himself?

Mom met her at the door. "Did you get" Her face fell. "So we're broke and don't have Rachel."

"That's about it."

Mom shuffled into the kitchen and dropped into a dining chair. "I'm hungry."

After yanking off her shoes, Lacey padded after her mother in sock feet. "Who cares? Who cares if we ever eat again?" She opened a cabinet door and then slammed it. It bounced back in her face, and she slammed it again.

She sat at the table with her mother. "I've tried to turn my life over to God. I've tried to eat right. I've tried to help people and be a good mother to Rachel. What good did it do?" She kicked the plastic trash can. It rocked and fell to one side, spilling half-filled coffee cups from this morning and some of the burnt scrambled eggs Mom had dumped.

"What are we having for lunch?" Mom asked

"Get your own lunch." Lacey raced to her bathroom to wash her face. Her mirror pinpointed her puffy eyes and red nose. She'd cried so much in the last four days that she could have filled Buffalo Lake all by herself. Remembering that night three months ago, she glanced to where the razor blade remained tucked under her mirror frame. At first, Lacey couldn't pull her eyes away from the blade. Hundreds of emotions and memories flitted across her brain, but the most prominent was when she cried out to God that night, and He had answered.

Except for God.

She pulled her eyes from the blade to her own image.

Except God's power overcame.

Now, as then, she cried out for God. When she reached the end of her rope, she tied a knot and hung on for Rachel.

She tromped into the kitchen. Mom remained at the table, her cane shaking in her hand. Opening the pantry, Lacey grabbed a can of soup and poured it into a saucepan to heat. She placed crackers and cheese, bowls, and spoons onto the table and brought over the heated soup. She sat, said a blessing, and ate.

With head down, Mom gulped a spoonful of chicken noodle. "I'm sorry."

Lacey patted her mother's arm and smiled. "It's okay."

They finished their lunch in silence, both missing Rachel's boundless energy.



Wednesday morning. Toby snoozed, his head lying on his desk. He roused with the break of day. He hadn't gone home after the failed drop yesterday. How could he when everything spoke of failure? Rachel had been gone for eighty-nine hours. Not many survived past twenty-four.

"Running home to shave and shower. Back in a few," Toby yelled to Mays. Mays and Jinks had managed the Wharton Rock Police Department since Saturday—he and Willie had been totally focused on the kidnapping. How long could they keep up the sixteen and eighteen hour days with no break? He'd hired a rookie last week but couldn't give him much responsibility.

After cleaning up, Toby fell onto his knees. "Lord, Rachel is out there somewhere, maybe hurt, scared for sure. Save her or give us your peace once more. Either way, I trust you."

Striding into the police station, he bumped into Amber coming on duty. She motioned him in first. "Any more leads on Rachel?"

Toby shook his head. "I'm beat. No more leads. I don't know where else to turn."

Willie looked up from his desk as Toby walked by. "Bradshaw called. He's leaving Agent Alvarez and the tap at Lacey's house through the

weekend. If nothing more is heard, he will remove both on Monday.” Willie walked with Toby to his office.

Toby slumped into his chair. “What am I going to do? I went through my notes last night. I’m out of leads.” He looked up at his sidekick.

Willie stretched out in the chair. His long legs tapped on the bottom of Toby’s desk. “I don’t know, Boss, but I know when things get bad with me and Timmy or me and April, you tell me to pray and keep praying. That’s what we have to do now.”

Toby’s smile was weak, forced. “It’s my only resource now.”

“You tell me it’s the best resource we have.”

Willie was almost to the point of submitting for salvation. Even in the darkest of nights, Toby could find hope in God’s goodness.

CHAPTER *Forty-Three*

Toby raised his head from his prayer and glanced at the door where the new officer, Larry Pullman, stood, holding a paper and waiting with respect.

“Excuse me, sir, I didn’t want to disturb you, but I pulled this off the fax a few seconds ago and thought you’d want to see it.” Larry was the picture of a perfect gentleman—tiny mustache and quiet manner. Not a rough cop at all. Marching across the room with squared shoulders and head held high, he reached the desk and handed his boss the paper before bowing and walking back out the door.

“That man acts as if you’re royalty, Boss.” Willie’s white teeth glistened.

“Humph.” Toby read the paper. “Where does the Dairyland manager live?”

“Not sure, but I think he lives in that little house behind the restaurant.”

Willie leaned forward. “Why?”

Toby handed Willie the paper and dialed his phone. “Nathan Jones might know.”

The deputy at the county jail answered and agreed to relay the question to Jones and call Toby back. Rachel’s kidnapping and the drug sells between Wharton Rock teenagers swirled and blended in his thoughts. Factoring in the meth house explosions, there was only one conclusion.

Willie had returned to his desk while Toby was on the phone, so he marched into the main station area to give instructions. “If Jones or the deputy call back, take the message for me. Think I might go fishing.”

Toby called to Amber. “I may be gone the rest of the afternoon—if I can get me a fishing partner.”

Willie yelled. "How come we work, and you get to fish?"
"Rank, my man, rank."



Parking Old Blue in front of Duffy's Drugstore, Toby prayed Mark would be there. School should be out by now. Chester might run Toby off after he made his suggestion, but he had to try. Walking in, he called to Chester. "Hey, there. Thought this would be a good day for fishing." Toby's gaze swept to Mark, who stood nearby. "I mentioned it to y'all when you were in the office. How about closing early and going fishing?"

Mark stepped around the counter. "Sure is damp and misty for being out by the lake."

Toby chuckled. "That's when fish bite." He looked up at Mark's dad. "How about it?"

Chester shuffled bottles back and forth. "Got several scripts to fill yet, but Mark can go if he wants." His tone was grouchy and gruff.

Toby twirled his Stetson in front of him. "How about it, Mark? You game?"

Mark looked toward his father then looked back at Toby. "Maybe."

"Ah, come-on. We won't be gone long. Have you back in time for dinner?"

Again Mark looked for a signal from his father, but Chester said nothing more. He stayed busy behind the counter and never looked up.

"Okay." Mark headed to the door. "Bye, Dad."

Chester gave a wave without taking his eyes off his bottles.

"I don't have a pole," Mark said.

Toby led him to his Suburban. "I've always got an extra in back of my truck. Why don't we swing by the pizza place and see if Sonny can tag along. You two know each other, don't you?"

Mark nodded, but his eyes were questioning.

An hour later at Wilderness Cove, Toby and the two teenagers hauled poles, tackle, and chairs over the rock ledge to the water's edge. Even though only early fall, the weather required jackets, so they'd swung by both Mark's and Sonny's homes to pick up wraps. Now the boys were thankful. A heavy mist dampened coats and faces, but as Toby had said, the fish were biting.

Sonny whistled within minutes of casting his line. "I've got one."

Toby admired Sonny's catch and held open the fishing bucket for him. Overhead, the caw of a crow sounded. The lake's ripples hit the shore with a steady rhythm. Toby cast his line into the water.

Mark's rod bent.

Toby dropped his pole and jumped to run to Mark's aide. "Hey, you have something. Turn the reel slowly."

Mark did as he was told.

Sonny stood still and watched, holding his breath.

"That's it, Mark. Slowly . . . slowly . . . oops." The line went slack. Toby sighed and patted Mark's shoulder. "That's okay. It may not have been a fish. Once I pulled up an old tennis shoe."

They all laughed.

Mark's crestfallen look hurt Toby. He wished he could put a big fish on that boy's line. He needed confidence. Toby cast his line. "You both notice how many fish I've caught."

Mark snickered. "You're not too good a coach. I'll take Sonny—he's the fisherman."

Sonny raised and lowered his eyebrows in jest. "So glad you noticed."

Tension dissipated. Each fisherman tended his pole.

It was time for Toby to start a nonchalant conversation. "Hey, guys, you both know Ty Holden, the manager at Dairyland? Do y'all know where he lives, or if he's had any friends around last couple months?"

Sonny frowned. "What do you need to know that for?"

Toby stared out to where the lake mingled with the heavy sky. Couldn't see the horizon today. Lake and sky blended into one. He swallowed. "Trying to find a four-year-old girl. Ty might know something."

"Hey, man. You've got a nibble." Sonny dropped his rod to help Mark. Once again, Mark reeled slowly, this time bringing up a small crappie. Sonny held up his camera phone. "Hold it up, man."

Toby breathed in relief. The fish may have been small, but he was thankful Mark had caught something—and also thankful it was Sonny who'd helped.

Sonny picked up his rod again. "Officer Wheeler, we're catching fish. What's up with you?" He grinned.

"Sshh. I'm concentrating here."

Wilderness Cove remained quiet except for the lap of the water until a V of geese flew north.

Sonny's words came as the geese disappeared. "I don't know where Ty lives. I think it's close to Dairyland. I was visiting Denny one day when this guy came to visit Ty. They went off for awhile, but came back real quick."

"Do you know the name of that guy?"

Sonny shook his head.

"What about you Mark?"

Mark remained silent.

Toby didn't want to push it. His biggest intention was to win Mark's confidence and help him heal after getting caught helping criminals. If Toby could do that and get needed information, too, that was a win-win, but he wouldn't jeopardize his burgeoning relationship with Mark.

"Ty lives in the small house directly behind Dairyland." Mark's voice came softly, almost inaudible above the water's ripple.

"Thanks, Mark. That helps a lot."

The already-dark sky grew even darker. Toby looked at his watch. "Seven o'clock. Guess we should pack it up."

The boys stood and helped with the loading.

Toby looked at Sonny's fishing pail—two bass and a catfish. "You're the star fisherman today." Toby never did catch a fish, and Mark had caught only the one.

Sonny waved his right hand in front of his mouth and blew on his fingertips as he shrugged his shoulders.

When they entered the Wharton Rock city limits, Toby headed for Sonny's house first.

"Drop me by the pizza place. Dad will need me tonight."

"Sure thing." Toby pulled up and let the boy out of the truck. "I'll catch up to your fishing skill next time."

When Toby drove into the driveway of Mark's house, he stopped and put an arm over the top of the seat. "Sure was glad you could come today. Hope you can make it again."

Mark opened the door.

"Don't forget your fish to show your dad. I can pick up the fishing bucket from you later."

"Chief Wheeler." The boy held the door handle but hadn't moved. "Once when I was at Dairyland talking with Denny, Katie Smith came in. She, Ty, and Denny talked over in the corner." Mark gulped. "One other time, after Denny died, Katie came in with this other guy and talked with Ty. Ty was mad. I left." Mark climbed out and reached for the fishing bucket.

"Thanks, Mark, I appreciate your telling me that."

Mark waved as he walked down the sidewalk.

Toby breathed a prayer of thanks as he went back to work, invigorated.

Willie looked up when Toby entered the station. "Have your message, Boss."

Toby took the note but gave his sidekick a frown. "What're you doing still here? Been a long day. Go home."

"Boss went fishing and didn't say nothing about time off for me." There was an edge of teasing to his complaint.

Toby read his message. "This confirms what Mark told me. Ty lives behind Dairyland. According to Nate, Ty doesn't do drugs or deal with drug dealers. Seems he hired Denny because they were old friends."

"You get more police work done while fishing than anyone I know." Willie sagged into his chair, looking weary and worn. Around his eyes were lines caused by lack of sleep.

Toby was being rough on his employees, but he had no choice. Every member of his staff was working overtime. Finding Rachel was imperative. "You feel up to going by Ty Holden's place tonight?"

Willie nodded. "Criminals don't rest." He stood. "Let's go."

CHAPTER *Forty-Four*

Lacey stretched out her legs to get leverage to screw the tire off the axle. With one massive heave, the tire dropped to the ground. Huffing from exertion, she pushed to her feet, threw the defective tire in the trunk, and dragged the spare to the wheel. Again, she plopped to the wet ground, thankful she had forty fewer pounds to carry. She finished the tire change and made her way home.

Two days had passed since the botched drop, and she'd had no word about Rachel. Sheltered from the rain, Alvarez, her arm in a sling, visited with her comrades on the front porch. Lacey nodded and walked through the group to go inside. Mom sat in the living room. Lacey gave her a wan smile, no words left to be said, no tears left to cry.

"I'm going to visit Pearl," she told her mom. "Do you want to go?"

Mom's eyes sparkled. "Yeah, I'd like to meet your nursing home friend." She stood, shuffled to her room for a coat and returned. "That home might be my future residence."

Lacey hugged her mother and kissed the top of her head. "Not for a long time. You're young yet."

Lacey relayed their plans to Alvarez.

"Sure," she said as she climbed in the back seat.

Lacey's brow furrowed. "You don't have to go with us."

"My instructions are to stick with you, but don't worry, I won't go in. I'll wait in the car."

The three drove the few blocks to Golden Oaks Nursing Home. The parking lot gleamed with a sheen of drizzle. Not many cars were there,

so Lacey pulled her Cadillac into a front spot. "Wait a minute—I'll come around and help you, Mom. This walk might be slippery."

Alvarez leaned against the window. "Call if you need me."

Mom got out, using her cane for balance until Lacey rushed to her aid. The automatic door opened for them, and Lacey led her mother to room 112.

"I'll bet this is your mother." Pearl said with a whoop. "Come on in, Mrs. Chandler. I've looked forward to meeting you."

Lacey found a seat and kept quiet.

"You raised this girl right," Pearl said.

Mom turned red. "Thank you." She glanced at Lacey. "She loves to help others."

"Some come here and look down their noses at we who are older or disabled, but not Lacey. I'll bet she's a big help to you with you on a cane and all."

Leave it to Pearl to speak her mind.

Mom's color deepened. "Yes, she is." She tilted her head to the right. Unlike Pearl, her voice could barely be heard.

"What?" Pearl was hard of hearing.

Mom cleared her throat and spoke with affirmation. "Frankly, I don't know what I would do without Lacey. She's a blessing."

Now Lacey could feel heat in her own cheeks. Her mouth had dropped. Did Mom mean that?

"Of course you don't have the problems like I do. You're just a youngster." Pearl rose and bustled toward her kitchen area. "How about some tea?"

Mom followed her. "I'd love some tea. Nice to find women who still believe the Bible's instructions to be hospitable. In my art class, which is early in the morning, you'd think the teacher would at least offer juice. Sure would help my diabetes."

Lacey remained in her seat and listened to the two ladies discussion of *some women* and their reminiscing about when people actually visited each other.

"You're so right, Betty. Young women don't know the first thing about being hostesses."

Somewhere in the conversation, the two had become just Pearl and Betty.

Lacey didn't need to talk. Relaxing and soaking up their conversation lifted her spirits. She learned things about her mother she'd never known. With Pearl, her mother discussed the turmoil she had faced when her mother was dying and how her husband's mind had lost its grasp on reality.

"Marty Chandler swooped me off my feet with his charm when I was a teenager. Who could have known his charm would turn crazy?" Mom sighed. "Did you ever have someone you thought you wanted to marry?" Mom asked the former missionary.

"Once." Pearl stared at a picture on her table. Lacey followed her gaze to a younger Pearl with a young man beside her. Lacey had wondered if that was a brother or cousin. Maybe not.

Mom leaned on her cane to look closer. "What happened?"

"God hadn't called him to the ministry, but he'd called me." Pearl's smile was wistful. "As Peter said, 'I must follow Christ instead of man.' That was what I believed. I broke it off with my fiancé, but it was the hardest thing I've ever done."

Pearl stood and reached for her Bible. She turned to Hebrews 6:10. When she sat again, her voice boomed out as she read. "God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them." Pearl was back in Africa for a moment, preaching to God's people. Her thoughts came back to the room, and she focused on Lacey. "God will bless you for doing his work. He will not forget. You come and bless us here at Golden Oaks. I know you're hurting right now with what's happened to your little daughter, but God will not forget how you helped his people and continue to help. I can promise you that."

Tears clouded Lacey's eyes. She blinked and sought a tissue. Mom was shaking. Her eyes misted. Lacey handed her a tissue, too.

"Thank you," Mom said to Pearl. She turned to Lacey. "We need to be leaving. My legs are hurting. I need to lie back in my recliner."

"Pshaw." Pearl waved a hand and nodded her head. "It gets worse as you get older, let me tell you." She stood and walked them to the door, closing it when they left.

Mom shuffled down the hall, sniffing as she went.

Lacey was amazed by Mom's tears. Lacey was the crybaby of the family. Mom was stiff, unemotional. But maybe not anymore.

Once settled back in the car, Lacey pulled onto the street.

Alvarez rose from the back. "Did your visit go well?"

"Yes, thanks," Lacey said.

"I'd like to come back to visit Pearl." Mom's voice sounded weird—more like pleading. But Mom demanded. Commanded. She didn't beg. "Do you think you might drop me off someday? You could pick me up later."

Lacey's heart skipped a beat. "I could do that." She made two turns and headed down her road.

"Pearl sure thinks a lot of you, Lacey." Mom's voice softened.

"I like her, too." Lacey swung left into her driveway. "Wonder why Joanne and the kids are here?" She waved at them before she exited, circled the car, and eased Mom across the yard and up the steps.

Joanne carried a large pan covered with foil. "We were fixing to leave. I'm glad you got home. With all that's going on around here, I thought you could use some help with dinner.

Tiffany held a pie, and little Bethany had a salad.

Mom unlocked the front door and entered. The rest trudged behind her. Joanne and her girls aimed for the kitchen and set their food on the table.

Joanne came back to the living room. She shifted from one leg to another. Her brown hair showed gray roots—it was time for a hair appointment. "Your mom gave me your recipes for Mexican casserole, salad, and butternut squash pie. I wanted you to be able to eat the food I brought. I noticed you're losing weight and all."

They'd been friends since they were kids, but Lacey was as uneasy as Joanne. This was ridiculous. She reached out her chubby arms and clutched Joanne's skinny frame to her chest. Tears started falling. Where had she gotten this extra supply of moisture? "Thanks. I love you, you know. I'm sorry I said those things."

"I love you, too." Joanne's tears wet Lacey's collar.

A load lifted from Lacey's shoulders.

Emotions ran rampant. Relationships sought healing. Restitution brought hope. Lacey was a rich woman except . . . *God, please bring Rachel home unharmed.*



“Boss, you there?”

Toby lifted his head from his desk. His eyes blurred. His mind was foggy. How could he fall asleep with Rachel still missing? “I’m here, Willie. You ready?” Toby had asked Willie to get Ty’s phone number before they left in case they needed to call.

Willie entered the chief’s office. “I’ve got the number. Oh—Bradshaw called. He’s pulling his team today.”

A nerve ticked in Toby’s cheek. His hands scrunched his Stetson when he retrieved it. With a tight jaw, he circled his desk, walked out of the station, and got behind the steering wheel of the squad car. Willie followed and climbed in on the other side. Toby kept quiet. Good riddance was what came to mind in reference to the FBI, but thoughts of finding Rachel without reinforcements tensed every muscle.

“When you going to let me start driving?” Willie pushed the seat back and stretched out his legs.

“When you learn to drive lying down.”

The squad car looped around Dairyland. At the edge of the parking lot, a small white house faced the street behind the drive-thru. An old pickup was parked beside the house, and light shone from the front room.

Their knock was answered by a short, pudgy man with piercing brown eyes. Toby recognized Ty Holden. Toby had heard Ty was involved with the twelve-step program in town but couldn’t confirm that since attendees like Lacey kept it anonymous. Toby had seen no reason before now to pry.

“Ty, I’m Chief Wheeler, and this is Detective Brandt. We’d like to ask you a few questions.”

The man’s wrinkled face scrunched into a hard knot. “What about?”

“We’re investigating the kidnapping of Rachel Smith. Our trail leads us to the Dairyland—and you. Thought you might have some information that would help us.” Toby propped an arm against the door frame.

"I don't know anything." Ty glowered. "I've been clean for years. Don't know anything about any kidnapping." He started to close the door.

Toby pushed his hand against it. "Could we come in just a minute anyway?"

Ty stiffened. "Why?"

"Just to talk."

Ty widened the door opening, and the two policemen entered.

Willie held up the fax they had received. "Katie Smith's ex-husband gave your address as his last known address." Willie made eye contact with Ty. "Why do you think he'd do that? Do you know Wayne Smith?"

"I might have met him back in my drug days, but I don't remember him." Ty kicked one foot to the side. "Course names didn't matter much back then." He hesitated. "Look, officers, I've worked hard to get away from that life. I don't want anything to do with those guys anymore. I'm a simple restaurant manager—that's all. Can't you leave me be?"

Toby looked directly at his suspect. "But will those guys let you stay out of it?"

A pinkish tint colored Ty's neck, and he stared at his feet. "I'm sorry. I can't help you."

Willie's gaze surveyed the room. "Can't. Or won't?"

"Same thing." Toby turned toward the door to leave, ushering Willie in front of him.

Ty closed the door.

When Willie and Toby reached the squad car, Toby drove back to the station. He remained seated after parking. "I'm calling in George to do a stakeout with Mays tonight—maybe tomorrow night, too."

Willie was halfway out of the car before he realized Toby wasn't moving. He sat back down. "Of Ty's place?"

Toby nodded. "Spotted a little girl's shoe sticking out from under his couch. Not sure if it's Rachel's. I'll swing by Lacey's to describe it." He looked up at Willie. "Go home. Get some sleep."

"Boss, tomorrow is when I head off to pick up Timmy. I'll need to leave by three, but I'll be back by seven or eight if you need me."

"I might need you, but go. Hurry back."

Toby and Willie climbed out of the car. Toby waved as Willie got into his Ranger truck and drove off. In the station, Toby called the part-time

guy, George, he gave Mays instructions, and he lay his weary body on the cot in his office. When Ruby left, Larry would be alone at the station, and he was green. Toby would rest at home only when Rachel had been brought in safely.

He hoped that was soon.

CHAPTER *Forty-Five*

The tip came in about six the next afternoon. George and Mays slept today and would watch again tonight. Amber would call it a day soon which left Officer Larry Pullman, Ruby, and Toby to handle everything until Willie returned from getting his kid.

Toby took a blank sheet of paper and outlined the area he needed to check. Ty's dad owned an old farm west of Buffalo Lake on the way to Benjamin. Larry had printed out a map. Bradshaw had called to say that he'd tried once more to get information from Katie Smith without success.

The soldier in Toby stood alert and erect. He didn't need the FBI. He knew his county. He would search the farm, and he would find the bad guys. "Larry."

The prim and proper rookie officer appeared at Toby's door and saluted. "Yes, sir."

"Tell Ruby I'll need her to stay until we return. You're coming with me to check out this farm."

"Yes, sir."

Toby gathered his map and his outline. The place looked to be about a forty-five minute drive. He marched through the station. "Ruby, we'll probably get back by nine. I'll call otherwise."

Ruby put her hands on her hips. "Well, now, I just didn't have anything else to do but wait on you, Chief Wheeler." She winked. "Find that baby girl."

"We'll do our best. Oh, and Willie will check in when he gets back. Let me know."

"Will do." The radio buzzed, and she headed that way.

"I'll take my Suburban instead of a squad car, so call me on my cell." Ruby nodded as she called an order to Mays.

Toby pushed on Old Blue's accelerator. Urgency churned in his stomach. His fingers clamped on the steering wheel as he sped down a two-lane country road, munching cold fries he had bought last night.

His truck headlights pierced the country's blackness. The quarter moon lent little light to surrounding crops, but Toby knew they were there. He didn't need to hear the swoosh to know an oil well pumped just to his right.

When he thought he must be near the farm, he stopped and looked again at the map. Turning into a narrow gravel road, he said, "Think this is it." He shut off his truck lights and flipped on a flashlight, hanging it out the window to see where he was driving.

A click from the right of the car told him Larry was cocking his 9MM. Who knew what they might face, or when?

A shiver started at Toby's neck and shot down his spine. His only sidekick was as green as lake water, but the kid was ready. The truck inched into the unknown. At the sides of the road, the flashlight highlighted where the crops ended. The outline of a tree stood just ahead, and where there was a tree, there was probably a house.

He inched his truck closer to the tree and stopped. When he and Larry got out, they eased their car doors closed, hoping the overhead light wouldn't be seen if anyone was lurking out there.

Twenty feet to their right, headlights sliced through the dark, illuminating a man, no gun drawn, running toward a car, something large in his arms. A scream drifted across the fields followed by scuffling and an eerie quiet. The figure had disappeared.

Toby called Ruby and whispered. "Send Willie here as soon as he gets back into town."

"He's already on the way, Chief."

"Good." Toby slipped the phone into his pocket. His fear eased just a bit. His suspicion was validated when he spotted a house to his right.

He no sooner saw it than the house's front door opened. A man, backlit by the house lights, was visible standing in the doorway. Toby's

breathing quickened, and his heart raced. Every muscle was pumped full of adrenaline, ready to run or fight. Every brain cell was on high alert.

He moved forward, motioning for Larry to go left. Toby's feet crackled brittle branches despite his careful steps. The car headlights went out. The man in the doorway aimed a gun and fired. A low moan sounded from Toby's left. "Larry, you okay?" he tried to whisper. No answer, but another shot was fired. A bullet whizzed through tree leaves by Toby's head.

His heartbeat muted the sound of more gunfire, but he felt sure it had come from his right. "Larry," he called again, "I think we're in between guns. Keep your head low."

Inside lights illuminated when a car door was opened. The man who had been carrying the package dropped his load and circled to the driver's seat. Toby beat him to it. He seized the front of the man's shirt. The odor of sweat and alcohol blasted Toby's nostrils, but he threw his weight on the man and pinned him to the ground. A whimper sounded from the car.

His enemy used distraction to turn Toby to the underside. He extracted a knife from his pocket and aimed it between Toby's eyes.

Toby put every newly-formed muscle he had into play to break the man's hand and cause him to drop the knife. The man pressed his knee on Toby's abdomen, and he almost lost consciousness from the pain. He socked the man's jaw with his other hand and then reinforced his pushback on the knife hand.

The man's grasp slipped, and the knife grazed Toby's cheek. Toby pushed harder. The knife fell. Toby gasped for air, twisted, and knocked the man off of him, releasing the pressure on his gut.

Each scrambled to their feet. The light from the car lit the man's face. Toby knew him, but he couldn't remember from where.

The man moved backwards. What was he doing?

Gunfire still issued from the house. Returning fire came from the left. Toby hoped that was Larry.

Like an angry bull disturbed from his sleep, the man charged Toby again.

Toby pulled his revolver and fired.

The man went down in a heap at just the moment a second man the size of a linebacker flung Toby to the ground. His head hit a rock.

The linebacker hauled out the package from the backseat.

Toby's consciousness ebbed away, but returned with a child's cry coming from the car. He used his last bit of energy to push his body up from the ground. His vision blurred. His ears rung. He rubbed the back of his head, and a warm, sticky substance gummed up his hand.

The linebacker closed the car door.

Toby threw himself at the man, but the lack of light and his woozy state equaled an absolute miss. The man trotted away with his package.

Toby heard the child's cry again, this time in front of him. He reached, clinging to the car for support. Did he dare chase the man? He had no choice.

In the lighted house doorway, the man aimed his rifle at Toby. Could he really see Toby in the dark?

He reached for his revolver, but the fall must've sent it flying. A bead of perspiration dripped into his eye. He wiped it away.

A gunshot came from the left, and the man in the doorway fell.

A scream sounded between Toby and the house. "Marty?"

Toby didn't wait to thank God for ridding him of one enemy while he stalked the other. The man's scream had given him a destination. Toby crashed through the bushes. A huge figure loomed ahead, lighted somewhat by the dim light coming from the house's open doorway. The sack sagged across the man's arms. He halted then ran for a truck on the right side of the house.

Toby accelerated his pace. He panted but pushed harder.

The linebacker reached the truck. Before he could drop his load, Toby was in mid-air, landing on top of him. The load rolled away. Toby heard a moan. He straddled the linebacker's big belly.

Another figure circled the truck. How Toby wished he hadn't dropped his weapon. He punched the downed linebacker and pulled to his feet, looking for a limb or a rock to thwart the new threat.

A familiar voice relieved his worry. "Boss, you seem to get in trouble when I'm not around."

"Am I ever glad to see you?" Toby's voice was shaky but strong.

Willie fired above Toby's head.

His bullet winged the linebacker who had been fixing to pounce. When Willie checked him, the man on the ground wasn't dead, so Willie handcuffed him.

Toby expelled a long breath. "Have you seen Larry?"

"I'm here, Chief." The rookie hobbled to them, a blood-soaked handkerchief tied around his thigh. "Sorry, I got held up."

Willie whistled. "Better get you to a doc."

A few feet away, a rolled-up rug, dropped by the linebacker, began stretching and groaning. Toby squatted to help.

"Is this who I think it is?" Willie asked.

Toby loosed the last fetter, and there lay the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. "Rachel." He slipped his hand underneath her, moved her to him, and cradled her head in his lap. "Thank you, Jesus," he whispered.

"I'll go check on Timmy."

"Timmy?"

"Hey, man, I headed straight here to save your sorry hide. Timmy's hiding in the back of my truck. I'll double check the house and the area, get my boy, and be right back." He looked at Larry. "You okay to go with me to search?"

"Yes, sir." Larry was back to prim and proper.

The two men moved to secure the house.

Rachel flopped, all her strength gone. Her eyes rolled back in her head.

Toby clasped her to his chest. "Oh, baby, what did they do to you? Did you take any medicine?"

Her soft voice was indignant. "The man who said he was my daddy told me I had to take it."

Toby crushed her to him with a relief and love.

She squirmed. "I can't breathe."

"Sorry, baby."

"Dec...tive."

"Yes, baby."

"I kept it."

"Kept what?"

One of the girl's hands dipped into her deep jean pocket. She pulled out her trophy. "It brought me good luck just like you said because here you are."

She displayed a single dove feather, wilted and worn. Her treasure. "Maybe you need to take it now. You look sick."

Toby squeezed her again.

"Dective," she moaned and pushed away. "Can't breathe."

"I'm sorry. I should get you off this cold ground." His legs wobbled when he heaved the small girl's weight up into his arms and stood.

Larry arrived in time to stabilize him and take the child. "Let me help."

"Let's get her to Old Blue."

Willie and Timmy stepped into the circle of dim light. "All's secure," Willie said.

Timmy went over to Rachel. "I did it. I did just what Dad told me. I hid in the backseat. Guns were going off everywhere, but I didn't peek. Not once. I'll make a good policeman, Dad said." Timmy's chest puffed.

Not to be outdone, Rachel boasted, "Mean people took me everywhere and gave me bad medicine."

The three policemen stifled their snickers.

"I called Ruby, Boss."

"Thanks." Toby began talking into his cell, arranging for the county sheriff and an ambulance to come. "The Vernon ambulance is the nearest. They'll be here for Larry within twenty minutes. The sheriff will arrive in ten."

Willie stood toe-to-toe with his chief. "I'll wait with the prisoner. You go sit in your truck, and when the ambulance comes, it can take you and Rachel, too." His tone brooked no argument.

Toby's tension vanished. He sagged into his seat. He was so ready to give up command for a while.



"I want my mama . . . Lacey . . . I want my Lacey."

The siren blasted through the quiet night, carrying three patients on one set of wheels.

Toby kept seeing two Rachels and two Larrys. He shook his head to clear his blurred vision. "We'll see her at the hospital. You'll be safe now."

"Because you're a policeman, and you make sure everything's okay. Right, Dective?"

He rubbed his forehead. A headache pounded. Though he was bent over in his seat, he could almost see Rachel bobbing her sassy curls.

The ambulance pulled into a slot near the double doors, delivering two wounded cops and a little girl that Toby prayed hadn't been hurt for real.

CHAPTER *Forty-Six*

Mom gripped both armrests in Lacey's old Caddy. "Slow down. You're going to kill us."

Lacey grimaced and gripped the wheel tighter. "If you hadn't forgotten your jacket and had to go back into the house, we wouldn't have been late."

The crescent moon gave little light. With few cars on a four lane highway, Lacey pressed down harder on the accelerator. Since Toby had called, saying he'd found Rachel and was taking her to the Vernon hospital, she couldn't get there fast enough. She tapped her fingers in time with the nervous tick pulsing in her neck. A swooshing sound in her ears almost blocked out Mom's complaints. Lacey should have counted on Mom wanting to tag along. She'd been frantic over Rachel, too.

Mom's sighs escalated in volume.

Lacey's frustration mounted. She let up on the accelerator to satisfy her mother but then pushed again despite her good intentions.

Hospital lights brightened the hilltop. Lacey looped through the emergency entrance, stopped her old Cadillac, and ran around to help her mother.

Mom opened her door, twisted to the side, and anchored her weight on her cane. She swayed, and Lacey grabbed her arm to offer balance. The two began the slow trek into the waiting room where Mom dropped her weight hard onto a chair.

"I'll go park the car and be right back. Then we'll find Rachel." Lacey headed out the automatic doors.

When she returned, the chair was empty. Down the hall, Mom waved. "The nurse will show us the way." Her words were hurried, anxious.

"The doctor should be examining her now." The clerk led them to a cubicle with a big white gurney supporting a tiny, fragile child. Her skin wasn't much darker than the starched, white sheets.

A wave of nausea hit Lacey. She clutched her stomach, swallowed the lump in her throat, and ran to the child. After placing a kiss on her forehead, Lacey breathed out a whisper of words. "I thought I'd never see you again." She hugged the tiny girl to her chest.

Rachel sputtered. "I can't breathe."

Lacey pulled back slightly and, with shaky hands, held onto Rachel's arms as if afraid to let loose her treasure.

Laughter erupted from the left side of the bed. "I did the same thing, held her so tight I shut off her air."

For the first time, Lacey realized Toby sat in a wheelchair beside the gurney, holding a big ice pack to the back of his head and looking almost as pale as Rachel.

A nurse spoke to Toby. "Now that her mother is here, may we take you to x-ray, officer?"

His cheeks turned a soft shade of pink. He nodded.

The back of his head was messy, his hair plastered to his scalp.

"You're injured," Rachel called out.

As he was rolled out of sight, Toby gave a dismissive gesture over his head.

Rachel's saucy grin thawed Lacey's heart, frozen since she'd lost her daughter. "I wasn't going anywhere, Lacey . . . Mom."

Doctor Sharp walked into the treatment area. He shook hands first with Lacey, then her mother. He smiled at the child, while he spoke to the adults. "I found a couple bruises that might have come from being pushed too hard. She complained of her stomach, but x-rays showed no internal injury. Her blood count's good." He lowered his voice. "No indication of abuse." His voice rose again. "I think you can take this little girl home and feed her. She said she was hungry."

"Thank you, Doctor. Thank you, so much," Rachel said.

He bowed slightly and walked out of the room.

Lacey turned to the remaining nurse. "I'll take her with me to the waiting room, but we want to get word as soon as Chief Wheeler is out of x-ray."

"I'll let you know," the remaining nurse said.

Lacey bent to tickle Rachel. "Let's get you into a pretty dress." She picked up the clean clothes she had brought just in case, dressed Rachel, and then carried the child to the waiting room. There they waited for news.

Rachel pouted. "I lost Margaret Rose."

"But, I know who has her," With gratitude for Rachel's safety, Lacey prayed for good news about Toby.



Two days later was a Sunday. Lacey and Mom sat in church with Rachel in between them.

Near the front, Sandra and Toby talked, heads together like co-conspirators—or, maybe lovers. The white bandage across Toby's head reminded Lacey to be thankful.

Mom leaned over toward Lacey. "Toby and Sandra still dating?"

"I think so." Envy threatened to sprout in Lacey's mind, but she glanced at Rachel, and gratitude squelched the poison. Many of the congregation crowded around her family, wishing them well and congratulating them on finding Rachel.

"Thank you for your prayers," Lacey repeated. It wasn't God's fault that she had lost Toby. That responsibility lay squarely on her shoulders.

God had blessed Lacey. Her mother's attitude had softened with Rachel's return. Even Myrna had called Saturday to tell Lacey to take off Monday and enjoy her niece. After all the days Lacey had been off the week before, Monday was an extra gift, but one she needed in order to cope. She'd pay for the time off beginning on Tuesday—her boss would see to that.

Joanne directed her youngest daughter to the pew behind Lacey. "I haven't been to church in two months." Joanne whispered. "Both our girls may be sticking close for a while."

Lacey's hand caught that of her friend like when they were school girls. "I love you, you know." Though she had apologized to Joanne, their renewed relationship overwhelmed Lacey. Another one of God's blessings.

Joanne showed her big front teeth when she grinned. "Friends forever." She didn't have an easy life. Why hadn't Lacey seen that before when she had envied Joanne's husband and kids?

Because my focus was on myself

The answer hit her in the face, and it hurt.

Knowing that problems lay ahead, she prayed her contentment would last.

CHAPTER *Forty-Seven*

Lacey's good spirits crashed as soon as she, Rachel, and her mother arrived home after church. They'd eaten lunch at the buffet. This time Mom did pay for Lacey and Rachel's meal. Lacey's heart sang until she pulled into her driveway and saw the car parked in front of her house. She bit her lip.

Agent Alvarez and her sister, Katie, waited on the front porch.

Mom jumped from the car quicker than Lacey thought possible. Katie met her mother halfway to the porch. Dropping her cane, Mom hugged her baby.

Picking up the cane, Lacey noticed the handcuffs on Katie's hands. She shot a questioning glance at the FBI agent who had lived with them and shared much of the family trauma.

Agent Alvarez skipped down the steps. "Chief Wheeler asked me to bring Ms. Smith here before I took her to jail. Ms. Smith wanted to talk to you two about what happened." The agent seemed nervous, evasive.

Mom released her wayward daughter. "Let's go inside." She took her cane from Lacey and walked toward the door.

Katie reached for Rachel, but the little girl clung to Lacey as she gazed at the handcuffs. Katie knelt and pleaded, "Momma loves you, honey. Can't I have a hug?"

Rachel buried her face in Lacey's skirt.

A surge of apprehension snatched Lacey and propelled her forward. "Let's go inside. Maybe a little time will help." She led the way, guiding Rachel in front of her.

Mom sat in her recliner while Lacey took the opposite one and held Rachel. Agent Alvarez stood facing the front window. Katie perched on the edge of the couch.

Lacey kicked off her black pumps and stared at her sister. "Now what? Are you out of jail or going to jail? I don't understand what's happening."

Katie heaved a loud sigh. "I was released Friday for the drug charge. The FBI was waiting outside the jail to arrest me for conspiracy to hurt a . . . a . . . child." Her voice shook. She cleared her throat and crossed her legs. Her face reddened. Her hands fluttered like she craved a cigarette. Her eyes engaged Mom's. "I would've never hurt Rachel. You have to believe that."

With a child's intuition that someone she loved needed a hug, Rachel slid from Lacey's lap and dashed to Grandma. She picked her up and held the girl on her lap. Mom's puzzled gaze searched first her oldest, then her youngest. "You had Rachel kidnapped? Your own daughter?" Mom's chin quivered.

Lacey's jaw tightened. She glared at Katie. "Who took her? You were in jail."

When Toby had come by yesterday, he told them Katie's ex-husband was responsible. But he was in jail. The two other men had been killed. The Wharton Rock Police department and the FBI were investigating. Lacey had been so thankful to have Rachel home safe that she hadn't pressed it.

Katie's story tumbled out in a rush of disjointed words. "Wayne and I hooked up again. I was going to get out of jail, but neither of us had any money." Katie stared at her feet and clenched her hands. "Wayne said . . ." she hesitated and bit her lip. "He said we could use Rachel to get money out of my family. My daughter wouldn't be hurt—only held until we had the money—and then she'd be brought back unharmed." She stamped one foot and flopped back against the cushion of the couch.

Lacey watched every movement made by the sister she loved. Bile rose into Lacey's throat. The taste made her sick.

"Wayne hired three old cellmates who decided to take over the operation." Katie's voice turned hateful and whiny. "They tied up Wayne and Rachel. They set explosives. Those two would have taken the money

with nothing at all to tie the crime to them. It would look like Wayne did it all. That wasn't fair."

The phone rang. It was Sandra Lloyd. "Lacey, I didn't catch you at church this morning, but I wanted to say it was so good to see Rachel back home. I hadn't wanted to bother you, but Toby told me she was rescued and safe. God answered all our prayers."

Lacey's voice trembled. "Thanks." This was no time for recrimination. Toby deserved someone like Sandra.

"Anyway, I wanted to be sure to tell you that, and I was afraid I might miss you again tonight." A vision of Sandra's sickeningly sweet smile flashed into Lacey's mind.

"I appreciate that." Lacey's answer was dull—her mind wasn't functioning.

"Have a good day." Sandra's voice was laced with merriment.

Anger and unease rendered Lacey helpless to comment further. She hung up the phone and took her seat. She remained quiet, processing Katie's information.

Agent Alvarez turned around. "We must be going now, Ms. Smith."

"What happened after that?" Lacey steeled her voice and kept her gaze focused on her sister.

Katie scooted precariously close to the edge of the couch. "Wayne got free of the ropes, grabbed Rachel, and took off for the woods before the blast." For the first time, Katie locked eyes with her big sister. "Wayne saved her life. He hiked out of the woods carrying Rachel and circled to where he had left his car. Only the two other guys caught up with him and tied him up again. Rachel, too."

Lacey looked at the FBI agent. "Are those the two men who died at the scene?"

"We think so. Chief Wheeler arrested Smith. We're still looking for the money." The petite FBI agent took Katie's arm and directed her out of the house.

Katie turned toward Rachel as she left. "I love you, honeybabe. Always remember Momma loves you." Her voice dripped with artificial sugar.

Sure you do.

Lacey whispered in Rachel's ear and then carried her toward her real mother.

"I love you too, Mama." Rachel remained in Lacey's arms and reached to hug Katie.

Katie kept her face turned, but Lacey spotted her sister's wet eyes.

Mom came up behind her oldest daughter and her granddaughter while they watched the police car drive away. "I'll pray for her."

Lacey put her left arm around her mother and felt her body shaking. When had Mom become so frail? A sense of closeness bound Lacey to Mom now after many years of bickering. "We're in this together, Mom. We'll agree in faith for our Katie." Lacey knew at that moment that all resentment and anger she had harbored for her sister was healed. God did work miracles. Lacey was one of them.

Before she and Rachel began a rousing game of Sorry, Lacey went to her bathroom. She glanced at the blade still showing at the corner of the mirror. Once again she fell to her knees on her bathroom floor, but this time her motive was to praise God.

"I'm always weak, but with God, I have power," she whispered.

If God could heal her, he could deliver her sister.

As she went through the living room, Lacey offered a warm smile to Mom. Her mother's mouth lifted slightly to one side in return.

Lacey paused and patted her mother's shoulder. "Better be careful, or I'll catch you smiling."

This time her mother did smile, but tears coursed down her cheeks at the same time. "God has done a lot for us, but I won't give up on Katie."

"Me neither, Mom." Lacey walked into the dining room where Rachel had strewn out the game pieces. She nudged the girl aside. "I'm gonna beat you this time."

And Rachel squealed sounded with excitement.

Lacey breezed through Sunday afternoon—calm, cheerful, and content. By six, she was anxious to go back to church. Hard to believe that a few months ago, she had dreaded it like a duty.

After another uplifting service, she and Rachel scooted from the pew. From the corner of Lacey's eye, she spotted Sandra Lloyd heading her way. Lacey's breathing stopped, and her heart skipped a beat. Her stomach would not settle. She wasn't ready for Toby's girlfriend. Not yet. She hurried her niece in front of her and weaved through the departing crowd.

Sandra's voice came from behind her. "Lacey. Lacey."

She pivoted. Her mouth ached, but she maintained her smile.

"Hello, Sandra."

A tall, skinny young man pulled up beside Sandra. Who was he?

"With all that's been going on with you, I don't think you've met Jim."

Sandra's eyes fluttered, and her cheeks grew pink. "This is Jim Bridges. He's taking over as our youth minister." She giggled. "He's also my fiancé."

CHAPTER *Forty-Fight*

Monday morning, Lacey was still trying to wrap her head around Toby not being engaged to Sandra. Had Lacey ruined his chance at love? With this extra day off work, she needed to regroup, rest, and restore.

Rachel played with a burnt, disfigured Margaret Rose while Lacey read in her room. After lunch, they would visit Joanne and her girls. Life with a daughter had resumed.

The doorbell sounded and then a knock. Mom muted the TV. Rachel bounded for the door, but Lacey beat her to it.

Toby stood on the porch, straight and somber. His patrol car sat in her driveway. His hands twisted his Stetson in front of him. “Missed church last night, had to work. It’s been a rough couple of weeks.” He stepped inside and planted his feet firmly in the middle of the room. “Okay if I come in? Thought you might like me to clear up a few things.” He shifted his stance then twirled the hat again.

Lacey chuckled. “Looks to me like you’ve already come in.”

He returned his hat to his head.

Trying to put him at ease, Lacey reached up to hug him, pushing his hat askew.

He snatched it off again.

Lacey apologized. “Thanks for everything. I had confidence in you, but most of all, I knew God would save Rachel, and I knew He could use you to do it.”

“Thanks,” he mumbled.

Lacey had never seen him so nervous. “Thanks also for arranging for Katie to come and speak with us. It meant a lot to Mom.”

Rachel dove at his legs and caught him around the knees. “Dective, I love you. The feather will give you good luck, too.”

“Yes, it will.” Panting like he’d just run a marathon and sweating about as much, he tugged the child to his side. “I love you too, Rachel.” He glanced toward Mom. “How are y’all doing after hearing Katie’s story?”

Mom turned off her TV program. “We’re okay.”

Toby held a white Stetson now—a measurement of his goal, his dream.

Lacey was so proud of the person he had become. “We’ll keep praying for Katie.” Toby’s faith in Lacey had helped her become a better person.

Toby shuffled his feet, shifted his hips, and straightened again. What was wrong with him? His ears were red, and sweat coated his forehead.

His cobalt eyes stared at her. His mouth opened and closed. “Guess I should leave.”

“Have a seat. Can’t you visit awhile, or do you have to hit the road?” When had he become such a handsome man? His strong jaw showed authority, but Lacey had experienced his tenderness when she needed a back rub and his loyalty when she hit her bottom emotionally. She understood the real Toby Wheeler, and she loved him. He was a hunk—a good-looking man any woman would be glad to call her own. She had always known that, but somehow he had never struck her as her prospective groom. Her feelings had been skewed by her own self pity.

He wasn’t marrying Sandra. Had Sandra broken his heart? She realized she knew little about this man’s inner thoughts and feelings. He had always comforted her, but she’d never helped him.

Toby swallowed. His Adam’s apple bobbed. “We got the money back. Guess that settles the case.” He didn’t leave. He didn’t continue. He just kept standing, twisting his hat, and clearing his throat.

“That’s great.” Lacey remained on her feet. She was as nervous as Toby seemed to be.

Toby kicked at the throw rug. “I’d like to talk with you, Lacey. Could we go out on the porch?”

“Sure.” She turned to Rachel to tell her to stay inside.

The girl scrunched her mouth like she was mad. “I want to go with Dective.”

"Not now," Lacey told her. She led Toby outside.

Since the weather was cooler, her roses were in full bloom, and the fragrance permeated the air. The day was one of Texas's finest fall days. Another blessing from God.

Lacey faced Toby. "I met Sandra's fiancé last night. I thought you two were an item. What happened?"

He plopped his hat on his head and tilted it down over his eyes. "Sandra is a sweet lady. I took her out a couple times. I thought God wanted me to seek her out and forget about you, but I couldn't do it." Toby's eyes probed Lacey's.

"Forget . . . about . . . me?" A strand of her black hair blew in the wind.

Toby pushed it behind her ear. Her clothes swirled around her smaller frame. Toby's stomach no longer bulged over his belt.

He pointed to the lawn chairs, and they sat there. "You told me after high school that we were friends, and that was all. But, by George, I have a hard time being just a friend to you, Lacey. My feelings run deeper. I can't escape that fact. I love you." He squirmed and focused on a big tree near the road.

She reached between the chairs and placed her hand on his chest, feeling his heart beating. She took his hand and placed it on her chest. "My heart belongs to you, Toby, only you."

He jumped to his feet. "You mean it?"

She'd gotten his attention all right. She stood, also. Her heart thumped so loud she expected it would drown out her words. "I thought I had come to my senses too late, but yes, I love you, Toby Wheeler."

"Yahoo!" Toby threw his Stetson up into the wind which caught it and sent him chasing. "Yippee-ee!"

Mom and Rachel rushed out to the porch. "What's the racket out here?" Mom asked.

Toby yelled from near the sidewalk. "Your daughter said she was going to marry me." His face looked from the yard up to Lacey. "That *is* what you said. Right?"

Lacey was thankful her blush wasn't visible in the porch shadows. "Yes, I will."

Toby came running. He forgot the steps and jumped the flower bed to the porch, swinging Lacey off her feet. “Yep, I can sure tell you lost weight.” He kissed her lightly at first, then deeper, deeper.

Lacey’s fantasies had never been this good. Her legs felt weak. She didn’t want this man to ever stop kissing her.

Rachel clasped their legs, and Toby lifted the child to him.

Mom came behind Lacey, putting her arm around her waist. “‘Bout time you two got some sense. Thought I’s going to have to sit you both down to explain the birds and bees.”

“I like birds, but I don’t like bees. They sting.” Rachel’s serious expression caused them all to break out in laughter.

Lacey and Toby and their daughter did a three-way kiss. Lacey collapsed in a lawn chair, winded with all the excitement. God had given her freedom and love. As she kissed her intended again, the song “How Great Thou Art” floated through her mind.

God had made her worthy of love. Maybe she’d join the choir again after she married. This time she wouldn’t require a choir robe to cover her disgrace.



Lacey's New Recipes

MEXICAN CASSEROLE

93% lean ground beef
½ onion, chopped
98% fat-free cream of chicken soup
1 can Rotel tomatoes
2 cups 2% Monterey Jack or Mexican-blend cheese
28 multi-grain Tostidas chips

Brown meat and onion in skillet with nonstick spray
Add soup and tomatoes.
Simmer for 15 minutes.

Spray 6 X 12 pan with nonstick spray
Crush and scatter chips on bottom of pan.
Spread meat mixture over chips.
Sprinkle cheese over meat mixture.

Bake in 325 degree oven for 20 minutes.

Low fat and delicious.
Serve with pinto beans and basic salad.

BASIC SALAD

Romaine lettuce and spinach in big bowl
Red peppers to taste
Cherry tomatoes (6)
Sliced grapes or sliced strawberries (depending on season)
1 teaspoon olive oil drizzled over salad
2 packets Splenda sprinkled over salad (if desired)
2 Tablespoons Walden raspberry vinaigrette dressing (-0- calories)

CRUSTLESS BUTTERNUT SQUASH PIE

1 large butternut squash
1 12 oz. can fat-free evaporated milk
¼ c Splenda
½ c plain Eggbeaters
1 ¼ t. ground cinnamon
½ t. ground ginger
½ t. salt

Heat oven to 350 degrees.

Place halved squash face down on baking sheet. Cook 40-50 minutes until tender. Cool squash before scraping out the insides.

Combine other ingredients, then fold in squash.

Blend or liquefy with blender or food processor

Pour into a pie pan (no crust).

Bake 40-50 minutes until set in the middle.

Serve with fat-free whipped topping.

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About Janet K. Brown



Janet K. Brown lives in Wichita Falls, Texas with her husband, Charles. Writing became her second career after retirement from medical coding.

Worth Her Weight is the author's debut inspirational women's fiction, it but makes a perfect companion to her recently released, *Divine Dining: 365 Devotions to Guide You to Healthier Weight and Abundant Wellness*. Both books encompass her passion for diet, fitness, and God's Word.

Worth Her Weight marks Brown's third book. Who knew she had a penchant for teens and ghosts? She released her debut novel, an inspirational young adult, *Victoria and the Ghost*, in July, 2012.

Janet and her husband love to travel with their RV, visit their three daughters, two sons-in-law and three perfect grandchildren, and work in their church.

SHE LOVES TO HEAR FROM READERS.

Find her on Facebook as Janet K. Brown, Author
and on Twitter @JanetKBrownTX
or e-mail her at Janet.hope@att.net

You can learn more on her website/blog:
www.JanetKBrown.com

