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Chapter One

MISS THELMA



It was only a mile to the pharmacy. To Becky, it seemed like 10 long miles. She hadn't walked this far in a long time. It was a hot, humid day in August and she could see and feel the sweat soaking through her t-shirt. She felt the heat of the street burning through her tattered sneakers. Today her thoughts weren't on the heat or the long walk.

Becky is seventeen, just barely. She looks the part with her cut off blue jeans and her long blonde hair through the back of her cap in a ponytail. It was her summertime uniform. She was a petite girl, but tough. Becky's life had been one of struggle and survival and raising herself. Her mother was a struggling single parent.

This walk was long but she was more than up to it. It would have been great if Jerry could have given her a ride but there's no way she can share this information with him. Not yet. Not until she was sure of the results.

Becky and Jerry had been going out for about a year. He was the first guy she had ever dated and she could not be more in love. He was going to a vocational school to learn to be an electrician like his dad. Jerry also had tattoos, a lot of them. Becky's mom hated tattoos! She always told Becky he had more tattoos

than skin to put them on. He was nineteen, two years older than Becky but definitely not as mature as her. His shaved head and tattoos made him look intimidating to some. Becky knew better.

Cars would slow down and watch her as she walked. She never returned their gaze .A few honked at her. Hopefully a stranger won't stop and offer her a ride. The middle class neighborhood wasn't the best but it did have a lot of hard working people just doing their best to get by. There was a time when the houses were kept up and the lawns manicured but time had taken its toll. Most of the people who lived there in the beginning moved in from the rural farm towns. They were looking for a new life and opportunities in the city. They had since moved on to bigger and better things.

Finally reaching the pharmacy, Becky walked through the automatic doors. The wonderful cool air hit her. She shivers as the sweat and cold air collide. A pleasant voice greets her.

"Good afternoon Miss, welcome to Bakers Pharmacy, can I help you?"

In her southern drawl, Becky answers back. "Good afternoon to you too Ma'am." Walking up to the counter, Becky puts her hand above her mouth and whispers, "where's the feminine stuff?"

"Aisle three." The lady answers, pointing with a grin.

"Thanks ma'am, I see it now."

Slowly going down the aisle, Becky searches. She came alone because she didn't want anyone else to know about her predicament. She stops when she sees the boxes of different brands of Pregnancy tests. Staring at them, she can't believe she is here, now, looking and needing one. She remembers that clunky night that her and Jerry went too far. It all just happened so fast. Now she was scared, scared and late. She was never late. She was also still trying to figure out if she was more terrified to be pregnant or more terrified to have to tell her mother or

Jerry. Looking around to see if anyone is watching, she picks up a box. The price was fifteen dollars!

"Oh no!" she whispers to herself. "I only have 5 dollars, what am I going to do? I need this really bad!"

An elderly lady in a wheelchair starts down the aisle. Becky hurriedly puts the box back and just stares at the other products. They exchange a smile as she passes and finally disappears around the corner. Her mind spins trying to figure out how she was going to leave with the test.

"It will be a very long walk back to try and find more money. I'll buy some bottled water and I think this test will fit in my pants under my shirt." She schemes and talks herself into the theft. Looking around again, she slid it into the band behind her pants. In her haste she doesn't notice the mirrors overhead. Grabbing some bottled water out of the cooler, Becky walks up to the counter to pay the lady. She hands the lady behind the counter her money for the water. Taking the money the lady holds out her other hand. Giving a quick, "Thank you ma'am." Becky starts out the door.

"Missy, if you don't come back and pay for whatever it is in your pants, I'm calling the Police!"

Becky stops in her tracks. Her heart starts racing. She thinks, "Should I run?"

The clerk pleads with Becky. "Please young lady, don't make me call the Police, Please!"

Turning around slowly and backing up, Becky takes out the box and lays it on the counter. Looking down at the floor she says, "I'm so sorry ma'am, but I didn't have enough money and I don't know what to do." She feels her tears start to fall. "I'm so scared Ma'am!" Becky's hands cover her face in shame.

Coming from behind the counter the clerk reaches out to hug Becky as she cries. "There Now Missy, I can help you. You

definitely shouldn't have to resort to stealing. I do ask one thing though if I do help you."

Wiping the tears from her eyes Becky asks, "What is it, what do I have to do?"

The lady responds with a calm and caring voice, "My name is Thelma, everyone calls me Miss Thelma. What's your name sweetie?"

"Becky, my name is Becky."

Miss Thelma continues, "If this test is positive, I want you to come back once a month and let me check on you. Is that a deal?"

"Yes Ma'am Miss Thelma I sure will, I promise."

Smiling a big toothy grin, Miss Thelma holds out her hand to shake Becky's "It's a deal then."

Becky takes her hand and shakes it. Taking some money from her purse Thelma pays for the test.

Becky pleads to her, "I don't know what to say except thank you, thank you so very much! Please believe me, I'm not a thief. I hope you understand."

"Everything is going to be fine Miss Becky, you just wait and see. Don't you forget our deal, ok?"

Becky assures her, "I won't, I promise." Becky manages a smile.

The two share another hug as Becky leaves to head home with her cold water, her pregnancy test and a big sigh of relief.

Miss Thelma looks Heavenward and whispers, "Thank you Lord!" as Becky disappears down the hot streets toward home.

Chapter Two

I SMELL BACON



“I smell bacon! Why do I smell bacon?” David glances over at the alarm clock to check the time. He looks over to Sandy’s side of the bed and sees that she’s not there. “What in the world is she doing?” He wonders.

Walking into the kitchen in his boxer shorts, rubbing his eyes, David sees Sandy has prepared a big breakfast for him. Crispy bacon, eggs sunny side up, toast with blackberry jelly, and a steaming cup of black coffee is waiting for him.

“Good morning sunshine!” Sandy bubbles, “You’re quite a sight dear.” She says as she checks out his morning attire. She had never gotten up to make him breakfast like this before.

He asks, “Sandy, what is going on here,” as he pulls up a chair and takes his first sip of coffee.

“Can’t a girl get up and make breakfast for her handsome husband?” she asks.

David steals a look at the calendar on the wall to make sure he hasn’t forgotten an anniversary or birthday. “You’re dang right you can,” he says as he grabs a couple pieces of bacon and takes a bite. “Every day if you want.”

Inside, Sandy is ecstatic over the news she wants so desperately to tell David but she can’t tell him just yet. Preparing a

plate for herself the two share a hurried conversation before he has to get up and get ready for work. He normally didn't leave time for an impromptu breakfast.

Stepping into the shower, David wonders what caused this breakfast gift. He smiles and knows how lucky he is to have Sandy in his life.

Cleaning up the kitchen Sandy notices herself in the glass of the china cabinet. She turns sideways and wonders what she would look like pregnant. Patting her belly she looks down to talk to it. "Ok little person in there, it's almost time to tell the world you are on your way." She shakes from the excitement

Sandy and David had been high school sweethearts and everyone knew they would eventually end up married. She was a vivacious beautiful black haired cheerleader who had plans to be a doctor and David was Mr. Everything in school. He was the son of a dental surgeon and he was expected to carry on the family legacy and so far everything was on track. His business was up and running with a lot of financial help from his dad. The future couldn't be brighter.

The two had tried for two years to have a baby. They both had been to the doctor to try and find out why they couldn't but the doctors all told them everything looked great. Just keep trying. Walking into the kitchen David grabs Sandy for a big hug and kiss. "You're awesome Sandy, I Love you!"

Looking into his big brown eyes she tells him, "You have no idea how much I love you David."

The two share a goodbye kiss and he turns to go down the stairs to the garage. Halfway down the stairs he yells up to Sandy.

"Hey surprise me with dinner tonight. Let's make it special!"

She yells back, "Oh it will be special, I promise!"

She hears the garage door open and shut and peeks through the blinds to watch him drive away. Sandy finishes up the dishes hurriedly and then goes into the bedroom to get dressed. She

looks at the time. Her doctor appointment was a little over an hour away. She wonders, "what if the test was a false positive?" How terrible it would be to go to the doctor to affirm the test and find out it was wrong all along. "One more," she says out loud to herself, "I'll buy one more test and check again."

Throwing on some clothes she heads to the garage. The garage door lifts as the hot August air comes in. "Another hot August day, thank God for air conditioning."

She drives a couple of miles to the drug store and walks in. She shudders. "Dang they keep it cold in here!" She walks straight to the pregnancy tests and looks them over. A lady about her age is looking too. The two exchange glances.

"You too?" she asks Sandy.

"I sure hope so, I really do."

"Your first?" she asks Sandy.

"Yes it is, what about you?"

"It's my second if it's positive. I just hope this time everything goes better. My first was premature and she has some disabilities. We will be fine I'm sure. She's such a blessing to us."

Sandy doesn't quite know what to say except, "I'm sure everything will be fine. Good luck to us both, right?"

"For sure," the lady says hopefully as Sandy makes her way toward the counter with her test. She grabs a bottle of water in the cooler and waits in line to check out. The lady at the counter totals her up and they exchange a smile and a thank you.

Getting into her car to drive home she thinks about the conversation she had with the lady. She can't imagine what it would be like to have anything wrong with her baby. "How can a mother deal with something like that?" she wonders. "No! I won't even allow myself to think about that! Not today. No negativity today. This is going to be a day to remember. This is our day!"

Sandy opens the garage door and comes upstairs. She heads straight to the bathroom. A long pause and then Sandy comes out with a big grin on her face. "Oh yeah! I'm most definitely making that doctor's appointment now!" Stopping herself, she looks into the mirror in the bedroom and says out loud, "I'm going to be a Mother, I'm going to be a Mother." Her tears of pure joy streak down her face and she looks up and whispers, "Thank you God, Thank you!"

Chapter Three

THE WATER BOTTLE



Becky takes the last drink of her water from the bottle. The afternoon heat is almost unbearable as she walks beside the steaming asphalt road. The only breeze she feels is from an occasional car passing by. The houses are familiar as she walks by them. She gives an occasional wave to the people sitting on their front porch. She's really hoping that one of the barking dogs won't be able to get off its leash and bite her. Becky is scared of dogs, especially the big ones. Looking down on the ground beside the road as she walks, she wonders if anyone has ever come out to pick up the litter. On the road, there's broken glass, water bottles, trash and even an occasional stinky, unfortunate critter who didn't quite make it all the way across the street. She picks up a few things to put in her bag to throw away when she gets home. Becky hears the sound of a loud car coming up behind her. It's a very familiar loud car. The car passes her and honks its horn as it pulls over beside the road in front of her. The car door opens.

"Becky, just what in the world are you doing walking down the road by yourself?"

It was Jerry, Becky's boyfriend.

"Get up here and get in this car girl! Where have you been?"

It was then that Becky remembered what was in her bag. What would she say if he saw its contents? Her mind begins to race, trying to come up with some kind of story to explain the bag from the drug store. He opens the door for her and she tosses the water bottle in the back seat because she decided she didn't want to add to all the litter on the side of the road.

"Hey! What does my back seat look like, a trash can?" He reaches for the bottle and hands it back to her. "Here you go. Put your trash in your bag and throw it away at your house in a real trashcan. I'm sure the city appreciates what you've picked up for them. Now tell me, what was so important that you would walk all the way to Bakers' Drug Store. It must have been pretty important." Jerry walks around the front of the car to get in the driver's seat. He closes the door and puts on his seat belt.

"You better buckle up girl, there are crazy people driving out here."

"I believe you're one of those crazy people Jerry," she says with a smile.

The two make eye contact as the car starts up with a puff of smoke and a roar.

"So, tell me what's going on." Jerry asks.

Becky looks over and drops her eyes to the bag. "It's kind of embarrassing. I didn't want to ask you to drive me to the store for what I needed."

Jerry continues to probe, "What is it that made you walk two miles in one hundred degree heat? You're soaked with sweat. I can't imagine what in the world..." He stops himself in mid sentence as he realizes what he thinks she went to get. "Oh! I think I get it now" He pauses. "I'm so sorry sweetie. You know how dumb us guys can be about that feminine stuff." Dropping the gear shift into drive to pull back on the street he says, "Well, at least you're not pregnant!"

They both share a laugh as Becky looks out the window thinking she has dodged a bullet, for now anyway.

Jerry loves Becky. He really does. He is determined to give her everything he can to make her life better. He is also determined to prove to Becky's mother that he is good enough for her, but also to get her out of her bad home environment. Becky's mother is struggling with alcoholism and is constantly bringing home friends she meets while she is out visiting local bars. Becky would sneak out her window some nights when that happened. She would turn on her radio and lock the door so her mother wouldn't hear her leaving or come in. Then she would walk to the gas station and call Jerry. Jerry was very concerned about the strange guys coming into the house. He never thought she was safe there.

They pull up into Becky's house, followed by a dust cloud from a yard completely devoid of grass.

"I'm sorry my air conditioner in the car doesn't work Beck. I'm working on it."

"That's ok Jerry, I know you'll fix it. Just try and fix it before the first frost please."

"I promise, I got this," he says as he starts to get out of the car.

Becky grabs his tattooed arm. "Hey, I hope you don't mind but I really want a shower and to sit in front of the fan for a while if that's ok?"

Jerry leans over to kiss her. "You bet sweetie, you do kind of stink you know," he says with a grin. "The next time, you just tell me you need to go to the drug store and I'll take you, no questions asked, I promise."

She leans in again to hug him tight. "Thanks Jerry, I will. I love you."

"I love you too Beck, I really do."

She gets out and walks to the front porch and opens the creaky screen door. "I'll call you, ok?"

He gives her a thumbs up as the car engine starts up again and makes it no longer possible to hear at a distance. Turning around she watches as he backs out and drives away. They wave goodbye.

"Here goes nothing," she whispers as she goes into the hot house. The screen door slams behind her. A loud voice can be heard from inside the house.

"Becky is that you? I thought I heard that loser boyfriend of yours in his loud car."

Becky cringes.

"Where in the hell have you been, girl? I need some cigarettes. You and that tattoo boy go get me some at Bakers. I think I have five dollars in my purse to get some. If that's not enough I'm sure you or that boy can make it up."

Becky knows there is no five dollar bill in the purse anymore. Standing there looking at the purse, Becky hears a beer open and sees her mother come into the room. She is all of ninety pounds and frail from the self-inflicted abuse she had put herself through for years. It appears she is still in the clothes she had on the night before and has obviously just awoken.

"Well, what's the holdup," she asks in her just woke up gruff voice as she opens and looks out the screen door. "Where the hell did he go and what do you have in that bag in your hand Becky?" She grabs the bag out of Becky's hand and reaches in. Becky covers up her face with her hands in anticipation of the explosion coming from her mother.

Chapter Four

THOSE WORDS



Sandy looks over at her closet. “Now, what does a potential mother wear to the doctor to find out if she’s preggers?” Walking into her spacious clothes closet, Sandy scans for something appropriate. The racks are filled with clothes for every occasion. One side of the closet is filled with fashionable shoes of every kind. They’re all organized by color and season. Sliding over one outfit after another, she tries to make her decision. She stops sliding. “Wait a minute, I know exactly what I want to wear.” She closes the closet door and goes to her dresser to pull open a drawer. “Here they are. This is perfect!” She pulls out her pink warm up pants and a matching shirt. “Today, I’m going to be carefree and comfortable. Who knows how much longer I’ll be wearing those fashions anyway.” She looks at the clock and sees she’s running out of time. She makes short work of a shower and dries her hair and applies her makeup. Putting her long black hair in a clip and finding her favorite tennis shoes, she hurriedly starts toward the stairs to the garage. She abruptly stops herself at the top of the stairs. “Whoa, I need to be more careful now. I don’t want to risk falling down these stairs. I’ve got a little egg shell in there.” She grabs her purse and goes down the stairs holding onto the rail, taking one step

at a time. She reaches the bottom and goes into the garage. Sliding into the seat she shuts the door. "Alright little uh, well, I don't know your name yet, let's go for your first doctor visit."

Backing out of the garage she wonders for the first time what she would name a little girl or boy. Thinking about family names, she pulls up to the stop sign and notices someone has thrown out some beer cans. She has a flashback from the weekend before. They had been out to dinner with friends and had a few drinks. She also remembered her good friend Rita was a smoker. "Oh God," she thought, "I hope I haven't damaged my baby! I'll ask Doctor Heck, he'll know. I'm sure everything will be just fine."

She leaves the radio off on her way to the clinic so she can try and think up some questions for the doctor. She knows she's being way too careful but it did seem that today everyone was either following too close or pulling out in front of her in traffic. Finally pulling into the parking lot, she gets out of her car and walks in.

The receptionists are very caring and cheerful as Sandy checks in. This trip to the doctor was very different. Every other time she had been, it was because something was wrong. This time, it was because something was right. Taking her seat, she looks around at the people waiting to see the doctor. Some were obviously sicker than the others. She thought, "I hope there's nothing contagious hovering around here. Who knows what these people have." Sandy shakes her head. "There I go again, I've really got to get this under control." She reaches for her first magazine to read while she waits. More people come in. She allows herself to guess what each person's affliction is as she watches them check in and sit down. Finally the door opens. "Mrs. Carter, Sandy Carter?" A nurse calls out. The two greet each other and walk to the back. The nurse directs her to a room to get her weight and blood pressure.

"It's so good to see you Mrs. Carter, are you doing okay today?"

Sandy smiles, "Well, I'm here to find out if those pregnancy tests are accurate."

The nurse senses Sandy's excitement and adds, "Most of the time they are very accurate and I'm sure the manufacturer appreciates you testing their product." She sits Sandy down to take her vital signs. "Is this your first Mrs. Carter?"

"Yep, this will be number one. My husband and I have been trying for a couple of years. We didn't think we were going to be able to have children."

The nurse adds, "Well I think you may have been wrong all this time." Getting up from her chair, the nurse leads Sandy to the rooms in the back. "First, we are going to need you to fill up this little cup for us to get it analyzed." She opens the bathroom door for Sandy and gives her the cup and shows her the little door to put it in. "Have a seat in the room here when you're done and the doctor will be in to see you. I know you're going to be a fantastic mom."

"Great mom? I really hope so. I haven't allowed myself to get that far ahead yet but God knows I'm going to try." Shutting the bathroom door she thinks "Okay, let's make this happen." There was always the worry that she wouldn't be able to go but she has no trouble as she completes her task and opens the door to slide in her sample. The silence is loud as she sits alone in the room waiting for the doctor to come in. On the counter there is a plastic model of a pregnant woman and her baby. You could even reach in and take the baby out. She really wanted to take it out and hold it but it just seemed weird. More than anything, she wanted to hear those words, the words that would change her and David's life forever. She knew from her tests she was most likely pregnant but to hear the doctor say them would make it true. Sitting there in her chair, her mind was a blur of

thoughts. "I really wish David was here with me but I just didn't want to get him all pumped up and then let him down again."

The door opens with a knock and Dr Heck comes in. He is the vision of what a doctor should look like in his white coat, white hair, clipboard and stethoscope around his neck. He had been her doctor for many years and if anyone was going to tell her she was pregnant, it was him. He begins by asking how David is doing and before he can go any further she puts up her hand and interrupts him.

"David is great, doctor. Am I pregnant, am I?"

He could see he could no longer hold her back "Sandy." he smiles.

"Yes, Doctor?"

"You are Pregnant!"

Bam! There they were! Those words! Finally! Sandy covers her face with both hands and sobs.

The doctor gives her a tissue from the box on the counter and pats her on the shoulder. "Congratulations to you both."

She lifts her wet eyes above her hands. "Thank you Doctor Heck, thank you. Now what, what's next?"

"I think you better tell David."

"Yes, definitely, I've got to tell David! Oh boy, am I going to tell David! How to do it is the question."

Chapter Five

DON'T BE CHASIN' NO RABBITS



“**T**rash? This is trash! What are you doing picking up trash?” Becky’s mother asks as she pulls out an empty water bottle from the bag and shows it to her. “So on your little walk you stopped to do the cities job? I’m sure they really appreciate you helping them out. I guess we should be expecting a check?” Becky’s mother Rose tosses the bag toward the trash can as more trash falls out. As each piece falls out, Becky’s tension rises. “I don’t know about you Becky. It’s burning hot outside and you’re walking the streets picking up garbage. Who knows, maybe some rich guy will see you trying to save the world and marry you. Now if you remember, I am still out of cigarettes. Call that boyfriend of yours and get to the store.”

“That boyfriend,” Becky reminds her, “has a name, it’s Jerry.”

“Whatever Becky, just call him now!”

Becky bends over to put all the trash back in the bag, still being very careful not to reveal the test.

“You can take that out while you’ve got it in your hand little missy.” Rose barks as she heads back to the bedroom.

“Yes ma’am I will.” Becky was glad to take out the trash this time and she was still marveling at her run of good luck. Hearing the sounds of beer cans and bottles in the bag, she takes it to

the rusty burn barrel in the backyard. Looking around to see if anyone is watching, she opens it and digs out the pregnancy test and once again puts it into the back of her pants. She goes into the house and picks up the phone but discovers her mother on the extension. It's Friday night and Rose is making her plans for the evening. Becky listens in while picking up the usual empties and cleaning the ashtrays.

"Oh yeah, I'm definitely coming tonight. It's Bingo night at Billy Rays. I could really use the money for sure. My dang disability check hasn't come in yet and I'm broke. Taking care of this hungry teenager is killing me. It would be nice to be somewhere cool for a change anyway. Just be here to pick me up at 7. I'll be ready." She hangs up the phone. "Now you make your call missy. Get that boy over here."

"Okay momma, I will. I just need to go to the bathroom first." Becky backs into the bathroom and hides the test above the mirror. She comes out and goes into the living room where her mother is holding an empty ashtray.

"Running out of patience here Becky," she scowls in her gruff voice.

Becky picks up the phone to call Jerry. The two talked for a few seconds. "Alright momma, he's on his way."

Rose points to the kitchen where her purse sits on the table. "Get that five dollars out of my purse for cigarettes."

Becky picks up the purse and fumbles around in it pretending to find the money. "I've got it momma." She says, knowing exactly where the money went. Going through the screen door to sit out on the porch to wait for Jerry, Becky remembers Miss Thelma. "If I go in there with Jerry, Miss Thelma's going to say something. I'll just have him stay in the car. What a mess I've gotten myself into," she thinks. "What if Jerry disappears when I tell him about being pregnant? What would I do then?" In the distance she can hear Jerry's car coming down the road. She

gets off the porch and walks to the road as he pulls up to the driveway. Getting in the loud car she reaches over to the air conditioner switch and turns it on.

"You know it doesn't work Becky." He reminds her.

"I know Jerry, just wanted to see what it would be like to do it. Just messin' with ya."

Rose opens the screen door to holler out to them. "Hurry back now, don't be chasin' no rabbits. I need my cigarettes!"

Jerry hollers back, "We won't miss Taylor, we'll be right back." Jerry lowers his voice. "Your mom is a work of art Becky."

"Picasso," Becky responds. "She's all kinds of colors and shapes that don't make sense."

"Who?" He asks.

"Never mind Jerry, just drive you goofball. I'm gonna need you to help me buy these cigarettes too, if that's ok? Momma didn't have as much money as she thought she had."

Jerry pauses then says, "I really don't want to support that terrible habit but I'll do it for you. You obviously forgot you can't just walk in and buy them at seventeen but I can't imagine going back without them. Who knows what she'd do."

Becky reminds him, "If I remember right sir, you're kind of under age too".

"That's ok Becky, don't worry. We'll go to the gas station. I'm under age but there's a guy there that will help me. He's a friend of mine." He pulls into the gas station and the two get out to go in. Jerry grabs her hand as they walk. Going to the counter to get the cigarettes, Jerry points, "Give me the Lancer 100s Juan." Jerry and his friend Juan acknowledge each other with a nod of the head. "This is Becky, Juan. She's with me now."

Juan smiles. Juan is an immigrant with a heavy South American accent. "Well at least you are finally starting to date man. I was beginning to worry about you. I thought the only thing you'd ever love is that loud, old, orange car of yours."

Becky is listening to the conversation.

"I guess you were waiting for the perfect match." Juan continues, "It won't be long before you two come in here toting a couple of kids."

"Whoa! Hang on Juan! Becky is a tad young for that right now. We're just hanging out having fun being together."

"Whatever Jerry, you two keep having fun." Juan says using air quotes on the, 'having fun' part. "Nice to meet you Becky."

"You too Juan," Becky says as she takes the bag from him. "Take care and we'll see ya soon. We've gotta get back home with these cigarettes for my mom before she sends out a search party."

On the way out the door Juan yells, "Hey!" to Jerry. He looks around to see Juan giving him a thumb's up. Jerry smiles.

The two walk back to the car and Becky questions, "just hanging out and having fun? Really? I guess I'm like your best friend or something now?"

The two stop before getting in the car. He grabs both of her hands. "Becky, you're so much more than that to me, girl. You're my forever and always girl. Now and forever, no matter what!" He opens the car door for her and leans in to kiss her. "Let's get these smokes back to Peekashoo."

She looks him over and smiles. "That would be Picasso Jerry."

"I like mine better." He says, as they pull out of the lot and head back home to deliver the precious cargo to Rose. Becky smiles. Her heart is happy.

Chapter Six

I NEED COFFEE



“**W**hat can we brew for you today?” The pleasant voice crackles through the speaker.

David scans the menu but always goes back to his usual. “I’ll have the Grande Vanilla Latte please.” He never seems to be able to try anything else. It was his normal routine and he was sticking with it. Of all the coffee shops in town this little place called, Jacks’ Java, had the best. The only time he changes up is for the holidays. The pumpkin spice is always a treat when it rolls around. He taps his finger on the steering wheel to the classic rock station on the radio as he waits in the line of cars. Today he’ll forego his normal muffin with his coffee. Sandy’s awesome breakfast was enough to fill his breakfast void.

Finally pulling up to the window, a young man with hoop earrings tells him, “We are so terribly sorry sir, but we are out of lids for the Grande cups. Would you like a tall one instead?”

David thinks about the clean, new white interior of his two seat sports car. “Yeah, you better give me the Tall instead. I definitely don’t want to spill it here.”

The young barista pours his drink into the smaller cup and fastens the lid on. “Sorry for the inconvenience sir.”

"No problem young man, have a great day." He pays him and puts a couple dollars into the tip jar then puts the coffee into the cup holder. Pulling into traffic, his mind wanders back to the morning breakfast. "I wonder what got into Sandy? She does so much for me but the breakfast thing was really unusual. I can't wait to see what she has in store for me tonight with supper." David's dental clinic opens at nine and with all the distractions so far this morning, he's running a bit late. His clinic was small but he managed with his fathers' help to put it in a very attractive part of town. He drives down the landscaped streets and past the upscale shops and checks out the bigger and more prestigious places he'd like to move into. Once he's able to stand on his own without his dad's help he knows his ideas of growing the business will be successful. He's startled when he hears cars honking their horns behind him. Looking into his rear view mirror, a car is swerving all over the road. It comes closer and David takes evasive action to keep from hitting the out of control car. The car passes him as he swerves. David suddenly feels something very hot in his lap. His coffee has turned over. Managing to keep control of his car, he pulls into a parking lot and stops. "Damn that's hot! What kind of idiot is driving like that over here in this part of town! He must be drunk or something." He hurriedly pulls open his glove box to find some napkins to try and wipe up the spilled coffee that's dripping down the sides of his white seats onto the carpet. "I knew those napkins would come in handy one day. Looks like a trip to the detail shop for cleaning."

He considers turning around to go home and change but he knows he has a white doctor's coat that will hide the coffee stains. No sense in turning around to go home now.

Opening the door to stand up and wipe up the spill he hears the terrible sound of a crash in the distance. The sound of breaking glass and squealing tires. The lights on the street all

go out. The traffic lights go dark. It's obvious the man in the car has found something to stop him. It was definitely a utility pole.

"I hope he's okay. Obviously he's having a medical issue." He checks his watch to see the time. He was officially late now. Hopefully the power at work would be on when he got there. Gathering himself, he pulls back into the morning traffic to go the last couple of miles to the office. "I need coffee." He thinks, as the traffic starts to grind to a halt. "I could probably squeeze some out of my pants. Just sayin."

It's stop and go, as he slowly moves toward his work destination. His phone rings in the car.

"Hello. Well good morning dad. I hope you're having a better day than I am. It's been crazy. I'm what? Oh my, I'm sorry dad. I forgot. We were going to meet to go over some financial information. I won't be long. I'm just about a mile away if you'll wait. Is the power on there? No. Do I have patients arriving? Ok, tell them we're probably going to have to reschedule. Who knows how long the power will be out? Sorry dad. We'll get together tonight if that's okay. Great. I'll give you a call later to set it up. Goodbye, sir."

The crawling traffic finally gets to the actual accident and just like David thought it was indeed a utility pole. An ambulance was loading up the poor man from the car. He noticed a wheelchair rack installed on the back of the car with the chair still fastened. He wondered, "What's a guy in a wheelchair doing driving a car? Doesn't sound safe to me. I sure hope he's okay though." He could see his business ahead as he rubbernecks the accident like everyone else. After what seemed like the longest two miles he'd ever driven, he pulls up into the parking lot and he hears a ding from his car. Looking down he sees his gaslight has come on. "Well that's about right! What else lays ahead of me today? I can only imagine."

He's an hour late as he walks into the clinic. "I need coffee!" he says to his receptionist Sarah as he walks by.

"Well doctor," she smiles, "we're gonna need some power before we can do that." She hands him his doctor's coat from the rack. "You might want to put this on doctor, you got a little stain there in your nether regions."

He reaches behind his back and takes the coat without turning around. "Yes, yes I will need that. Thank you very much Sarah."

"Doctor Carter, your dad just left, he was supposed to meet you here". She whispers, "He didn't look very happy when he left."

"I know Sarah, I've already talked to him. He couldn't wait."

David goes about seeing his patients and very apologetically explains the predicament to them. Most are very understanding of the turn of events. He apprises his staff of his morning drive, then goes into his office, closes the door and sinks down in his leather chair. "Wow! What's next? I sure could use my coffee now."

Sandy couldn't help herself. On the way home from the doctor she stops into a baby clothing store. She wanders the aisle looking at all the choices. The little girl clothes are so cute and colorful. She takes a favorite and holds it up visualizing her little girl in it. She does the same with the little boy outfits. The clothes are so small and wonderful to hold in her hand. They're all so soft and cuddly, every one. The tiny shoes are amazing. "I can't wait to put ten tiny toes in some shoes like this." She still hasn't decided how to tell David. She wants it to be so special for him. She wants it to be a day they'll always remember.

An employee comes over to ask her if she needs some help. She tells her about just finding out and that David doesn't know yet.

"Congratulations to you!"

Sandy gushes as she tells her story of finding out and telling her husband. Sandy asks her, "Any ideas about how to tell my husband?"

"We have something new you might be interested in. I think it's a great idea. Does your husband drink coffee?"

"Oh yeah, he definitely drinks coffee. What do you have?"

The two walk toward a rack of coffee cups. One of them has the announcement of being pregnant at the bottom of the cup

"This will be perfect! I'll get this for sure. Oh and this too! These are too cute to leave." Sandy grabs a little girl and boy outfit to take home. "I can't forget these shoes." The counter begins to fill up with her treasures. "Maybe I'll get this blanket."

Chapter Seven

CAPTAIN BILL



Rose perks her head up as she hears Jerry's car in the distance. She is sitting on the porch in her favorite smoking chair and pretending to smoke an imaginary cigarette. She hollers out to them as they pull up. "It's about freaking time you love birds got back here. You'd think that loud car would get places a whole lot faster."

Becky leans over to kiss Jerry goodbye.

"I'll give you a call when I get done working Beck. It'll probably be around six."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Rose mumbles. I think y'all will survive a few hours without each other. Young love, whatcha gonna do. Jerry, you get on out of here and Miss Becky, you can bring me those cigarettes." Jerry takes the clue to leave and honks and waves as he pulls out. Rose gets up and snatches the cigarettes out of Becky's hand and reclaims her seat.

"You are very welcome mother!" Becky snaps sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

"You better watch your smart mouth young lady."

The shade from the porch makes it cooler to sit outside than to go inside the hot house. The only thing the little box fan did inside was to move the hot air. At least an occasional

cool breeze would blow through on the porch. Rose lights her cigarette and takes a long draw on it. She blows out a cloud of smoke. "Now that's what I'm talking about. That's exactly what I needed, now Becky, be a sweetie and get me a beer."

Becky heads to the refrigerator.

Jerry was on a mission. His decision was made. The more he's with Becky, the more he knows he not only loves her but feels like he's her protector. His plan was to get her out of that old house as soon as possible before something really bad happened. She was going into her senior year in school and he knew how important that was for her to finish. Her grades were very good despite all her distractions. His hope was that she would get a scholarship to college. Her mother wanted her to quit school and go to work to help support the household. What he knew it meant was, Rose would have plenty of money for beer and cigarettes and trips to Billy Rays'. Every day that he drove home from Becky's house he would pass by the local pawnshop. Today was different. Today he was going in.

The door rings a bell as he goes in. An elderly gentleman is leaning on the counter.

"Hey Captain Bill. How's business today?"

Captain Bill is a retired navy man. This pawnshop is his ship and he enjoys being the Captain. He still wears his seaman hat and has many stories about time spent on the battleship during the war. There are great stories of honor and heroism. The flag, flying on the pole outside is the biggest in the county.

"Well Jerry, if I count you coming in today, I'll have two. Two whole people have come in. The second person is me. That's how business is today. What can I do for ya matey?"

"Captain, you know that ring I've been checking out for a while? Do you still have it?"

Bill shakes his head, "Yep, I sure do. I put it back for ya. I knew you'd want it eventually. Still got it in the original box. Sad

story about this ring though. A young fellow about your age got it for his girl before he went overseas in the Army. Well, he just didn't make it back, bless his heart. I figured it was waiting for a man like you, to come and claim it and let it finally sit on the finger of his lovely bride." Bill hands the small box to Jerry in the palm of his hand. Jerry carefully opens it up. The ring sparkles like nothing he's ever seen. It seems to have a life of its own. He knows Becky is the one who can bring back the love meant for it.

"Okay Captain, I'll take it. I sure will. Can we work out a payment plan or something?"

"You bet we can Jerry, I'd be honored to do that for ya."

The two complete their transaction and Jerry turns around to leave. On the counter by the door is a small air conditioner still in the box.

"Captain Bill?"

"Yes sir matey?"

"Is this a new air conditioner?"

"It sure is Jerry, you interested?"

"Heck yeah Captain, I'll take this too."

"Well I'll be doggone Jerry, I think this does it. I think I can finally retire."

The two men share a good laugh. Carrying the air conditioner outside, Jerry loads it into the back seat of his car. Jerry really didn't have to work that day like he told Becky. He had been planning on doing this for a while. He had been saving money doing odd jobs and hoping that Captain Bill wouldn't sell the ring. He didn't know he put it back for him. It made it seem like it was meant to be. Finally, he had enough saved for a down payment. The thought of him and Becky together as a married couple made him happy and he was so excited about finding a way to ask Becky to marry him. He wanted to ask her

in a special place. How and where was the burning question in his mind.

Pulling into the driveway at home, Jerry notices his dad's work van. It looks like he has painted the company name on it. The paper stencil is still taped to the side. It was so unusual to see the van at home this time of day. His dad was always working. He was a much sought after electrician in their town, known for his expertise and craftsmanship. Jerry idolized him and wanted to learn his craft. The technical classes were very beneficial.

Walking into the kitchen to the refrigerator to grab a drink, his dad is sitting at the table with his mother.

"Hello son. We were hoping you'd come home soon. What's going on with you today?"

"Not much dad, what's going on here? Why are you here in the middle of the day? You're normally out there working your magic."

"Son, we have some good news for you. Come with me outside."

The parents and Jerry head out the door to the carport beside the work van.

"Your mother and I have been thinking about doing this for a while and we think it's time you joined the business as an apprentice electrician."

Reaching up to the paper on the side of the van, he pulls it off to reveal the words, Paul and Son Electrical. You'll make some money and learn and who knows, if you do right and work hard, eventually this business will be yours."

Jerry looks them both over. He's finding it hard to speak. "Uh, seriously, no kidding?" Jerry takes his hand and touches the bright red words on the van. "Of course I will! Absolutely!" He reaches out to his dad to shake his hand. "Thank you dad, it's going to be an honor to work for you.

"You're welcome son, you're going to make me proud, right?"

"You bet dad, I sure will. I'll be learning from the best."

His mother Marge steps in to get in on the affection with a big hug. "One condition though son." his mother chimes in, "Please find another car, a quieter one and a different color. Please!"

"Sounds good to me mom. Wow! What a day!" Jerry beams. "I can't wait to tell Becky!"

Mom and dad look at each other. "How is Miss Becky and that mom of hers?" his mom asks.

"Becky's great, but her mom is pretty much the same as ever. She's hard on Becky for sure." Jerry pauses for a minute. "I uh, guess I have something I want to tell you too." He searches for the right words. "I've decided Becky and I are going to get married." He looks into each of their faces for reaction to the news he just spilled on them.

His dad looks up at him. "Jerry? Did you get that girl pregnant?"

"Of course not dad! I just love her and want to spend the rest of my life with her. I also want her to be safe. She's not in a good place there with her mom. There's not even an air conditioner in the house. It's hot in there. Dang hot! I don't know how she sleeps."

Jerry's mom speaks up. "I hope you're not marrying her to save her from her mom or because you feel sorry for her."

"No mom, I love her and that's enough, right? He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the box with the diamond ring. He puts it on the palm of his hand and opens it. The sun makes it explode with color. "I'm going to ask her tonight."

The two parents marvel at the beauty of the ring.

His mom speaks up, "Well, one thing for sure, you're going to need this job to pay for that. We love Becky Jerry, we always have. She's still young but she's smart. Isn't she still in school though? I hope you're planning on her finishing."

"Yes, ma'am I do. She's not only going to finish, I'll see that she goes to college".

"That is very smart for you both. Congratulations son! This is quite a day for all of us. It's definitely a day to remember."

"Yes it is! Yes it is!" Jerry beams." Let's talk about that car mom. Do you like red?"

Chapter Eight

THE BROKEN COFFEE CUP



Sandy throws the sacks from the baby store into the trunk. “Next stop” she thinks, “The grocery store, to figure out what to cook when I tell my husband I’m going to have his baby.” She continues to talk to herself. “Maybe some baby carrots or a bun to put in the oven.” Her mind is racing with ideas. She gets in the car to head to the local grocery store. It’s hard for her to believe that she wasn’t more prepared for this. She never allowed herself to get to these thoughts until she was sure of her pregnancy. Her train of thought is abruptly interrupted by a phone call in her car. She sees on the screen it’s David calling. “Hello there dear. How’s my handsome husband today?”

Hearing him through the speaker, he tells her, “Hi Sandy. I know you are planning a special dinner tonight.”

“Yes I am David, is something going on?”

“Well, yes it is. We had some issues with power at work today. I was supposed to be there early to talk to dad about business issues but I got stuck in traffic. He was on a time schedule and had to leave before I got there. What I’m trying to tell you is, he is coming over tonight to talk about the business stuff we didn’t get to discuss this morning. It seems to be important.”

"Okay" she pauses, "Could you please call him and ask him to do it some other time? I really wanted tonight to be special for us. I had big plans David!"

"I know dear, but you know dad, he's not going to take no for an answer. Just get some pizza on the way home or something. We can do our special night again soon. I'm so sorry Sandy."

"Okay David, if that's what you want. We can reschedule."

"Thanks Sandy, I love you."

"I love you too David. I'll see you at home in a little bit." Touching the screen to hang up the call, she doesn't know whether to be mad or cry. She is tired of her father-in-law calling all the shots with the business even though she understands he has helped David so much to get it going. "One day, one day soon," she thought, "we will be on our own without his help. Now what do I do? I can still tell him. I'll just have to do it when it's good for us both. I really don't want to tell him with his dad there. I want it to be about us. We'll tell them soon enough." Sandy gets home and takes her baby stash upstairs. She goes to her dresser and stuffs the baby clothes and shoes into the back of her dresser drawer. She had put the coffee cup into the cabinet upside down in the back. She is putting the sacks from her shopping in the trash when she hears the sound of the garage door opening. She glances at her watch. "It's way too early for him to be home. This day just continues to be strange." The garage door goes down and she hears him coming up the stairs. She goes to the stairs to greet him, and sees the coffee stains on his pants. "I can see you've had an eventful day dear. Are you here to change or are you here to show me your new fashion craze, coffee crotch?"

"I am actually here for the rest of the day Sandy. Our power outage caused us to reschedule everyone. I left early. Dad is on his way here now."

"Well, alrighty then. Do I need to go ahead and order a pizza or something or is it too early for that right now?"

"Just wait, Sandy. I'm going to head to the bathroom to change and get on something comfortable before dad arrives."

"The bathroom? Oh no!" Sandy gets a flashback from the morning. She still has the pregnancy test and the box on the counter in the bedroom bath. She makes a run for the bathroom before he can get there. "Please excuse me David, I gotta go. I gotta go right now." She says, as she passes him going down the hallway to the bedroom.

"We have other bathrooms you know. What's the deal with this one?" He wonders out loud to Sandy.

"It's a woman thing David, you wouldn't understand." She goes in and locks the door and stashes the box and test under the sink. It was right there on the counter for anyone to see. She felt stupid for leaving it there.

David grabs some workout pants and waits for her as she comes out. "Can I go in now? Is it safe in the women's bathroom?"

"Yep," she smiles, "It's all good my love." She grabs him and brings him close for a long passionate kiss. "It's all very good!"

David goes for more as they hear the doorbell ring. "Dang it dad! Bad timing!" He says as they stop.

"You change David, I'll get the door."

She hurries toward the door because she knows David's dad Chris, doesn't like to wait for anything. The doorbell rings again as she opens it. "Good afternoon dad, how are you? Come on in. David is changing. He had a little spill today."

"Yeah, I heard about his morning. Has he told you yet?"

"No sir, he hasn't, I'll have to get the details later from him."

Christopher M. Carter DDS is his name. He was a no non-sense dental surgeon, a very successful one. He had little time for family drama or anyone that might get in his way of being the best in his field. His home was on the edge of a cliff

overlooking a beautiful valley. Walking into the foyer of his home was like walking into a bank. Statues and marble floors were everywhere. He expected no less from his only son David. He was hoping that David would get serious about his career and do what he did, give up everything to make it succeed. The business he had to share with David was about his commitment to the profession. It was time to grow up and get busy. No more distractions allowed.

Sandy shuts the door and leads the Doctor to the dining room so the two can have a place to set their papers and computers down to talk business. David comes out of the bathroom and joins him. "Hey dad, I hope your day was better than mine."

"Enough about the past David, let's get on to the future. We've got a few little problems to go through."

Sandy asks them, "Can I get you guys anything?"

David thinks, "You know what I need? I need some coffee. I haven't had a cup all day. What about you dad? Anything for you?"

"No David, let's quit this yakking and get on to the business end. I don't have any time to piddle around."

"Okay dad, let's do it."

The computers come on and the papers come out. Sandy can hear them talking from the kitchen while she's getting David's coffee. She wonders, "Should I go ahead and do it? Should I give him the mug now? His dad wouldn't know if David didn't tell him when he saw, "I'm Pregnant" at the bottom of the cup." It will actually be funny that David sees it while his dad is talking business. His face would be priceless. Okay, I can't wait any longer. I've waited long enough. I'm going to make this happen." She pours the coffee in the cup. The words, "I'm Pregnant," disappear beneath the black coffee and she takes the special cup into the dining room, placing it in front of David. "Here you go, my dear, I know you've been waiting for this all day." She beams.

"Thank you very much dear" he agrees, "I sure have." Chris gets a good whiff of the fresh coffee. "My goodness, That really does smell great! I'll just take that one." David watches his cup of coffee disappear as his dad scoots it over to himself.

"You can get David another."

Sandy objects, "Mr. Carter, I just bought that new cup for David today."

Chris picks up the white cup and looks it over. "Nothing very special about a white coffee cup Sandy. He's good. You bring him a pretty one to make up for it. Now, back to business."

David keeps his silence. She goes back to the kitchen. "No, no, no! This is not good. This is not what I planned." She paces around in the kitchen and then goes to the cabinet to find another cup for David. "I've got to find a way to get that cup away from him and back to David." Filling the next cup, she starts back to the dining room. The two men are looking at paperwork. She reaches over the table to hand David his coffee and bumps a laptop. The laptop slides over and knocks the special coffee cup off the table onto the floor breaking it into two big pieces. Sandy watches as her cup hits the floor. She gasps.

"Well there ya go again! It must be a national spill your coffee day" David exclaims as he bends over and picks up the two pieces. Putting the pieces together to take to the kitchen. He looks down at one of them. He sees, "I'm Pre." He then picks up the other piece and sees the "gnant." He looks up at Sandy. She's staring at him with tears starting to fall from her eyes.

"Sandy! Really! Is it true?"

"Yes! Yes it is David!" She runs to him and they embrace as he starts to cry with her. Sobbing on David's shoulder she tells him, "I couldn't wait any longer, I had to tell you tonight!"

Chris shakes his head, "That must have been one hell of a special cup! Now someone please tell me what's going on here!"

Chris takes the pieces from David's hands and looks at them. "Well my goodness! This *is* a special cup. I should say, this was a special cup before it hit the floor. Congratulations to you both! David, we need to call your mother and tell her to come on over for this news."

"I need to tell my mother too." Sandy tells them. I've got to tell everyone!"

Chris thinks to himself "This is really bad timing for this to happen."

Chapter Nine

THE DAISY BROACH



The box fan in the window is blowing hot air. The drapes are rhythmically moving in the wind. Becky is propped on the couch sipping some sweet tea and watching an early evening talk show. The horrible problems the people on the show area going through make her life seem a tad more tolerable.

Rose is in the shower getting ready for her Bingo night at Billy Rays and Becky can hear her singing a country song, badly. She is waiting for her mother to leave so she can call Jerry to come over. Bingo nights out at the club usually last until about 3 in the morning. She was trying to decide whether to tell Jerry she thought she was pregnant or to keep it to herself until she was positive it was true. She had read the box and the instructions told her to wait until morning to use it for best results. She really wanted to go ahead but she knew if she did and it came out negative, she would still wonder. She was taking no chances. It would definitely be better to wait until morning. What time was morning? Was it four or seven in the morning? The phone rings beside her on the couch.

"Hello? Well, hello Jerry. I'm just sitting here thinking about you. What's up? You coming over later? Mom will be gone by seven. Okay, I guess I can dress up. Where are we going? Wow,

I've never been to a steakhouse. I hope I have something to wear. Can you afford this Jerry? You know we can just get something and bring it here. Okay then. I can't wait. I'll see you about seven thirty. Love you! Goodbye." Becky felt flush with excitement just thinking about going to a fancy restaurant with Jerry. It was like they were all grown up and adults.

The bathroom door opens. "Who was that on the phone Becky? It wasn't my ride backing out of taking me was it?"

"No mamma, it was Jerry."

"Now look young lady, I'll not have him here all night while I'm gone. I don't trust that boy. Boys like him got one thing on their mind. The last thing in the world I need right now is some squalling baby to take care of. Don't you dare let him come over and get you messed up."

Becky's patience with her mother was getting very thin. "Mom, you need to stop that right now. When are you ever going to trust me? Jerry is a great guy and he takes good care of me. I know he loves me whether you think he does or not." Becky knew the truth of her pregnancy scare but she definitely wasn't going to let the cat out of the bag until she had to.

"Just hear me Becky, he is not to be in this house if I'm not here. You got me?" "Yes ma'am I got you." Getting up, Becky takes her tea outside to sit on the porch.

A strange car pulls up in the driveway and stops. A man with a cowboy hat gets out and walks up to her. "Your mamma ready to go yet? I'm here to take her to Billy Rays." He reaches his hand out to shake Becky's. "My name is Wayne, great to meet you. Your mamma has told me all about you."

Becky looks him over. He's tall and lanky. His cigarette is barely hanging on to his lip. His belt buckle looks like a license plate and his boots are sharper than any knife they would have in the drawer.

"My name's Becky, nice to meet you too. Momma is almost ready if you want to come in and wait." She opens the screen door for him and he takes a seat on the couch.

"Reckon you got something cold to drink while I wait, Becky. It's damn hot in here."

"Would some tea be ok, or would you rather have a beer?"

Wayne points his finger at her like a pistol. "We got a winner, beer it is."

Becky goes to the bathroom. Her mother is drying her hair with the blow dryer. "Momma, there's a guy named Wayne here to pick you up. Are you about ready?"

She turns off the hair dryer and pokes her head out. "Just a second Wayne, I'm almost done here."

"It's all good Rose, your lovely daughter is taking good care of me."

Becky puts the beer on the table beside him.

"Thank ya sweetie. You are alright in my book."

"You're welcome sir." She says as she heads back to the porch.

Wayne watches her walk out. She feels a bit creeped out by him. It was just the way he looked at her. She felt almost violated. Becky wonders what it would have been like if her dad had come back from Iraq. She was just a little girl then but she remembered her dad and she remembered how much she loved him and missed him. Her mother just seemed to give up after that. The drinking was her way to hide her grief in the beginning but had now become her demon. The addiction was obvious to everyone, everyone except her. Becky remembers her family when he was still alive and she even missed the mother that Rose used to be. Sometimes she felt sorry for her despite her addiction.

Wayne holds the screen door open for Rose. "After you my lady, after you." "Thank you very much my good man, shall we get this show on the road?"

Becky rolls her eyes. "You guys have a great time. See ya later."

"You remember what I said about having Jerry over here" Rose reminds her.

"I heard you mamma, I heard you." She watches as Wayne opens the car door for Rose.

"You see that Becky" she yells out, "That's what a gentleman does for his lady. Your boy needs to take lessons."

"Bye mom, see you later."

Wayne waves at Becky as they back out and drive away.

"Finally," she says. She picks up the phone to tell Jerry they're gone and to come on over. She hangs up the phone and knows that now it's time to get ready for her night. "What am I going to wear?" she wonders, as she goes into her small bedroom closet. Jeans and a few shirts is all she has. She knew this was a real date with Jerry. It was the first time they had actually gone on one where they were going to go in and sit down. She had to look good for him.

She walks to her mothers' closet. There were a lot of old clothes her mother used to wear. Many of them were too big now because of the weight she had lost. Scanning through the closet she came across a yellow dress with spaghetti straps. It looked like it might fit but it stunk from cigarette smoke. She takes it out of the closet and to the kitchen sink. She reaches for the dishwashing liquid and squirts it on the dress. Brown water pours off of the dress as she soaks it in the sink. The bright yellow color returns and she washes it again and again. There was no time to take it to the laundromat. It wouldn't be long before Jerry arrived. She squeezed out the water the best she could and then took it to the bathroom and hung it on a hanger. Taking the hair dryer, she did her best to dry it. It seemed like an hour before she took it off the hanger to try and iron it. It was then she noticed one of the spaghetti straps was torn. "Oh no! What am I going to do? Everything in the closet reeked from cigarette smoke. She had to make this work. She remembered that

there was a pretty broach in her mothers' jewelry box she could use to hold it on. She ironed the dress and hung it back on the hanger while she hurriedly took a shower. She used mostly cold water so she wouldn't come out all sweaty. She didn't hear Jerry drive up while she was drying her hair.

Jerry had driven the work van over to surprise her with his news. He knocks on the screen door and then walks in. He hears the hairdryer in the bathroom. Going to the kitchen he grabs a glass of tea. On his way back, Becky comes out of the bathroom holding the dress heading to the bedroom to get the broach to hold the strap.

"Hi Becky, I'm here." He announces as he sees her come out.

Standing in the hallway half naked, Becky screams. "Oh my God, Jerry!" as she tries to cover herself up. "You scared the crap out of me! Don't look, I'm not dressed."

He puts his hands over his eyes as she rushes into her mothers' bedroom and closes the door. "Sorry Beck, I thought you heard me."

Her heart still racing from the scare, she gets dressed and puts the broach on the torn strap. The pin is a small yellow daisy. She wasn't sure where it came from but she had seen her mother wear it years ago. "That's not too bad, not bad at all." She finishes her makeup and places a yellow headband in her hair.

Jerry hears the door open and stands up. Becky comes out into the living room. She is standing there, in her bare feet. Jerry is dumbfounded. He has never seen her look so grown up. He had never seen her hair down and out of a ball cap.

"Becky, wow, you are beautiful." He feels his heart rev up just seeing her like this.

"Thank you Jerry. No one has ever told me that before." She rushes up to him. The two stand together in a hug and stare into each other's eyes.

"You look pretty nice too sir. You're wearing a tie and coat and everything. I even think I smell some cologne."

He slowly reaches in to kiss her ever so lightly on the lips. The feeling is almost electrical as their lips touch.

"I love you Jerry. I love you so much." Her voice breaks as she speaks and buries her head in his chest.

He has never experienced so much from such a small kiss. "I love you too Becky, more than anything in this world. Let's back off a bit girl," he says breathlessly. "Get some shoes on, I've got a surprise for you outside."

She runs to her mothers' bedroom and finds some shoes that match. "I've got to put these back before mom comes back" she thinks, "or she'll kill me."

Jerry is waiting on the porch when she comes out.

"Why did you drive your dads' big white van over here? Is your car broke down?" "No ma'am, check out the painting on the side."

She runs out to the van. "Jerry, are you kidding me? Your dad asked you to be his partner?"

"Sort of, I'm going to be an apprentice and learn. He said if I'm good and learn everything, the business will be mine someday."

"That's incredible news Jerry! I know how much you love your dad. He's such a great guy."

"But wait" Jerry goes on, "there's more." He goes to the back of the van and opens the door. Reaching in the van he picks up the air conditioner box from Captain Bill's and brings it out. "Now you're gonna sleep more comfortably Miss Becky."

"Oh my goodness Jerry, you're the best, you're the very best!" Once again the two embrace. "This is a great day Jerry! So much good news and we are going to a fancy restaurant to top it off. How could it get any better?"

"I'm gonna try Becky, I'm gonna try." David says, as he reaches into his pocket to hold the box containing the ring.

Chapter Ten

BIG SHOES TO FILL



Sandy bounces upstairs to get the baby clothes she bought to show David. She's singing as she goes up the stairs. "Havin' my baby, what a lovely way of saying how much you love me." I can't believe I remember the lyrics to this song," she thinks as she goes through the drawer to retrieve the baby clothes and shoes.

David is sitting at the table with his dad. He has reassembled the cup to see it all together. He's staring at the words, 'I'm Pregnant', and smiling.

Chris gets up to close the door to the room and he locks it. He takes the cup from David and sits down.

"Son, what are you doing? Were you not using any protection? How could you let this happen? Now is definitely not a good time for you to have a baby." He throws some papers on the desk in front of David. "Look at these numbers son. Can you not see that your business really needs all of your attention right now?"

David is stunned. "Really dad? You honestly are saying you are not happy about this? Sandy and I have been trying to have a baby for two years now. We are excited beyond belief! This business is new and growing. I fully expected a slow climb. I've got this dad, don't worry."

Chris raises his voice, “two years, are you crazy? David I am so disappointed right now. Two years ago I was giving you money hand over fist to get you started. I fully expected a real commitment on your part. I put you up in the best part of town in the finest of offices. I guess I totally overestimated your business drive. Maybe you need to just get you a smaller place with less expenses.”

David rises to his feet. “Dad, stop it, take a breath. I can’t believe this right now!”

“Son, please listen to me. I am not always going to be here to bail you out. I need you to take ownership of your business or you are going to lose it.”

“Dad, that’s the reason we didn’t tell you we were trying. We knew you would overreact. ”

Chris takes a deep breath. “Son do you think Sandy can handle this while you work ten or eleven hours a day? Can she get up all hours of the night with a baby so you can get your rest to do what you have to do? Will she go to all those doctor visits by herself or is she going to want you to go?”

“Dad, don’t you dare start on Sandy. She’s going to be a fantastic mother. You’ll see.”

Chris gathers up his papers and laptop.

“Where are you going dad? I didn’t think we were done.”

“Oh yeah, we are done David. We will continue this when you are in your right mind.”

Chris opens the door to find Sandy standing there with two little boys’ shoes in her hands smiling.

“Look daddy,” she hands to shoes to David, “I’ve got some big shoes to fill.”

Chris pushes past her and David with his briefcase. “You’re damn right he does! Not every son can fill his father’s shoes. Just saying.”

"Doctor Carter, what does that mean? What's going on here David?"

"I can let my own self out Sandy. You both celebrate. The rest of the world will take care of business."

Sandy and David sit at the table. Neither one can believe what just happened.

"I knew dad would be a problem. I don't know why I thought he would be happy. I guess I just figured that he would react like any potential grandfather. Once again, I am wrong where he's concerned. I understand the business is new but we are doing just fine."

Sandy looks at him with a look of disbelief. "The business? I don't understand David. What does the business have to do with us having a baby?"

David takes the shoes and puts them on the table. He makes them walk over to Sandy. In his best baby voice he says, "Mommy, I love you! It's all going to be just fine. I promise."

She smiles and gives him a kiss on the cheek. "Yes it is, uh, little Davy."

"Little Davy," he says, "Seriously? I really think we need to get busy on naming this baby. Little Davy is definitely not going to cut it."

Chris gets into his car and slams the door. He tries to calm himself.

"Okay, this is going to be fine. We can still do this. No decisions made when you're mad or in love. I'm definitely mad so I'll let this settle for a while. I do want a grandchild but not right now."

He backs out of the driveway and turns into traffic. He thinks back on his conversation with David. Realizing he might have been a bit overboard on his opinion, he decides to call his son.

"Call David," he says to his car phone. David picks up on the fourth ring just before Chris decides to hang up.

"Hello dad, what do you need?"

"Hello son, I just wanted to call and tell you I might have been a little rude there on your news. I'm just trying to get you going so you don't need me to prop you up. I want you to be independent and good to go with your business."

"I understand dad but it was such good news to us and we wanted you to be happy too, that's all. Your reaction shocked us both."

"Well son, you and Sandy get ready because this is going to be tough. I want both of you to come over and tell your mother Friday night. I'm sure she'll be over the moon."

"It's okay dad, I understand. You're just looking out for me. Don't worry, we can do this."

"Does supper sound good to you?"

"Sure dad, I'll tell Sandy, we'll be there about six. Is that good for you and mom?"

"Sounds good David, we'll see you then." David hangs up. Chris remembers that he never did get that coffee he wanted after all the commotion. He pulls into the local coffee shop and orders. Sitting in the line his phone rings again. He takes a deep breath before answering it. "Hello? Yes this is Doctor Carter."

A voice on the other end asks him. "Doctor Carter are you still available tomorrow at two for your Oncology appointment with Doctor Harrington?"

"Yes, I am. Gotta say I'm not looking forward to it though."

"I understand Doctor, if you have any questions please feel free to ask Doctor Harrington. We will see you tomorrow at two."

"Okay, see you then. Goodbye." He pushes the screen to hang up. "I guess we all have our little secrets now don't we."

Chapter Eleven

SIZZLIN' STEAK



Jerry finally returns after taking his dad's van back home. He runs up the stairs and through the screen door. Becky is waiting for him in her bedroom.

"Well?" Jerry asks. "What do you think? Do you like it? Does it feel awesome?"

Becky's eyes are closed. "Jerry I don't know how I have lived without this. This is life changing for me. I can't wait to just lie in bed and soak it all in tonight. I can't thank you enough!"

"I always knew you would Becky. I'm used to air conditioning, so I guess I just take it for granted." Jerry had quickly installed the small air conditioner in Becky's bedroom before he returned the van to his dad.. He wants her to be able to sleep cool when he brings her home. He came prepared with tools to put it in her window. It's a small unit but it's a perfect fit. "Well Miss Becky, are you ready to get on our way to eat? Are you hungry?"

She reaches for him and whispers in his ear, "Jerry, I don't care where we go as long as I'm with you." Pulling him close to her she kisses him passionately.

Feeling the hair on the back of his neck tingle, he breaks their embrace. "We better get on to the steakhouse girl. If we wait any longer we might not make our reservation. Just saying."

They both take a deep breath and reach for each other's hand. "To my chariot Miss Becky."

"Why thank you Mister Jerry, lead the way."

Becky closes the bedroom door as they go out. "I'm gonna have it ice cold in there when I get back. I better find my blankets."

"I don't know if it will do all of that Becky but you will definitely sleep cooler."

They reach the car and he opens her door for her. She daintily slides in "Wow, that's one hot seat on these bare legs Jerry."

"I'm sorry Beck. I should have parked in the shade." He shuts her door. It springs back open. He tries again, same thing happens. Grumbling and smiling, he reaches into the glove compartment to grab a screwdriver. Holding the door open, he pries and bends the mechanism. "Okay my dear, now it will shut." He slams the door and it finally shuts. Wiping the grease off his hands he gets in the driver's seat.

"Still no air I guess?" she asks. "I don't want my hair to blow. I used hairspray and everything. I'm just trying to be pretty for you."

"You're the prettiest thing that's ever sat in this car before Becky. Leave your window up. We don't have to go far. The restaurant is just up the road."

Becky scoots over by his side. He turns the key to start it. All he gets is a click. "You have got to be kidding me!" he says with a raised voice of frustration. "I should have kept the van."

"There, there now, you can do this ole orange," Becky says in her sweet voice as she pets the dash of the car. "Try it again Jerry."

He looks over at her, smiles and turns the key. The old engine roars to life. "You've got the magic touch girl. I might need you to ride with me everywhere, just to keep it running."

"Sounds good to me Jerry. Sounds good to me."

The two drive toward the restaurant. He pulls her close and puts his arm around her. They pass by the new car dealership in town.

"There you go Jerry. That's what you need, a brand new car. I bet you could even get one in orange if you wanted. One with an air conditioner that works."

"A truck," he adds, "I want a truck and I doubt very seriously that it will be orange."

"I'd love to see you driving up in my driveway in a new truck. You could load up all my stuff and take me away to paradise." She muses.

"I can't promise paradise or a new truck but I can promise you a good steak. We're here at Bobs' Steakhouse. He's been cooking steaks all his life." He pulls into the parking spot and goes around the car to open her door. She sees him reach to slam the door shut and she stops him.

"Let me," she says, "I've got the magic touch, remember." Slowly and deliberately she pushes the door until it shuts.

"Now let's eat." Jerry smiles.

Walking through the door, a beautiful hostess greets them. "Welcome to Bob's Steakhouse. Will there be two tonight?"

"Just us tonight, thank you," Jerry says in his manly voice.

She leads them to their seat and they slide in on one side of the booth. Becky looks around at the people there eating. Most are in suits and ties like Jerry and the women with them are very well dressed. She thinks about her dress being held together with a broach. She hopes it keeps holding up the strap. Picking up the menu and looking it over, she sees the prices. She whispers, "Jerry, we could buy groceries for a week at my

house with what you are going to spend here. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Becky, please stop. We are going to enjoy this together, you and me. Don't feel bad. I've got this girl." What he wasn't telling her was that his parents had given him their credit card for this very special date. They wanted to be a part of the evening for their son and future daughter-in law.

A young couple comes in with a baby carrier. They sit down and place the carrier on the table. Becky watches as they play with their child. Her reality hits her again. The fact that she may be pregnant is still foremost in her mind. She looks over to see Jerry watching them too.

"Do you think a young couple should have kids Becky or do you think they should wait for a few years?"

She feels her face flush with his question. "I'm not sure Jerry, I guess it depends on the couple. I'm sure it would be fine either way. How can you not love a baby?"

He pauses to think, "I don't know either but I do want kids though." She didn't quite know what to do with the information he was giving her but he didn't say he was opposed to kids. She was happy with that. The waitress steps up to the table. "Good evening to you. My name is Susan and I will be your waitress."

Becky speaks up, "Hi Susan, how are you?"

"I'm good tonight. I love your dress ma'am. The broach is pretty too."

Becky hears the waitress call her ma'am. It makes her feel grown up.

"Thank you very much Susan. I might need a little help with this menu though."

Jerry takes her menu and points out a few things she might like. Susan leans over while he's looking. "You've got a good guy there ma'am." Susan tells her.

"My name's Becky and yes I do."

Jerry helps her order and she questions the waitress about working there. She is thinking, if she's pregnant, she's definitely going to need a job. Maybe this would be a good start. She could do this job for sure.

The steaks arrive sizzling on the plate. She breathes in the excellent steak aroma and picks up the knife to cut her first bite. "Oh my gosh Jerry! This is like food in Heaven."

Jerry has already gotten his first bite and the best he can with food in his mouth says, "You're right Becky, this is the good stuff."

The two eat like it's their last meal. She can't put each bite in her mouth fast enough. The conversation goes silent as they enjoy it. She has never had steak before and she decides she likes it...a lot. After they eat they engage in a long conversation about her mother and what her life has been like, losing a father and dealing with an alcoholic. She tells him how fortunate his life is with two good parents who love him.

The baby in the carrier starts to cry. Both parents go about taking care of the baby's needs. The mother takes it out to cuddle it. Becky can't help but watch them. Time passes as they continue to talk. Jerry is very nervous about his proposal. He talks a lot when he's nervous and thinking about asking her is making him very nervous.

"What do you say we get out of here Becky? Are you ready to go?"

"I don't want this date to end Jerry but I guess I'm ready, if you are."

He puts a twenty-dollar bill on the table for the waitress.

"Holy Cow Jerry, that's a big tip."

Jerry fills her in on the life of a waitress and their wages. He pays Susan and thanks her. Becky gets up and hugs her. "You're an awesome waitress. This is a great place."

The hug surprises the waitress but she responds with a smile. "You are so welcome Becky. Ya'll have a fantastic evening!"

"I already have Susan. Thank you again."

They step outside to a clear, moonlit August night. It's still hot but tolerable.

"Where are we going now Jerry?" she asks.

"You'll see Becky. It's a surprise."

Getting in the car he reaches for the key to start it. He pulls back and tells her. "You start it. I don't want to be stuck here all night."

Becky reaches over and turns the key and the car once again starts up with a roar and a puff of smoke. "Magic touch," she reminds him, "Magic touch."

Chapter Twelve

WHAT IS A YAYA



Friday night arrives and Sandy and David are getting ready for the dinner invitation at David's parents house. Dinner was always a big occasion at Doctor Carters' house. Dress casual was required. Sandy is worried about the evening. She is checking herself in the mirror and looking radiant in her red evening dress. "David, this is really going to be awkward for me tonight. After the confrontation you had with your father yesterday, I'm not sure how this is going to go."

David walks up behind her and puts his hands on her shoulders and kisses her on the neck. "Don't worry dear. He called me and apologized. The best way he can anyway. You know my mother. She is going to keep him under control. He won't be all negative in front of her. She won't let him. How long has she been wanting us to have her first grandbaby anyway?"

"Years," Sandy answers, "all our married life, I think."

"Exactly my dear, it's been years so let's just get over there and have a great time and give my mom the news she's been waiting for."

"I know you're right David, I guess I'm just a bit nervous to let out the news. Oh, and by the way, you look amazing tonight."

"Yes we do my dear wife. We are a great looking couple. Imagine what our baby will look like.

Sandy and David admire themselves in the mirror. He makes a goofy face.

"Let's hope it looks like me." Sandy says with a push towards the door. "Let's go you big goofus."

Chris' wife Donna is preparing for the arrival of Sandy and David. She is going through the house doing a little last minute pick-up of magazines and books the doctor is reading and straightening out some couch pillows. She walks by the table and adjusts the silverware and napkins and makes sure everything is in order. Walking into the large kitchen, she checks with the cook. "How's it going Michael, everything ok?"

He takes a step back from the counter where he is cutting vegetables and comes to attention. "It couldn't be better Mrs. Carter. Everything is going as planned and will be ready on time."

"I knew you would be great, as always Michael. It smells fantastic."

"Thank you so much Mrs. Carter. Is this a special occasion?"

She steps toward the stove and takes a spoon to taste one of the sauces. "Oh my, Michael, this is delicious. I can only say that Doctor Carter told me to get everything ready for tonight because there was going to be an announcement to the family. I don't know for sure but it's probably business related, knowing him. We'll see. Don't let me stop you. Carry on Michael."

"Yes ma'am, I will."

Donna walks toward her dressing room to prepare to get ready for the evening. Looking over at Chris' dressing room she hears him in the shower. He has thrown his clothes on a small couch. She reaches for the dirty clothes to toss them into the hamper. As she is gathering up the clothes a business card falls out of his shirt. Picking up the card, she reads it. She stares at it and reads it over again. 'Dr. Bill Harrington Oncologist.' "Oh

my God, oh my God," she whispers. "This is going to be the big announcement to the family tonight. Why hasn't he told me? Oh my God!" She doesn't know what to do with the card except put it back in the shirt pocket and put the clothes back on the couch in the dressing room. She doesn't know whether to be mad or to cry. A tear falls from her eye. Wiping it away, she hears the shower stop. Quietly she steps into her dressing room and shuts the door to get ready for the evening.

Donna has always been the ideal wife and mother. She has served her husband Chris for many years. He never allowed her to have a career of any kind. Her time was devoted to him and David. She knew that Chris expected nothing but order in the house. The house was his island and his respite from all the drama and hassle of business and customers. Peace and quiet was what he wanted and she was in charge of providing it. It was a stressful life for her but she had managed over the years to be able to give it to him.

She sits motionless in the dressing room. Trying to put on her makeup and pick out her dinner attire all she could think of was the card she found. She wondered, "Why would he have a dinner party to announce this horrible news. Maybe it wasn't bad at all and he was going to say he was free and clear and beat whatever he had." He was a very private person. A knock comes on the door.

"You about ready dear? They'll be here soon."

"Yes Chris, I'm just about ready. Be out in a second." She wanted to tell him what she discovered and embrace him and say everything would be okay but he was not a very affectionate man and mostly resisted emotional contact. Sometimes she was a lonely woman but she loved him dearly.

The doorbell rings and a servant lets David and Sandy in.

"Wow, something smells amazing. Looks like Michael, is at it again." David says, sniffing the air.

Sandy asks, "Yeah David, When do I get one of those for my kitchen?"

"Maybe for Christmas Sandy, if you're really good this year."

Donna meets them at the entryway. "Good evening you two," Donna says as she hugs them both. "You look fantastic Sandy."

"Thank you Donna, you do too."

"What about me mom? Do I look fantastic too?" David asks sarcastically.

"Oh you'll do son, good enough I guess. Come on in and have a seat. I'll get you some drinks." Donna heads out of the room and Chris comes in.

"Hi dad, hope all is well in the house today."

"I'm fine son." He leans in to David and Sandy and whispers, "I haven't told her yet and she doesn't know why I called this dinner party, so if she asks you tell her you don't know either. I know she's going to be very excited. Come on in to the dining room and we'll sit and talk with a few drinks, that is, everyone but you Sandy. You've gotta start watching everything that goes into your body."

They head into the very ornate and beautiful dining room. Donna comes in with the usual drinks for Sandy and David.

"Could I just get some water Donna, I'm really not ready for a drink right now."

"Sure Sandy I can do that, I'll be right back."

Michael comes into the room pushing a cart. "Dinner is served." He goes around to each place and after lifting the lid, pours a soup into each bowl. "This is Broccoli Cheddar Soup. I hope you like it."

Donna comes in with Sandy's water and takes her place at the table. They all taste the soup. David raises his spoon after a taste. "Michael, you are the soup master my friend. It is very good."

Michael bows to David, "Thank you sir."

Sandy takes a spoonful. The smell of the cheese is making her feel woozy for some reason. She swallows the spoonful trying to be courteous. "Very good soup Michael, thank you." Sandy glances over at David as he enjoys the soup. He notices that she has a look of disgust on her face. He mouths to her, "You okay Sandy?"

She shakes her head and gets up from the table. Reaching for a napkin she means to say excuse me but that's not what comes out. She gets sick standing there as everyone watches her. David gets up to help her. Chris has turned in his seat to try not to watch and for a moment Donna is frozen, mouth open. Sandy opens her eyes and looks around. She is horrified and embarrassed. Servants are running in to clean up and Donna takes her by the arm with David to lead her out to get cleaned up.

"I am terribly sorry Miss Sandy," Michael pleads.

"It's not your fault Michael, really. I'll explain in a few minutes."

"Hey Michael," Chris says as he gets up from his seat, "we'll probably not be having the soup tonight. What's next?"

"Sea Bass sir," Michael says.

"Might be interesting, get it ready for when they return."

"Yes sir, I will."

They all return and have a seat. Everything has been cleaned and replaced. Sandy remains standing. "I am so terribly sorry Doctor Carter."

Donna chimes in, "It's just fine dear. We all have our moments."

"That's right Sandy," Chris' says, "we all do have our moments and I think this moment can be for you both. David, tell your mother what's going on."

Donna was expecting an announcement from Chris about his visit to the Oncologist. She is dumbfounded and waiting for an explanation. David comes over to his mother holding

Sandy's hand. He puts his hand on her shoulder. "Mom, I think I can explain what just happened with Sandy."

"David, is Sandy sick?" She asks.

"Well Mom, she's probably going to get over her nausea but she's going to be having other symptoms for about nine months."

Donna looks at Chris then looks back at David and Sandy with her hands over her mouth. "Sandy, are you pregnant?"

"Yes I am Donna. You're finally going to get that grandbaby you've always wanted."

She gets up from her chair to hug David and Sandy. With tears rolling down her face, she says, "Finally, I'm finally going to be a Yaya!"

Chris gets a look of confusion on his face. "What the hell is a Yaya?"

Chapter Thirteen

THE ROAD OF LIFE



Jerry's loud orange car turns into an unfamiliar neighborhood. "Who lives in this neighborhood Jerry? Do you have a friend we are going to see?"

"You'll see Becky, just hang on." He navigates down multiple streets and finally comes to a stop under a nightlight and turns the key off. "Okay Becky, we are here. Just follow me."

Jerry gets out and comes to Becky's side of the car to open her door.

"This is strange Jerry. Where are you taking me?"

He reaches into the car and gets a flashlight out of the glove compartment and shines it beside one of the houses. He opens the trunk and retrieves a blanket. "See that trail there. We're going down that trail. Don't worry, I've been here many times before by myself."

She takes his hand as he leads her down the trail. It's an unusual place to be but she decides to trust him. They walk down the trail and come up on an overlook. In the distance, you can see the city and freeway below them. The city buildings are illuminated with lights as well as the cars on the freeway. Jerry goes to the edge and puts the blanket down on the ground.

"This is really a neat place Jerry. Do you come here a lot?"

"I come here alone when I have things on my mind Becky. I like to watch the cars going down the freeway and to see all the lights of the buildings. Sometimes an airplane will fly overhead. I always imagine myself on the plane going somewhere special." He takes her hand and pulls her down with him to sit. He is terribly nervous but is determined to tell her how he feels. He pauses for a bit and turns to her. Taking her face in his hands, he kisses her on the lips. "Becky, I want to tell you something."

Becky looks him in the eyes. "Okay Jerry, what is it?"

Jerry points to the cars on the freeway. "See those cars down there. They are all going somewhere. Maybe they're going out with their wives or girlfriends. Maybe they're going to work. They could be taking their kids to a movie or out to eat with their family. When I come up here, I watch them going to their destinations and wonder about my life. I always wondered what twists and turns I would take in my life and who would be with me to experience those twists and turns. Would I ever find someone that I would want to share life with me? I'm not perfect and I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed but I have a lot to give someone" He turns to face her again. "Becky, I want that someone to be you." Jerry reaches into his pocket and takes out the ring box and opens it. "Becky, would you marry me? Would you be the one beside me going down the road of life?"

She takes the box from Jerry. The moonlit night makes the ring come alive with colors. She tries her best to speak but the words won't come. Her eyes fill with tears as she embraces him. She whispers in his ear. "Yes! I will marry you Jerry. I love you so much!"

He takes the ring and puts it on her finger. It's a bit loose but she admires it in the light of the moon.

"It's so beautiful Jerry, so very beautiful."

"Just like you Becky," he whispers to her as the two kiss passionately and fall to the ground on the blanket. Time passes as

the two share their passion with each other until Becky breathlessly stops him.

"Jerry, wait a minute. We can't continue this right here."

Jerry sits up. "What do you mean Becky?"

She tells him softly. "I want to start our physical relationship when we get married. I know what happened before with us and I just want our honeymoon to be the best it can be. Do you understand?"

Jerry smiles at her. "That's exactly why I love you Becky. Of course we can do that and I agree with you totally."

They stand up as an airplane flies over.

"Hey look," she says, "there we go on our honeymoon to Hawaii."

"I don't know about that girl but we will try. I promise."

"It's getting a little late Jerry. I think I better get home in case momma comes home early. I really doubt it but she has surprised me before."

Jerry grabs the blanket and flashlight to head back down the trail. He shines it on her. "Becky, you've got a little problem there."

She looks down and notices that her strap is dangling and the broach is missing. "Oh my, I didn't mean for you to see all of that Jerry." She says as she pulls the dress back up to cover herself.

Jerry turns while she adjusts. "I didn't see anything Becky, I promise."

"Help me find that broach. I borrowed it from my mother and I guarantee you, she will notice it missing."

Shining the flashlight on the ground they start to look.

"I don't see it anywhere Becky."

They continue to look until Becky notices a sting. "Wait! I think I found it." She turns around and digs into her bra and pulls it out. "Of course it fell down there. Ouch!" She says, handing the broach to him. "Will you pin it on me again my dear?"

"Okay," Jerry smiles as he pins the strap back on. "Crisis averted. Let's get you home to that air conditioned room so you can sleep in comfort."

"Oh yeah," she says. I can't wait."

The two take each other's hand and head down the trail to the car. Jerry's heart is full and Becky's happiness is tempered by her thoughts of the morning test that awaits her. Sharing one more passionate kiss before leaving her house, Jerry remembers something.

"Oh, I almost forgot. My parents want you to come over tomorrow night. We are gonna have a celebration dinner. I think dad is going to cook out. Could you eat another steak?"

"Wow Jerry. You are gonna spoil me."

"That's the plan Becky, get used to it."

They share one more hug and she disappears into the house. Going to her bedroom, she opens the door. The difference in temperature in her bedroom is obvious. "Oh yeah! It's awesome in here." Shutting her bedroom door, she heads to her mother's room to return the dress and broach. She takes off the dress and puts it as far back in the closet as she can and then she takes the broach and places it carefully back in the jewelry box in the same drawer. She puts the shoes back in the closet exactly where they were before. "What an incredible night!" she says out loud. She notices a picture on a nightstand turned over. Wiping the dust off of it, she sees a familiar family picture. It's her mother and father and her as a little girl in a ponytail. Their faces are smiling and happy. She remembered the day that the military people showed up at the house with the bad news about her dad. It was a terrible day and one that still had bad effects even now. She felt sad for her mother and wished she hadn't gone down the path of addiction.

Becky goes into her cool bedroom to get ready for bed. So many things are whirling in her head. Her usual summertime

shorts and t-shirt were not going to be enough tonight. Going through her dresser, she finds her workout pants and a shirt to wear to bed so she won't be cold. A wonderful date, a proposal and a chance of real happiness came to her all in one day. Life is good. Becky gets in her bed and pulls the covers up to her neck.

"I could really get used to this," she says with a smile. She thinks back through the day and all that happened. Sleep doesn't come easy but she finally dozes off dreaming of being in Hawaii with Jerry on their honeymoon. They are swimming in the surf in the beautiful blue waters. She can feel the sand on her feet and smell the coconut in her drink. She wakes up with a smile on her face. It all felt so real to her. She looks over at the clock. It's two thirty in the morning. She wonders if Jerry is awake too. "Surely not," she thinks. Reaching over for the telephone, she dialed his number. It rings once and she hangs up. "I don't want to wake him." She puts the phone back on the nightstand as it starts ringing.

"Hello? Is that you Jerry?"

"It's me. You can't sleep either, I see."

"I sure can't Jerry. I am so excited I can't sleep. I might have dosed off a few minutes but that's about it."

He asks, "How is that air conditioner doing? Are you cold?"

"It is awesome Jerry! I've got covers on and my winter pajamas too. I am uptown for sure." Becky hears the sound of a car door outside. "I think momma is home. I just heard a car door. I hope she's not plastered."

The drunken banter is loud as they come up the porch to the screen door. He is holding her up and she stumbles up the steps into the house. Wayne takes her to the couch and sits her down. "You look a tad sleepy Rose. Have a seat there while I find your bathroom. My back teeth are floating."

Rose mumbles something inaudible and points down the hallway.

"I believe you mean this way as he walks past Becky's door. He pauses and notices the cool air coming from underneath the door.

Becky is listening while she whispers to Jerry on the phone.

"Jerry I think he's standing outside my door. I don't like this."

Wayne continues toward the restroom.

"Okay, he's gone. I'm sure it's nothing."

"Becky do you want me to come over?"

"No Jerry, he will be leaving soon, I'm sure."

The toilet flushes and the bathroom door creaks open. She can hear him walk past her door to the living room. Rose, is passed out on the couch. Wayne shakes her.

"I might have put a bit too much in your drink there, Miss Rose. You're no good to me now. He turns to look at Becky's door. "Hmm, I wonder what I can do, in there." He says, as he walks toward her door and stops.

Becky is now alert and scared.

"Jerry," she whispers. "Please come over here. I think he's going to come into my room!"

Jerry jumps out of his bed.

"I'm on my way Becky!"

She watches her door as it opens. The silhouette of him standing there is terrifying to her. She pulls the covers up to her eyes. Jerry hears her over the phone tell Wayne, "get out of here. I'm trying to sleep"

He walks over to the bed and sits on the edge. "I just want to say goodbye to you before I leave. It's nice and cool here girl." He takes his hand and puts it on her leg.

"Momma!" She screams out. "Get him out of here!"

Wayne sees the phone lit up beside her and pushes the off button.

Jerry hears the phone go silent. He rushes into his parents' room.

"Call 911! Becky is in trouble. Some strange man is in her house. I'm headed there now."

His parents jump up to call the police as Jerry rushes out to his car. He turns the key to start it. It just clicks. "Damn! Come on! Start! He tries again and it starts up.

His parents rush out the door to see him speeding down the road. The smell of engine and rubber smoke is hanging in the air. Putting on their robes, they run to their car to join him.

"Momma! Help me!" Becky screams out again.

Wayne puts his hand on her mouth. "I don't think your mother is going to be helping anyone tonight girl. You just need to calm down. I'm not going to hurt you." He reaches for the covers and pulls them off of her. "You are one pretty girl Miss Becky."

She rolls to the opposite side of the bed and heads for the door. He meets her and grabs her by the waist. "Slow down missy. You don't have to be this way." He tries to kiss her and she pulls her head back and head butts him, knocking his cowboy hat off. He releases and Becky runs into the living room to see her mother unconscious on the couch.

"Momma wake up!" she screams, as she runs out the screen door. She feels him catch her from behind.

"Now you just pissed me off young lady."

Becky turns around to see his nose bleeding from her head butt.

"Leave me alone! My boyfriend and the cops are on the way. They'll be here any minute."

"That's okay with me missy. That just leaves me enough time to do this." Wayne grabs Becky by the shoulders and pushes her off the porch. She flies off and hits the concrete steps with her head. Wayne straightens himself up and wipes the blood off his face with a handkerchief. He walks over to Becky who is lying motionless on the ground. He notices the ring on her finger. "Oh

yeah! This night isn't going to be a total waste." Slipping the ring off Becky's finger, into his pocket, he hears the sirens in the distance. He runs to his car to make his getaway.

Jerry arrives at the house and sees Wayne running to his car. He parks his car sideways in the driveway to stop him and gets out. Jerry sees Becky on the ground. He feels fiery anger rising in him as he heads toward Wayne's car.

Wayne knows he has to escape and punches the accelerator and slams into Jerry's car to knock it out of the way. The two cars explode as fire shoots out every window illuminating the night. Wayne is unconscious sitting in the burning car. Jerry opens the door and drags him out. He throws his burning cowboy hat back into the car. Two police cars pull up. Jerry rushes towards Becky. He gets to her and sees her head bleeding. "Help!" he yells out to the policeman. "We need an ambulance now!" He points to Wayne on the ground, who is starting to sit up. "He did this! Arrest him!" He looks back at Becky. "Becky! Becky, can you hear me?"

Jerry's parents arrive and run to him and Becky. "Oh my God Jerry! Is she okay?" they ask as they stoop down with him.

"I don't know. I just don't know. I can't wake her. She hit her head on the steps trying to get away from that monster." Jerry reaches for her hand and notices the ring is gone. "Oh hell no!" he yells out, as the policeman put cuffs on Wayne. "Wait, don't load him in there yet. He's got something of mine." He gets up from Becky and walks over to where they have Wayne handcuffed and reaches into his pocket. He pulls out the ring he gave Becky. He looks over at Becky on the ground and back at Wayne.

"You low life bastard!" He yells, punching him to the ground. Wayne looks up from the ground. "Arrest him, he just hit me!"

The policemen look at each other. "You see anything Richard?"
"See what Ben? I didn't see anything."

They load him into the back of the police car as he continues to complain.

The ambulance arrives for Becky as well as a fire truck to put out the burning cars. The neighbors are starting to come out to see if they can help. The paramedics rush over to where Becky is laying on the ground. After doing some preliminary checks, they gently put her on a backboard and take her to the awaiting ambulance. Jerry hops inside with her as they speed off toward the hospital. He kisses her on the forehead. "Hang in there sweetie. Help is coming."

The paramedics assure him they'll do everything they can and continue working on her. The blue and red lights of the police and fire crews light up the dark. Heavy black smoke from the burning cars still lingers in the air. Jerry's parents alert one of the policemen that Rose is probably in the house and could be hurt. Stepping up on the porch, the screen door of the house opens and Rose stumbles out on the porch. "Becky! Where are you? I need my cigarettes."

Chapter Fourteen

THIS IS YOUR BABY



Three months later:

Chris reaches for the handle of the glass door to the doctor's office and slowly pulls it open. It seems heavier than it did the last time they came. He really hated coming here for his treatment. The thought of sitting there in the chair with a bag of poison in his arm seemed counter-productive. Taking it all in as he slowly finds his seat, he looks around at the people sitting quietly and patiently for their turn. Some of the people had obviously been coming for a while because they all have the same look. They were gaunt and had a peculiar yellowish color. Just a few had enough hair to cover their head. Most of the women had colorful scarves or hats on. He takes the nearest seat in the waiting room and Donna goes up to check him in. Chris recognizes the man wearing the Navy hat sitting beside him. "Hello again Sam. I'd ask you how you're doing but by the looks of everyone else in here, it's pretty obvious. I'll just say how are you coping, my friend?"

Sam turns to answer him without any change of expression. "You are exactly right Doctor Carter. I am just coping. If it weren't for my family wanting me to keep trying, I would have

already got off this big ole boat. They want me to continue my treatment but every time I come here I feel like I end up paying for being tortured.”

Chris agrees with him, “I know exactly what you mean Sam.” Chris leans in and lowers his voice. “This is it for me. I am not going to come back and go through this again. The nausea and the way it drains my energy is more than I can stand. I love my son and my wife but I am going to make this decision. I have always made my own decisions and this time it’s not going to be any different.”

Sam puts out his hand to shake Chris’ hand. “Good for you Doctor. It’s been a pleasure to meet you. I just wish we would have met in different circumstances.”

Donna comes to where they are seated as they are shaking hands. “What’s going on here? Did you guys make a bet or something?”

“Sure we did,” Chris agrees with her, “I bet him I would be more bored than him sitting back there in the worlds’ most uncomfortable chair reading the most boring magazines. We decided it would be a tie.”

A nurse opens the door to the back rooms. “Mr. Jackson, Sam Jackson.”

Sam stands up slowly with a grunt. “Well, here I go Doc. When I was a kid waiting my turn for something, I was always excited when it came. It’s a bit different now isn’t it?”

Chris stands and reaches out his hand again to say goodbye. The frail gentleman grabs it, and hugs him. “Take care my friend. Godspeed.”

“You too Sam, you too.”

Donna is carrying a big bag with her. She has come prepared for a long afternoon. She has a few light snacks, some bottled water, a good book and some knitting that she has been working on. She sits beside her husband and pulls out her yellow and

green yarn and knitting needles and pats him on his leg. "You okay honey? Do you need any water or anything else?"

"No, not really dear. I'm ready to get this over with. The bad part doesn't usually hit until I get home. Looks like a light supper if anything. Michael will get off easy tonight. What are you knitting there anyway?"

Donna smiles, "I am knitting a little hat for the baby. Sandy and David won't tell me what it is yet and I can't wait any longer to get started on my knitting for it."

Chris puts his hand on her leg. "Donna, Sandy and David are just across the parking lot right now having a consultation about the baby. You should be there, not waiting here for hours until I get finished. I'm a little concerned about what they're going to find out. I'll tell you what, when they call my name, you go on over and be with them. Get out of this depressing place and go where life is just beginning. See the babies. Okay?"

She takes his hand. "Are you sure Chris? I came prepared for the wait and it really isn't a big deal to sit here."

"I will call you when I'm done. I promise."

"I did kind of want to go there," she says, "I am somewhat concerned about what the doctor is going to say also. He said it's probably nothing but he wanted to check out some things to be sure. You call me as soon as you get out. No secrets either. If I hadn't found the card in your pocket that afternoon, you probably would have never even told me, would you?"

"Probably not," he says, "I was just trying to protect you my love."

She puts her knitting back in her big bag and hugs Chris. "It is kind of strange our appointments are close to the same time. I love you dear."

"I love you too Donna."

"Mister Carter, Chris Carter." The nurse announces.

Donna watches him stand up slowly and begin his walk to the back. He turns around and gives her a quick goodbye wave and disappears behind the door. She wonders how many more times she'll watch him walk back there. What would she possibly do without him?

David finally finds an empty space in the crowded parking deck.

"Finally!" he exclaims. "I knew there had to be at least one. I should have let you out at the door Sandy."

"No David, I need all the exercise I can get. I've got to keep from gaining too much weight. The more I gain, the more I have to lose when the baby is born."

"Like you'll ever have a problem with weight. You have been a stick as long as I've known you."

The two get out and lock their car. The beep echoes through the deck as David checks his watch. "We're a tad early. Want to go see the babies on the second floor before we go?"

"You know I do David. I need to see some sweet babies."

After a long walk to the front door they wait for the elevator. Sandy is proud of her baby bump and she has just recently started wearing maternity clothes. The elevator door opens and a soon to be mother comes waddling out holding the hand of her son. She's obviously close to term and she is not in the mood to go by the gift shop to find a toy for him.

"Momma please, can we just go look?"

Without answering him she heads through the front door and into the car that is waiting for her outside. Sandy and David watch her as she mouths inaudibly to her husband. "He's yours Bob, you handle this."

Bob puts his crying son in the car seat while she collapses into the front seat and shuts the door. Watching the parental crisis, Sandy and David miss their elevator.

"Oh boy," Sandy says, "She has definitely had all of being pregnant she can stand. I'm sure this heat doesn't help either." A different elevator becomes available and they step in and push the second floor button. The door opens to lots of pinks and blues on the maternity floor. Some of the doors have beautiful wreaths on them. They are Decorated with baby toys, storks and ribbons.

"David, I'm going to have one of those beautiful wreaths, right?"

"Of course you are Sandy. I'm sure you will have that and more. You know how my mother is."

They wind around the floor until they spot the babies.

"Look David, look at them. How precious are they?"

They stare at them through the glass. Most of them have little pink or blue beanies on their heads. They look like little elves. In the back of the room one of the baby boys is hooked up to some tubes.

"David, look at that little guy in the back. Bless his heart. I hope he's okay. Do you think we should worry about our baby David? We have done everything they asked. We did the anatomy ultrasound and found out we have a baby boy. Little Joseph Christopher. I do think your mother is upset we won't tell her what it is until my parents make the trip down from Michigan. We came in for the Amnio test they wanted. I must say, this has been the longest two weeks waiting for this appointment. The doctor said he was just making sure everything was fine. Tell me not to worry David."

"It's been on my mind too Sandy. I would definitely want to be sure everything was good. He was just worried about some measurements and things. At least that's what I heard him say. It's getting close to time." He takes her hand, "Let's head on up and find out."

They go into the clinic on the fourth floor and check in. There are women in different stages of pregnancy sitting and

waiting. Magazines about babies and being healthy mothers are strewn about on the tables and seats. Donna walks in. The walk over has been longer and hotter than she expected. She sees them sitting and looking through the latest magazines.

"There you are. I was worried I would be late and miss your meeting."

"Mom, why aren't you with dad?"

She seats herself and puts down her big bag and reaches in to take out a water bottle. She takes a big drink.

"He wanted me to come over here when they called him back. It sounded like a great idea. I can knit here or knit there. You guys want a snack or some water? I came prepared."

"Did you walk all the way over here in this heat mom?"

"I don't think it's going to kill me. It's probably good for me to sweat a little. I hope it's okay if I go back with you?"

"Yes Mrs. Carter," Sandy assures her, "I'm sure it's fine."

A nurse walks up to them. "Dr. King will see you now. Come on back."

Donna looks Sandy over. "Sandy, I love your little blue blouse. Is that a sign I should pay attention to?"

"Maybe," she says. Maybe not."

The three go down the hallway. They look in the rooms as they walk back. Some are vacant and some have hopeful couples waiting for their doctor. They continue to walk by the rooms until they come to a conference room in the back.

"Please step right in. The Doctor will be in shortly. Feel free to grab some water out of the refrigerator or have a cup of coffee. It won't be long."

The table in the room is huge with a dozen or so big leather chairs. Sandy looks over at David. "Honey why aren't we going into a regular room? I don't like this. Should I be worried?" She reaches for his hand.

"Just hang on Sandy. I'm sure there's a reason to be in this room." David looks over at his mother. She raises her eyebrows to tell him, without saying, they should be concerned.

Sandy's concern has reached crisis level. "David, I'm scared. I think there's a real problem. We wouldn't be here if everything was okay."

She starts to cry and David brings her to himself. "I agree, Sandy, I'm pretty concerned right now."

Donna gets out of her chair and hands Sandy a tissue from a box on the table. "Here you go sweetie. Hang in there. We will know soon enough."

A nurse comes in and turns on a television monitor on the wall. She is very stoic and only says "good afternoon," before going back out. Sandy wants to run out. This is not what she expected. They hear a couple of doctors discussing something outside the door.

"I think that's him." David says.

They strain to listen to their conversation. They stop talking and step into the room, closing the door.

"Good afternoon," he says as he reaches out his hand to shake David's. "I am Doctor King and this is my associate, Doctor Pool."

The doctors shake each of their hands and sit down across from them. Doctor King opens his laptop to push a few keys and an ultrasound appears on the monitor on the wall. They all watch as the baby moves around. Doctor Pool steps up to the screen and points to it with a laser pointer.

"This is your baby."

David takes Sandy's hand under the table and squeezes it.

"He is an active little guy."

Donna hears him say guy and smiles at David.

"When we were alerted by ultrasound tech, we gave it a good look. She was concerned about how his legs were not meeting the normal measurements we should be seeing. We were hoping

that it was just the way he was laying or how he was turned. We thought, just to be sure, we would do the Amniocentesis to make sure we didn't have a disability of some kind."

Sandy could feel the heat of concern in her body start to burn.

"After the test we looked at the results and we have determined your baby has what we call, Andover's Disease."

Sandy buries her head on David's shoulder and sobs.

"Doctor!" David replies, "What is Andover's Disease? We don't have any disabilities in either of our families. What happened and is our baby going to die?"

The doctors turn off the monitor and sit down. "This disability is not fatal usually. I will tell you he will never walk."

Sandy immediately remembers the little shoes she bought to show David the day she told him she was pregnant. Donna gets up to put her hands on David's shoulders.

"Your baby will not have any learning disabilities but physically he will need a lot of care early on. This child will require both of you to help it get a good start should you decide to continue the pregnancy. That is your decision."

Sandy wipes her eyes and says, "Continue my pregnancy? What do you mean?"

The doctor continues, "I understand this is a terrible day for you right now. I hate to tell you this information but I wanted to be up front and available with you and all the questions you will have. I suggest you write down any questions you have so you can remember them. I'm sure it will be a long list. I know the first thing you will do when you leave here is look it up online. A lot of children have been born with this disease and thrived so don't let the internet make your decision. You will need to make your decision by your twenty fourth, to twenty eighth week. That's about 4 weeks away. Please don't hesitate to call me. Here is my personal card with my number on it. Call me at any time, okay."

David takes the card from the doctor. "I don't know what to say doctor. Our world has changed in just a few minutes. We will try to think this through and come up with some way to deal with it. I can't imagine how hard this has to be as a doctor to tell a family about their unborn baby having a serious problem."

Doctor King puts his hand on David and Sandy's shoulder. "No David, I can't imagine hearing it as an expectant parent. My prayers are with you and Sandy."

The two doctors turn to leave. "Call me David, I know you're going to have tons of questions. We will set up other appointments later. We want you and Sandy to be able to process all of this for now."

David's voice cracks, "Thanks Doctor King. I will give you a call soon."

The heavy door is loud as it shuts them in. Sandy buries her head in David's chest and cries. "What are we going to do David? I don't want to lose my little boy."

"We have a real decision to make Sandy."

Donna gets up and reaches for her bag. The spool of green and yellow yarn with the little beanie falls onto the floor. She picks it up as her tears begin to fall. The three embrace and hold tight.

Chapter Fifteen

THE NIGHT OF THE ASSAULT



The emergency room nurse listens to the radio from the ambulance. “We’ve got a seventeen year old female with head injuries. Estimated time of arrival 4 minutes.” The radio continues on about vital signs and information as she heads to the hallway. She grabs her phone and makes a call. It rings multiple times before she gets an answer. A sleepy voice comes on the line. “Hello, this is Thelma. Is this you Gwen?”

“Yes, it is mom. You need to gather your prayer team. We have a young lady coming in with head injuries. Head injuries are always serious. I’m not sure what happened yet but I’ll call you back with details. Call Sadie Mae and Ophie and you guys get to praying.”

“I sure will honey.” She assures her. “Give me a name as soon as you can. I know God knows her name but it helps us to know too.”

“I will momma. Call you back as soon as I can.”

Gwen hangs up the phone and returns to the ER awaiting the ambulance’ arrival.

Jerry is stroking Becky’s hair in the ambulance, hoping to get her to wake up. “Why won’t she wake up?” He pleads to the medics.

"With head injuries you never know sir. Hopefully real soon."

The ambulance arrives at the hospital and everyone jumps out to get Becky inside. They rush her into a room and it fills with medical personnel from the ER. A young doctor comes in. "Hello, my name is Doctor Jones. I am the doctor on call tonight. Are you her husband?"

"No sir, not yet, but we are engaged. Does that help?"

The doctor asks, "Is a parent here? Or someone here that can approve for us to treat her?"

Jerry thinks about Rose and knows he doesn't want to wait. "No sir, no one that is available right now. Can we just move on and treat her?"

"Okay," the doctor agrees, "we need to get her in quickly for an MRI and see what's going on with this young lady."

Jerry reaches out his hand to take the doctors.

"Thank you doctor. We just got engaged last night. Please help her."

"Well, one thing you can help me with is to tell me how this happened."

Gwen walks up to them. "Could I get some information from you before we proceed sir?"

"Sure," Jerry says, "I can do that."

He takes the clipboard from her and does his best to give them as much information as he can while telling the doctor what has happened. Handing it back to her he apologizes, "I'm sorry about all the empty lines here. I did the best I could."

She thanks him, "I'm sure it will be enough for now sir, thank you."

Gwen takes the information and gives it to the ladies at the desk. Walking back into the hallway, Gwen calls her mother. She picks up on the first ring.

"Momma, I've got a name. I can't tell you the last name though. It's against the law."

"Okay Gwen, I've been waiting. Give it to me."

"Her name is Becky. You got it?"

Miss Thelma pauses and has a flashback from just a day ago at the drugstore. "Oh sweet Jesus! You've got to be kidding me! Is she a young blonde girl about sixteen or seventeen?"

"Yes momma, she is. Do you know her?"

"I believe I do Gwen. I met her at the drug store and I must tell you, she was buying a pregnancy test. Have you done any tests on her that might hurt a baby?"

"Oh my, momma, I've got to tell the doctor before they do something that might hurt that baby. I'll call you when I find out something, okay?"

"Listen Gwen, I am coming up there right now. You go tell the doctor."

"I will momma, right now." Gwen hangs up the phone and runs to tell the doctor.

Thelma is on her phone. "Sadie, we've got an emergency at the hospital. Get your clothes on. We need to get there. I'm getting dressed now. Call Ophie and let's get started praying." Miss Thelma throws her phone in her purse as she begins to pray out loud for Becky and her baby. "Lord, I don't know for sure if that sweet child is pregnant or not, so I'm gonna pray for the safety and healing of both just in case." She hurries out the door and to her car on her mission of love.

Gwen comes into the room where Becky is laying on the bed. Jerry is patiently waiting with her. They are about to take her out to get her MRI.

She asks Jerry, "Where is Doctor Jones? He needs to know she might be pregnant."

Jerry looks up at her astonished, "What! "What did you just say?"

Gwen backtracks, realizing that Jerry may not be aware of it yet. "Uh, that's just normal protocol sir. Just making sure we

cover all angles. We just need to be sure because some of the tests we may be doing could put a baby at risk. Do you know if she is pregnant sir?"

He saw the question on the form but just marked no beside it. He remembers picking her up on the side of the road that day. She was coming back from the drug store.

"That could explain the walk to the drugstore that day," he says. "Oh my God!" Maybe she is!"

Jerry and Gwen head out of the room to find the doctor. Spotting him behind the counter they beckon him over.

Gwen begins, "Doctor, we have reason to believe that she may be pregnant."

He looks at Jerry. "Well, is she? Is she pregnant?"

Jerry shrugs his shoulders, "I really don't know. I'm not sure."

The doctor begins to tell Jerry of the risks of doing an MRI or any x-rays on a pregnant woman. Jerry is in shock just thinking about this new information. He sees his mother and father come in the door to the ER. They come to where he and the doctor are talking.

"So what do you think, doctor," Jerry asks. "Is there a chance of doing damage to a baby by doing an x-ray or MRI?"

His parents hear his question. His dad asks, "Jerry, what's going on here? Is Becky pregnant? How is she doing? Help me out here Jerry!"

The doctor interrupts them. "Look, we need to get on with this. Looks like all of you need to talk. We are going to go on with this test. The timing is very important. We need to find out what's going on with her. She has lost some blood. Hopefully, not enough to hurt a baby, if she indeed is pregnant."

"Yes doctor," Jerry agrees, "I understand, please hurry."

The door opens to the ER again and three elderly ladies come in carrying bibles. Gwen meets them at the door and fills them in on what is going on. The orderlies bring Becky out

on the way to the MRI. Her head is bandaged and she is still unconscious. Thelma looks through the window on the door and sees her going back. "Oh Lord, that's her. That's Miss Becky right there."

Pulling three chairs together, the three ladies start their prayer vigil. One after another, their hands go up and eyes close. Jerry and his parents come into the waiting room and see the ladies praying in earnest, loudly. He hears them ask for the Lord's help for Becky. He walks over to them and interrupts.

"Excuse me, are you praying for my Becky? Does she know you? I don't understand."

Miss Thelma gets up and introduces herself. "Hi. What's your name, young man?"

"Jerry, my name's Jerry."

She puts out her hand. "My name is Thelma, they call me Miss Thelma. I work over at the drug store. I met Miss Becky a day ago. She came in to buy something."

Jerry interrupts, "Was it a pregnancy test?"

She pauses, "Yes Mr. Jerry, it was a pregnancy test. She was very upset and scared. She promised me she would come see me once a month if it was positive. Was it positive?"

The two other ladies are still praying, praying and listening.

"I had no idea Miss Thelma. I don't know if she is or not. The doctor told us that there were risks for a baby if they did the MRI but they went ahead."

Jerry's mother Marge steps up. "Hi, I'm Jerry's mother. Do you mind if I join your prayer group for Becky and what possibly could be my grandchild?"

"You bet honey, come on in. There's always room for more prayer warriors." She pulls up a chair and grabs her husband Paul's hand. "You too Paul, let's be a part of this."

"I agree Marge, let me in"

Looking over at Jerry, Paul holds out his hand, "Son, are you ready to pray for your wife and child?"

"Yes dad, I am," He agrees," I really am!" Jerry goes to his knees as his tears of concern begin to fall.

Chapter Sixteen

THE STORM



Twenty years later:

The lunch hour rush was finally over at 'Sit A Spell Diner'. The place had cleared out quicker than usual with rain in the afternoon forecast. No one wanted to be late to their classes because they were trapped in the diner during a storm. 'Sit A Spell Diner,' was the closest place to hang out and have some coffee or grab a quick snack. It was only a couple of blocks from Lone Oak College.

Anna is a waitress at the diner. She is working there to have some spending money for herself. Her family was paying for her education but they told her if she wanted to have anything extra, she would have to work. The owner and the other waitresses there were pretty easy to get along with most of the time and she could wear her jeans and be comfortable. Graduating at the top of her class in high school, she had set big goals for herself. Her mom and dad were very proud of her accomplishments so far. Her father Jerry was a master electrician and had his own company. She had even done some apprentice work for him. Joining his company was not her goal. She was going to college to become a medical researcher. She had grand illusions

of curing everything from cancer to alcoholism and everything in between.

Her grandmother Rose had died from her alcoholism and Anna had recently been told by her mother Becky, she had been diagnosed with breast cancer and was undergoing treatment. Her mother assured her it was really small and nothing to worry about. She didn't believe her. Her mothers' diagnosis made her more determined than ever to follow her medical research dream. It was her mother that she was thinking about when she sat down at a booth to take her afternoon break. She was her best friend in the world. They had a bond most daughters could only dream about. That bond was one of the reasons she decided to go to Lone Oak College. It was only a couple hours away from home and was known for its cutting edge approach to educating people wanting to solve the mysteries of medical research.

The forecast for rain was beginning to look very true as she had her cup of coffee and a sandwich while looking through the window of the diner. The clouds were rolling in and it was getting darker all the time. The parking lot was empty, except for a few cars that people had left to ride with someone else. She could hear the wind on the window and see the leaves on the trees moving in the wind. One of the other waitresses joins her in the booth.

"I hope the lights don't go off again Anna. I get all scared when storms hit. I'm from Oklahoma and we've had some pretty terrible storms and tornadoes there."

Anna looks at her and gives her a reassuring look. "We've had our share in Arkansas too. I'm sure it's just some wind and rain Jennifer. It's probably nothing to worry about. I bet we are both going to be bored with nothing to do while this storm goes through. I can't imagine an actual customer coming in for a little while." Anna no sooner gets the words out when a car

pulls up to the handicap space by the front door. She can see the man in the car reaching into the back seat. The car door finally opens and he grabs something and puts it outside the car. Both waitresses curiously watch him through the window. The next thing they can see is the man reaching into the back seat and grabbing a spoke wheel. He takes it and puts it on what they can now see is becoming a wheelchair. He continues to complete his chair by putting on the next wheel and then a seat and foot supports. The rain comes down as he shifts himself over to the chair. He reaches back inside the car and grabs a laptop and puts it in a bag beside him so it won't get wet. Thunder booms as the rain suddenly becomes a deluge. He swings his legs over to the chair supports and unlocks the brakes.

"Jenn, we've got to help this poor guy before he drowns. He must really like the coffee here."

The two get up from the booth and rush to go outside to help him. Jennifer opens the doors to the diner as Anna grabs the handles to the wheelchair.

"Stop it!" he says to her. "Let me go, I've got this. I don't need any help from you." He takes control of the chair and wheels himself into the diner, leaving Anna standing in the rain. She notices he didn't close the door to his car, so she shuts it and comes inside. Grabbing a towel from behind the counter, she hands it to him to dry off. He immediately wipes off his bag with the laptop.

"I'm an idiot! I knew I wouldn't get in before this thing hit. I should have known better. Dang it's cold in here. Look, I appreciate what you tried to do but I am very independent. I may be in a wheelchair but I'm good. I can handle anything. I don't need any help from anyone."

Anna feels both anger as well as sympathy as she takes a towel to dry herself. "I was just trying to help sir. I'm sorry if I offended you."

He wipes his face with the towel she gave him. "I guess that's okay. You can't understand. Where can I sit and have a cup of coffee and do some studying."

Without thinking she reaches for the chair again.

"Hands off! Just point, okay!"

Anna looks at Jennifer when he turns to go to where Anna has pointed and rolls her eyes. "Right this way sir, we have seating for you and your chair."

"Thank you, uh," he looks at her nametag, "Anna. I will have some coffee with two creams but no sugar."

"Right away, Mister?"

"Carter, my name is Joseph Carter. I will be coming in here quite often. I am switching colleges to come here to Lone Oak. It has the best Doctors for medical research."

Anna smiles. "Research huh? I am here at Lone Oak for the same thing."

"That's fine Anna. Please get me my coffee and cream. I would appreciate you researching that right now."

"No problem mister Carter. I'm on it!" Anna heads for the counter to retrieve his coffee. Jennifer comes to her.

"Wow! He's kind of snarky, don't you think? We were just trying to help him."

"That's okay Jenn, there was a lot going on with the wheelchair and the rain. I'm sure he's not really that way. What did you say he was, snarky?"

"My mother's word for big butt hole I think."

"Hey girls, " The manager, Mary, shouts, "Great job helping him."

Both girls give her a thumb's up and in unison say, "You're welcome." Anna pours his coffee and grabs four creamers on her way back to serve him. He is sitting by the window working on his laptop. The storm outside continues. The diner

is illuminated by the lightning strikes and the wind and rain are pelting the window.

"Here you go Mister Carter."

He turns his head from the laptop and glances at the coffee and creamer. "I guess the noise from the storm kept you from hearing me correctly. I said I wanted two creamers, not four." He pushes two of the creamers to the side of the table. "You can take those back Annie."

Finally having enough of her verbal abuse from him, she pushes the two creamers back and sits down in the chair beside him. He looks at her and responds.

"Really? Do you really want to get me started with you?"

"Look here Mister Carter, Mister Joseph Carter, I don't know what I have done to you other than try and help you since you pulled up in your car. I don't know what kind of wasp has crawled up your butt and stung you but I don't deserve any of this you are dishing out right now. I don't know you and you don't know me, and you have no reason to treat me this way. Stop being so, uh, snarky. My name is Anna by the way, not Annie."

He is not ready for her defensive posture but begins to give it back to her when a loud clap of thunder rattles the diner and a strike of lightning flashes. The lights go out. The light from his laptop illuminates the two.

"Oh my!" she shouts and hunkers down beside the table.

"I told you it was going to happen Anna." Jennifer yells from somewhere behind the counter in the dark.

Joseph looks down beside the table and offers Anna a hand. "You okay Anna? It's just some wind and lightning. It's really nothing to worry about. It actually reminds me of home. We get them all the time."

She takes his hand to stand up. There is a long silent pause, as they just look each other over. He reaches down to put two

creamers in his coffee and stirs them. "Girl, when you get angry, God and everybody knows' it. Could you turn the lights back on now Miss Anna?"

She realizes just how upset she had gotten. "I am so sorry Mister Carter. I never should have come at you like that. It's just what you said..."

"Stop Anna, It's all okay. I have been a real ass since I got here. I apologize." Joseph reaches out his hand. "Let's start over. Hi, my name is Joseph."

Anna smiles. "Hi, my name is Anna. It's really nice to meet you."

They shake hands as the lights pop back on. "Electricity is really fickle sometimes." She adds as they release their handshake, "I'm curious now Mister Carter."

Joseph shakes his head. "You can call me Joseph. How old do you think I am?"

Anna looks at him. He has very muscular arms and chest. His big brown eyes and black hair are mesmerizing. It wasn't until now that she noticed just how handsome he really was.

"Well, I think you are about my age. I'm twenty. Am I close?"

"Yes you are. I am exactly twenty."

"One more question," she asks, "You said you were used to storms where you lived. Where are you from?"

"I am from Arkansas." He says, "and you?"

She sits down on the opposite side of the table. "You've got to be kidding me! I am too."

Where in Arkansas are you from?"

"Seriously?" He questions, "I should have known. I was born in Little Rock."

The manager sees them talking and asks.

"Hey Anna, do you have any time to wash a few dishes for us when you decide to go back to work?"

Anna pushes the two creamers back over to him.

"I'm sorry, I've got to get back to work."

She takes his napkin and writes her phone number on it.

"We've got a lot to talk about Joseph, I'm from Little Rock also. Call me tonight when you get settled in, okay?"

He takes the napkin and puts it into his shirt pocket.

"I can do that. How about some more coffee?" "No problem." She responds with a smile and heads over to the counter to get more. The thunder and lightning return with a vengeance as the lights once again flicker and go off. Jennifer yells out in the dark.

"Anna, that's it! I'm going home!"

Chapter Seventeen

THE WHEELCHAIR GUY



A cell phone vibrates on a marble countertop. It vibrates until it walks over to the edge about to fall off. “Gotcha! Sandy says as she saves it from falling. “Hello? Well, hello son. How are you? Have you settled in yet?”

“I’m working on it mom.” Joseph assures her. “So far so good. I’m checking in like you asked me to. Where’s dad?”

“You know where he is. He’s still at work. That place is going to kill him one day. He’s been there for 14 hours. He’s just like his dad, work, work, work, work.”

“I know mom. I hear you talk about my grandfather and what work ethic he had. I wish he wouldn’t have died before I was born. I’m just glad he set back some money for my education before he died. He couldn’t have been all that bad. I don’t want to talk long. I’ve got lots of studying to do so I’m just checking in.”

“Wait Joseph, what’s the hurry? I miss you. There’s a lot to tell you about your grandfather. One day I will fill you in. David is a lot like him for sure. He is just a softer version. I did see that you guys had some bad weather come through today. I hope you didn’t get caught in it.”

Joseph hesitates to tell his mother what happened, “I guess I do have a bit of a storm related story to tell you. I got trapped

in it just as it started coming down. I was assembling my wheelchair and it hit. It was pouring down and a couple of waitresses from a diner came out to help me.”

“Oh no Joseph, I hope you let them. I know how you don’t want anyone to help you.”

“Yeah mom, it wasn’t pretty. I was a real butt to them, mostly to one in particular.” “Joseph, did you apologize?”

“Mom, you would have been proud of me. I not only apologized, I ended up with her phone number. I really hope she wasn’t just throwing chocolate at me to make her feel better about herself. You know how people are around someone in a wheelchair.”

After a pause she asks him. “So, son, are you going to call her?”

He looks down at the wet napkin with the phone number barely legible on it. “I wouldn’t normally mom but she is from Little Rock. It’s kind of weird how it all happened. Maybe I should.”

“She’s from Little Rock? Did you get her last name? Was she pretty?”

Joseph shakes his head. “Wow mom, I just got a few moments with her during a bad storm. The lights were going on and off. Lightning was lighting up the diner and the thunder was really loud.” He thinks back at Anna’s face, “Yes mom, she was beautiful.”

Sandy smiles. “Well, okay. Day one for you was eventful. Give that girl a call Joseph. Who knows what can happen. Could be your first date. What’s her name?”

“Stop it mom. There are no wedding plans yet. I just met a potential friend. I knew I shouldn’t have told you. You’re probably already counting grandchildren. Her name is Anna and I guess I’m going to let you go and give her a call. You know I love you. Tell dad I love him.”

“I will Son. Talk to you soon. Be careful.”

"I will mom, goodbye."

Sandy hangs up and dials a number on her phone. It rings numerous times before there's an answer. "David, guess what? Joseph met someone at college. It's a great story. Wait until you hear what happened." She stops to listen to her husband. "Yes dear, we can talk about it later. Goodbye." She slowly lays the phone back on the counter and takes a breath. She can't help herself and pumps her fist, "That a boy Joseph!"

Joseph looks back at the number on the napkin. He had always wanted a relationship but all of his high school and college days had been without a girlfriend. It's not that there weren't interested girls. He just didn't want them to feel sorry for him or feel like he was less a man than the other guys. He had become quite a loner. Maybe he was reading too much into meeting Anna. Maybe it was the storm that made it more special. Maybe it was the way the lightning illuminated her face. Was it the thunder that he felt or was it the butterflies in his stomach? He picks up his phone.

Anna and Jennifer are roommates at Lone Oak College. It's silent in the dorm room except for the turning of pages and the clicks on the keyboards. The two girls have books open and laptops lit up studying for the next days' classes.

Jennifer lowers her glasses and looks over the top of her computer. "So Anna, you and the wheelchair guy were really talking today. What's going on with that?"

"He's just a customer Jenn. We helped him get in and out of the storm. That's about it."

Jennifer lowers her glasses to look at the screen, on her laptop, again. "If you say so Anna. I saw some smiling going on back there after you sat him down and the lights came back on. Did he ask you out or anything?"

"Jennifer, not every guy I talk to is a potential date, okay? Don't forget we really need to be studying right now and not

discussing going out with someone. This is some very difficult stuff to understand."

"Okay Anna, you're right. I'll drop it. I was just curious if you would go out with a guy in a wheelchair."

There's a long silence. Anna closes her laptop. "Oh my gosh, he was so freaking good looking wasn't he?"

"Well, you got a whole lot better look than I did Anna. You sat down across from him. What did you talk about?"

"Listen to this Jenn. He is from Little Rock too. Is that crazy or what? I don't know about dating a guy with a wheelchair though. I've never even known anyone in a wheelchair. I did kind of, you know, write my number on his napkin. He probably won't call. I just wanted to help him find his way around and stuff. He is new here."

"Well aren't you Miss helpful. I'm sure he will need lots of help finding his way around here Anna. You are quite the helper. Helping yourself to a date with a hot wheelchair guy."

"His name is Joseph, Jennifer. Joseph Carter. He's here studying medical research and development like me."

"Oh yeah, I know what his major is going to be, Anna-ology I think."

The two girls laugh at Jennifer's remark until Anna's ringtone starts going off. They both look at the number coming in. Unknown number pops up on the phone.

"Answer it Anna, it could be him."

She takes a deep breath and hits the button on her screen. "Hello?" After a long silence she hears a nervous voice.

"Is this Anna?" Anna smiles at Jennifer. "Yes it is. Is this Joseph?"

"Yes it's me Joseph. Looks like the rain stopped. I don't know if I can talk to you when it's not storming. Can you talk or are you busy?"

"I'm good Joseph, just a second." She gets up and goes to another room to talk to him.

"That's not fair Anna, not fair at all." Jennifer yells out as she leaves the room.

"So, Mister Joseph. Just where in Little Rock are you from. I lived in the Rose City area growing up and then moved to Lakewood. Where did you live?"

"I was a Valley resident all of my life. Looks like we were from pretty different places in town. That's probably the reason we don't know each other." He was searching for something else to say when she offers,

"What do you say we meet at the diner in the early morning for breakfast and then I will show you around the campus. What do you say?"

"That would be great Anna. How about seven a.m.?"

"Seven a.m.? Dang you are an early bird. Okay, I can manage that. I will see you then."

"Looking forward to it. I will see you at the diner Anna. Goodbye."

"Goodbye Joseph."

Joseph hangs up the phone and reaches for a glass of water in the cup holder of his chair and takes a long drink and a deep breath. "I did it! Momma would be very proud." Rolling over to the table in his room he opens a medical book and opens his laptop and smiles.

"Well?" Jennifer asks. "Did he ask you out now?"

"You know what Jenn? I think I asked him out. It's like I said earlier. I'm just going to help him find his way around. I wonder if he's going to let me help him though. He said he was very independent and I want to let him know I heard him. I'm going to be very careful. I saw what he was like when he was frustrated. It's not really a date. I'm just being helpful. That's all."

The two girls take their seats again to get back to studying.

"Hey Anna?"

"Yes, Jenn?"

"I don't want to see you riding on his lap while your showing him around. Okay?" Anna throws a seat cushion at her.

"You are one crazy chick Jennifer. I just hope our college has lots of wheelchair ramps and stuff. I've never even noticed them before. I think I'm going to be getting a whole different kind of education tomorrow for sure. You know what? I think I'm going to go to bed. Mister Joseph and his chickens get up early in the morning."

"Anna just one more thing before you go to bed. What are you going to do when you run into Keith tomorrow?"

"Well Jenn, I guess we'll roll over that bridge when we come to it."

Chapter Eighteen

DON'T CALL ME WHEELEY



The digital numbers on the alarm clock turn over to six a.m. The annoying buzzing begins. Anna reaches over to hit the snooze button. Jennifer rises up in her bed and mumbles. “Anna, time to get up. Time to meet the wheelchair guy.”

Anna opens her eyes and stares at the time. “Jennifer, I told you his name is Joseph, or Joey or Joe. I don’t know. Quit calling him the wheelchair guy.”

“Whatever!” she mumbles out and lays back down. “Just don’t let that loud, annoying buzzer go off again. I don’t have to work and I need my beauty sleep.”

Anna sits up on the side of the bed and adds, “You definitely could use a few more minutes of beauty sleep Jenn. A flying pillow hits Anna in the head. “Just kidding girl. You know I love ya.” She stretches and gets up to head to the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, she decides that maybe she was the one who needed her beauty sleep. “Oh my gosh, look at this hair, she says with squinted eyes, “Ok fine, let’s start this renovation. It might take a while. I hope he doesn’t mind if I’m a tad late.”

She steps into the shower to begin her morning routine and notices that Jennifer has written, ‘Good Luck,’ on the shower tiles in lipstick.

Joseph checks his watch. "I thought they opened at six o'clock. It's already five minutes after. What kind of business is this?" He is sitting in his wheelchair waiting outside the diner door. "I'm glad it's not winter and twenty-five degrees out here." He knew he was early. He couldn't sleep. He thought it would be a good idea to get to the diner early and have a few cups of coffee so he would be more able to have a conversation. His stomach was in knots but he was determined to be as suave and debonair as he could. He was still harboring some fear that she was just being nice to him because of his disability. There was nothing wrong with having a new friend that was a girl. He had lots of friends that were girls at home. Anna seemed so different to him. It was like he had known her all of his life. He didn't quite understand how he felt. It was different this time. Thinking back at their first meeting in the storm, he couldn't help but think how he treated her and how she saw him at his worst. This time he hoped, would be better. A car pulls into the parking lot and stops by the front door. "It's about time." He thought to himself.

Mary, the manager gets out of the car and heads for the door. She is a petite middle-aged woman. She's every bit of five feet tall if she's wearing her tall shoes.

"Well good morning young man. You're early. You must have an early class."

"Good morning to you too." He said "No, no morning class today. I'm just meeting Anna here so she can show me around the campus."

She reaches into her purse to grab the keys to open up. "Come on in. We'll get the coffee started. That Anna is a sweetie. She is so willing to help whenever someone needs something. I'm glad she's the one showing you around today. I love Anna. She's also a great waitress. People come here just to be waited on by her. I must also say, she's not bad looking, is she?"

Joseph rolls through the door. "I haven't really noticed, uh, what's your name?"

"My name is Mary. This little diner was my mothers' when I was a kid. I worked here myself. Now come on, "Joseph," she adds, "You can't tell me you haven't noticed," she says with air quotes. "I saw you guys talking yesterday. I'm not blind."

"Okay," he agrees, "she's very pretty."

Mary smiles at him. "I knew it. I hope you guys have a great day together. She knows her way around here at the college. Head on back to where you were sitting yesterday and I'll bring you some coffee. Anything else?"

"No ma'am, not yet. I'll wait for Anna."

She puts her hand on his shoulder. "If you got Miss Anna to get up early to meet you here, you must be special."

The door rings as a couple of more waitresses come in talking to each other and head back to the kitchen. Joseph rolls back to the table and checks his watch. He sits and watches the parking lot waiting for her arrival. One of the early waitresses brings him his coffee and creamer and a glass of water.

A big red four wheel drive pickup pulls up and parks. Two young men get out. Beer cans fall out and they pick them up and throw them in the bed of the truck. Mary greets them as they come in.

"Good morning Jack and Virgil. You guys are up early."

"Not us," Jack says with a sleepy drawl. "We're just coming in from the night. We thought some breakfast would be good before heading to the dorm. Just bring us the usual, Mary."

"Gotcha boys, coming right up." The two guys walk past Joseph. Virgil bumps into the wheel on the wheelchair.

"Ah man, I'm sorry Wheelley, I didn't mean to bump ya."

Joseph is in mid sip on his coffee and the bump makes him spill a bit on his shirt. "Come on man," he says as he wipes off his shirt.

"Hey!" Jack adds, "He said he was sorry."

"No he didn't," Joseph says, "He said I'm sorry 'Wheeley'. What the heck was that?"

Virgil walks up to Joseph's table and Jack grabs his arm.

"Forget it Virg'. Just look at him. This guy has enough problems without you being in his face. It's way too early for that. Let's just have a seat.

"Yeah, I guess you're right Jack. Enjoy your coffee, Mister Wheeley." He says, as he turns to go to his seat.

Joseph can't believe what has happened and dips a napkin in his water to wash off the coffee on his shirt.

"Well, good morning Joseph." He hears, as he looks up.

"Good morning Anna. I didn't see you come in."

She scans the diner knowing who came in this morning. The red pickup belongs to her ex-boyfriends best friend Jack. She sits down at the table with Joseph and she hears. "Hey, Anna!" She hoped they wouldn't talk to her.

"Good morning guys." She responds back.

"Do you know those two guys?" Joseph asks.

"It's a long story, but yes, unfortunately, I know them. They are my ex-boyfriends running buddies. They didn't say anything to you, did they Joseph?"

"Yeah, we had a few good morning words, I guess." He says, wiping the coffee stain on his shirt. "I had a little accident with my coffee this morning."

A waitress comes up to the table. "Good morning you two, what do ya'll want this morning?"

"Hi Jasmine, I'll have some coffee and a cinnamon roll, thanks."

"Make that two cinnamon rolls please." Joseph adds.

Jack picks up his phone and calls his friend Keith. The phone rings multiple times before a sleepy voice answers. "Hey Jack. What the hell could you possibly want this early in the morning?"

"Man, you won't believe who is in here right now."

In frustration, Keith answers back, "I don't know Jack, maybe Captain Kangaroo or The Easter bunny."

"No Keith, Anna is in here with some guy in a wheelchair. If they are here this early, maybe they came from the same place. You get my drift man?"

"Look Jack, I've moved on from little miss Annie. She's definitely not my type. I'm looking for someone who likes to party. I've got to say though, it is a bit curious. By the way Jack, don't ever call me this early again, you dipstick! Goodbye!"

Virgil hears Keith's loud voice from where he's sitting. "Probably not a good idea to call Keith this early, huh jack?"

"Yeah," Jack agrees, "Probably not." He continues. "Hey man, let's get this to go and head out. I'm about to fall asleep just sitting here and you are not cute enough or interesting enough to keep my attention."

"I'm ready to sack out myself," Jack agrees. Let's go."

The two guys get up and head to the counter to have the waitress put their breakfast in a to-go tray. They pass by Joseph and Anna's table and Virgil can't help himself.

"Be careful Jack. Don't hit Wheeley's chair. He might spill his coffee again."

Joseph looks at Anna. He has fire in his eyes. She suddenly realizes what happened before she came in. Standing up beside the table, she confronts them.

"You guys are mean, inconsiderate slobs. You don't even know this guy or what his life is like."

Joseph interrupts her. "It's okay Anna. You are right. They have no idea. I don't need you to defend me."

Virgil grabs the handles on Joseph's chair and shakes him. Anna rushes him and pushes him down. Jack grabs her arms to stop her from jumping on his friend.

"Hey girl, calm down!" Jack yells. "We're just messing with him. It's no big deal."

Mary runs to the scene. "You boys get out of here. We've got no use for your stupidity in my diner. Don't come back, you hear?"

Virgil stands up and looks at Anna. "Keith was right to dump you. I guess you weren't ready for a guy with four wheels."

Mary grabs him by the arm. "Now git, both of you. Now!" They continue to complain as she shows them the front door.

Joseph looks at Anna. "I'm so sorry Anna. You didn't have to do that. Maybe coming here wasn't a good idea. I think I'm just going to go back to my room and study."

Anna adjusts herself from the fight with Virgil. "No Joseph, you're not. We are getting out of here together and I'm gonna take you somewhere to calm us both down. Are you with me?"

Joseph stammers, "I, I, I guess so. Where are we going?"

"You'll see." She says "You're gonna love it. I promise."

Chapter Nineteen

THE RIVER



Anna goes to the counter to pay the tab. “We’re ready to check out Mary.”

Mary takes her ticket and rips it up. “There’s no way that I’m going to take your money today. No one should be harassed like that in my diner.”

Joseph pulls out his wallet. “Look Miss Mary, our waitress didn’t have anything to do with what happened. Please give her this ten dollar tip.”

“You’re very nice Joseph. I’m sure Jasmine will appreciate that a lot. Is there anything else I can get you guys?”

“Yes there is.” Anna replies, “You can get me about five pieces of uncooked bacon wrapped up in tin foil.”

“You want what?” Mary asks.

“Five pieces of raw bacon wrapped in some tin foil please.”

Joseph looks at Mary and shrugs his shoulders. “I have no idea Miss Mary.”

She questions her again. “Raw? You want raw bacon? You know I can cook it for you.”

“No way,” Anna assures her, “It’s never as good as raw. I’ll fill you in later, okay. I also need two large water bottles.”

Mary turns to go to the kitchen and comes out with a pouch of tin foil then hands her the two water bottles. "Here you go Anna, enjoy."

"Thanks Mary, I appreciate it. Joseph, are you ready to go?"

"I'm ready Anna, let's roll. That's a little wheelchair humor for you."

Anna turns to look at him as he smiles "Funny Joseph, very funny."

The waitresses and Mary watch as they head out the door.

"There's something about those two "Jasmine says, "Something special."

Mary nods her head, "There sure is Jasmine, there sure is."

There are just a few vehicles in the parking lot. She walks beside him on the way.

"Anna, I'll have to take my chair apart before I get in your car. Maybe we should take mine. I'm used to putting my chair parts in certain places in my car."

"Car?" Anna says, "I don't drive a car. I've had my truck for years. Check it out."

He rolls up to a classic red truck. On the front bumper is an orange license plate. "This is your truck? This is a classic."

"Yes sir it is." Anna beams. "This is one special truck. Let's figure out how we're going to get you in it and I'll tell you the story." She opens the passenger side and reaches in to move some school work she has on the seat. "I need to ask you, do you mind me helping you get in the seat or can you do it?"

He looks at the seat and the height of his chair. "I think if I got in the drivers side, I could do it. I need to grab the steering wheel to help pull me in." He rolls around to the driver's side and opens the door. Showing great strength he pulls himself in with a grunt.

"Wow!" She says, "You are one strong guy."

"Not really Anna, just lots and lots of experience, now hand me the keys."

"You can drive if you know the way mister."

"Well," He continues, "Maybe you should because I have no idea where to go with raw bacon in a tin foil pouch," he says as he scoots over to the passenger side.

She rolls his chair to the tailgate and puts it in the back then reaches into a toolbox and takes out some straps to secure it. "Alright Mister Joseph, let's do this."

She starts the truck and they head out of the driveway.

Joseph turns down the radio in the truck. "Anna, you have no idea how far this is out of my normal routine. For some reason, I think I trust you. I don't know where we are going but I really don't want to know. So, tell me about this really cool old truck and why in the world is a bright orange license plate on the front."

She checks her mirror as she gets on the freeway ramp. "Joseph, this was my dad's truck. My grandparents got it for him brand new off the lot. He tells the story about how he used to have an old car he fixed up. He painted it bright orange. When my mom and dad were dating, my grandmother brought a strange guy home from a bar. He drugged my grandmother and tried to rape me. Momma was on the phone with dad when he walked into her room. She whispered to dad to come over because she felt threatened. Dad had my grandparents' call 911 and jumped in the old car and high-tailed it over to her house. Momma fought the guy. She even gave him a bloody nose. When dad pulled up he saw the guy trying to get away and saw momma lying on the ground. He pulled his car sideways into the driveway so he couldn't get out. The guy rammed dad's car and it caught fire. The police showed up and took him away. Dad always wanted a new red truck so they bought him one after that."

Joseph takes a deep breath. "Oh my gosh, was your mom okay?"

Anna continues, "The guy pushed her off the porch and her head hit the concrete steps. She was unconscious for quite a while. She had some head injuries. She still has headaches sometimes."

Joseph nods, "Now I see why the orange license plate is on there. It's kind of a memorial to the old car, right?"

"You're right Joseph. That's why it's on there. Dad took real good care of this truck and when I got old enough he gave it to me. He told me the story and ever since then, this truck has been so much more than just a truck to me. It's part of my life and I'm going to protect it."

"That's quite a story Anna. I'm sure that was a scary night for everyone."

Anna gets off the freeway in a small town and comes to a stoplight. "Yep, I'm sure it was but that was also the night they found out momma was pregnant with me. Dad tells me when he found out, how scared he was when they told him the tests they were running on momma might hurt me. They were doing x-rays and MRI's and all kinds of stuff. I guess it didn't hurt me though. Here I am." The light turns green and Anna pulls onto a gravel road. The dry summer made the dust from the road look like a cloud behind them.

"Well, I don't think I've ever been on a gravel road before Anna. Are we almost there?"

"We are almost there Joseph. We'll probably have to wash your wheelchair and this truck when we get back." She drives a few more miles and then turns on a one-lane dirt road. She drives about a mile and they can see a river.

"I love this place Joseph. I come here when I have lots of thinking to do. I think about school and my research and life in general or just to chill out." She pulls under a huge oak tree and

gets out. She reaches into the bed and pulls out the wheelchair and dusts it off. Taking to the drivers side she tells him. "You're gonna love this. Wait until you see it."

He slides over and just as he got in, makes his way out to the chair. "I don't know if my chair will roll in this dirt and rock. I guess we'll just sit here at the truck."

Anna takes the handles. "Joseph, I'm going to help you down to the water if that's okay."

Joseph unlocks his wheels. "Okay, take me to your place. It sounds like it's sacred ground."

She pushes the chair over the bumpy ground until they come to a bank by the river. A small pond has formed beside it. The pond is covered in a green haze. Trees blanket the pond with shade. An occasional fish disturbs the calmness and reveals the clear water underneath. Anna puts Joseph on a flat area and he locks his wheels. "I'll be right back, I need to get some stuff out of the truck."

He takes in the beauty of the scenery. He feels calm just to be there. A light breeze blows towards him from the river. He turns around to see her coming from the truck carrying their water bottles as well as her bacon and two fishing poles and a rope.

"Well Joseph? What do you think about my secret place?"

"I love it Anna. It's truly beautiful here. I guess I see what the bacon is for, now?"

"You're dang right. You know everyone loves bacon and fish ain't no different."

She takes out the bacon and then reaches into her jeans to retrieve a pocket knife to cut it into pieces. She hands one of the fishing poles to Joseph then hands him some bacon. "Put that on your hook and chunk it out there. It won't take long before you're pulling one in."

He looks down at the greasy bacon in his hand. "So I put this on the hook right? I hate to say it but I have never been fishing before. You might have to kind of show me the ropes."

Anna baits her hook and carefully places it in the water by a small log. She grabs his hook and puts the bacon on it. "Oh crap!" she yells as her pole takes off down the bank. She reaches it at the edge of the water.

"Wow, that didn't take long!" Joseph excitedly says as she fights the fish to the bank. She pulls it in and grabs it behind the whiskers.

"That's one hungry catfish for sure Joseph. Hand me that rope so I can put him on it. Mary makes some great fried catfish." She takes the rope and expertly threads it through the fishes' mouth. She ties the other end to a stump and places it back in the water. Anna puts more bacon on her hook and places it back in.

"Okay Joseph, it's your turn. Put your bait in the water. They're not gonna walk up here and get it." Anna realizes what she said and apologizes to Joseph. "I'm sorry about that comment about the walking fish."

Joseph laughs, "That's a pretty funny image in my head right now. I'd love to see it come up here and get some bacon. I'm ready to catch one too Anna." He puts his bait in the water and waits. She can't wait for him to experience catching his first fish. It's not long before his bobber starts moving back and forth and then goes under the water.

"Get him Joe, pull him up!"

Joseph pulls up hard and the fish flies over their heads landing on the grass behind them flopping.

"Holy cow Joseph, that's what I call setting a hook." She runs up to the fish and takes it off the hook to take to the rope.

"I hope I didn't pull his head off Anna."

"No way, he's gonna make it alright. Well, until he hits the frying pan anyway."

The two share a laugh.

"Anna?"

"Yes Joseph. What is it?"

"You called me Joe."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

He puts his hand to his chin and thinks. "You know what? I think I like it when you call me Joe. You have my permission. You have it until you meet my mother and then you probably better call me Joseph."

"Awesome, I can call you that if that's ok?"

"I totally give you my permission. But only you."

Anna reaches down in the water to wash her hands off after handling the fish. She comes back to him to bait his hook. While she's standing in front of him he grabs her hands. The two make real eye contact. She stares into his eyes as he looks into hers. He feels fire inside and pulls her down to him. He closes his eyes to kiss her. She drops down to his level and they share their first kiss. Her mind is consumed with him. How did this happen so soon after meeting him? She gives in to the intimacy and gets in his lap to continue sharing their moment. The long kiss ends with a huge hug. She gets off of his lap and stands. The two are speechless. Neither one knows what to say. They just look at each other and they both know that this is special, very special. He reaches for her hands again to pull her towards him for another kiss. Her secret place has now become their secret place. Two young lovers find each other against all odds. The kisses continue as Anna's fishing pole takes off down the river with another fish.

Chapter Twenty

COULD IT BE LOVE



Anna puts her truck in park as she pulls into her space at the dorm of Lone Oak College. The engine continues to idle as she stares out of the windshield. She feels like she has been completely blindsided by everything that has happened. She started out the day trying to be helpful to a new guy at school. Now she felt like a huge void inside her was being filled. When she took him back to the diner to get his car, she didn't want the day to end. She craved his presence. She was almost scared of the way she felt. Turning off the ignition, she gets out of the truck and goes up the stairs to the second floor dorm room. Grabbing the key from her pocket she reaches for the door handle and notices a red ribbon tied around the doorknob. "Dang it, looks like Jennifer has company. I better come back later." Just as she turns around, the door opens.

"Well hello Anna. I was just leaving."

"Hi Todd, I guess you guys are, "studying tonight?" Anna says sarcastically.

"Nope, we weren't, Anna. We were making out. Boyfriends and girlfriends do that ya know."

She hits him on the shoulder. "I was trying to be nice you big goofball."

"Oh it was nice, it really was." He says with a smile.

"Shut up Todd and get out of here." Comes a reply from Jennifer inside the room.

"See ya'll tomorrow girls, I'm out of here."

"If you're lucky Todd, only if you're lucky." Anna responds.

Todd had been Jennifer's boyfriend since junior high school. They knew they were going to be married someday and they both had decided on a medical career. Going through it together was important to them.

Anna goes into the room and heads to the refrigerator. She grabs a water bottle and takes a big drink.

"Well Anna. Did you show Joseph around today?"

Anna pauses to think. "I did show him around today. Not in the way I planned, though. It was a whole lot better than I thought it would be. We started out with good intentions. We met at the diner but we ran into Jack and Virgil and, of course, were their usual butt hole selves. I believe they were being mean to Joseph before I got there and continued after I sat down with him. I went all redneck on Virgil and took him to the floor."

"Dang Anna, then what?"

"Mary threw Virgil and Jack out and I decided to take Joseph to the river to chill out and catch a fish or two."

"Anna, you've got to be kidding me. You never take anyone to your spot."

"I know Jenn, you're right. It just seemed like the right thing to do."

"Okay then, how did that go? Did you catch anything?"

"Jennifer, I think I caught more than just a fish. I'm still trying to explain it to myself but this feels very special to me. I just can't explain it right now."

Jennifer walks up to Anna and puts both hands on her shoulders. "Could it be Love?"

"Maybe that's it Jenn, maybe that explains it all. I just don't understand how it can happen so quickly."

"Oh yeah Anna," Jennifer remembers, "I meant to tell you that your mother called. She said to call her back when you get home. Where's your phone?"

Anna reaches into her pocket to retrieve her phone. "It's turned off. I didn't realize it. I better call her."

Becky is in the kitchen cooking supper. She has flour on her hands as she prepares fried chicken for her and Jerry. Still in their daily work clothes, the two are talking about the days electrical business when Becky's phone rings. She knows who it is by the ring tone. Wiping her hands on a dishtowel she answers and puts her on speaker. "Hello sweetie, how are you today?"

"Hi momma, I had a great day. Jennifer said you called."

"Hi baby!" Jerry adds from the kitchen table.

"Hi dad." Anna answers back.

"How's my truck doing? You're taking good care of her I hope."

"Of course dad, I know what that truck means to you."

"That a girl Anna, I knew you would."

"Momma, what's up? Is everything okay with you?"

Becky takes a fork to turn over the chicken in the frying pan. The sizzle is loud.

"Well," Becky continues, "I have some good news and some not so good news."

Anna braces herself for whatever is coming.

"I have a breast lumpectomy next Friday. That's the good news."

Anna is waiting for the not so good news. "And what else, what's the bad news?"

"I didn't say bad news Anna, I said not so good. It could have been bad. You know how your dad climbs those ladders like a monkey. Well, he was on top of one pulling wire through some conduit and the ladder gave way and he fell."

"Oh no momma, is he okay?"

"He's kinda bumped and bruised and he's got a big pop knot on his head but I think he's gonna be just fine. I tried to get him to go to the doctor but you know how stubborn he is. Can you come down next Friday for the procedure?"

"First let me say something to dad. Hey dad, why are you climbing ladders when you have guys to do that for you? You could have been killed!"

"It's all okay sweetie, I landed on my head. No damage can happen to this old, hard head."

Anna shakes her head. "Dad please be careful and mom, of course I can be there. Are you staying in the hospital?"

"No dear, it's outpatient and I'll come home. I'd love to see you and maybe your dad can cook out or something."

"That would be great, mom. Can I bring someone with me?" She asks.

"Like who Anna? Is it Jennifer?"

"Nope, not this time. I met someone and I want you both to meet him too. I won't know until I ask him if he can come but I just wanted to make sure it was okay. He's here at college studying medical research like me and he is also from Little Rock."

Becky takes the last chicken leg out of the pan and sits it on a plate on the table. "I can't wait to meet him Anna. Did you know him when you lived here in town?"

"No mom, it's all kinda strange how we got together but I can't wait for you to meet him too."

Jerry speaks up, "Do I need to load my shotgun Anna? I don't allow just anyone to date my girl."

"No need to load your gun dad. He's safe, believe me."

"Okay Anna, sounds like a plan. We'll invite Paul and Marge too. We will see you Thursday night. I'm supposed to be there by seven on Friday morning."

"You got it mom. Sounds great. We'll be there Thursday night. Love you guys." Becky hangs up the phone and sits down at the table with Jerry. "Sounds serious Jerry. She's never brought anyone else home to meet us. I didn't even ask her his name." Jerry reaches for a piece of chicken on the plate. "Hang on Jerry, you didn't say grace yet."

"Sorry dear. Looks like we need to be praying for more than just food tonight."

She reaches for his hand to pray. "You are right my dear, we sure do."

Chapter Twenty One

LITTLE ROCK BOUND



Joseph has gotten home and gone through his normal nightly routine of showering and making himself something to eat before sitting down with all his research to study.

He relives the day's events over and over again. Her pretty face is all he can see. He remembers her golden blonde hair shining in the afternoon sun at the river. The beautiful scenery of the special place she shared with him and experiencing his first kiss with her. It was a lot to take in. Studying was the last thing on his mind. He still couldn't find his way around campus but he knew she would be there to help him. He looked forward to finding his way with her by his side. He wanted to call her but he didn't want to seem too eager and scare her off. His phone rings beside him. His heart races when he sees her number come up. "Hello Anna. What's going on?"

"Hi Joe. I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed our day together. It was pretty special. I don't think I will ever forget it."

"I agree, Anna. I'm still enjoying it just thinking about it."

"Well, listen Joe I just got off the phone with my mother in Little Rock and she's having a lumpectomy next Friday. I'm going to go down for that. She said it was just outpatient and she wanted dad to cook out for me that evening."

"I'm sorry about your mom's surgery Anna. Is she going to be okay?"

"She seems to think that this procedure will take care of it. I did tell her a little about you. Is that okay?"

"Of course it is. No problem."

"I also asked her if you could come with me. Can you come next Thursday?"

Joseph puts the phone to his chest and pauses. He takes a deep breath and then raises it back to his ear, "I don't know Anna. Did you tell them about me? Is their house able to accommodate my chair? Did you tell them about my disability?"

"No I didn't Joe. I'm sorry. I really didn't think about it until right now. I don't see your chair Joe, I just see you. Don't worry. Whatever comes up, we will deal with it. Will you go?"

Joseph feels empowered by her statement that she only sees him and not the chair.

"Yes, Anna. I will go for sure. I would love to meet them and while we are down there we can drop by my parents house so they can meet you. What do you think?"

"I would like that a lot Joe. I can't believe I didn't even know you like two days ago. What in the world is going on here?"

"I don't know either Anna, but I think I like it. Are we meeting at the diner in the morning for coffee before class?"

"That sounds like a plan Joe. I will see you in the morning and hopefully it won't be as full of drama as this morning. Have a good night."

"You too Anna, goodnight."

Joseph's thoughts slowly turn back to studying. He reaches into a box by his bed and takes out a very thick binder full of research and then reaches in again for a second one. The cover of both binders has, Andover's Disease Cure, written in permanent marker. He scans through all of the pages he has written over five years of his life and prays out loud. "Lord, you have

given me this disease for a reason. I believe I have it so I can cure it. I am getting close and now you have put someone in my life that I think could possibly be my wife and ultimately have my children. I must find a cure before I have children. I couldn't stand one of my kids dealing with this disability. Lord, please give me the wisdom and intelligence to solve this very intricate puzzle. Amen."

Chapter Twenty Two

DR. JOSEPH CARTER



Mary has opened the Sit A Spell diner early. Jennifer, Jasmine and Mary are watching through the windows. They are waiting for Joseph and Anna to arrive. Jennifer has filled them in on the couple's day at the river. Mary, remembering what happened the day before, wanted to do something special for them. Headlights light up the diner as Anna pulls into the parking lot.

"There's Anna. Joseph can't be far behind. Go ahead and get their stuff on the table." Mary says excitedly.

Anna gets out of her truck as Joseph pulls up and parks beside her. His door opens and he begins the process of assembling his chair. "Give me just a minute Anna. This won't take long."

"No problem Joe. It amazes me how organized and efficiently you put it all together. You're amazing. I must say, also, that you do look awesome in your cool bowtie."

Joseph smiles at her, "I don't know about amazing or awesome but I have years of experience going through this routine." He scoots over into the chair.

Anna walks up and bends down to hug him and gives him a kiss on the cheek. "Shall we go in? I'm sure this will be a whole lot better than yesterday. I promise it will."

He reaches back inside the car to grab his backpack before shutting his door.

Anna sees Jennifer's car in the parking lot. "I wonder why Jennifer is here so early? I usually have to squirt her with a water gun to get her up."

Joseph rolls toward the diner as Anna walks beside him. They come through the door and Mary and the two waitresses meet them. Jennifer motions toward their seat in the back. "Right this way you two. We have been waiting for you."

The table is set with a tablecloth and a small vase with a red rose in it. A candle makes the scene glow. There is coffee with two creamers and a cinnamon roll on each side of the table.

"You guys! I can't believe you did this for us. Thank you so much," Anna says as she gives the girls a hug.

"Really, thank you." Joseph chips in as he adjusts to the table.

"Well," Mary says, "It's the least we can do after what happened yesterday. You both have a seat and don't worry about anything."

They all walk back to the counter but can't help but watch them sitting there in the candlelight.

Joseph grabs Anna's hand as they talk. "I guess we have a redo today. I am so ready to get back to class and have you show me around."

"It will be a pleasure sir but we better eat these cinnamon rolls while they're hot. They're the best in town."

"Anna, are you sure you want me to go with you on Friday? Your mother is coming off of surgery and I'm sure she will be sore."

"Don't worry Joe my dad will take care of everything. I will warn you though, my dad is a big guy with lots of tattoos. Don't be scared of him. He's just a harmless little fuzzball."

"If you are sure it's okay, I will get packed to go for a weekend. I'm not worried about your dad, I'm not very threatening but I may have to stay with my parents. Their house is definitely

ready for my chair. I have lots of stuff to help me there. I hope that's okay. Maybe you can stay at my parents house with me."

"Don't worry, Joe, we will figure it all out when we get there. I want you to meet my grandparents too. They are coming over. My grandfather started my dad's business and he is the Paul of Paul and Family Electrical. My mom and dad are both master electricians and work together every day. You're gonna love them."

"So your mother is an electrician too?"

"Yep, she learned it all from my dad and then took some classes. They have been working together for years. They're the best in town without a doubt."

"Electrical huh? I have some questions I would like to ask them. My research on Andovers Disease has some electrical questions as far as the body's electrical current. It could be interesting to hear what they have to say. Let's finish this up and head to class. I'm ready to be an active participant of Lone Oak College."

"You got it Mister Carter. Let's do this." She can see the excitement in him she hasn't seen before. She can tell he is very serious about his research and she couldn't wait to see him in class with her.

Joseph leaves a twenty-five dollar tip on the table on the way out as they thank them again for all they have done.

The sun is rising as they begin their day together at the college. It's a mid September day as they make their way to the sidewalk towards the building their classes are in. Joseph checks his watch. "We have about ten minutes before class starts. Let's hurry." He starts to roll faster as Anna has to go into a light jog to keep up with him. His muscular arms are like a piston on a locomotive. They get to their building and find that the college is well prepared for someone with disabilities. A ramp takes him inside the door as they look for the class.

Anna points, "It's just about three more doors and then we go right."

They get to the door that has a Clinical Research sign on it and they go in. There are probably twenty people in the class so far. They are drinking their morning coffee or drink of choice and finding their way to the seats. Joseph spots the area for wheelchairs and rolls over to take his space. Anna finds a seat near him and sits down.

"Dang Joe, you can really get that thing going when you want. I think I ran off my cinnamon roll getting here."

"I'm sorry Anna. I just get a bit excited when I get the chance to talk about my research."

He reaches into his backpack and takes out the two large folders and puts them on a table beside him with a thud. Anna hears the weight of the folders dropping and asks him. "Is that your research?"

He pats the folders, "Yes it is Anna. It's many years of research on my disease. I hope to, one day, find a cure so no other child has to be in one of these chairs because of it. I have a twenty- five percent chance of my child getting it so I'm kind of on a time schedule."

She thinks of her time at school and realizes she hasn't had the same kind of urgency that he shows. It causes her to question her resolve. An elderly man walks up to the podium. He is dressed in a white lab coat and carries a cane. He takes the cane and raps on the podium to get the classes' attention.

"Good morning. My name is Doctor Bernie Stocks. I have been a Clinical Research Specialist all of my life. Well I must say, most of it. I have researched many diseases and ailments and I must tell you out there, you will not always find the cures that you seek. You will be frustrated on many fronts. You will continue to see diseases change lives and make people's existence here on Earth difficult. They will suffer and some will

die. You will have a front row seat to witness all of the carnage associated with diseases you hate and want to eradicate. There is one thing you must do when you see all of these things. You must continue your research. You must be diligent. You must do the same tests over and over again hoping for different results. I believe that's almost the definition of insanity. Someone right now is sitting in a class that will find those answers we seek. He or she will have that Eureka moment when you find that one plus one doesn't equal two. Mistakes often find the answers you seek. Make mistakes because that's where you find those answers that hide from us. Are you going to be that Doctor who eats and sleeps this research? Who's every waking hour is devoted to finding the one answer to the one equation that changes everything? Sitting in the audience with us today is someone who is close to finding the answers he seeks. I have followed his astounding research as he has left no stone unturned and has been that person who, even as a very young man read every single thing on a disease that he is determined to take off of this planet forever. He got his Doctorate from the Jacksonville School of Medicine at 16 years old. He has since transferred here to our fine college to continue fighting this disease called Andovers Disease. I must say when this disease affected him and his family it affected the wrong guy. I wanted to welcome him here with us today. Doctor Joseph Carter, raise your hand and let us give you the applause you deserve sir."

The class applauds as Joseph raises his hand and looks over at Anna. She is wiping the tears running down her face.

Joseph responds, "Thank you Doctor Stocks. I look forward to working with you and all of these fine students. It's an honor sir."

Anna reaches over to take his hand. For a man she has only known for such a short time, she could not be more proud to

be there now sitting beside him. She is more than blown away. Joseph takes his other hand and places on top. Her heart is full.

Joseph smiles at Anna and whispers to her softly, "Doctor Stocks is a wonderful clinical researcher but he can be quite a blowhard. I didn't know he was going to do that to me."

She whispers back, "Why haven't you told me all of this? I had no idea. I thought you were just here like me to get your degree."

Joseph scribbles a note and passes it to her. It says, "I'll tell you all about it after class."

She takes her pen and draws a heart on the paper and gives it back. He grips her hand tightly and smiles.

"Now class," Doctor Stocks continues, "Let's get on with attempting to push this stuff into those young skulls full of mush."

Chapter Twenty Three

I THINK I FELL



Doctor Stocks lecture ends and the class stands to leave. Many of the class walks over to Joseph to shake his hand and meet him. Some of the students had been following his research and were hoping to get a chance to be a part of his upcoming class. Anna watches as the students approach him with ideas about research. Joseph patiently talks to each one and invites them to sign up for his class. He puts all of his work into his backpack and asks Anna, "Could you take me to lunch? I am hungry. Are you?"

She puts her hands on her hips. "Am I hungry? I'm definitely hungry for some answers Doctor Carter. I don't think I know you at all. You've got a few secrets to spill for me today. We can discuss all of this at the cafeteria. They have great soup and sandwiches today."

He fakes a sad face. "I know, I've got some explaining to do. Show me the way Miss Taylor. I will even let you push me if that's okay?"

She puts her hand over her heart. "Oh my, I definitely would be honored, my good man."

He agrees, "As you should be Miss Taylor, as you should be."

She knows he would never allow anyone to push him, so she tries to be very careful not to bump into anything or anyone. He notices the staring, coming from so many. Some smile at him and nod. Most people are courteous to make way for them. On the way Anna points out different classrooms as well as the bathrooms and exits to the building. They arrive at the cafeteria and get in the line for the soup and sandwich special.

She asks him, "Joe, if you want to go ahead and find a table, I will get whatever you need."

He looks around to find a table by the window. "Okay, that sounds good. Just bring me a water bottle and the soup."

"I gotcha. It won't take too long."

He rolls over to the window table to wait. She grabs a tray to put their lunch on as well as a couple of bottles of water. She walks over to his table with the tray. "Here you go." She says, "I got you crackers and napkins. Anything else?"

"Nope, I'm all set Anna. It's interesting to see you go into waitress mode so quickly. Now, what would you like to know?"

She reaches her hand out to him. He puts down his crackers and takes her hand. "Hi, my name is Anna. I am a student here at Lone Oak College. Who the heck are you?"

He shakes her hand vigorously. "Hi my name is Doctor Joseph Christopher Carter. I have been a research scholar most of my life on the disease that has put me in this chair. I was quite the child prodigy. I have pictures of myself with famous scientists and governors and even some sports people. My mother has all of it on my wall of fame at our house in Little Rock. There are newspaper clippings of me at twelve years old doing my research and about getting my scholarships to various colleges. I am here to work with fellow doctors on my research and they thought it would be great if I had a class on how I went about finding the answers I have found so far. I never, ever meant to hide anything from you but all my life, people have treated me

differently than others because of my intellect and the fact that I'm in this chair. I have had to be careful and try to figure out if someone is being nice to me to get something out of me or because they feel sorry for me. I hope you understand. I was going to tell you all of this soon but I was afraid."

She asks him, "Afraid? Afraid of what?"

He looks down and takes his spoon to stir his soup. "Anna, you don't know how much these last few days have meant to me. I feel free when I'm with you. Every disability disappears and it's just you and me. You make me feel like home. I can't explain it all really. I'm sorry if I'm rambling like a teenager."

"Wow! You are an amazing man Joe. You are such a fresh person to meet. I have never met anyone like you. It all just means that you are even more special than I thought. I'm just a hometown girl who loves her momma and daddy and wants to help people who can't help themselves. I hoped to come here and help find ways to treat some cancers and alcoholism. I know those are two things that don't even go together but they have both had impacts on my life. Now I believe that we have crossed paths for a reason. I can't wait to go home and show you off to my mom and dad and then meet your parents. Friday can't come soon enough."

Joseph takes a couple of spoonfuls of soup and a drink from his water bottle. "So, are we good?" He asks.

She takes her water bottle and holds it up for a toast. "We are good Doctor Joseph."

He takes his bottle to do the same. "Awesome! I'm glad."

A lady in scrubs walks up to the table and speaks to Joseph. "I heard you were going to be here Doctor" She reaches out to shake his hand. "My name is Adele Evans and I am a lab technologist here at the college. I have always wanted to meet you. Can I show you something on my phone?"

He has a puzzled look on his face and really doesn't know what to expect. "Sure, what is it?"

She goes to her pictures and scrolls down until she finds the one she wants. "This is my little boy Wyatt."

He takes the phone from her to look at the picture. It's a picture of a little boy in a wheelchair with a huge grin on his face. Joseph shows it to Anna.

"Miss Evans, that's one cute kid. Love the smile."

She begins to tear up. "He's the love of my life Doctor. He was born with Andovers disease too. You must know how much I searched for help when I found out he had the disease when I was about twenty weeks pregnant. Your name came up in about everything I read. It was your tireless research that made me want to be in the medical field. I felt like for his sake and for all the kids to come I had to do something. I can't believe I finally get to meet you."

He looks again at the boy in the picture. "Miss Evans I will be teaching a class about my research and I definitely want you to attend. My work is continuing here at the college. We are so very close to a cure now. Maybe you could be there when it happens because with God's help it will happen Miss Evans. No mother or child will ever again have to deal with this awful disease. Will you be with me?"

She wipes the tears from her eyes with her sleeve. "Yes doctor, you know I will. I can't wait to get started." She goes to her knees to give him a hug to thank him. "I'll see you there, Doctor Carter."

He raises his hand as they exchange high fives. "Yes you will Adele, see you soon."

She walks off to her lunch and he looks over at Anna. "Once again, you make me all giddy inside. Can I join your research team too?"

He looks her over. "I don't know, do you think you could handle it? It's awfully technical and I am a genius you know."

She throws a cracker at him. "I taught you to fish, it's the least you could do."

"Oh yeah, what happened to the fish I caught anyway? The one you put on the rope."

She leans in to him. "That's what you remember about that day? The fish? Well if you must know, Mary has it in the freezer to cook for me when I ask her. Does anything else come to mind about that day?"

He puts his hand under his chin to think. "Hmm, I think I fell that day."

She questions him, "Fell? You didn't fall."

Taking both of her hands on the table, he tells her. "Yes I did Anna, I fell in love." She gets up from her seat and bends down beside him. The noise of the crowd disappears as she kisses him and hugs him and then whispers. "I fell too Joe, I fell hard. I love you too."

Chapter Twenty Four

PLANET JOE-ANNA



David parks his car in the garage at home. He has had another long day at work. He longs for a needed vacation at their beach house in Florida. Opening the door to go into the house, he is met there by Sandy. She has been waiting for him to come home to tell him the news about Joseph. She gives him a kiss and a hug before he can get in the door. “Good afternoon dear husband.”

“Well hello there Sandy. This is an awesome way to greet your husband when he gets home. What’s going on here?”

She leads him over to the kitchen counter to a stool and they sit down. “You will never guess what happened to Joseph.”

He looks at her with a puzzled face. “You’re going to make me guess, aren’t you?”

Sandy is still excited from Joseph’s phone call that afternoon. “He caught a fish!”

“Okay?” David says, “I was going to say he found the cure for Andover’s or got the Nobel Prize for Medicine. Catching a fish was definitely not on my list. Go on, I am truly intrigued.”

She takes a deep breath and starts over. “He is coming home this weekend.” David takes her hands to calm her down.

“And?”

"He's bringing someone with him from the college. He's bringing a girl home to meet us David!"

"Now Sandy, what in the world does catching a fish and bringing a girl home to meet us have in common?"

"I'm sorry David, I'm just excited because I could hear it in his voice that he cares a lot for her. Her name is Anna and she is from here in Little Rock."

"I know most of the doctors in town. What's her last name?" he asks.

She tries to remember the name Joseph told her. "Oh yeah, I remember now. It's Hughes. Her family owns the trucks you see around town that have Hughes Family Electrical on the side. They met in a diner by the college. She's a waitress there. He told me so much about her and that they had only met a few days ago. They're the same age too. He said she was blonde and he joked she was taller than him."

David laughs, "That's my son for sure. Are they staying here?"

"He told me her mother was having a lumpectomy and her dad was going to cook something on the grill at their house on Saturday. We are invited. Can you take off on Saturday? Please, can you? You've got to meet her."

David takes out his phone to check his patient lists for Saturday. "I don't have any surgeries on Saturday and just a few appointments. I'm sure they can handle it. Sounds good to me Sandy. I'd love to meet her."

She stands up to hug him. "Thank you David! I know you would never take off for just anything. Thank you, thank you!"

David pushes her back from the hug. "Now, what about the fish?"

She thinks it over and tells him, "Maybe I should let him tell you about the fish David. I want you to hear his story from his own lips."

"One thing's for sure Sandy, I won't forget this conversation for a while. This is one of the very first we've had about our son and something other than his research or a doctor visit. I think I kind of like it for a change."

"Me too David. It reminds me that our son is no different than anyone else. He needs to love and be loved. Isn't that what we all want?"

David reaches for her and brings her close to him. "I found mine a long time ago Sandy. I would have never gotten through all of the ups and downs with Joseph without you. Thanks for never giving up on our son, even when no one else gave him a chance. My dad pushed for me to let him go and try again. He pushed even on the day he was born when you were having all the trouble with the birth. When they told me to leave the room during the birth and then came out and told me you were in danger, he looked at me and said that maybe our choice to have him might cost both of your lives. I had to wonder if we made the right choice."

Sandy tried to remember what she could of the night Joseph was born. "It's all in bits and pieces David. I can't imagine what you were going through at the hospital."

David pauses and thinks back, "I do remember one thing for sure. When it was the darkest and we didn't know what was going to happen, a group of ladies came in to where we were waiting and asked if they could pray with us. It was a prayer group from a local church. I wasn't then much of a praying man but that night I joined them. If I remember right I think one of them was named Miss Thelma. I don't think I ever saw them again. I just know it had something to do with the outcome that night."

Sandy smiles at him, "What I remember so vividly was when your dad came into the room when we were all good and ready for visitors. You were holding your newborn son all wrapped

up with his little beanie on and you turned to hand him to your dad. He looked at him. The child that he never wanted to be born was right before him in all of his innocence and wonder and he took him. He turned to sit in the chair with him and it wasn't just a few seconds before he completely broke down and started sobbing and apologizing to the baby and all of us. Never in my life have I seen anything like it. That man who was dying of cancer changed in a moment. He was never the same again."

David agreed, "He was a different man the rest of his life and dedicated so much money to Joseph for his education and care. I wish he could have seen how brilliant he is and how the money he entrusted to him was never used for his education because of all the scholarships but was put into real research on Andovers disease. He would be so very proud."

Sandy and David embrace and David whispers to her. "We made the right choice Sandy, we made the right choice."

Joseph pulls up to Anna's dormitory in his car. He texts her on her phone he is there to pick her up. She has already spotted him and is on her way down with her suitcases and bags. It's mid -morning on Thursday and it's only a couple of hours to their destination. She is in her traveling clothes today. Jeans and t-shirt with sneakers and no socks. She has her hair in a ponytail and that's what catches Joseph's eye as it swished back and forth on her way to the car. He is impressed by her strength to carry all of her baggage in just one trip. Joseph pops open the trunk and she skillfully chunks everything but one bag into it and then shuts the trunk. She hops into the passenger side and greets him with a kiss on the cheek.

"Good morning sunshine, are we ready for this?"

He agrees, "Yep, I am definitely ready."

She looks him over. He is dressed in slacks and a shirt and bowtie with a jacket. "Goodness gracious Doctor Carter. Seeing patients on the way are we?"

"Hey, stop it. I want to make a great first impression."

She notices all the controls on the car that allow Joseph to drive. "Wow! Looks like a spaceship in here. I'm excited, let's roll Joe!"

Joseph engages the controls to start the trip. Most of them do all the work for him as the car backs out of the parking lot and heads to the freeway for Little Rock. She takes his hand as they get on their way. He asks, "Did you ever tell them about me Anna?"

She smiles as she questions him, "Tell them what? You're incredibly strong and handsome and so stinking smart and all of that? Maybe I should tell them about getting your doctorate at sixteen or that you've never caught a fish until recently or that you learned bacon is good fish bait?"

Joseph cuts his eyes at her, "And?"

Anna continues, "Oh, do you mean that wheelchair thing? No, I only told them the important stuff."

Joseph shakes his head. "I'm just saying it could be important so they can move furniture or stuff like that. Just saying."

She reaches up to straighten up his bowtie and gives him another kiss on the cheek. "So are you ready to meet the family?"

"This is all new for me Anna. Just a little over a week ago, going somewhere with a woman to meet her family wasn't even on my radar. It was never on my radar. Now I'm on my way home with a girl who is kissing me and who can't wait to meet my family. I'm also going to meet your family. What planet did I wake up on?"

"Call it planet Joe-Anna. Hey I just made that up. I like it. We are from planet Joe-Anna. On our planet there aren't any children with diseases or parents struggling with alcoholism or cancer. Sounds great to me. What do you think?"

Joseph gets a very serious face. "One cure at a time sweet lady, just one cure at a time."

Chapter Twenty Five

CONDEMNED



Becky is in the kitchen making dips and snacks and awaiting Anna and Joseph's arrival. She can't wait to see her daughter. She really needed Anna right now. Since she heard about her diagnosis she had been tied up in knots inside. She was trying to be strong but that nagging feeling that this could be more serious than they were telling her wouldn't go away. They told her it's just an outpatient procedure and she would be in and back home before she knew it. She had lost friends to breast cancer. How could she not be worried? Trying to look and sound strong for Jerry was important to her but she didn't know how much longer she could keep it in.

Jerry is in the living room watching football. The season was finally beginning. He knew he needed a distraction to keep his mind off of Becky's lumpectomy. His worst nightmare would be to lose her now. They had been inseparable for so long. Every day they worked together in the business. They made many fishing trips together as a family and now that Anna was in college the trips were just the two of them. They were enjoying their time together immensely.

Jerry gets up from his seat and walks into the kitchen. He samples all the dips and snacks as well as sampling the cook's

lips. "Hmm, I don't know which one I like best. Let me try this one again." He grabs her by the hips and pulls her close to kiss her again. "Yep, this is the one I like. More please."

Becky shoos him off of her. "Hey, I'm trying to cook here. They'll be here any minute and I want everything to be done. We've got to make a great first impression for Anna."

He turns to go back into the living room with snacks and dips in hand. She slaps him on the butt on the way out. "Now don't come back now you hear."

Before he can lay his food down on the table beside him he sees a car pull up in the driveway. "I think they're here Beck! I wonder why she didn't drive my truck? I wanted to check it all out for her while she's down."

Becky is trying to place everything on the table and she yells out to Jerry. "I'm coming Jerry. Get on out there and help them get in."

Jerry steps out on the front porch as Anna gets out to run and hug her father. "Hey dad! It's so great to see you." She takes his hand to lead him to Joseph's side of the car. Joseph rolls down his window and extends his hand.

"Hello Mister Hughes, It's so great to finally meet you."

Jerry opens the car door for him. "Well come on out, I'm not going to bite you."

Joseph looks over at Anna. "I'm coming sir. Give me just a minute."

Becky comes out on the porch wiping her hands on a dish-towel as Joseph reaches into the back seat to grab the seat portion of his wheelchair and places it outside. She wonders why he hasn't gotten out yet. Jerry is the first to notice what is beginning to appear before him.

"It will just take him a second dad. It's amazing how he has it all down to a science."

Anna sees her mother walking up to the car and she grabs her in a hug. "Okay, I want you both to meet Joseph Carter."

Joseph reaches into the back seat again and grabs the last wheel and slides it on the chair. He grabs the handhold in the car and scoots himself over to the seat and extends his hand again. This time he takes Becky's hand and shakes it.

"Well this was a tad awkward." He says to them both.

Anna takes the blame for the awkwardness. "I'm sorry, Joseph told me to give you guys a heads up. He was right."

Joseph takes her hand. "It's all just fine Anna. I'm sure they've seen people in a wheelchair before."

Becky steps forward and leans down beside him and gives him a big hug. "I'm so glad you guys came. I really needed my girl to be here and Joseph, you come right on in. I've got stuff to eat and there's football on the television."

Jerry puts his hand on Joseph's shoulder. "That's really impressive how you put that thing together so fast man."

Jerry looks at the front porch and notices there are steps. He realizes his house isn't wheelchair friendly."

I'm sorry Joseph but we'll have to help you get up the stairs."

Realizing this is going to be a work in progress, he asks Anna to help him get to the front porch. "Anna, I think you are going to have to help me. I recognize my limitations here."

"Of course I will Joe, not a problem at all." She grabs the handles to the chair and they head to the porch.

Becky goes into the house to make way for the chair and finds Joseph a place where he can be comfortable. Jerry and Anna take one handle each and back him up the stairs to go inside the house.

Joseph tries to think back to when he had to have help in other places before all of the ramps and things that now are so commonplace. They find a place for him in the living room by the couch and they all sit down. Anna sits beside him and takes

his hand. "I'm really sorry I didn't tell anyone Joe. Next time we will be ready for sure. Right dad?"

Jerry looks over at Joseph. "One question young man."

"What's that, Mister Hughes?"

"I have got to know, what in the world is the story about the fish. I've been waiting for too long to find out the answer. One other thing, do you like football?"

Joseph laughs at the question. It gives him some relief from the frustration he's felt so far. Something really needed to break the ice and they all felt it. "I'll have to say I normally don't watch football. My research has taken up most of my time but your daughter has shown me that there is so much more to life and who knows, I might just become a big fan. I do know I have become a fishing fan. She took me to a great fishing spot and I actually caught my first one. It was pretty special."

Anna smiles. "It sure was."

Becky stands up. "I need to run to the grocery store to get a few more things for tomorrow. Can you give me a hand Anna? If that's alright with you guys."

Still feeling a bit awkward Joseph agrees. "Sure, you girls go ahead. I'll sit here and watch football with Jerry and eat dip and chips. I do need to call my parents and let them know we are here."

Anna reaches over and kisses him on the cheek. "We won't be long. You need anything at the store?"

"Nope, I'm all good here with Jerry. Hurry back and be careful."

The two girls go out the door as Joseph takes off his coat. "Fishing and football all in one month. My horizons are expanding Mister Hughes. I think I like it."

Jerry puts up his hand for a high-five and Joseph slaps it.

"Let's do this Jerry, turn it up."

"Let's do this Joe! Can I call you Joe?"

"Not really, I only let Anna call me that, if that's okay?"

"Then Joseph it is. Here, have a jalapeno popper."

Backing out of the driveway, Becky questions why Anna didn't tell them about the wheelchair.

"It would have been nice to have a little heads up girl. We could have been more prepared."

"I know mom. I just don't look at him like that. I never have."

Becky smiles at her. "I see how you look at him. I love it! There's something special about you two."

Anna agrees. "I hear that from so many people. It must be true. Mom, how are you? I know you're trying to be strong for me but how are you really?"

There's a long pause as they head down the road.

"Well mom?"

"Anna, you are right. I'm really trying to be strong but I'm really scared."

Her voice breaks as she tries to speak. "I don't want to miss anything in your life and I don't want to leave Jerry alone. I know they told me not to worry but how can I not worry?"

Anna knows the store they are going to but she sees her mother take an unusual turn. "Momma, where are we going? The store is the other direction."

Becky looks over at Anna. "I really didn't need anything at the store. I wanted to show you something."

They travel down unfamiliar territory for Anna and after turns and twists they turn into an old neighborhood. Most of the houses are boarded up or torn down. She finally turns into a driveway. The grass is high in the yard and the glass is broken out of the windows. There's a sign on the front door, 'Do Not Enter, Condemned'.

"Momma, where are we? Is it safe?"

"I just need a second here Anna. Let's get out and go in."

"But the sign says condemned. I don't think it's safe."

They walk up to the front door.

"Anna, this house should have been condemned when we lived here for all the bad stuff that happened."

Anna realizes where they are now. "Is this grandma Rose's house? Are those the steps you hit your head on?"

Becky steps back and with all her might kicks the door in. The old place stinks of mildew and rot and it's filled with old beer cans and graffiti on the wall. The light coming in the broken windows is all there is to see.

"Mom, why did you bring me here?"

Becky walks down the old hallway to the dilapidated bathroom. The crunch of broken glass under her feet is loud. She reaches up to the top of the broken mirror and pulls down an old box. "I cannot believe it's still here."

Anna takes it from her and throws it to the floor. "Momma, it's an old pregnancy test. That's gross!"

"No Anna. That test was the one I stole from Baker's Drug store when I thought I was pregnant with you. I never got to take it. That's the day I met Miss Thelma. I was hurt that night before I was going to take it. My mother almost cost me my life as well as yours. Do you smell the cigarette smell in here? It's embedded in the walls and floors from her constant smoking. Now I may have breast cancer and who knows if her smoking wasn't the reason I have it. She keeps trying to kill me. It's like she doesn't want me to be happy without her. She wants me for herself. I'm glad she disappeared with some guy from Billy Ray's bar after the accident. I don't know what I would have done if Jerry's parents hadn't taken me in."

Anna feels a bit uneasy as she sees her mother dealing with a hurt she has kept inside for way too long. She puts her arms around her and the two embrace.

Becky continues, "I woke up the next day with Jerry sitting beside me holding my hand. He kept saying to not rush things and to get better. My head was all bandaged up and then he told

me he found out about me being pregnant when they did some blood tests. I had been so worried about finding out if I was or not. I was afraid he would leave me.”

Becky leans over to pick up the old test on the floor. “This is the test that was going to tell me if you were coming or not. Jerry could not have been more supportive as well as his parents. I think he was even excited about it all even then. I knew then we were going to have a baby. A beautiful baby who became a beautiful woman.”

Anna wipes the tears from her eyes. “He loved me even then didn’t he momma.”

“Yes he did sweetie, no one loves you like your daddy.”

“Can we get out of here though momma, it’s really creepy in here.”

“Yes we can Anna. Just one more thing before I go.” She walks into the old bedroom and finds the closet doors off the hinges. She looks into the closet and remembers the night she took her mothers’ yellow dress and cleaned it. She really didn’t know what she would find in there but something told her to go in the room. On the floor of the closet was an old beer bottle. She reaches down to pick it up. “This was my mother’s Anna. This is the brand she drank most of the time.”

Anna takes it from her and with a windup like a pitcher, she hurls it against the wall and it breaks it into thousands of pieces. “There you go momma! This chapter is over now. Tomorrow you are going to have your surgery and get that passed you and then you and dad are going to get to know Joseph and see how wonderful he is. This is going to be a weekend to remember. She can’t hurt you anymore.”

Becky looks around the old house one last time. “No Anna, she can’t. Never again! Let’s get home and see just how wonderful your Joseph is. There’s no telling what your dad is telling him. Let’s get out of here.”

Anna takes her hand as they head out the door onto the porch. They both take a few seconds to look at the concrete steps as they go down them. Getting into the car, Becky can still hear the echo in her head of her mother barking at her.

“Becky, where are my cigarettes?”

The two back out of the driveway leaving the old house behind. The trees that caught fire that night when the cars burned still stood as a monument of a changed life. A change for the better.

Chapter Twenty Six

WE HAVE A SECRET



Jerry gets up from his recliner to look out the window. “I wonder where those girls are? It’s been a while since they’ve been gone. They probably went somewhere else before coming home.”

“There’s no telling Mister Hughes. I’m sure they’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Jerry walks over to his seat and grabs the remote and turns the sound down on the game. “Joseph, I thought we’d spend a few minutes talking about your relationship with Anna.”

Joseph shifts in his seat. “Okay sir, what would you like to know?”

“How long have you been going out with Anna?”

“We have only known each other for about a week so far. I know that’s really odd for you to understand. I don’t even understand it all yet.”

Jerry sits back down and takes a drink from his cup. He’s a big man and the tattoos make him a bit intimidating. “So you’re a student at Lone Oak just like her I guess.”

Joseph knew he was going to have to do a lot of explaining about his life. He takes a deep breath and goes into his stock answer to people who can’t understand. “Mister Hughes, I am a

doctor. I got my doctorate at sixteen years old. With you being from here, you might remember me on television shows with stories about me when I was a kid going to college.”

Jerry thinks back. “You know what Joseph, I think I remember that. So you were one of those child prodigies, I guess.”

“Yes sir, if that’s what you want to call me. I don’t know why God decided to give me this gift but I intend to use it to find a cure for my birth defect so no other child has to deal with it. I really never thought I would meet anyone like your daughter. There’s something about her that makes me feel free and comfortable.”

Joseph was starting to feel more at ease talking to Jerry.

“Joseph, I hope you understand why I ask these questions. I only have one daughter and I love her more than words can say.”

“I totally understand sir. She’s a very lovable young lady for sure.”

Jerry continues, “I would like to know about your research a little bit Joseph. How close are you right now to finding a cure?”

Joseph pauses to gather his thoughts. “Mister Hughes, I intend on having a family one day. One of the things in my way of having children is the fact that there is a twenty-five percent chance I can pass on this defect to my children. Since I have met Anna, I have renewed a sense of urgency in my research for a cure. You might ask what I mean by that.”

“Yes, I was wondering what you meant for sure. It sounds to me like you plan on having children with my Anna someday.” Jerry takes the remote again and turns off the television.

“Let me explain Mister Hughes.”

“Please Joseph, just call me Jerry. Mister Hughes is my dad.”

“Okay Jerry, first let me tell you where we are on my research. You are an electrician right?”

“Yes I am Joseph. What does that have to do with your research?”

“Let me explain. Every human being has an electrical current. It uses certain chemicals in the body to create it. Electrolytes, sodium, potassium and stuff like that. We are looking into the fact that children in the womb who have Andover’s disease have an electrical current different than other babies. Making a human being in the womb is a step, by step process. When the nervous system is being made is when we are looking at making sure the baby has all the correct current it needs to develop through that step. We can implant a device to alter the current. After the nervous system has been created we can then check the current again and make sure it’s still correct. If it is, then the child is past where the disability is made and we can stop it. I know this all seems so simple in a few words but there has been many years of research into it. Andover’s is a rare birth defect and because of that the funding for research has been very limited. Because of my grandfather who left me a huge sum of money for my education, I have been able to go this far. The money is running out and the college has decided to help me in my research. I must say this Jerry. I find it very unusual that Anna’s family is in the electrical business and that is exactly where this research has led me. I really consider it a God thing. I really do.”

“Wow Joseph. I had no idea about any of this. It’s all very exciting. I can see the fire in your eyes when you talk about it. Now what about Anna? What are your intentions with her?”

Joseph rolls over to look out the window to see if the girls are back yet. Turned toward the window, Joseph asks Jerry. “Do you know when you made your decision about Becky? Was there a certain time that you knew she was going to be with you forever?”

Jerry walks over to him. “I guess I always knew Joseph. I knew she was for me the first time I laid eyes on her. Is that what you’re saying about Anna? It’s only been a week.”

Joseph turns to Jerry. "Jerry if I were to ask you for the hand of your daughter right now, what would you say?"

"Oh my! You're really going to ask me that?"

Joseph composes himself. "Yes I am sir. Can I marry Anna? Do I have your permission?"

"Have you talked to Anna about this? Have you asked her yet?"

"No sir I haven't yet. I don't have a ring or anything. It wasn't until just now that I realized, what am I waiting for?"

Joseph's phone rings. "It's my parents."

"Go ahead and answer it Joseph."

"Hello? Hey mom. Yes, we are here at Anna's house. Mister Hughes and I are having a very good conversation. Let me ask him. She wants to know if she can come over to meet all of you. She can't stand it any longer."

"Sure she can Joseph, she's very welcome."

He writes down the address so she can put it in her phone. Joseph tells her the address. See you in bit mom. Love you."

Jerry takes a deep breath. "Okay, this has turned into a very interesting day."

Becky and Anna pull into the driveway and honk the horn. They both get out with chips and drinks.

"Joseph I'm not going to tell Becky yet. I think that it should be up to Anna to tell her."

"I think you're right Jerry. When the time is right."

"Exactly Joseph, when the time is right."

The girls come into the house and put the sacks on the kitchen table. Anna asks, "So what have you two been talking about? I noticed the television is off. It must be halftime."

"Yep," Jerry agrees. It's halftime. We've just been sitting here watching football and talking about school. What took you two so long?"

Becky agrees, "It has been a longer trip than I expected. You know how mothers and daughters can spend money."

"You got that right Beck. I totally agree. I wanted to let you know, Joseph's mother called and she is on her way to meet everyone."

"That's great Jerry. I can't wait to meet her."

"You're going to love my mom. I guarantee you." Joseph adds.

Jerry turns the television back on as he takes his seat again and looks over at Joseph.

"You ready for all of this young man?"

"I sure am Mister Hughes, I am so ready."

Anna takes her seat next to Joseph and takes his hand. Becky brings more chips and drinks into the living room to fill all the bowls.

"Mom, you sit down. I can do all of this. You've got a big day tomorrow."

"It's all good Anna. I want to do it. After tomorrow I will be too sore to do anything. I need lots of hugs today and tonight because if you hug me tomorrow I might whack you."

Jerry watches Anna and Joseph together and he can't help but wonder if she is really ready for a husband with a disability. He seems very smart and personable but is he the one for his beloved daughter? It doesn't take too long before Sandy drives up in the driveway.

"There's momma. I didn't think it would take very long before she got here."

Becky opens the door and steps out on the porch. "Come on in Mrs. Carter. We've been waiting for you."

The two ladies hug each other and Sandy says, "I brought some snacks and a good bottle of wine if that's okay?"

"That's great, just put it on the kitchen table with the rest of the stuff and help yourself."

Sandy heads straight for Joseph to give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Hello Joseph, I have been on pins and needles to see you and meet Anna."

Anna steps forward to reach out her hand to Sandy. Sandy grabs her hand to pull her close for a hug. "It's so nice to finally meet you Anna. You and your mother look so much alike. You're both so pretty."

Becky speaks up, "I'll take that any day. Sandy, I want you to meet my husband Jerry."

Jerry gets up to take her hand to shake it. "Welcome to our house Mrs. Carter. Come on in and sit a spell."

Joseph speaks up, "Hey that's where me and Anna met you guys, The Sit a Spell diner at the college."

Sandy leans over toward Becky, "Has Anna told you about them meeting at the diner during the storm Mrs. Hughes?"

"Just call me Becky and yes I heard all about it. It's a great story. What do you say we ladies go out on the porch and do some talking while these guys watch the game?"

"Hey," Jerry says, "I've kind of lost interest in this game anyway. Can we come too?"

"Sure there's plenty of room out there for all of us. Bring the snacks."

Joseph starts toward the door and he turns to Anna. "You do look like your mother Anna. I love the matching blonde pony-tails and caps."

"It's our uniform Joseph."

Anna looks at her mom to see her watching them. She smiles at her. They have a secret.

Chapter Twenty Seven

AM I PREGNANT?



Jerry and Anna are sitting with Becky in the recovery room at the hospital. The occasional intercom message breaks the silence as the various doctors and nurses make their way to see each patient. Jerry is holding Becky's hand waiting for her to come out of the anesthesia. The doctor has told Jerry everything looked good and that they would know whether she needed more treatment in a couple of weeks. Becky's hand squeezes Jerry's as she begins to come around.

Anna leans over her. "Momma? Daddy and I are here. Welcome back to the conscious world."

Becky tries to sit up. She is very woozy from the surgery. "Jerry, am I pregnant?"

Anna looks at her dad and smiles. "No mom, you're not pregnant. You just had your lumpectomy. Everything is going to be fine now."

"Where's my momma? Is she on her way?"

Jerry takes her by the shoulders and carefully lays her back down. A nurse comes over to check on her. "How are we doing here Mrs. Hughes?"

Jerry answers the nurse. "We are still pretty goofy right now."

The nurse assures her, "That's all very normal. The patient usually wakes up like they went out with the anesthesia. Whatever was on their mind is usually still there when they awake. She'll be fine in just a minute or two. Let me know if you need me."

Becky's eyes look at Anna. "Hi sweetie, I'm so glad you are here."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world momma."

She rises back up and feels a twinge of pain. "I think I need something for pain Jerry. My boob hurts."

Jerry and Anna laugh.

"I bet it does Beck. I will get the nurse to get you something." Jerry heads to the nurses station to get her some relief. She begins to come around better and tells Anna.

"I really like your boyfriend Anna. He's a good, looking guy. He's smart too. He's going to make a great husband one day."

Jerry walks back over to them. "She's bringing some pain meds for you in a second Becky. What are you guys talking about?"

"Nothing dad, just watching her come back from the goofiness."

Becky takes her hand and puts her finger up to her lips. "I have to be quiet. Anna and I have a secret."

Jerry looks at Anna. "A secret huh? What's your secret?"

Anna shakes her head. "Mom, be quiet. We don't have a secret."

Becky smiles. "Oh yeah, that's right. No secret here. Where's that nurse? I'm ready to get the heck out of here. I got company coming. Everyone is coming."

"Don't worry momma. Dad and I got all of this. We are going to get you home and let you sleep."

The nurse brings over a drink and some pain meds to help her. She fills them in on the care of her surgical procedure and they set up an appointment for a couple weeks down the road.

Becky takes the arm that doesn't hurt and brings them to her in a hug. "I love you both so much. You're my world and my heart. I can't wait to see what lay ahead of us in the future. I know it's going to be awesome."

Anna responds. "Yes it is mamma, yes it is."

Chapter Twenty Eight

THE CURE



Sandy is sitting at her kitchen counter making her coffee. She and Joseph didn't come home until late. They had a great first visit with the Hughes family. They all seemed so down to earth and they all genuinely seemed to love each other. She especially was taken with Anna. She could see how Joseph had fallen in love with her. It makes her smile. She never thought she would see her son like this. It was definitely an answer to a prayer.

She takes her first sip from her hot coffee and hears the familiar sound of Joseph coming down the hall to the kitchen. He rolls into the kitchen with a thick binder in his lap.

"Mom! I'm ready! I am ready for my first clinical trial for the cure for Andover's. I was up most of the night checking and double-checking my notes. While I was talking to Anna's dad yesterday it all came to me. I am ready to test my theory on a mother who is pregnant from a father with Andovers. I'm sure they will be willing to take the test. All the electrical talk yesterday and last night cinched it for me. All my other theories have checked out and there is no reason to delay any longer. We are going to do this!"

Sandy gets up and stoops down to hug Joseph. They both have tears in their eyes.

"We are going to stop this momma. I am so confident now."

Sandy is so proud of her son. She has watched him slave over his research for so long. She knew he would be successful one day finding the cure. She looks over at the shadow box David made of the broken "I'm Pregnant," Coffee cup pieces and takes it off the wall to show Joseph.

"I know you've seen this before Joseph and we have told you the story about your grandfather breaking the cup but I want you to know something. We would have been proud of you no matter what. If you'd been born with normal intelligence and two functioning legs nothing would have been different."

David comes into the kitchen looking for his coffee. "What's going on in here with you two?"

"I'll let your son tell you David. Go ahead Joseph."

Joseph raises up his binder that reads, "Cure for Andover's disease,"

"I've got it dad! I really think I've got the answers now. I am ready for a clinical trial with volunteer subjects. We are going to cure this once and for all!"

David comes over to his son. "You have got to be kidding me Joseph! What's next?"

"When I get back to the college, I am going to let Dr. Stocks in on what I have discovered and we will go from there."

"Wow, my son has discovered a cure for a disease. This is all so unreal. Totally believable but so unreal right now."

He takes Sandy's hand and they stoop down for a family hug. Sandy lifts her coffee cup up in a toast. "To Doctor Joseph Christopher Carter, the finder of the cure"

"That's my boy, that's my boy." David exclaims!

Chapter Twenty Nine

IS SHE COMING?



Jerry carefully closes the door to Becky's bedroom. The pain meds and the remaining anesthesia have taken their toll on her. Anna asks, "Dad, do you think this was a good idea to have all of these people over after mom's surgery?"

"Anna, your mother was the one that suggested it in the first place. I think she wanted to see everyone after the surgery. I think she really struggled with some things. I could see it in her."

Anna agrees, "I did too dad. On our ride yesterday we went to Grandma Roses old place. I think she was dealing with not having her mother here for her and a lot of things from the past."

"Really? You both went in that old house? I thought they tore that thing down."

"They're going to soon. It had a condemned sign on it. She showed me the steps and the burned trees that were still there."

Jerry remembers that horrible night. "I thought I lost her that night Anna. I didn't have a clue that I almost lost you too until they told me she was pregnant. Well, let's not think about that night anymore. We are past that and we're past the surgery. Nothing but good stuff is in front of us. This is going to be a great day. Let's get started cooking. We've got about two hours before people start arriving."

Anna asks Jerry, "Is Miss Thelma and Gwen coming?"

"She said she would try to come. She has quite a bit of trouble getting around now. She's in her eighties you know. She is full of spunk for sure and I know she'd want to be here to see Becky. She was always there when your mother was pregnant with you. I don't think she ever missed a single one of your birthdays."

"I really hope she can come dad. She's a special lady."

"Yes she is Anna and your mother loves her like she's her own grandmother."

Anna's phone rings in her back pocket. "It's Joseph dad. Hello? Well good morning Joe. Did you sleep well in your bed? I'm sorry, what kept you up? Okay. I can't wait to see what it is. When are you coming? Great! We'll see you soon. Bye Joseph."

Jerry asks, "What's going on with Joseph?"

"I'm not sure dad. All I know is he can't wait to tell me something face to face. I can't imagine what it might be. Do you have any ideas? He said it kept him up all night."

Jerry thinks back to his conversation with him the day before. He thinks Joseph is going to ask Anna to marry him. He looks over at Anna.

"Well dad? Any ideas?"

"I can't imagine sweetie. We'll just wait for him to get here and we will all find out. Won't we."

"Yes we will dad. Yes we will."

Chapter Thirty

THE REUNION



Becky is dreaming about the night Jerry asked her to marry him. Maybe it was the anesthesia. Maybe it was the trip to the old house. Maybe it was the smell of steaks on the grill from outside. She felt herself dreaming about the daisy pin that was holding up her dress strap that night. Talking in her sleep she was telling Jerry how much she loved the steak she was eating. Anna is in the bedroom checking on her and smiling as she hears her talking in her sleep. Jerry has sent her in to check on her.

Most of the people coming to the cookout have arrived. Anna sits on the side of the bed and pats her on the shoulder. She really hates to bother her but she told them to wake her up after a couple of hours sleep.

“Momma? Do you want to get up yet? Everyone is just about here. Dad has set you up with a recliner outside so you can be comfortable.”

Becky opens her eyes and tries to sit up in the bed. She winces as she sets up. “Oh my, Anna! I’m a lot sorer than I thought I’d be. Get me another pain pill and help me get ready. Anna slowly helps her out of bed and they go to the clothes closet. Anna brings her a glass of water and her medication for pain. They search for a button up shirt so she won’t have to raise her arms above her

head. They finally decide on a yellow shirt and jeans. She carefully helps her get her arms in the sleeves. "Momma you look good in yellow. You should wear it more often." Becky smiles at the thought of the yellow dress and daisy pin on that fateful night.

"Your dad loves me in yellow. It's a perfect outfit for a perfect day sweetie. Are you really ready for this?"

The two step in front of a full length mirror in the bedroom. Anna brushes her mother's hair as they see their reflection. "Yes momma, I'm ready. This is going to be a day to remember. I'm really ready to see what it is that Joseph has to tell me face to face."

Becky backs off and looks at Anna. "You don't think he's going to ask you to marry him, do you?"

Anna pauses to think. "I don't think so momma but who knows right now. This day is starting out crazy already. We'll see very soon. Are you ready for your grand entrance? You look very pretty."

"Thank you sweetie. I do want to do one thing before we go out." Becky goes over to her jewelry box and searches through it. "Here it is Anna. I want you to wear this today. I was wearing this daisy pin when your dad asked me to marry him. I want you to wear it today."

Becky pins the daisy on Anna. "Okay Anna, let's do this. I'm ready to see everyone."

The screen door opens to the huge deck on the back of Jerry and Becky's house. It's a beautiful day. There isn't a cloud in the sky. He built the deck, spacious and beautiful for Becky. They always cook out on the weekends in the summer if the weather permits. He and Anna have prepared picnic tables and chairs on the lawn for everyone to sit. Coolers full of drinks are available with many different desserts brought by everyone. Jerry sees the two come out the door and clangs his tongs on the grill to alert everyone.

"Here she comes everyone! She's up and ready to rumble."

All of the people in the backyard, applaud for Becky as she gingerly makes her way down to the recliner, Jerry has taken outside for her to sit in.

Becky reminds them, "I may be up but there isn't any rumbling going on here today. I am ready to eat a good steak. I'm hungry for sure. I haven't eaten since supper last night."

Sandy walks up to Becky's recliner. "I hope you're doing okay Becky. How are you really?"

"I'm okay Sandy. A bit sore though. Where's your husband? I haven't had a chance to meet him yet."

"My workaholic husband had to go by the office before coming today. He should be here any minute."

Anna brings over some appetizers and a drink for Becky. "Here you go mamma. You can start on this. The rest will be done pretty quickly."

Joseph comes over to Becky. She brings him close to her to hug with her good arm. "Hello there good lookin'. What's going on with you? I hear you have an announcement for all of us."

Joseph whispers to Becky. "Yes I do. I was waiting for everyone to get here. Who hasn't made it yet?"

Becky looks around the crowd. "I believe Sandy's husband David isn't here yet and I hope Miss Thelma and Gwen can make it."

Becky asks Anna. "Is she coming?"

"I think so mamma. I talked to Gwen earlier and she said if they didn't get here before time to eat go ahead and start without them."

Sandy sees David's car coming up the street. He finds a place to park and gets out with drinks and chips in his hands. He comes over to where Sandy and Joseph are standing with Becky and Anna.

Becky reaches out her hand to shake his. "I'm assuming this guy is your husband, Sandy."

Sandy answers, "Yes, this is the love of my life Becky."

"Hi David. I'm Becky and that big tattooed guy over there cooking is my husband."

Jerry raises his spatula and waves to David.

"Gosh, you guys have a fantastic setup outside for grilling. It smells so great. It's so nice to meet you Becky. Is this your beautiful daughter Anna that I have heard so much about?"

Anna steps up to take David's hand. "Hello Doctor Carter. I finally get to meet you. Joseph looks a lot like you."

David glances at Sandy, "Well, I say he got his good looks from his momma and his brains from me but it could go either way I guess."

"Anna, go around and introduce David to everyone. Jerry's dad and mom are over there by Jerry. They are looking forward to meeting him. They already met Joseph and Sandy."

Anna walks David and Sandy over to where Jerry is cooking. Jerry reaches out his hand to David. "Welcome Doctor Carter. I hope you're hungry. We got plenty to eat."

"Nice to meet you Jerry. You have a beautiful place here and a beautiful family. This daughter of yours has really changed Joseph."

Anna responds, "In a good way, I hope."

Joseph takes Anna's hand. "Definitely in a good way."

Jerry leans in to talk to David. "I understand he's about ready to have a special announcement."

David puts his hand on Joseph's shoulder. "You haven't told them yet son?"

"No dad, I was waiting for everyone to arrive first."

Jerry looks them both over. "So you know about this announcement?"

"Yes Mister Hughes, Joseph told us this morning. We were over the moon. It's been a lifetime dream for all of us but especially Joseph. He's worked so hard on finding it."

Anna hears the conversation and bends down in front of Joseph.

"Joe did you find it? Do you know what the answer to the cure is now? You've got to be kidding me!"

He looks into Anna's eyes. "Yes Anna, I have it now. Everything checks out and we are ready for a real test."

They exchange a big hug that draws everyone's attention. She stands up and asks for everyone's attention. "Listen up everyone Joseph has an announcement."

Jerry is still trying to figure it all out as a huge classic car pulls up honking the horn. Anna stops and tells everyone, "Just a minute, I want Miss Thelma and Gwen to hear this too. Just a minute."

Joseph grabs her by the hand. "Who is that Anna?"

"That's Miss Thelma and Gwen. I can't wait for you to meet them."

Gwen finds a place to park the huge old car. She steps out and comes to the passenger side of and places a walker there for Miss Thelma to use. "Come on momma, these folks have been waiting for us to get here."

Miss Thelma grabs her walker and stands up as Anna runs up to the car.

"Hey Miss Thelma. I'm so glad you came." The three embrace. "Did you bring your banana pudding?"

Thelma pulls down her glasses to look over them. "Of course I did sweetie. I know Miss Becky loves my banana pudding. She wouldn't let me come if I didn't."

Gwen reaches into the back seat to grab a big platter of the pudding wrapped in aluminum foil. Anna takes the pudding from her as Gwen helps her walk to the gathering.

Everyone's attention has now shifted to Thelma's entrance. She takes one hand off of the walker and waves. "Hey everyone. Ya'll don't stop what you're doing for this old lady. I'll be there in a minute. Where's my girl?"

Becky waves back. "Here I am Miss Thelma. I'm the one on the throne here."

Jerry rushes over to pull her up a seat by Becky. "Here you go. Sit right here by our Queen for a day."

David is watching Thelma walk over and sit down. He is thrown back to the night he almost lost Sandy and Joseph.

He calls Sandy over to him. "Sandy, I know this woman. I really think this is the lady that had the prayer group in the hospital that night when you were having all the trouble."

"I don't know David, I was unconscious most of that night."

"I have to know Sandy. I'm going to ask her."

He walks to Miss Thelma and introduces himself. She looks up at him. "Young man, you look really familiar. Do I know you?"

"Twenty years ago, I was in the hospital with my wife having my son Joseph. That's him over there in the wheelchair standing by Anna. We had numerous problems and you and two other ladies came into the room and had a prayer. I will never forget it. Everything seemed to change after that prayer. Was that you?"

Anna gets everyone's attention again. "Okay listen up everyone. Joseph has something to say. Go ahead Joseph."

Joseph adjusts in his chair and clears his throat. He takes Anna's hand.

"I really was just going to tell Anna this face to face but I really think this warrants shouting from the rooftops. After many years of research, we have found what I really believe is the cure for the disease that put me in this chair. I hope no other child will have to deal with this again."

Everyone claps as Sandy and Anna hug each other. Anna looks over at Becky after the hug and makes a swipe on her forehead. Thelma can't believe what she is seeing and experiencing. Everything is coming into focus for her. "Sweet Jesus! Help me get up Gwen."

She gets up and walks with vigor over to where Joseph and Anna are standing. She looks back at David. "I'm gonna answer your question Mister David. You wanted to know if that was my prayer group that night at the hospital."

Gwen walks up to her and puts her arm around her because she knows her momma is going to make a speech. "Go ahead momma. Tell it."

"Yes it was David. My daughter Gwen called us when she thought there was a real need for prayer here at the hospital. She worked in the Emergency room and we got many calls. I remember that night very well. You were very distraught and scared you were going to lose your wonderful wife and son. Miss Ophie and Miss Sadie, bless their hearts, and me came and we prayed and prayed and you even joined in with us. Just like Jerry did that night I met him."

Thelma looks over Gwen. "Help me get in between these two babies right here Gwen."

Gwen positions her in between Joseph and Anna.

"Here's the truth ya'll. We bathed both these babies in prayer. That night Miss Becky and Jerry came in and the night Sandy and David came in to the hospital. David had a huge choice to make that night. He was being pulled both directions. I prayed that night that God would use this child's disability to make him stronger. I know he made the right choice now. Jerry had a huge choice too and he didn't even know Becky was pregnant. If either one of these babies hadn't been born we wouldn't be standing here celebrating. Look at them now. This man has discovered a cure for a disease and I know what a sweet and wonderful child Anna is. My God is so good. Look what He has done ya'll. Look what He has done!"

Becky and Sandy look at each other with tears in their eyes. They can see the connection they always had now. It was like a puzzle that finally found the last piece.

Anna smiles at her mother as she takes a knee by Joseph. Becky yells out to everyone. "I think Anna has something to say now. Go ahead Anna."

"I am blown away by being here now with so many people I love. To see how this all fits together is so awesome. Momma, you and daddy are everything to me. I love you more than you could ever know. Grandma and grandpa Hughes, you took my momma in when she had nowhere to go and gave her a life worth living. Miss Thelma, you taught me how to pray your way, how important is that?" She takes both of Joseph's hands. "Joe, mom and I went on a little trip yesterday. We went by Captain Bill and Son Jewelers and I got this for you." She reaches into her pocket and takes out a ring. "Joe I knew the first day we met, we were meant to be together. I really believe the storm that day was sent by God. I see now, how this all came together and I'm positive that I want to be your wife. Please marry me Doctor Joseph Christopher Carter."

Joseph is speechless. "I believe that's my job to ask you Anna. Isn't it? You know what, I don't care. Yes, of course I will marry you."

The two embrace and kiss. Miss Thelma raises both hands up. "Thank you Jesus!" Everyone gathers around and congratulates the two.

Jerry and David fight back tears. Becky's voice rises above the crowd. "Ya'll that was the sweetest thing ever but I'm still hungry here. Would somebody please bring me a steak and my banana pudding?"

