



CHRISTMAS

in Redemption Ridge

Remembering

THE
RANCHER

LIWEN Y. HO

Remembering the Rancher

A SMALL TOWN CHRISTIAN COWBOY
ROMANCE

CHRISTMAS IN REDEMPTION RIDGE

BOOK TWO

LIWEN Y. HO

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For everyone looking for redemption.

Bella

“**E**arth to Bella? Table three’s ready to place their order!”

A tap on her shoulder drew Bella Knight’s attention. She switched her gaze from a painting on the wall to her older sister who stood by her side. Sophia had a deep line between her furrowed brows, and her eyes, the same shade of light blue as Bella’s, stared back with annoyance.

Bella winced. She must have gotten lost in her thoughts again. That had been happening a lot lately, but she really needed to get her act together. The last thing she wanted was for her family to find out that her marriage was on the rocks. “Sorry, Soph, what did you say?”

“Table three needs their order taken.” Sophia nodded toward one of the circular tables by the storefront window where four guests were seated. “After you’re done with that, tables five and six need to be cleared. The lunch crowd’s already starting to trickle in. If we don’t get a move on, we’re going to fall behind before noon! Come on, sis!”

Bella took a deep breath and straightened the red apron tied over her jeans. She could do this. Push aside her worries and fears and put on a happy face—that had been her MO for as long as she could remember. She’d always had a role to fulfill: the perfect daughter, sister, wife, or mother. Right now, it was as a server at their family’s restaurant in their small town of Redemption Ridge.

Blowing her long bangs out of her eyes, she wove her way around the tables of the diner that she’d grown up in. This had

been her home away from home ever since she could remember. The decor on the walls hadn't changed since the day her parents opened this place up nearly three decades ago. Old paintings hung on the wooden walls highlighting the beautiful sights of their state. Her favorites were the watercolors her mother had created of Colorado's tall Blue Spruce trees. She might be stuck indoors working all day, but every time she glanced up at the artwork, she felt a sense of peace and awe.

No wonder she'd been so caught up staring at the paintings this morning.

Bella focused her attention on her customers as she approached table three. "Hi there, welcome to Flapjacks," she greeted the couple and their two preteen daughters. "I'm so sorry about the wait. What can I get for you today?"

After hearing about the daily special, a bacon and egg hashbrown casserole, the family asked for two of them, along with two orders of confetti pancakes for the kids.

"Great choice," Bella replied as she committed their order to memory. "My son was the one who came up with the idea to add Fruit Loops to the pancake batter. I'm sure you girls will love them."

"How old is your son?" the younger daughter asked with a toothy grin.

"He just turned twelve."

"Twelve?" the mother exclaimed. "You look much too young to have a twelve-year-old. You must have started your family young."

"Something like that." Bella's smile faded. While she was proud to talk about her son, the circumstances surrounding her unplanned pregnancy was a topic she steered away from. She'd learned that the less she said, the better. "I'll go put in your order, then I'll be back with your coffee and juice."

Bella passed Sophia as she walked to the ordering system at the counter, earning a wide-eyed look along the way. It was her sister's way of telling her again that the tables needed to be

bussed—not that she needed the reminder. As their dad liked to say, she had the memory of an elephant. She never had to write down any order she took, regardless of the number of dishes or special requests a customer made.

Her ability to remember was her God-given talent, if one could call it that. Bella didn't know why the Lord had blessed her with such a good memory, but she treasured all the details she remembered from her thirty years of life. Especially those of her mom who had passed away when she was in middle school. The last fond memory they'd shared had been right after Bella had confided in her about her first crush. She'd been able to talk to her mom about everything, from boys, to her dreams, to her fears. What she wouldn't give to be able to talk to her now about her marriage.

Or with anyone, for that matter.

She longed for advice that went beyond the trite *Just pray about it* suggestion that her sister was known to give. The truth was that she had prayed, over and over again, but she still didn't know how to forgive or trust her husband.

Working swiftly, she inputted the order she'd just taken, then delivered drinks to table three before stepping inside the kitchen. The smoky smell of bacon grease mixed with the sweet scent of syrup enveloped her as she grabbed a plastic tub from the sink.

“How's it going, pumpkin?” her dad called out above the clamor of pots and pans. Trevor Kelly gave her a quick wave from where he stood in front of the commercial-sized range. Wearing a green shirt with a red bib apron over it, he fit in well with the holiday decorations they had put up in the dining room last week. “Did you start playing any carols yet?”

“Not yet, Daddy,” Bella laughed. Her dad's enthusiasm for all things Christmas was a bit extreme but nevertheless contagious. “Thanksgiving was only a week ago. We should have at least a short break in between holidays.”

Trevor raised the metal spatula he held in protest. “I beg to differ! This is the most wonderful time of the year! And with it being the first of December, we have more than enough reason

to start celebrating. We need to do everything possible to make Christmas last as long as we can. Our customers depend on us to bring the holiday spirit. We mustn't disappoint them now."

"All right, all right, I'll put on your favorites in a bit. Right now, I need to clean up two tables before Ms. Drill Sergeant makes me do a hundred push-ups."

"Only a hundred?" He winked. "Go on, get to work, young lady!"

Bella's steps quickened as she gathered up the dirty dishes, cups, and utensils from the tables. Talking to her dad always lifted her mood. He was the prime example of a godly husband and father in the way he served people, especially those less fortunate. Anyone in need of a warm meal was welcome at their restaurant, no questions asked. It was this type of care and kindness that Bella had longed for in a husband ... and thought she'd found in her childhood best friend. But the boy she had fallen in love with in fifth grade wasn't the same man that she'd exchanged vows with a decade ago. And most certainly not the same person who had packed his bags and moved out of their home a month ago.

But neither was she.

So much had happened in their marriage that couldn't be forgotten. If only the problems they'd faced could be as easily wiped away as the ketchup and gravy stains on these tables. If only, if only, if only. Bella was tired of the if onlys. Every morning and night she prayed for a miracle, that she and Maverick could have a marriage like her parents had. That they wouldn't need to go on pretending in front of their family and friends that everything was fine when it wasn't. But most of all, that their son Jesse wouldn't have to grow up in a broken home.

She'd never forgive herself for ruining her child's life. But maybe it was already too late.

"What's going on with you lately?" Sophia's irritated murmur pulled Bella out of her thoughts. "You're so spacey. You're not expecting, are you?"

Bella bit back a caustic laugh as Sophia took the dish towel from her hand to finish wiping up the table. There was no way, no how that she'd be expecting. She and Maverick hadn't been intimate in many months, much less hugged or kissed. For years they had tried to have another child with no success, and the disappointment had taken a toll on their relationship. That, along with Mav's gambling habit, had driven them to be co-parents at best and roommates at worst. The only reason they still talked was for Jesse's sake. She shook her head at Sophia. "I'm one thousand percent sure I'm not pregnant."

"Then what's going on? Is it Jesse? Is he having trouble at school again?"

"No, he's doing a lot better since he started getting help from the reading specialist. He even got a B on his last spelling test."

"Then what is it?" Sophia softened her tone as she asked, "Are you and Mav doing okay?"

The surprising concern in her sister's voice nearly broke Bella's resolve. Her throat grew raw and hot tears filled her eyes. Turning away, she quickly took a deep breath to calm the storm raging in her heart. Once upon a time, she'd been able to confide in her sister as a friend, back when they had first lost their mom. The two sisters had been close then, but a wedge had come between them after Bella got pregnant her senior year of high school. Sophia had never thought much of Mav, but her opinion of him sank like a two-ton weight after that. As much as Mav had disappointed her, Bella didn't want to talk badly of him and tarnish his reputation even more. He was the father of her child, after all, and her first love. So, she did what she had always done over the course of their marriage—protect him.

Putting on a brave smile, she faced Sophia. "He's been busy at the ranch lately—lots of long days. We haven't seen much of each other," she added without reservation. At least every word she'd said was true, even if it didn't tell the whole story. "That's married life for you, right?"

Sophia had only gotten married last year, but at least she'd gone the traditional route of finding a husband before having a child. She gave Bella a knowing look. "I get it. If you want, Jesse's more than welcome to stay over with us this weekend so you and Mav can have some adult time."

"Thanks, Soph. I'll think about it."

The bell hanging on the front door jingled, cutting off their conversation. They both looked over to see a tall, bald man enter the restaurant. Sophia grabbed the tub filled with dishes off the table, then rested it against her hip as she gestured to Bella. "I'll take these to the kitchen. Why don't you help that customer?"

"Sure, thanks." As Bella grabbed a menu from the counter, she couldn't help but wonder why her sister was being so nice and helpful today. Could it be that she suspected something was amiss between her and Mav? There was no time to wonder though because the man was fast approaching her.

"Are you Mrs. Knight? Mrs. Annabella Knight?" he inquired, his voice gruff and curt. Dressed in a dark suit and shiny dress shoes, he didn't look like anyone who worked at Redemption Ranch or in town. Perhaps he was from Denver or Colorado Springs or one of the bigger nearby cities? The more important question was, how did he know who she was?

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Knight. How can I help you?"

He reached into the leather briefcase he carried and pulled out a manila envelope. After handing it to Bella, he presented her with a clipboard and pen. "Sign here, please."

Bella glanced at the form, thoroughly confused. It appeared to be a legal document of some sort with the words *Acceptance of Service* across the top. "I'm sorry, I don't understand what this is for."

He glanced down his crooked nose at her, doing little to hide his annoyance. "This form is to confirm that you received the papers I just delivered to you. Did you or did you not receive them?"

"I did, but what are they for?"

“You’ll have to open it up and see. But first”—he tapped the clipboard—“your signature.”

Bella did as she was told. Once the man had retrieved his belongings, he headed for the door without a look back. His hasty exit made Bella wonder if the envelope he’d delivered to her contained a bomb of some sort. The idea seemed bizarre, but so did this situation. Something in her gut told her to expect the worst. She bit her bottom lip and said a quick prayer for peace. Then with trembling hands, she pulled out a stack of papers from the envelope.

The big, bold print she read caused her world to spin out of orbit.

Divorce Agreement: Maverick Knight vs. Annabella Knight.

Maverick

This wasn't what he had planned.

Sighing, Maverick ran a hand down his face as he stopped his pickup truck at a red light. For once, he'd been able to leave the ranch at six, which would have given him plenty of time to get to his second job, but one call from Bella had changed his plans.

Wasn't that the story of his life?

It'd been one call thirteen years ago that had made him grow up faster than he'd ever expected to. He'd been a freshman in college and Bella a senior in high school when she'd told him he was going to be a father. A couple of years after that, Bella had called him with an ultimatum—give up football or forego a relationship with her and their son. It may have taken him six foolish months to make the right decision, but once he had, he'd never looked back. He'd had to give up on his NFL dream, but nothing compared to providing for and protecting his wife and son.

Which was why he'd had to file for divorce. It was the only way he knew how to keep his money troubles from hurting the ones he loved.

His cell phone rang with an incoming call as the light turned green. He answered via the speakerphone, "Maverick speaking."

"Hey Mav, I heard you're not coming in tonight," the boisterous voice of his friend, coworker, and current roommate greeted him over the line. Milo Gibson had been the one to help him find a job as a nighttime security guard at

Redemption Ranch six months ago, the same ranch he'd been teaching riding classes at for years. They'd known each other since high school when they'd played football together. Although they were the same age, Milo acted like the older, wiser brother he'd never had. "I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"I'm fine, thanks for checking. It's Bella. She wants to talk, most likely about the divorce papers she got served with today." He grimaced, not liking the words coming out of his own mouth. Marriage was supposed to last a lifetime, at least that's what his parents had taught him. They'd also taught him not to run away from his problems and to take responsibility for his actions. At least he'd gotten the latter right. "I should've known she wouldn't let this go without a fight."

"That's a good thing, man. It means she still cares, right?"

That was news to him. From the way she'd been acting the past year, Maverick had thought she'd given up on their relationship. They hardly talked anymore. She didn't even want to be touched. But Bella had always been stubborn, a trait that was both a strength and a weakness. She didn't know when to give up.

For some reason he didn't understand, she had stayed with him through thick and thin, ever since they were kids. When he'd struggled with his studies, she'd spent hours after school helping him with his homework. Throughout middle school, when he'd gone through an awkward phase and was the shortest person in their class, she'd stood by his side. After he'd had a growth spurt and gained in popularity with the opposite sex, Bella had been the one constant in his life. Other girls may have come and gone, but he always had his best friend to fall back on.

He'd never meant to cross the line with Bella, but a moment of weakness and insecurity after a breakup had moved them past the friend zone. Before he could do damage control and reverse course on their relationship, she'd told him she was pregnant. After that, it'd been a mixture of obligation and guilt that had driven him to stay.

He didn't deserve Bella—never had, never would.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Milo's question broke through Maverick's thoughts. “Are you sure you want to get a divorce? There are other options, you know.”

“It doesn't matter what I want. This is what Bella and Jesse need.” He'd given this matter plenty of thought. He probably should have prayed about it, too, but God had bailed him out enough times already. He'd messed up so much this past year, he'd run out of favors at this point. “I'm not going to let my debt ruin their lives. Divorce is the only way to ensure that Bella has a clean slate.”

“What if she'd rather have you and your mess than not have you in her life? Have you thought of that?”

“It's better this way,” Maverick answered matter-of-factly. Bella always made decisions with his interests in mind. This was one time when he wouldn't let her make that sacrifice again. “Trust me, I'm doing this for her own good.”

“If you say so.” Milo sighed. “Speaking of clean slates, you know you have one too, Mav. God wiped your slate clean when Jesus died for you. You don't have to keep trying to make amends yourself. I know it's easier said than done, but you gotta keep reminding yourself of the truth and stop believing the lies. You don't need to punish yourself like this.”

“Like you said, it's easier said than done.”

He appreciated Milo's encouragement, but his friend had no idea how much trouble he'd gotten himself into this time. He wasn't only trying to make up for the past, he was trying to protect his family's future. It wasn't the amount of money that he'd borrowed that worried him, it was the people he'd borrowed it from. So-called businessmen who had turned out to work on the wrong side of the law. Distancing himself from his family was the only way he knew of to keep them out of harm's way. “Thanks, man, but I've got this under control. I appreciate you covering for me tonight. I owe you one.”

“How about you name your next kid after me and we'll call it even?”

Maverick laughed, knowing the chances of that happening were slim to none. “You’ve got yourself a deal. But I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you.”

“God can do anything, brother, don’t forget that. I’ll talk to you later. Night.”

“Night.”

Maverick blew out a long breath as he navigated his truck along the narrow street leading to his childhood home. He’d inherited it after his dad had passed, and he’d hoped to raise his own family there. At least the quaint two-story house had been paid off long ago, so Bella and Jesse would be guaranteed a place to live.

Even if he wasn’t able to live there with them.

With a heavy heart, he pulled into the driveway and parked beside Bella’s VW Beetle. Seeing the old yellow car brought back so many memories. There was a stain on the passenger side seat from the time he’d spilled his soda when she was first learning how to brake properly. The backseat’s upholstery had faded from years of wear and tear. They’d also shared plenty of kisses in that tight space, as well as late night talks, both before and after they’d gotten married. Because this car had been such a big part of their lives, Bella couldn’t bear to part with it.

Nevertheless, if Maverick could, he’d buy her a new vehicle and everything else that she deserved. That had been his original plan. Sign on with the Denver Broncos, make a name for himself playing football, and earn enough money to retire early and spend time with his family. Instead, here he was on the verge of divorcing the only woman he’d ever loved.

“Dad!” His son appeared at the driver’s side window, waving at him to come out. Jesse was a carbon copy of Bella with his blond hair and blue eyes, but his frame was lanky like his own had been when he was twelve. His toothy grin lit up his whole face and matched his innocent enthusiasm.

Maverick got out of the truck and immediately wrapped Jesse up in a hug. “Hey, buddy. It’s good to see you.”

“What are you doing here? Are you staying over?”

He winced to hear the hopeful tone in Jesse’s words, knowing that he’d have to disappoint him. “Not today. I’m here to talk to your mom. Did you guys have dinner already?”

“Yeah. Mom brought food home from Flapjacks.” He led the way to the front door, then turned around when he reached the doorstep. In a quiet voice, he warned Maverick, “I think she’s been crying. Her eyes and nose are all red.”

Maverick gave Jesse’s shoulder a firm pat. “Don’t worry, I’ll figure out what’s going on with her. You go on up to your room, all right? I’ll come and say goodnight before I go.”

“Okay.” Jesse’s expression sobered, looking far too mature for a boy his age. “I’ll pray for you guys.”

“Thank you, bud.”

Once they were inside the house, Jesse ran off in the direction of the stairs and left Maverick standing in the foyer. He glanced around for Bella but didn’t see or hear any signs of her. It was just as well. He needed a moment to gather his thoughts and steel himself against the emotions that were sure to come. Anger and disappointment he could handle, but sadness was another story. He’d rather face Bella’s wrath than be the cause of her tears.

Soft footsteps cut through the silence, causing Maverick to look up. He swallowed hard when his eyes landed on Bella’s petite frame that appeared even smaller in an oversized gray sweatshirt and leggings. She walked over, holding her head up high even as she avoided his gaze. As Jesse had said, her eyes were bloodshot and swollen. The fact that she didn’t try to hide her emotions surprised him. He knew she’d been upset when he’d moved out, but that was because Jesse had overheard her crying and had told him so. But not once had she shed a tear in front of Maverick. He didn’t know what to make of this.

“Hi, Bella,” he greeted her cautiously, “you wanted to talk?”

The moment she stood in front of him, her countenance changed. Anger flashed in her blue eyes in a way that he'd never seen before. With her arms crossed, she answered coldly, “Who is she? Who's the woman you're willing to break up our family for?”

Bella

“**W**hat are you talking about?” he demanded, running his hands through his hair. “There is no other woman.”

Regret stabbed Bella’s heart like a knife. The shock on Maverick’s face confirmed how much she’d let her emotions get the best of her. She’d never accused him of being unfaithful before. Sure, there had been moments years ago when the thought had crossed her mind. Especially when she’d visited him at college and found him surrounded by girls who were more mature and confident than she had been as a high school senior. It hadn’t helped that Maverick had always been a charmer and never turned down a chance for conversation. While he had done his best to reassure her of his commitment, she couldn’t help but wonder what happened when she wasn’t around. If she’d fallen head over heels for his dazzling smiles and good looks, what made her think other women wouldn’t?

“How can you accuse me like that?” Crossing his arms over his leather jacket, he spat out the words as if they were poison on his tongue. “What kind of man do you think I am?”

“I’m not sure I know anymore. I thought you were the kind of man who cared about his marriage vows. What happened to ‘for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part’? Were you lying when you made your vow to me?”

Bella had intended to back down, but Maverick’s indignant tone twisted her insides like a vise. She didn’t get it. How had the man who had pledged to stay with her for the rest of his life turned into this stranger standing before her? He wasn’t a

stranger in the sense that she didn't know him. In fact, she could recognize the back of Maverick's head from a dozen feet away. At over six feet tall, she could easily spot his head of chestnut brown hair and his broad shoulders in a crowd. He also had a telltale way of standing with his back straight and his head cocked to the right when he was engrossed in a conversation. These were traits that she was more than familiar with, but that was where the familiarity ended.

This angry version of her estranged husband was not someone she knew or wanted to know.

"It's complicated, Bella." Maverick grew quiet, but his face told a different story. He arched his brows high on his forehead, forming deep lines that made him appear older than his thirty-one years. His chocolate brown eyes held her gaze as unspoken emotions stormed in them. Through gritted teeth, he added, "Things are different now."

"Of course, things are different! We're not kids anymore; we're raising one!" She winced at the volume of her voice. Their house was small enough that sound traveled far. The last thing she wanted was for Jesse to hear them arguing. "Can we talk in the kitchen?"

Maverick followed her silently to the room farthest from the stairs. They stood on either side of the island where one of two plates of leftovers from the restaurant sat in the center untouched. Not too long ago, there would have been three plates there. Maverick's absence was everywhere Bella looked. From his coffee machine that remained unused every morning to the clean floors where his socks used to lie—everything was different. He didn't have to spell it out for her to understand. But did he realize how much these differences were affecting their son?

"Have you stopped to think about Jesse?" she asked, trying to keep her tone calm. "This is going to break him. He's already having such a hard time since you moved out. How am I supposed to tell him you don't want our family anymore?"

"I never said that. Don't put words into my mouth, Bella." He shook his head and broke off eye contact for a moment.

Grasping the edge of the counter, he leaned forward until he was glaring down his straight-edged nose at her. “I promise you, this won’t change my relationship with Jesse. I’m still his dad. I will be there for him when he needs me. Nothing about that’s going to change.”

Bella shook her head sadly as she backed away. How did Maverick not get it? Everything was going to change. Once they signed the divorce papers, their family would be irrevocably broken. “This isn’t something temporary. Even if you see Jesse every other day like you’ve been doing, it’s not the same as us living under the same roof. We’re talking about ending our marriage. How can you stand there and say nothing’s going to change? Everything’s going to change!”

He simply stated, “It’s just the way it has to be.”

“What? That’s all you can say?”

“This is for everyone’s good. It may not make sense to you, but it’s how it has to be.”

“I don’t understand why you keep saying that! None of this is how it has to be.”

“It’s just how it is.” His shoulders fell with a deep sigh. “We haven’t been on the same page for a long time. We don’t act like husband and wife anymore; we’ve just been going through the motions. I don’t want to pretend that everything’s okay when it’s not. Take this for what it’s worth, Bella—a way out. I’m giving you a way out of this mess.”

A way out?! This freedom that Mav was talking about sounded more like a death sentence. Did he really believe she wanted to be free at the expense of their family’s future? Maybe he never knew her at all. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think *you’re* the one who wants a way out.”

“You have no idea.”

His reply was so quiet, she wondered if she’d heard him right. But when she lifted her gaze, the look in his eyes caused a chill to go down her spine. Gone was the light and warmth that had once made her feel safe and secure. All she saw now in his eyes was a cold, resolute determination.

A finality.

Bella swallowed hard. “Fine. If that’s what you want, that’s what you’ll get. I’ll sign the papers.”

She turned and held onto the edge of the sink, a wave of sorrow crashing over her. The sky outside the window had already turned dark like the mood in the room. Piles upon piles of dirty plates and cups filled her view, adding to the misery of the situation. Like those dishes, she felt messy and spent. She so longed for a clean, fresh start. If only there was some way she could wash away all the gunk and grime that had built up between her and Maverick.

Bella clamped a hand over her mouth, vowing not to cry. She’d done enough crying today. From the minute she’d left work to pick Jesse up from school and up until the moment Maverick had arrived, the tears had not stopped falling. She’d left Jesse to eat dinner alone while she’d hidden in the bedroom and stared at the divorce papers, torn between signing them and throwing them away. In the end, she’d shoved them under the bed, then called Maverick to come over. She’d wanted to give him one last chance to explain. A full reconciliation had seemed unlikely, but she hadn’t imagined he’d be so indifferent. He didn’t care at all. Maybe he never had.

That last thought broke her heart the most.

Bella wiped away the moisture on her cheeks and took a deep breath. If Maverick didn’t care about keeping their family together, why should she? All she could do now was make the most of the situation. Sign the divorce papers and give Maverick the freedom he wanted. Be the best parent she could be to Jesse and figure out how she’d make ends meet as a single mom. She would take it day by day and learn how to move on with life. But first, she needed to pull herself together.

She spun around to face Maverick, her head held high. One favor, that’s all she would ask of him before they parted ways. The least he could do was give her this one thing.

“I need to go for a drive and clear my head. Will you stay here with Jesse for a few hours?”

“Yeah, sure.” His expression softened for the first time since he’d stepped inside the house. “Take all the time you need. I’ll stick around till you come back.”

Truer words had never been spoken. Bella’s fractured heart cracked even more as she walked away.

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Bella didn’t get very far before her tears started falling again. This time it was a mile from her house at a gas station. She parked her VW Beetle in a space next to the pumps for water and air, then pulled out her phone. Even if she couldn’t talk to her family, she could talk to her best friend.

Nora St. James picked up on the third ring, her sweet voice filling Bella’s ear like it often had over the last two decades since they became friends. “Hey Bella, what’s up?”

“It’s Mav,” she uttered in between sniffles. “He wants a divorce.”

“A divorce?” Nora yelled. “I knew you guys were having a rough time, but I didn’t know things were that bad. What happened?”

“That’s the question of the century. I don’t know. He says there’s no one else in the picture, but I can’t help but wonder if he’s telling the truth. Maybe he met someone younger and prettier?” The woman staring back at her in the rear-view mirror had seen better days. Her red-rimmed eyes and pale complexion made her appear dull, almost lifeless. She used to take care of herself and put effort into how she dressed and did her hair and makeup. She’d stopped caring a while ago, probably around the time her every desire had been wrapped up in expanding their family. When pregnancy test after pregnancy test came back negative, her mood had also taken a dive. It had been too hard and sad to accept that maybe God

didn't want them to have another child. She still hadn't recovered from the disappointment. "I guess I wouldn't be surprised if he met someone else who makes him happier than I do."

"No way," Nora insisted. "It's always been you and Mav. You guys have been endgame since high school. I can't even picture either of you with anyone else."

"A lot's changed since high school. Well, everything except for you and Clint," she said, referring to Nora's best guy friend. "If anyone's endgame, it's the two of you."

"Oh, please. Don't change the topic. We're talking about you and Mav. There has to be something we can do to make him see how wrong this is! What about couples counseling? I've heard good things about the new therapist in town."

"I doubt it if Mav would go. Even if he did want to, we can't afford it. And it's too late now. He already sent me the papers to sign." Bella stared down at her silver wedding ring, an exact copy of the one Maverick wore, just smaller. It was the most expensive thing he had ever bought her. He'd spent months saving up the money he'd made from random jobs he'd had during college and had even splurged on adding a small diamond to each of their bands. Funny how something that had once seemed so significant and costly now held no value in her husband's eyes. Was that why she hadn't seen him wear his ring recently? "He doesn't want to work on the marriage anymore. He just wants out."

"I'm so sorry, Bella. I wish there was something I could do to help. Wait, there is! I'm going to pray for him and for you. Don't sign the papers yet. Promise me you'll wait."

A small smile lifted her lips. Nora's faith never failed to impress her. She'd always been the steady, responsible one. Perhaps if Bella had been able to stay on the straight and narrow like Nora had, she'd have enough faith to pray, too. All she could do was thank God that she had a friend who would intercede on her behalf.

"Thank you, Nora. I'll wait a few days, but please pray hard."

Maverick

Maverick's heart swelled with pride as he watched Jesse move one of his chess pieces. His son was so much smarter than he'd been at his age and more mature, too. He'd truly gotten the best of both his and Bella's traits, and for that Maverick would forever be grateful. Having a good head and a caring heart kept Jesse out of trouble. The kind of trouble that he himself had gotten caught up in as a kid and that still followed him around to this day. For him, the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree; his own father had had his share of troubles to deal with. Unfortunately, his dad's addiction to alcohol had won out in the end. But Maverick was determined to change the story. Even if he couldn't do it for himself, he'd do it for Jesse.

His son deserved that much.

"Your turn, Dad." Jesse's blue eyes lit up with confidence as he sat back in his chair. "Good luck, 'cause you're gonna need it."

"Am I now?" Chuckling, Maverick stretched out his long legs under the square dining table and assessed the situation. He eyed his half of the board with his black pieces, then Jesse's white ones on the other side. The gears in his head began turning as he considered his possible moves. "Did I ever tell you why I started playing chess in college?"

"Because your friends played?"

"No, none of them did. They were too busy par—studying," he corrected himself. It wouldn't do any good to tell his son about all the drinking and partying he'd done when

he should have been hitting the books. At the time, his habits had been reckless enough to make Bella question his commitment to her and their future. He'd resented her for making him give up football, but in hindsight, it was the best decision he had ever made. He wouldn't have a relationship with his son otherwise. "It was my coach who taught me how to play. He said chess is a lot like football. There are specific jobs for each piece just like each player has his own role and responsibility. There's also teamwork involved and a balance between learning when to attack and when to defend. Each move you make has a purpose."

Jesse's eyebrows drew together. "I guess they're kinda the same, but there's still a big difference. You can't get hurt playing chess, but you can playing football. Isn't that why you couldn't play anymore?"

Maverick moved one of his rooks forward on the board. "I did injure my knee, but it wasn't something I couldn't recover from. The reason I stopped playing was so I could start working and take care of you and your mom."

"But weren't you like a big deal? Your picture was in the paper. Mom showed me all the articles she kept of you."

"She has articles about me?" This was news to him. He didn't think Bella had cared at all about his short-lived college football career. "Where'd you see them?"

"They're in a box under Mom's bed—your guys' bed."

Jesse's wistful tone made his stomach turn. Bella was right. Things had changed, especially for their son. As much as Maverick wanted to do right by his family, he couldn't forget all the wrong he'd already done. How had he let himself get to this point?

For a couple of years after he and Bella had gotten married, he'd been on the straight and narrow—working hard at the ranch and making his family a priority. They'd even gone back to church, and he'd made peace with God. All was fine and good until he'd started gambling.

That's when he'd fallen down a rabbit hole with no end.

Betting on horse races had begun with the best of intentions. He'd only wanted to earn some money to fund the IVF treatments that Bella had desperately wanted, but it soon became a habit he couldn't shake. One win led to another, then another, until the losses began adding up. Denial and pride had kept him from quitting when he should have. By the time he woke up to how bad the situation was, it was too late to make a clean break.

If only he could go back in time and stop himself before he'd made a mess of things.

Jesse made his next move, then looked up from the chess board. "Do you want to see the articles Mom saved? I can go get them."

"No, it's all right. We should finish our game. It's getting close to your bedtime." Maverick checked his watch, noting that Bella had been gone almost two hours. He hoped she was enjoying whatever she was doing; she deserved the time off. She always put their family, especially Jesse, first. As young as she'd been when she'd had him, she'd come into motherhood so naturally.

She'd amazed him with her patience and perseverance in caring for Jesse despite her own exhaustion and inexperience. Whether it was challenges with nursing, teething, or ear infections, Bella had faced each obstacle with grace. She was just happy and thankful to watch Jesse grow up. That's why he knew it hurt her to not be able to have more children. And that's why he'd tried so hard to make her dream come true.

Maverick blew out a heavy breath and took his turn without giving much thought to his strategy. He already had enough on his mind with real life problems to spend energy on a game. "Back to you, son."

Chewing on his lower lip, Jesse stared at the pieces with intense concentration. "Do you wish you could've kept playing? Maybe if you had, you'd be in the NFL now. Mom said that was your dream."

He wondered if the intensity in his son's expression was due to the game or the topic of conversation. There was a lot

he didn't understand about Jesse, not for lack of trying. Their personalities were like night and day. He was someone who'd never wanted to grow up, while his son was like an old soul walking around in a child's body. With that kind of maturity though came a lot of questions and unspoken worry. Maverick tried his best to reassure Jesse. "I don't regret the choice I made. I got to be there when you were born, and I got to watch you grow up. I wouldn't have been able to do that if I'd kept playing. It's a no-brainer—between you and football, you win every time. You're much more important."

Stray locks of blond hair fell into Jesse's eyes as he cocked his head. "What about mom? Is she more important than football?"

Maverick's body flinched as if he'd been hit. Who knew mere words could have such a big impact? Maybe all the guilt he'd been carrying around had made him weak. His conscience could only take so much. He swallowed hard, debating how to respond. When he finally opened his mouth, he could only speak the truth. "Of course, your mom is more important. Everything I do is for the two of you. I know things are changing for our family and it may not make sense, but you have to trust me that I have your best interests in mind. You believe me, don't you?"

"I guess. I just wish you could live here with us. It's not the same without you."

"I know. I'm sorry."

He nodded, then pushed back his chair. "I'm tired. Is it okay if we finish playing later?"

"Sure thing."

Jesse stood, lingering by the table for a moment. "Are you sure you can't stay over tonight? You can sleep in my room if you want, and I'll sleep on the couch."

The eagerness in Jesse's voice almost broke his resolve. "That's generous of you, son, but I'm afraid not. I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

With a shrug, he replied, “If you want to,” then walked out of the room.

Maverick hung his head as he tried to erase the disappointed look on Jesse’s face from his mind. If he could, he would wipe away the past few years and start over. Back to a time when he’d been a more worthy husband and father. One who didn’t make decisions that put his family at risk. He just needed a do-over.

What do I do, God? How do I get myself out of this mess?

The faith he’d had as a child felt like the stuff of dreams. He had once believed in prayer and miracles, but that was when his mom had been alive. She had been his greatest encourager until she’d passed away in a car accident during his junior year in high school. That’s when he and Bella had grown closer; she’d understood what it was like to lose a parent, too. The two of them had learned to lean on each other. If only they hadn’t stopped supporting one another.

Maverick’s phone buzzed with an incoming call. He pulled it out of his pocket and immediately tensed when he saw the number on the screen.

He reluctantly answered, “Hello?”

“Where’s my money, Knight?” the gruff voice on the line barked out without so much as a greeting. “You said you’d bring it tonight. I’m still waiting. You should know better than to be late.”

“I didn’t forget. I just got held up a bit. I’ll be over as soon as I’m done. You have my word.”

“Words don’t mean anything to me. I need cash. You better not be playing games with me. Do you have my money or not?”

“Of course, I have it.” Maverick tightened his hold on his phone, feeling it slip against his sweaty palm. He knew better than to lie to someone he was indebted to. Even though he’d never met the man behind his so-called “business loan,” he’d heard enough from his associates to know that he had the

power and connections to do damage. The sooner he paid him back, the better. “I should be able to make it there in an hour.”

“An hour? What’s so important that you’d make me wait another hour for you to bring me my money?”

“It’s my—” He hesitated, not wanting to drag his family into the picture. If there was a good time to lie, it was now. “It’s my car. The battery died, so I’m waiting to get it jumped.”

“Why didn’t you say so? I’ll have one of my men come over and get it from you.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I can bring it over. I *will* bring it over. Just give me some time. Please.”

Silence ensued, followed by a tsk-tsk sound. “You should know there are two things that I hate—waiting and being lied to. You’re lucky I’m feeling generous today, so I’m going to let you off the hook this time. But if you don’t make it here within the hour, there will be consequences. Don’t test me, Knight. I’m not playing games. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand. I will be there.”

“If you don’t show up, I’m going to have to tell your pretty little wife about our business transactions.”

Maverick’s heart rate spiked. As much as he wanted to react, he needed to stay calm. For Bella’s sake, he had to outsmart this guy. “There’s no reason to involve her. I served her divorce papers this morning. She’s out of the picture as far as I’m concerned.”

“So, you’re telling me you don’t care about the mother of your child at all anymore? For your son’s sake, you better hope nothing bad happens to her. I have a feeling that old Bug that she drives around won’t hold up well in a crash.”

“How do you know what—” An ominous laugh cut off the rest of his words.

“I have eyes everywhere, Knight. I keep tabs on every person who owes me. That’s how I keep my business

successful. If I were you, I'd tell your wife to run on home so you can bring me my money. *Now.*"

The call ended as a chill fell down Maverick's spine. What had he gotten himself and his family into?! The situation was worse than he thought. He dialed Bella's number and prayed for her to quickly pick up.

Bella

While Bella didn't have a definite destination in mind for the evening, she soon found herself parked outside of Polished Perfection. She didn't often get to pamper herself with a manicure, but there was another reason why she'd come to this nail salon—for nostalgia's sake. Her mom's best friend, Lottie, was the owner and the closest thing to a mother figure she had in her life. If a fresh coat of polish didn't lift her spirits, talking to Lottie surely would.

She turned off her phone and headed into the brightly lit shop. The moment she took off her coat and sat down across from her middle-aged friend, she felt a weight lift from her shoulders. Lottie's kind, dimpled smile was as warm as the soft scarf around her neck. This shop, with its large racks of nail polish bottles hanging on one wall and a row of massage chairs for pedicures, didn't look much like an oasis, but it sure felt like one. And even though the place was bustling with the Friday night crowd, including those getting ready for the annual barn dance tomorrow night, Bella knew Lottie would never turn her away. "Thanks for squeezing me in, Lottie."

"Of course, sweetheart. I always have time for my favorite customer." She winked as she gestured for Bella to place her hands on the log-shaped cushion in the center of the desk. Quirking a brow, she opened the bottle of pink polish that Bella had chosen. "What's clouding your heart? You look like you could use a listening ear. Tell Lottie what's wrong."

Despite her somber mood, Bella couldn't help but loosen up. Hearing Lottie talk about herself in the third person was as comforting as syrup on a stack of pancakes. Her mom had

always teased her old friend about this quirky habit of hers. Bella was thankful that some things in her life hadn't changed. That included the memories of her mom that came flooding back whenever she smelled the pungent scent of nail polish. They had spent many afternoons in this very place getting their nails done together when she was younger.

Bella inhaled the nostalgic scent lingering in the air and shook her head. "Nothing's wrong, Lottie. I'm just tired from being on my feet and needed a break."

"I bet you are. That's one good thing about my job; I get to sit in this cushy chair all day long. I appreciate it more and more the older I get," she mused as she applied the first coat of polish to Bella's fingernails. "I don't know how your father manages standing—much less cooking—morning, noon, and night. That man is a saint. I always told your mama she picked a good one."

"He's amazing. I don't know where I'd be without him. I wish all guys were like him."

"All guys have the potential to be." Lottie moved quickly from fingernail to fingernail, painting them with the skill and ease of a professional. "You picked a good one, too, Bella. Maverick works hard to support you and Jesse."

"Hmm," was all Bella could reply. Her husband did work hard, but he also played hard, too. He liked to spend money on expensive gadgets and good food. While she didn't know all the ins and outs of their financial situation—Maverick took care of the bills—she'd overheard a couple of phone conversations that had raised some red flags. Talk about placing bets and paying back debts. When she'd brought up her concerns to Maverick, he'd reassured her that he had everything under control. Bella could only do what she'd always done—trust his word. But now that he'd gone back on his marriage vow, could she believe anything he'd ever told her?

Lottie raised her gaze, her hazel eyes filled with unspoken concern. "Are the two of you doing all right? I've never been married myself, but I can imagine it's not easy blending your

life with someone else's. And there's the fact that you guys became parents when you were so young. You've had to grow up mightily fast."

Bella sighed. If there was anyone who understood her past, it was Lottie. She'd been the first person she'd told about her pregnancy. There had been no judgment from her, only love and support. She wondered though how she would receive the news of her imminent divorce.

Divorce—that was a word that had not been part of her vocabulary up until today. Christians weren't supposed to have failed marriages. Well, neither were they supposed to get pregnant out of wedlock either. If there was anything she was good at, it was disappointing God and her family.

"I just feel like we're not on the same page anymore. Like we aren't the same people we were when we fell in love in high school," she quietly admitted. Her heart was so burdened with this truth, she had to confide her fears in someone. "Can I tell you something?"

"Of course, sweetheart. Tell Lottie what's on your mind."

"I think Mav resents me for making him give up football. The thing is, *I* resent me. I should have let him go after his dream. He gave up his whole future for me and he hasn't been happy since. Sometimes I think it would have been better if we hadn't gotten married at all."

To her credit, Lottie didn't even blink at Bella's confession. She simply nodded and gave her hand a gentle pat, careful to not smudge her fresh coat of polish. "I understand what you're saying. It's always easier to look back on our life and see all the things we could have done differently. But doing so doesn't make the present any easier. It just makes us long for something we can't have when we should be remembering what we do have. It's a hard spot to put yourself in."

"It sure is."

"Have you told Maverick how you feel?"

“No, but even if I did, it’s too late. He’s so unhappy, Lottie. He—” Her chest tightened as she forced the words out. “He doesn’t want to try anymore. He’s done.”

“Done? What are you saying?”

Bella lowered her voice to a whisper. “He wants a divorce.”

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m so sorry.” Lottie’s voice broke with sorrow. “No wonder you looked like you lost your best friend when you walked in here. I had no idea things had gotten this bad. Are you sure he wasn’t just saying that in the heat of the moment? Maybe he’ll think differently after he has some time to calm down.”

“He’s not changing his mind. I got served with the papers this morning.” She released a shaky breath as the finality of the situation sank in. Soon, she and Maverick would no longer be a unit. She couldn’t even imagine what life would be like for her then. As far as she could remember, he had always been around. Lottie was right, she was not only losing her spouse, but she was also losing her best friend.

Maybe she had already lost him a long time ago.

“I can’t really blame him for not wanting to be in this marriage anymore,” Bella confessed. “We aren’t living like husband and wife. We hardly talk anymore and when we do, we always end up arguing. He got used to sleeping on the couch every night until he moved out last month to stay with Milo. I thought he’d eventually come home, and we’d somehow fix things; I never thought he’d just give up. What am I supposed to do, Lottie?”

“I’m not sure, sweetheart,” she answered with a sigh. “But what I do know is that you’re not divorced until you sign those papers, so you still have time. Don’t give up, Bella. God’s not done with you guys yet. If your mama were still here, I believe that’s what she’d say, too.”

“I just wish we could go back to how things were, when life was simpler.”

“What made it simpler then?” Lottie asked as she gestured for Bella to place her hands inside the nail drying machine. “And what made things change?”

A quiet whirring sound filled the air as the fan switched on. Bella tossed those two questions around her brain, trying to figure out the answers. “I suppose things went south when we had trouble getting pregnant again. Testing negative month after month made me frustrated and then depressed. I didn’t know how to deal with the disappointment. I stopped hoping.”

“That’s awfully hard. Without hope, there’s not much to keep you going.”

“Yeah. It got to the point where I didn’t care anymore. Other than being a mom to Jesse, I didn’t care much about anything else. I guess you could say I gave up,” she admitted. Her heart pounded as the truth dawned on her. “I was the one who gave up first, Lottie.”

Hot tears welled in her eyes. All this time she’d been blaming Maverick, she herself was at fault. She had pushed him away. She’d wanted another child more than she wanted him. Why hadn’t she realized this earlier?

Thank You, God, for helping me see the plank in my own eye. I pray it’s not too late to make up with Mav.

Bella pulled her hands out of the dryer. “Lottie, I have to go. Can I pay you later? I need to talk to Mav.”

“Of course, don’t worry about it. You go on. I’ll be praying for you, dear, for both of you.”

Bella planted a quick kiss on Lottie’s cheek, then ran out the door. It wasn’t until she was seated in her Bug that she realized she’d left her coat at the salon. No matter. Her priority was to get home and make amends with her husband.

She gripped the steering wheel gingerly with her freshly manicured hands and pulled away from the curb. Stepping on the gas, she drove as quickly as the law allowed through the streets of Redemption. Even in her rush, the scene outside the windows called for her attention. At the red light, she stopped to take in the sights.

Several couples strode along the sidewalks, stopping to look at the festive decorations in the shop windows. The downtown area was already lit up with green and red lights. The holidays were always fun for old and young alike. Their town had several annual traditions, all of which she had grown up with and shared with Maverick when they were kids. They had also been bringing Jesse to the Christmas barn dance and the New Year's Eve charity concert since he was a baby.

How ironic was it that just hours before, she had been dreading those upcoming festivities. She'd been completely without hope. But in this moment, Bella felt a glimmer of possibility that she and Maverick could turn their marriage around. And what better time to do so than at Christmas? She prayed to the God of miracles for their own special miracle this year.

When the signal turned green, she started on her way again. Another mile down, her car was the lone one on the road as she drove out of the downtown area. She passed Flapjacks where the restaurant lights were dimmed. Even though the *closed* sign hung on the door, she was sure her father was still in the kitchen cleaning up. On any other day, she'd stop and help him, but she needed to get home.

As she neared her neighborhood, a vehicle suddenly joined her on the road, tailing her. Its headlights shone brightly, filling up her rearview mirror. The height of the beam made her suspect that it belonged to a truck. Whoever the driver was seemed to be in an even bigger rush than her. She squinted against the light and considered pulling to the side of the road to let it pass. But before she could slow down, a small animal darted in front of her car. The black cat froze in place, its ears flattened in fear. Bella slammed on the brakes and swerved to avoid hitting it. That's when she heard the crunch of metal against metal as the truck rammed into her bumper. The force of the impact caused her body to jerk helplessly backward and forward like a rag doll's. Her head crashed into the steering wheel and her whole world turned black.

Maverick

This is all my fault, all my fault. God, please let Bella be okay.

Maverick paced back and forth outside Bella's hospital room. The last place he'd imagined being at on an early Saturday morning was Mercy Regional Hospital. He hadn't stepped foot inside these hallways in years. Aside from Jesse's birth, all his memories of this place were wrought with pain and grief. The antiseptic smell and sounds of beeping machines brought him right back to those last days of his mother's life when he'd felt so helpless and alone. Save for Bella, the one person who had always stuck by his side and made sure he was okay.

Now she was the one in the hospital bed, and it was all because of him.

He'd left their house last night believing everything would be okay. When he hadn't been able to reach Bella, he'd called around and found out from Nora that she was headed to Lottie's nail salon. He'd then asked Sophia to come over and stay with Jesse until Bella returned. Soon after, he had made his way to the drop-off location to deliver the money he owed. Everything had gone according to plan ... until a phone call from the police at midnight woke him up to the nightmare of a situation they were currently in.

He paused in the doorway, praying for Bella to wake up. From what the ER doctor had told him, she'd been in and out of consciousness since the ambulance brought her in. A nurse said she'd been coherent during the few minutes she'd talked to her. Bella had only complained of a bad headache and

soreness in her upper body from where the seat belt had restrained her. Why wasn't she waking up then?

"Mr. Knight?" an older doctor with short brown hair approached him. The name tag clipped to her white coat read Dr. Stillman. She gestured for him to follow her inside the room. "Why don't you have a seat and talk to your wife? It may help her wake up faster if she recognizes a familiar voice."

He lingered at the foot of the bed and rubbed his jaw. While he didn't doubt the doctor's suggestion, he didn't think Bella would want to hear the voice of someone who had caused her so much pain. But maybe if he talked to her about Jesse, she would respond. He pulled up a chair and sat down beside the bed. "I'll give it a try."

"If she comes to, tell the nurse to call me."

"Will do. Thank you, Doctor."

As soon as the two of them were alone, Maverick rested his elbows on his legs and leaned in for a closer look. Other than an angry bruise on Bella's forehead, she appeared like her usual self. Her long lashes splayed on her cheeks as she slept, her chest rising and falling slowly with each breath. He hadn't seen her look so peaceful in a long time. Hopefully his presence wouldn't disturb her. He cleared his throat and began talking. "Bella, it's me, Mav. I don't know if you can hear me, but if you can, you need to wake up. For Jesse's sake, please wake up."

He paused and waited for a beat. Why wasn't she responding? Worry constricted his throat, making it hard to talk, but he fought to get his words out. "Bella, there's so much for you to do with Jesse before Christmas. We were just talking last night about going together to pick out a tree. He also wants to get one of those big inflatable snowmen for the front yard. And get this—he wants to put together care packages for the older folks at church, the ones who don't have family in town. He's such a good kid, Bella. I don't know where he gets these ideas from—well, actually, I do. He gets

them from you. You've raised him so well. Please wake up. Jesse really needs you."

Bella suddenly stirred and turned her head toward Maverick. Wincing in pain, she murmured something under her breath.

Maverick craned his neck to hear her better. "Bella, what did you say?"

"Where am I?"

"You're at the hospital. You were in a car accident last night on your way home from the nail salon."

Her eyelids fluttered open, then closed again. "My head—it hurts so much."

"I know, you got pretty banged up. I'll ask the nurse if they can give you something for the pain." He grabbed the remote off her bed and pressed the red call button. "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"I don't think so. Was there anyone else in the car?"

"Only you. Good thing no one was sitting in the back. That half of the Bug took the brunt of the impact."

"Oh no, poor Lady. Daddy's going to be so upset I wrecked it."

Maverick blinked in surprise. He hadn't heard Bella refer to her car as *Lady* since she was in high school. "I doubt if Trevor will care. The more important thing is that you're okay." He hesitated, wondering how much to ask Bella about the accident when she wasn't feeling well. But if she had gotten hurt because of his money troubles, he needed to know. In a casual tone, he asked, "Do you remember anything about what happened last night? Was there someone tailing you? Did you get a look at the car?"

"I-I don't know. The last thing I remember was talking to Nora. I think it was about a dress she wanted to buy for prom, but she was bummed they didn't have her size."

"Prom? What are you talking about? What prom?"

“Junior prom, of course.” She opened her eyes and stared at him in confusion. “When did you grow a beard, Mav?”

His jaw dropped. Junior prom? Why was Bella talking about something that had happened more than a dozen years ago? What was going on?

“Did someone call for help?” A nurse appeared in the doorway, dressed in scrubs with a red-and-white candy-cane print. Reindeer antlers sat on top of the headband she wore, bouncing with each step she took as she entered. “My name’s Carol. How are you feeling, dear?”

“My head hurts.”

“I bet it does. I’ll get you some pain medicine, but first, let me check your vitals.”

Maverick stepped aside while Carol checked Bella’s blood pressure and temperature. He trained his eyes on Bella, observing her expressions and actions. There was nothing amiss that he could spot, but the unsettled feeling in his gut wouldn’t go away.

After Carol made her notes on the clipboard attached to the foot of the bed, he motioned for her attention. “Can we step outside for a minute?”

“Sure thing. I’ll be right back, dear.”

As soon as the two of them were in the hallway, Maverick laid out his concerns. “Bella doesn’t seem to be acting like herself. Is she okay?”

“Her vitals are normal, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Is there any chance she could be feeling confused after hitting her head?”

“Of course. Headaches, confusion, irritability—those are all common concussion symptoms. Her brain has been through a traumatic event, and it will take some time for it to recover.”

“But is it normal for her to be talking about the past”—he swallowed hard—“like it’s the present? She just mentioned the prom. That happened years ago!”

One of Carol's eyebrows rose in concern. "I see. Let me page Dr. Stillman for you, so she can do a full assessment now that your wife is awake. Try not to worry, Mr. Knight. These things usually have a way of working themselves out," she added with a hopeful smile before walking away.

Not worry? It was too late for that.

As a former football player, he was familiar with head injuries. He'd himself suffered a concussion after getting tackled at a homecoming game. But he'd never had any memory loss or seen any of his old teammates experience it. Bella's case seemed much more severe. How could this condition possibly work itself out?

As Maverick's thoughts began to spiral out of control, he spotted Bella's dad running past the reception desk toward him.

"Maverick, what happened? Where's Bella?"

Trevor's usual serious demeanor had been replaced with a look of grave concern. The last time Maverick had seen him like this was when he'd handed Bella off to him at the altar. He'd been able to gain a little of Trevor's trust over the years, but it felt like he'd lost it all again in this moment. He did his best to keep his voice calm. "She got rear-ended and likely has a concussion. I'm waiting for the doctor to tell me more."

"Is she awake? Can I see her?"

"Of course. She's in here." He quickly led the way into Bella's room. "Bella, your dad's here."

Her blue eyes lit up at the sight of Trevor. She reached out for his hand. "Daddy! I'm so sorry about my car. I didn't mean to wreck it."

"I don't care about the car, pumpkin. I'm just relieved you're okay." He shook his head sorrowfully. "What a day you've had. First, you got sick, and then you got into this accident. Thank the good Lord you're still in one piece."

"I was sick?" Bella asked. "Did I miss school?"

“School? No, you were at Flapjacks. Don’t you remember? You left early because you weren’t feeling well.”

“I ... I don’t remember. My head really hurts, and I can’t see clearly. Everything’s blurry.”

Maverick stood off to the side observing this exchange. He could tell Trevor was as confused as he’d been minutes before. It was becoming more and more apparent that Bella was suffering from some serious effects from the car accident. He ran a hand down his face and prayed for God to help them all.

Soon the nurse and doctor both returned. After some brief introductions, Bella received her medication and Dr. Stillman began her assessment.

“I have some questions I’d like you to answer if you’re up for it,” the doctor stated. When Bella agreed, she continued, “What is the last thing you remember before your car accident?”

“I think I was on the phone with my best friend Nora. Mav said I was driving home from the nail salon, but I don’t remember going there.”

“That’s fine. You may not remember everything that happened last night. How about the ambulance ride? Can you describe it to me?”

“There was an older man who helped me out of my car. He smelled like bubblegum, and he had a beard like Mav’s but more bushy.”

“Bubblegum and a beard? That sounds like Jake.” Dr. Stillman smiled. “How about after you got to the ER, can you tell me about the intake process? Who did you talk to and what did you see?”

“There was a nurse. She did all the stuff they do in the movies when someone goes to the hospital. She took my temperature and blood pressure and looked at my eyes with this bright light. She asked what my name was and if anywhere hurt. Then she gave me a gown to change into and said I could stay in bed. I asked her if I could call my dad and

she said she'd call him for me. I think I fell asleep after that 'cause I was really tired. That's all I can remember."

"That's fine, Bella. What you just told me gives me a good idea of how your brain is doing after the accident. In cases like yours, we expect to see patients experience headaches, dizziness, irritability, fatigue, and difficulty concentrating. It's a good sign that your symptoms are not worsening. If they were, we would do a CT scan to rule out any bleeding in your brain."

"Wouldn't it still be a good idea to do the scan," Maverick asked, "just to be sure?"

"There's no need for one when the symptoms are mild. How about this? I'll come back in a couple of hours to do another assessment and we can decide for sure then."

"What about my head?" Bella winced in pain. "Will it stop hurting soon? And my eyes? I can't see very well."

"Your headache and your vision should improve in a few days. You can continue taking the pain medicine in the meantime. If there's no other questions—"

"Oh, wait, I remember something else that happened earlier."

"What is it?"

"The nurse who helped me was being really strange." Bella's cheeks darkened as she wrinkled her nose. "She made me do a pregnancy test! I told her there's no way I could be pregnant. Is that something they ask everyone, even teenagers?"

Maverick's jaw grew slack as everyone in the room fell silent. How were they supposed to break the news to Bella that she was no longer a teenager but a thirty-year-old woman?

Bella

Why is everyone so quiet?

Bella blinked quickly, wishing her vision would clear up. The fuzzy images of her dad, Maverick, and the doctor and nurse surrounded her bed like visitors in a dream. Her mom often appeared to her like this when she dreamed of her on nights when she felt alone. Although the hospital room was crowded, Bella felt very much on her own. The silence seemed deafeningly loud and ominous, as if she were on trial for a crime. What was the matter? Was it something she'd said?

"What did you say, Bella?" Dr. Stillman stepped closer to the head of the bed. "Can you repeat yourself, please?"

"I said the nurse made me do a pregnancy test even though there's no way I'm pregnant." It suddenly dawned on her that maybe they didn't believe her with Mav here. Kids at school always assumed there was something going on between them. Even Nora teased her about having a boyfriend. People didn't understand that they were close because they'd grown up together. As much as Bella wished there could be more to their relationship, the simple fact was that Mav didn't feel the same way. "I promise I'm telling the truth. I don't even have a boyfriend. Mav is a friend, but that's all we are. Tell them, Mav. You have a girlfriend, but you offered to take me to prom because no one else asked me. We're just going as friends."

"Bella, I don't have a girlfriend. You're my ..." His voice faltered before he finished his sentence. "Doctor, may I have a word with you outside?"

“Of course,” Dr. Stillman answered. “Give us a few minutes, Bella. I’ll be back soon to discuss your prognosis.”

The nurse, doctor, and Maverick stepped into the hall, leaving Bella alone with her dad. Still grasping his hand, she gave it a desperate tug as she tried to sit up. “Daddy, you believe me, don’t you? There’s nothing going on between me and Mav or any other guy. And even if I were dating someone, we would never ever cross that line. I promised Mama I wouldn’t.”

“Sweetheart, it’s okay.” After adjusting the bed to allow her to be upright, he brushed a lock of hair from her face. “Your mama would love you, no matter what you did. She wanted the best for you, but she didn’t expect you to be perfect. No one does, least of all God. He sent Jesus to die for you, knowing full well what mistakes you would make. That’s the best thing about grace—there’s nothing we can do to earn it. You’re forgiven.”

Bella sucked in a breath. Why did her dad sound so emotional? And why was he going on about this? It wasn’t like she hadn’t heard the gospel before. She’d been going to church from the time she was in her mother’s womb, and she had never missed a day of Sunday school in her life. She was the poster child of a good Christian—not that she was perfect, of course, but she did her best to follow God. Why was her dad talking to her about making mistakes and forgiveness?

“Is everything okay, Daddy? Did I do something wrong? Was I driving too fast and that’s why I got into an accident?” She gasped, afraid to ask her next question. “Did I hit someone?”

“No, no, you didn’t hit anyone or anything. You were the one who got hit.”

Her lungs expanded as she breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, good! I would never want to hurt anyone, even if it wasn’t on purpose.”

He gave her hand a squeeze. “I know, pumpkin.”

“What about the person who hit my car—is he or she okay?”

“I’m not sure. Maverick didn’t give me all the details of the accident when he called. He just told me to come to the hospital. We can ask him when he comes back.”

She closed her eyes, suddenly feeling weary. So many questions ran through her mind as she tried to grasp the situation. What other problems did she have from her head injury that she didn’t know about? Would she be able to go to prom in two weeks? That last question seemed foolish under the circumstances, but she’d been looking forward to being Maverick’s date for a night. It would be the only time she could live out her fantasy of being someone special to him. Because as long as she could remember, that’s all she ever wanted to be in his eyes—special.

Her eyes flew wide open as a thought hit her. Something wasn’t right. “Daddy, why did Mav know about the accident before you did? Wouldn’t the hospital notify you first? Why would they have called him before calling you?”

Her dad cleared his throat. “The thing is, Annabella, there are some things about your life that you’re not remembering due to your head injury. I’m sure the doctor will tell us more when she returns.”

Bella’s throat constricted. Her dad never called her by her full name unless something was gravely wrong. The last time he had was to let her know that her mom had passed. This was a very bad sign. “Where’s the doctor? Can you go find her? Please?”

“I’ll go check. But don’t worry, pumpkin, I’m sure this is just temporary,” he added before leaving the room.

Temporary or not, Bella had never felt so confused. She touched the side of her head before moving her fingers down the blonde strands of hair that fell to her shoulders. When had she gotten a haircut? She’d always kept her hair long, down to her waist, since she was a little girl. What else was different about herself?

Her hand searched for the small gold cross that usually hung around her neck. When her fingers came up empty, she nearly burst into tears. Her mom's necklace—where did it go?! Had the nurse asked her to take it off? Why couldn't she remember that detail?

God, please don't let me lose Mom's necklace! That's the last thing she gave me. I can't lose it.

She repeated this silent prayer as she touched her chest again. A gasp escaped her lips as she realized her body felt different. She had curves in places she'd never had them before. Her hips were much wider and fuller beneath her hospital gown. Even more surprising were the lace undergarments she had on. When and why had she bought these? And why did the skin along her stomach feel kind of bumpy? None of these changes made sense.

There has to be a good reason for all of this, Bella mused. Her heart pounded as she told herself not to panic. *As soon as the doctor comes back, she'll explain everything.*

"Pumpkin, the doctor's here," Bella's dad announced from the doorway. He walked into the room, followed by the two figures whom she presumed were the doctor and Mav.

"Bella, I know you have some questions," Dr. Stillman began, "but let me reassure you that what you're going through is normal and expected after a head injury."

"H-how is this normal?" Her voice shook with worry as did her hands. She clasped her hands together to stop them from shaking. That's when her jaw dropped. On the fourth finger of her left hand was a ring. She held up her hands in front of her face, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. "What happened to me? Why am I wearing a wedding ring? Why is everything different?"

"It seems that you're experiencing amnesia. I know this comes as a shock to you, but it's most likely temporary and you'll regain your memories over time. The best thing you can do is to get plenty of rest and good nutrition and trust the recovery process."

Bella's skin grew cold and clammy as this news sunk in. Was this all a dream? Or a nightmare? How could this be happening? "I don't understand. You're saying I lost my memories? How much did I lose?"

"I'll let your family fill you in on that. In the meantime, I've ordered a CT scan for you. A nurse will be by in a while to take you to get that done, then I'll be back to go over the results with you."

The words barely registered in Bella's mind as she watched the doctor leave. All she knew was that she needed answers and her dad was the one who could give them to her. "Daddy, what am I not remembering? Please tell me."

"Sweetheart, I think the best person for you to talk to about this is Mav."

"Mav?" She glanced over at his tall frame standing by the door. "Why Mav?"

"Because Mav is your husband. The two of you have been married for nearly a decade."

"What?" Despite her headache, Bella laughed. Her dad had to be joking! "Mav has a girlfriend. Why would you say that?"

Mav returned to her bedside and pulled up a chair. "It's true, Bella. You're my wife."

She clamped a hand over her mouth. The pieces were starting to fall into place. "That's why the hospital called you first."

"Yes."

She swallowed hard. This was crazier than she'd thought. "Ten years? I forgot ten years of my life? How old am I supposed to be?"

"Actually, more like thirteen years. You're thirty now."

Her hands began trembling again. "Thirty?" she whispered. "That means you're thirty-one, Mav?"

"Yes."

"And Daddy, you're sixty?"

“That’s right, pumpkin.”

“What about Sophia? And Nora and Lottie? Where are they?”

“They all live here in Redemption Ridge. Sophia got married last year. The two of you help me run Flapjacks.”

“Flapjacks?” It was good to hear her family’s restaurant was still around. But what had happened to her dream of becoming a flight attendant and traveling the world? Had she given that up when she’d gotten married? More importantly, how had she managed to move out of the friend zone with Mav? She turned to him, suddenly feeling shy. “What happened with us? How did we end up together?”

Her dad cleared his throat. “I’ll let you guys talk. I’m going to give Sophia a call and let her know how you’re doing.”

“Okay, thanks, Daddy.”

The room grew quiet as soon as her dad left. She took a good, long look at Mav as she waited for him to reply. No wonder he had a beard now. He was a grown man. Her man, to be exact. A rush of anticipation flowed through her body at the thought. If she had to wake up with amnesia and find out she was married, there was no one she’d rather be married to than her best friend.

After a minute had passed and he still hadn’t spoken, she wondered if he was still processing his own shock. “Are you okay, Mav? This is all so crazy, right? I mean you must’ve been so confused when I was talking about the prom.”

“It’s unexpected, to say the least. So, you don’t remember anything that happened the night of the prom or afterwards?”

“I wish I did. I was really looking forward to going with you. Did we have a good time?”

“We did. We kissed that night for the first time. You could say that’s when things changed between us.”

“But you had a girlfriend! Why would I kiss you?”

“She and I broke up the week before your prom. You were being a good friend and trying to console me, and one thing led to another ...” He cut off his words with a soft sigh. “Anyhow, it was a long time ago. I won’t bore you with the details.”

“I don’t mind, Mav. I want to hear the details, all of them. I feel like there’s so much I’m missing. What else happened? When did we get married? How did you propose?”

“We got married on Christmas Eve. It’ll be ten years next month. I took you horseback riding at Redemption Ranch and proposed at sunset.”

“That sounds so romantic.”

“Actually, it was far from it. You were so tired from staying up with Jesse all night, you almost fell asleep during the ride.”

That name sounded familiar, but Bella couldn’t put a face to it. “Who’s Jesse?”

“He’s our son, Bella.”

“We have a son?! I can’t believe I didn’t know that.” Her eyes welled up with tears. She’d always wanted children and had longed for a big family one day. “I’m a mom! Where is he? What’s he like?”

“He’s amazing. He’s smart and kind—a great kid all around. Sophia’s with him right now. He’ll be relieved to know you’re okay.”

Bella couldn’t stop smiling. Not only was the pain medication kicking in, but she was also learning about so many wonderful things in her life. Gratitude filled her heart to know that God had blessed her in ways she’d never imagined. A husband *and* a son? What other amazing things would she find out about herself?

“Mrs. Knight?” A young nurse entered her room, bringing with her the pungent scent of hand sanitizer. “I’m here to take you to get your CT scan.”

“Thank you,” Bella answered, feeling a little giddy. Mrs. Knight? She could get used to the sound of that. “Can my, uh, husband come, too?”

“It would be best for him to wait for you here. The scan will only take about fifteen minutes.”

“That’s fine,” Mav stated as he rose to his feet. “I have some phone calls to make. I’ll be back in a bit, Bella.”

“Okay, see you soon.”

Bella leaned back against her pillow as contentment washed over her. Maybe having amnesia wouldn’t be as scary as she thought it would be. As long as Mav was here to fill in all the blanks, she didn’t have anything to worry about.

Yet not a minute later a worrisome thought crossed Bella’s mind. Mav had said she’d been up with Jesse the night before he proposed. Why hadn’t they been married before they had their son?

Maverick

God, *You sure have a sense of humor.*

Maverick stared down at the discharge papers the nurse had just handed him, his mind not quite believing the situation they were in. Only last night he'd wished for a do-over and now he'd been handed one. Bella's amnesia had effectively erased all the unhappy memories of their past in one fell swoop. Yet, why did he not feel free?

Perhaps he hadn't gotten over his shock yet. The woman lying in the hospital bed almost felt like a stranger to him. He hadn't seen this innocent, trusting side of Bella in years. The way she'd so easily accepted the news of their relationship surprised and humbled him. She seemed happy, even proud, to be his wife. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her at peace like this. It was such a welcome change. But how was he supposed to reconcile the real state of their marriage with the false one that Bella believed?

"Mr. Knight?"

Maverick glanced up to see Bella's doctor walking over to the registration counter where he stood. A few minutes earlier, she had given Bella the all-clear to go home after her CT scan came back normal. He wondered why she was back to speak with him again. "Dr. Stillman, is everything okay?"

"Yes, but I wanted to check in with you. I imagine your wife's amnesia must be difficult for you to process. If you're in need of support, I can refer you to one of our hospital social workers."

“I appreciate the offer, but it seems like Bella’s doing all right with this change.”

“And you? How are you doing?”

He ran a hand across his jaw and shrugged. “Honestly, this isn’t the worst thing that has happened to us. It might even be a hidden blessing if you’ll believe it.”

Her brows drew together in curiosity as she peered up at him through her red frames. “How so?”

“Bella and I—we haven’t been doing all that well. We’re actually separated.”

Dr. Stillman’s green eyes brightened with understanding. “And now you feel like you’ve gotten a chance to start over with her.”

“In a way. Bella doesn’t remember any of the fights we had. She’s the happiest I’ve seen her in years.” He paused, feeling a mixture of emotions stirring in his chest. “I prayed for a do-over and then this happened. Is it foolish to think this might be God’s answer to prayer?”

“His ways are much higher than ours. I wouldn’t presume to know what His plans are, but I know He hears our prayers and works things out for our good.” She placed a hand on his arm. “I do want to caution you, Mr. Knight, that there’s a high possibility your wife will start to remember things as the days go by. You’ll want to prepare yourself for when that happens.”

Maverick nodded, his mood sobering. “I know. I’ll deal with it when the time comes.”

“Now, before you leave,” she continued in her no-nonsense tone again, “I want to remind you to watch your wife over the next few days, especially when she’s sleeping. It’s a good idea to wake her up every few hours, ask her a couple of questions, and make sure she’s coherent.”

“Every few hours? Is that including at night, too?”

“Yes, particularly at night. Are you comfortable doing that, Mr. Knight? Or is there someone you can ask to help you out?”

His original plan was being flipped on its head. Despite his best intentions, distancing himself from his family hadn't kept Bella safe. It was also becoming clearer by the minute that Bella would need help during her recovery. And since she believed they were happily married, the best thing to do was to return home. Back to where he could keep a close eye on her and Jesse while he figured out how to pay off the remainder of his debt faster.

"I can do it," he replied confidently. "I'll watch out for Bella."

"Good. If there are any changes in her behavior, I want you to bring her in right away."

"Will do, Doc. Thanks for all your help."

After some last-minute instructions about Bella's pain medication, Dr. Stillman left Maverick to finish filling out the paperwork. He had turned it in to the nurse and was about to go back to Bella's room when a man stepped into his path.

"Maverick, do you have a minute?" his father-in-law asked with his arms crossed. "We need to talk."

Trevor's serious tone would have had him literally shaking in his boots a decade ago. Maverick was no longer afraid of him, but he didn't appreciate being mistrusted or disrespected by him. No matter how much he'd done to provide for Bella and Jesse, it never seemed to be enough. He'd heard countless lectures over the years to know he still hadn't gained Trevor's approval. Maverick steeled himself for the talk he sensed was coming. "What's on your mind?"

Trevor gestured for them to head over to the vending machine in the corner for privacy. When they were out of earshot of the other patients, he stated, "I couldn't help overhearing your conversation with the doctor just now. What is this about you and Bella being separated? How long has that been going on?"

"Only a few weeks," Maverick replied, trying to keep his cool. "But I'm going back home tonight and staying there. I'll take care of Bella as she recovers, I promise."

His eyes, so much like Bella's, turned an icy shade of blue. A muscle in his jaw clenched as he shook his head. "Do you hear yourself, Maverick? Is this the same kind of promise you made when you said, 'for better or for worse, till death do you part'? I don't know how much stock to put in your promises anymore. You made a lifelong commitment to my daughter when you made your vow on your wedding day. You can't just come and go as you please."

"I understand why you're upset, Trevor, I do. But our situation isn't so cut and dried. I never abandoned Bella or Jesse. I've been doing everything I can to provide for them and to keep them safe."

Trevor's face fell, his expression one of dismay. "You can say what you want, but I'm tired of your excuses, Maverick. You've done enough damage. I won't let you hurt my daughter or grandson more than you already have. I'll take care of them."

"But I'm Bella's husband and Jesse's dad!" He struggled to keep his volume down as his frustration rose. "You can't keep me away from my family."

"You're right, I can't. But you already did that yourself. You were the one who left them in the first place." His voice grew somber as he continued, "Be honest, Maverick. If it weren't for this accident, would you have considered going back to your family?"

"That's beside the point. What's happened has happened. Bella needs me. Didn't you see how happy she was to find out we're married?"

"And what's going to happen when she remembers you're separated? It's going to break her heart all over again. Is that what you want?"

"I'll cross that bridge if it happens."

"You mean *when* it happens," Trevor insisted. "It's only a matter of time. You heard the doctor. Bella's memory is bound to come back."

“I know.” Maverick held his father-in-law’s gaze and spoke from his heart. Now that he was forced to face reality, he knew what he wanted. “I know I messed up, but I promise to do better. When Bella starts remembering the past, I hope and pray she’ll forgive me. I won’t let her or Jesse down again.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.” Trevor held his gaze, his eyes unblinking. “Trust me, I’ll be watching.”

Bella

Something wasn't right. Bella noticed her dad and Maverick had barely spoken a word to each other on their way home from the hospital. She also didn't understand why her dad had insisted on riding with them when he had his own car. Maybe he was just worried about her? He had been especially protective the last few years since her mom passed away.

No, not the last few years, she reminded herself. You're not a teenager anymore. You're an adult now. An adult with a husband and a son.

She wiped her damp palms along the front of the gray sweatpants Maverick had brought for her to change into. The right knee was worn and there was a reddish stain on the left thigh that looked like sauce. Maybe Jesse had wiped his little hand on her leg during mealtime? She had so many questions about their son that she hadn't gotten a chance to ask Maverick earlier with the medical staff around. The most pressing one of course being why he had proposed *after* Jesse was born. Could it be that they'd gotten married without a formal proposal and Maverick then made up for it?

"We're home," Maverick announced as he pulled his truck into the driveway and parked. "Do you remember this place?"

Squinting against the late afternoon sunshine, Bella glanced out the window at the two-story house. Her vision was still blurry, but she recognized the blue exterior paint and the reddish-orange door. It was the only house on the block with those colors. "It's your parents' house, Mav. This is where we live?"

He nodded. "I inherited it from my dad."

"Your dad? Does that mean he's ...?" Bella hesitated to finish her question. She knew Mav had been devastated when he lost his mom. Losing his dad must have been terribly hard, too. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. I have you and Jesse; you guys are my family. That's all I need."

Her dad cleared his throat from the backseat. "I'll let Sophia and Jesse know we're here."

"Thanks, Daddy. We'll be right in." After her dad had closed the door, Bella turned to Maverick. "Is everything okay with you and my dad? It seems kind of tense between you guys."

"Everything's fine. Come on, let's get you inside."

"Wait, Mav." She looked over at the house again, unsure of what to expect. How was she supposed to return to her life when she didn't have any memories of what that life was like? What if she didn't know what to do, or even how to be? "I'm just kind of nervous. I don't know if I'm ready to go in yet."

"Nervous? What for?"

She grabbed onto the hem of her coat and bunched it up in her fists. Releasing a shaky breath, she confided her fears to him. "What if I don't know how to be a mom? What if Jesse doesn't like me?"

"Bella, trust me, you're a natural. Jesse loves you. You've always been his favorite person in the world."

"But I don't remember anything about him. What food he likes or doesn't like to eat or what toys are his favorite or what stories he likes me to read to him at bedtime. I do read to him at bedtime, don't I?"

Maverick chuckled softly. "You haven't in a while, but I don't think he'd mind it if you did. And don't worry, he'll tell you what he likes and doesn't like. He's good at speaking his mind."

“Is he? That’s a relief. I wasn’t sure if it’d be hard to understand him. The little kids that I help out with in Sunday School—*used* to help out with,” she corrected herself, “almost have their own language. Sometimes even their own parents don’t know what they’re saying.”

“Uh, Bella, how old do you think Jesse is?”

“I’m guessing four or five. I don’t know. How old is he?”

“Jesse’s twelve.”

“Twelve?! But we’ve only been married ten years. I don’t understand.”

Maverick wiped a hand down his face as he turned to her. “You got pregnant your senior year of high school. We got married after Jesse was born.”

Bella’s heart pounded against her rib cage as a wave of shock washed over her. Guilt and shame immediately burned her cheeks as she considered the implication of his words. “We slept together before we were married?”

“Yes.”

She hung her head, letting that one word echo in her head in the silence that followed. She’d broken her promise to her mom. She’d no doubt disappointed her dad, too. That’s why he had tried so hard to console her at the hospital. He knew she had failed.

How could she have failed?

“I-I’m kind of surprised,” she admitted. “I mean, I’m very surprised. That’s not how my parents raised me. It goes against everything we were taught at church.” She sucked in a sharp breath. “What kind of example would I be for the kids in Sunday School?”

Maverick sighed. “I won’t lie, it was hard. We stopped going to church for a while. It took time, but most people came around. You stopped helping with Sunday School though. Not because they didn’t want you to, but you were busy taking care of Jesse. He was pretty colicky as a baby and

wanted you to hold him all the time. He usually preferred you over me.”

“I see.” How much had her pregnancy changed the course of her life? It must have affected not only her future plans but so many relationships as well. “Is that why you and my dad don’t get along?” she asked Maverick. “Because of what happened with us?”

“It did create some tension, but once Jesse was born, your dad softened up a little.”

“Is that also why I didn’t become a flight attendant like I’d wanted to?”

He nodded. “You wanted to stay home with Jesse, which you did until he was old enough to go to school. That’s when you started working at the restaurant, so you could have flexible hours and be able to pick him up from school.”

“What about you? Did you get to play football?”

Maverick shifted in his seat and faced the front windshield. “No. I dropped out of college and started working. I’ve been at Redemption Ranch ever since. I teach riding classes, mostly for kids.”

The weariness in his voice tugged at her heart. She couldn’t believe he’d given up his dream. “But you loved football, and you were so good at it. How could you stop playing?”

“When the choice came down to family or football, I chose family.”

An alarming thought crossed Bella’s mind. “Is that why we got married? Because I got pregnant?”

“That wasn’t the only reason. It was a matter of time. We would have gotten married eventually. The pregnancy just sped things up a little.”

Bella suddenly felt sick to her stomach. A bitter taste settled on her tongue, making it hard to swallow. Everything she was learning about her past was not what she expected or wanted to hear. The warmth and excitement she’d had for her

little family was fading, much like the light in the now darkening sky. With night came the wonder and beauty of the stars, but there was nothing bright nor hopeful about her situation. At best, Maverick had proposed out of a sense of responsibility; at worst he'd married her out of obligation. Either way, she couldn't help but question why he had stuck around. Did he truly love her and want to be with her?

"I want to believe what you're saying, Mav," she confessed softly, "but my dad more than likely pressured you into marrying me. I bet your dad and other people at church did, too."

"There was some pressure of course, but in the end, it was my choice to make. I wanted to marry you."

A wistful smile crossed her lips. Good ol' Mav. He was still so supportive and always knew the right thing to say. "Thanks for trying to make me feel better, but I know you probably felt like you had to. I'm sorry you couldn't play football because of what happened. I feel so bad about that."

"Bella, that's not what—"

"Mom!" An exuberant voice called out to her from outside the passenger window. "It's me, Jesse!"

Bella's brows rose as she made out the frame of a boy with a mop of blond hair on his head. This was her son! Her heart swelled with a deep love she didn't know she possessed. She quickly opened the door and stepped out to gather him into her arms. "Jesse, hi!"

He buried his face in the crook of her neck and hugged her back. After a few moments, he pulled away to look at her. "Do you remember me, Mom?"

"I ..."

She stilled, taking in every detail she could of her son. How his voice sounded more like a child's even though he was tall enough to look her in the eyes. The way his damp hair smelled fresh and citrusy from a shower. And the tight grip he had on her arms as if he were afraid she'd disappear if he let go. Even though she didn't have any memories of Jesse, she sensed a familiarity about him. "I'm sorry I don't

remember much of anything right now, but I'm sure I will soon. I do know that I've missed you so much. It's so good to see you."

"It's okay if you don't remember. We have lots of pictures to help you. And I can tell you stories, the stories you told me about when I was little."

"I'd like that, Jesse. But right now, we better get you inside or else you'll catch cold with that wet hair."

Jesse laughed. "You still sound like yourself. That's what you say to me all the time."

"Do I?"

"He's right." Maverick came up behind them, carrying her belongings. "You better listen to your mom, son. Let's go on inside."

"Wait till you see what we're having for dinner, Mom! Lottie brought us fried chicken and biscuits!"

"Lottie's here?" Bella followed Jesse to the front porch, her mood lifting with each step she took. Despite her worries about her and Mav's relationship, there was much to be thankful for. Her mom's old friend was one of the wisest and most caring people she knew. Having Lottie around would definitely help her feel more grounded. She needed as much normalcy as possible now that her whole world had turned upside down. "I'm so glad Lottie's here. I can't wait to see her."

"Aunt Nora's coming over after dinner, too. She said she'll bring your favorite for dessert."

"Brownies and ice cream?"

"Yeah! Your memory's not all gone, Mom."

"Thankfully not all of it."

When they got to the front door, Maverick opened it and stepped aside to allow them to pass. Jesse quickly ran inside. Before she could step through, however, he placed a hand on her arm.

“Bella, I’d like to finish our conversation later,” he murmured in a low tone. “There’s more I want to say to you.”

“It’s okay, Mav, you don’t have to explain anything.”

“I do; I want to. Please hear me out.”

The urgency in his tone moved her to nod. “Okay, sure.”

She agreed, knowing he wasn’t going to leave the matter alone. Despite the years that had passed, Maverick was as strong-willed and loyal as he’d been when they were kids. At least some things hadn’t changed. There was a reason why she and Maverick had been close. Even though they’d had different friend groups at school, he’d always watched out for her. He’d taught her so much—everything from how to ride a bike to how to change a flat tire. They’d had so much fun together watching movies on lazy summer nights and playing board games on rainy days. But never in her wildest dreams did she think she’d end up married to him.

She wasn’t nearly as pretty or popular or confident as the girls he’d dated in high school. Maybe that’s why she couldn’t believe he’d willingly want to be with her. What if she had just been a rebound relationship for him? Then she’d gotten pregnant, and it was too late for Maverick to break up with her? There were so many uncertainties and unknowns. If only she could remember exactly what had happened between them.

As she stepped inside the house and heard the familiar laughter of her sister and Lottie, she realized she could learn about her past. She would ask her family and her friends. They would help her fill in the missing pieces she had forgotten.

Maverick

Maverick had never believed in time travel, but seeing Bella tonight with her family and friends made him think otherwise. He felt like he'd been transported back to happier days.

They had finished up dinner, and Bella, Sophia, and Nora were in the living room catching up. Lottie had offered to load the dishwasher with Trevor's help, leaving Maverick to finish his chess game with Jesse. The mood was peaceful in their home, something that hadn't happened in years. They used to have gatherings just like this when Jesse was younger. Maverick had forgotten how much fun they could have together.

"Did the doctor say how long Mom's amnesia will last?" Jesse asked him from the other side of the dining table. He kept his voice low as his gaze darted over to the armchair where Bella sat about fifteen feet away. "Is it possible her memories won't ever come back?"

Maverick's brows shot up at his son's cautious tone. This had to be a lot for him to take in. He hadn't considered how Jesse would feel to be the one person Bella didn't remember from her life. "The doctor said she'll remember things over time. I'm sure her memories of you will return eventually."

"I'm not worried about that, Dad. I'm worried about the opposite happening." His blue eyes lit up as he whispered, "I like it that Mom doesn't remember everything. She's really happy like this. God answered my prayers. I just wanted Mom to be happy again and now she is."

The hopeful expression on Jesse's face made him swallow hard. He wished he could make this last as long as possible for his son. "I like seeing her happy, too."

"Do you think it's okay for me to ask God to *not* give her memories back?"

"I don't know, Jesse," he replied truthfully. "I think it's okay to be honest with God about what we want, but it's up to Him to know what's best for Mom."

Jesse nodded. "Yeah, I know. Whatever happens, I know He'll take care of us."

Maverick marveled at his son's faith. Sometimes being a child was a lot easier than being an adult. Kids didn't need to have all the answers, so long as they had good parents to rely on. But wasn't that what being a child of God meant, too? He didn't need to worry about their future as long as he trusted God to provide for them.

Why did faith always have to be easier said than done?

"Checkmate!" Jesse declared with a bright smile as he placed his queen chess piece in front of Maverick's king. "Take that, Dad!"

Maverick's jaw dropped. Pretty soon his son would be smarter than him; actually, in a lot of ways he already was. "Nice move, Jesse! You won!"

"I'm gonna tell Mom!"

He watched as Jesse jumped to his feet and sprinted over to Bella. They exchanged a high five before Jesse took a seat on the couch. There was nothing better than seeing the two people who meant the most to him in this world be happy together.

Noting the late hour, Maverick began packing up the chess pieces back into their box. Every so often he would pause and listen to the happy snippets of conversation coming from the adjacent room. Hearing Bella's laughter, in particular, freed up the tightness that had gripped his chest during their talk earlier in the car.

Bella had seen right through him, as usual. He *had* proposed out of a sense of duty, but one that was rooted in loyalty. He'd tried hard to do right by her. She was his greatest friend, and he hadn't wanted to cause her any more pain than he already had. He may have had to sacrifice his football career, but it had been worth it. He needed to reassure Bella that marrying her was the one decision he'd never regretted.

But how?

Date her again.

The idea came to him like the first snowfall of winter, blanketing his mind with a sense of stillness and peace. It was an answer to a prayer he hadn't even spoken, but God could surely see his heart. Dating Bella was the perfect plan. He would show her how much she meant to him and how good they once were together, while she was still open and receptive to hearing him out.

"Thanks for having me over, Mav." Lottie interrupted his thoughts to give him a hug. Trevor stood behind her, putting on his coat. "I'll give the old man a ride home," she added with a wink in Trevor's direction. "If you and Bella need any more food, let me know and I'll be more than happy to drop some off. Don't hesitate to call, okay?"

"Thank you, Lottie. It was good of you to bring dinner over tonight."

"Of course. That's what family's for, to help each other out through thick and thin. I'll be praying for you all. However things may turn out, know that Lottie's here for you."

The pointed way she spoke that last line made Maverick's brows rise. Did Lottie know more about their marriage than she was letting on? Maybe Bella had confided in her when she'd been at the nail salon. He trusted Lottie to be discreet, but the last thing he needed was to air out more of their dirty laundry in front of Trevor. Hoping to change the conversation, he casually answered, "I appreciate the offer and the prayers, Lottie. I'm sure everything will be fine."

Trevor shot him a stern look. "It better be, Maverick."

“Trevor Kelly,” Lottie exclaimed in surprise, “what’s that supposed to mean? Don’t mind him, Mav, he’s a bit grumpy tonight. I better take him on home so he can get his beauty sleep.”

“I’ll walk you guys out,” Maverick offered, leading the way to the front door.

Once Lottie and Trevor had said their goodbyes to the others, they headed out. Not long after, Sophia and Nora took off, too.

With all their guests gone, Bella let out a long yawn. “Excuse me! I think all that socializing’s catching up with me. I should get to bed. You too, Jesse. Aunt Sophia said she’ll come pick you up for church tomorrow.”

“Aren’t you and Dad going, too?” Jesse asked.

“Not tomorrow, but hopefully next week.”

“The doctor wants your mom to stay home until her vision clears up,” Maverick explained. “And someone needs to watch her at all times until her headache gets better—that’s going to be me.”

Jesse’s eyes widened. “At all times, even while Mom’s sleeping?”

“It’s a bit much, right?” Bella sighed. “But that’s what the doctor said we need to do, just to be on the safe side.”

“I think it’s a great idea!” Jesse stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels, not even trying to hide his excitement. “I’m gonna go to bed. Good night!”

Before they could respond, Jesse gave each one of them a tight squeeze before running off in the direction of the stairs.

Bella chuckled in wonder. “Is he usually that excited about sleeping?”

“I think he’s excited to have you home,” Maverick simply replied, knowing there was so much more to the story that was better left unsaid.

Now that he and Bella were left alone, he realized how unprepared he was for the situation. The last time they had been in this house together, they had been on such bad terms. They might as well have been enemies with the way they'd fought. Now here they were interacting on peaceful, friendly terms. The change was enough to make his head spin. It was a good change—the best change—but it would take some time to get used to.

“I’m so tired,” Bella piped up with another yawn. “Can you show me where to go? I remember where the bedrooms are, but I’m not sure which one is mine—I mean, ours.”

“It’s the master bedroom. Jesse has my old room. The other room is the study.”

“Oh, okay. I’m guessing I have clothes and everything else that I need in our room?”

“Your stuff’s either in the closet or in the dresser by the bed—the top two drawers are yours. Clean towels are in the linen closet in the hall.”

“Good to know. I’ll look for some pj’s to change into, then head to bed.” She hesitated as she drew her brows together. “I know you wanted to talk some more, Mav, but could it wait till tomorrow? I don’t want to fall asleep in the middle of our conversation.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll go up first. Do you mind bringing my pain meds and some water? I’m supposed to take them before I go to sleep.”

“Yeah, I’ll grab those and be right up.”

“Thank you.” Her expression turned shy as she stated, “I’m really glad we’re still friends, Mav.”

“I think most people would call us a little more than friends, Bella,” he said half-jokingly.

“We’re obviously more than friends, silly. I just mean that I’m so glad after all these years that we still have our friendship. You’ve always been there for me, and it’s nice to

know things haven't changed," she added with a smile before leaving his side.

Maverick watched her take the stairs, slowly navigating them with one hand on the handrail. He blinked, not believing his eyes. She looked like the woman he'd talked to yesterday—her blonde hair and clothes were nearly the same—but her demeanor and posture had completely changed. There was a lightness to her steps and an innocence about her that he'd forgotten used to exist.

This Bella didn't carry the weight of the world on her shoulders. The smile she'd given him when she'd talked about their friendship left him with a smile of his own. This was the girl he'd fallen in love with all those years ago. This was the Bella he had been longing to see again.

God had brought her back to him.

He couldn't mess things up this time. He wouldn't.

After grabbing the items Bella had requested, he double-checked that the front door was locked and the alarm turned on. Once he had secured the house, he took the stairs two by two. When he reached the second story, he followed the light that spilled into the hallway from the open door at the end of the hall. When he stepped inside their bedroom, the sight of Bella standing in the bathroom stole his breath away.

She wore a cotton flannel nightgown that he'd bought for her for their first Christmas as a married couple. He had a matching set of pajama pants in the same red-and-green plaid pattern. It had been so long since she'd worn it, he'd forgotten about it. But seeing her now brought back a host of happy memories, many of which they'd made together in their intimate times as husband and wife. He missed their closeness but even more the trust they once shared. Could they capture that type of relationship again?

Approaching the bathroom doorway, he cleared his throat to signal his presence. He took an appreciative glance at her shapely legs that peeked out from beneath the hem of her gown. "It's been a while since I've seen you wear that. You look beautiful, Bella."

Her cheeks pinkened. “You don’t have to say that, Mav, but thanks.” She then pointed to a red toothbrush hanging from the wall-mounted holder. “Is that one mine?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. Mine’s the green one.”

“What about toothpaste? Do we share one or do we each have our own? I only ask because my mom and dad always had their own. They didn’t like the same brand.”

“We use the same one. We share just about everything, except our clothes. Although you have been known to borrow my T-shirts to sleep in.” Maverick smiled at the image that popped into his memory, one that he wouldn’t mind seeing again. “Feel free to help yourself to anything in my closet.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said as she squeezed some toothpaste onto her brush.

“I put your water and medicine on the nightstand on the right side. That’s the side you sleep on.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem.”

The sounds of water and toothbrushing soon filled the air. Maverick rolled his neck from side to side, suddenly feeling the stress of the day in his body. Hot water would do the trick to ease his muscles. Without a second thought, he walked past the sink toward the shower. He quickly slipped out of his long sleeve tee and jeans and tossed them onto the floor. Just as he was about to take off his boxers, he heard a loud gasp behind him.

He turned around to see Bella with one hand over her eyes as she finished rinsing her toothbrush.

“I’m done! The bathroom’s all yours!” she called out before fleeing the room.

Bella

Bella dove under the covers and pulled them up to her chin. She couldn't believe she'd almost seen Mav naked! What had he been thinking taking his clothes off in front of her?

Her heart pounded from the sight of his bare back. Fortunately, she still couldn't see clearly, or else she would have really seen more than she should.

Wait! Her cheeks heated with embarrassment. What was she doing? She was his wife, and he was her husband. What he'd done was normal for someone to do in front of their spouse. Why had she overreacted like that? Well, the obvious answer was that she had no recollection of their married life. What was supposed to be normal was all very new and unfamiliar territory. How was she supposed to take on this new role?

She'd thought being a mom would be challenging, but that fear had fled the moment she'd met Jesse. While she'd only known her son for a short time, she'd immediately felt at ease with him. Being a wife, on the other hand, was turning out to be the real challenge. The ironic thing was that she remembered Maverick and did feel comfortable with him. But she had no idea what it meant to be his wife. What did he expect from her?

Anticipation ran through her body as she listened to the sound of the shower. She was on too much of an adrenaline rush to sleep now. Especially as she realized that there was only one bed in this room. Of course, she and Maverick shared the space; it would be strange if they didn't. But how would it

feel to sleep next to him ... or to do more than sleep? She gulped. Maverick was her best friend, and she may have had a crush on him for as long as she could remember, but that didn't mean she could make the leap from friend to wife in the span of a day.

God, what do I do?

Eyes closed, she prayed for help. Surely, God could heal her brain and return whatever memories she was missing. Talking to Sophia, Nora, and Lottie tonight hadn't done much to fill in the gaps. Their comments were vague and generalized, ranging from "You and Mav love each other" to "You've always been so good together." Even if they could give her more information about their relationship, Bella was sure there were things they didn't know. Private, intimate things that only a husband and a wife would know about their marriage. That's why she needed to get her memory back. And the sooner, the better.

After a few minutes, silence filled the air as the water stopped. Bella tensed and held still, listening for Maverick's return. The bathroom door opened, allowing hot steam to flow into the room. She heard the soft padding of his feet as he walked on the carpet over to the dresser. A drawer then opened and shut as he likely got dressed. She kept her eyes shut, feigning sleep, so she didn't encounter another uncomfortable situation like she had in the bathroom. The only problem was that in her rush to get into bed, she hadn't taken her medicine yet. She could feel the painkiller she'd taken at the hospital wearing off, which meant she wouldn't get a good night's sleep if she didn't take her next dose.

"Bella?" Maverick's low voice murmured in her ear as he gently patted her arm. "Did you take your medicine yet? It doesn't look like you drank any of the water."

She stirred and opened her eyes. Good, he was fully dressed. She sat up, then took the pills and cup he handed her. "I forgot. Thank you."

He sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for her to finish, so he could take the cup from her.

Even after she lay down again, Maverick lingered where he sat. His fresh soapy scent drifted in the air to Bella's nose as she wondered what he was thinking or expecting. Why wasn't he saying anything?

When he finally spoke, his tone was somber. "I'm sorry I scared you back there in the bathroom. I should've realized that all of this must feel very new to you. You only found out today that we're married. But don't worry, Bella. I don't expect anything from you. All I want is for you to feel comfortable and safe here. If there's anything that I do that makes you feel uncomfortable, you let me know, okay?"

The knot in Bella's stomach loosened. Hearing Maverick's concern soothed all the tension in her body. She should have known that he would have her best intentions in mind. The boy she had grown up with had taken care of her and protected her. Why would she assume any different now that he was a man?

"Thank you, May, for being so understanding. I do feel comfortable and safe with you. I just didn't expect you to"—she winced—"undress like that, but I know you've probably done it hundreds of times in front of me before. I just need some time to wrap my head around what our relationship is like now. I'm sure it'll come back to me."

"It's fine. There's no hurry. We can use this time to get to know each other again. It'll be like being newlyweds."

"That sounds good."

"I'll set an alarm to wake you up every two hours tonight. I know you'll be groggy, but I'll need to ask you a few questions."

She groaned. "I hated being woken up in the hospital all night long. Please make the questions easy."

"I plan to. I don't know if you remember, but you're not the friendliest person after eleven o'clock," he teased. "You always hated it when I tried to get you to stay up to see the ball drop on New Year's Eve."

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Maverick Knight,” she stated, knowing full well he was right. She had always been an early bird, while he was the night owl. She’d rather wake up at the crack of dawn than stay up late for any reason. Which meant she needed to turn in now before she got grumpy and proved that Maverick was telling the truth. “This doesn’t mean you’re right, but I’ll go ahead and apologize in advance for anything I may say when you wake me up.”

“Apology accepted,” he said with a chuckle. “Not that I mind. You’re more cute than menacing when you’re annoyed.”

Bella blushed. He thought she was cute? She still couldn’t believe someone like him would like someone like her.

The mattress shifted as Maverick eased himself off the bed. “I’ll let you get some rest. Good night, Bella,” he added before placing a soft kiss on her forehead.

The warmth from his lips made her cheeks burn even more. It was an innocent gesture, but it signified so much. He’d never shown this type of affection to her before when they were kids. Once again, her anxiousness subsided. Even if their marriage had started off on the wrong foot, they had obviously learned how to care for each other. After all, they had built a life and raised a son together.

Maverick was right; they were definitely more than friends.

She watched as he made his way to the corner of the room and sat down. That was when she noticed the old recliner, one his dad used to sit in when he watched Sunday Night Football with Maverick. It had been such an eyesore with its brown-and-red plaid upholstery, she was surprised she hadn’t noticed it sooner. Maverick’s mom had threatened to throw it out multiple times, but she’d never had the heart to. Apparently, neither had Maverick, even though it didn’t match any of the other décor in the room.

The blurry images Bella saw confirmed that she had been able to decorate their bedroom in her favorite color scheme. The curtains and bedspread were a pale pink, while the walls had been painted a light gray. She felt at ease knowing that

Maverick, who was as masculine of a man as they came, hadn't minded making such a change. This room, as well as the downstairs rooms, were very different from what she remembered his parents' house looking like when they were kids. They must have redecorated the whole place when they got married and moved in. She wished she remembered those days, but at least she could ask Maverick about it.

That's when she realized he had adjusted the recliner and put his feet up.

"Mav? What are you doing over there?"

"Going to sleep. Feel free to turn off the light when you're ready."

"Are you planning to stay there the whole night?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Doesn't that recliner have some loose springs? I can't imagine it being very comfortable."

"It's not that bad. You know me, I can sleep anywhere."

Once again, Maverick was right. In high school he used to get so tired after football practices, he'd fall asleep at the dinner table still holding a fork in his hand. "I know you can sleep anywhere, but why are you—oh!" As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Bella realized his intentions. "You're letting me have the bed to myself."

"Given the circumstances, I thought you'd feel more comfortable sleeping on your own."

Bella's heart swelled. Could Maverick be any more considerate? His thoughtfulness filled her with such reassurance. He really was doing his all to make her feel safe and secure. It was only right that he get a good night's sleep, too.

"Mav, you can sleep in the bed, too. I don't want you to get a crick in your neck from sleeping in the recliner."

There was a short pause. "Are you sure, Bella?"

"I'm sure."

The recliner creaked as he got up. Not two seconds later, Maverick climbed into the empty side of the bed and lay down. Bella sensed his presence immediately—the heat from his body beneath the blanket and a masculine scent that was uniquely his. He was so close. Only a few inches separated them on the queen-sized mattress. She sucked in a sharp breath. Her body was on high alert, feeling both anxious and giddy. With what little composure she still possessed, she quickly turned off the light on her bedside table, then closed her eyes and started praying.

Lord help her because there was no way she was getting any sleep tonight.

Maverick

This had to be a dream.

Maverick woke up to a sight he hadn't witnessed in years—Bella sleeping in his arms. Sometime after the last wake-up session a couple of hours ago, she had crossed the imaginary boundary he had drawn down the middle of their bed. A line he had told himself he would not cross, no matter how much attraction he felt toward his wife.

Under normal circumstances this vow could be considered sacrilegious. What husband would refrain from showing affection to his wife? But their situation was anything but normal. He understood Bella needed time to essentially adjust to a new life. She had no idea what they had shared or done as a couple; the last memory she had of him was as a friend. That's why he had decided to let her take the lead, not expecting that she would be open to sharing a bed with him.

But here she was snuggled into his side with one hand on his chest.

The sky outside the sheer curtains remained mostly dark at this early morning hour. The beginnings of a sunrise cast a soft reddish glow in the bedroom, allowing Maverick to glimpse Bella's features. Her smooth complexion, full pink lips, and long lashes that splayed on her cheeks. She was naturally beautiful, even without makeup on.

He loved the feeling of having her close. Her soft curves fit perfectly against his torso, and her even breathing had a calming effect on him. No wonder he felt so refreshed, despite the constant waking throughout the night. Even those

instances, as disruptive as they were, only served to remind him of one thing—he slept the best with Bella at his side. And being able to do so now was a dream come true. God had truly answered his prayers. Maverick prayed that the Lord would be gracious and allow him to keep dreaming, at least until he could win Bella’s full trust and heart again.

Bella suddenly jerked in his arms. She whimpered softly, her brows drawn together in fear. “Don’t leave me. Please don’t leave me.”

Maverick wrapped her up in a tight embrace. “I’m here, babe. You’re having a bad dream. I’m here.”

Her hand clutched the front of his shirt as she buried her face in his side. She took a few deep breaths, her body shaking as if she were standing unprotected in a snowstorm. Whatever storm was going on in her head wouldn’t leave her be. Maverick rubbed her back, all the while praying for God’s peace to surround her.

Hearing her desperate pleas tore him up inside. If only he had been a better husband to her. If he’d been smarter and more self-controlled, he wouldn’t have gotten himself and his family into such a mess.

Now that God had given him a second chance, he understood what he’d done wrong. Divorce was not the only option; in fact, it should never have been one. Trevor was right; the vow he’d made to Bella was meant to last a lifetime. Instead of hiding secrets from her, he should have come clean about his financial mistakes and his debt. Then they could have worked together to figure out a solution.

Instead, he was left picking up the pieces of a marriage that he had broken.

Maverick continued to hold Bella as she dreamt. After what seemed like an hour but was likely only minutes, she stopped whimpering. Her body relaxed and she opened her eyes, meeting his gaze. She gasped loudly and pulled away. “Sorry! I didn’t mean to crowd your space.”

“Hey, there’s no need to apologize.” He turned onto his side to face her. “I don’t mind it at all. We used to sleep like that all the time.”

She gave him a shy smile. “I imagine that’s what married couples do. It’s going to take me some time to get used to this, us sharing a bed.”

“That’s understandable. You were having a bad dream just now. Do you remember what it was about?”

Her blue eyes went wide. “It was intense. I can’t remember all of it, but I think I was driving somewhere when the air bag suddenly exploded. Maybe it was a memory from the night of the accident. The social worker at the hospital said I might have some PTSD. Nightmares are one of the symptoms.”

“Do you have any other symptoms?” He hadn’t observed any behaviors that made him suspect she did, but he wanted to be sure. “Are you doing okay?”

“Sometimes, yes; sometimes, no. I just feel tired and overwhelmed. It’s been a lot to take in.”

The dark circles under her eyes didn’t lie. She looked so lost and uncertain, so unlike the strong person she always appeared to be on the outside. In all the years that he’d known Bella, she had never let her guard down with him like this. Despite her being a year younger, she had been the steadfast, consistent one. The person who had a plan and could be relied on to see it through. He had always felt like he needed her more than she needed him. But here she was telling him that she didn’t have it all together. She was the one who needed his support now. And everything in him wanted to let her know that he would be there for her.

He carefully brushed a lock of hair from her forehead, then murmured, “I’m here for you, Bella. You aren’t alone in this, even when you’re sleeping. I’ll protect you.”

“I know, Mav. I’m glad you’re here. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You don’t need to worry about that.” His voice grew thick with emotion. “I’m here and I’m not leaving.”

“I know you won’t, but it’s still nice to hear you say it.” She turned her head to look him in the eyes. Her smile was tentative as she asked, “Do you mind holding me again?”

“Of course not. Come here.”

She scooted closer back into his embrace. He rested his chin on the top of her soft hair as she settled into his arms. They stayed this way as the room began to grow brighter with the sunrise. Soon enough, Bella’s breathing grew even as she fell asleep. Maverick held her, savoring the moment. Bella’s willingness to be close to him was surely a positive sign. He prayed he would continue to be worthy of her trust.

A buzzing sound coming from the nightstand on his side of the bed drew his attention. He reached slowly behind him for his phone, careful not to wake Bella with his movements. Who could be texting him this early in the morning on a Sunday? The message that he saw pop up on the screen made his blood run cold.

How’s your pretty little wife doing? Don’t be late with my money next time, Knight.

Maverick gripped his phone so tightly his hand began to shake. The anger that had been stewing inside of him ever since he heard of Bella’s accident came to a boil, threatening to erupt. He could hardly see straight. His suspicions were right—his so-called creditor and his minions were responsible for Bella’s crash.

They would pay for this. They would pay for hurting the woman he loved.

“Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.

That verse from the book of Romans echoed in his head while he attempted to rein in his emotions. He hadn’t cracked open his Bible in over a year, but all those Sundays spent at church had apparently stuck with him. It had to be the grace of God. If it were up to him, he would never seek to follow God’s wisdom over his own, even as flawed and insufficient as the latter was. He was a man of action, and choosing to not act was in opposition of everything that he stood for, especially

where his family was concerned. But something in his heart made him pause. He wanted to do better. He needed to do better. For Bella and Jesse's sakes, he had to change his ways.

What would You have me do, Lord? How do I expose what they did to Bella? How do I keep my family from harm by doing nothing?

Trust.

That simple yet weighty word came to mind. He had never been good at trusting in anything or anyone. It was easier to take matters into his own hands. But if God wanted him to trust Him, he would find a way.

Give me some direction, Lord. Please let me know what I can do to protect my family.

A rustling at the bedroom door pulled Maverick's gaze over. There he saw Jesse peeking in, his mop of blond hair still messy from sleep. Their son often woke with the sun since he had taken after Bella with his early morning habits. It wasn't a surprise to see him up early, but the real shock was the teary look on his face. There was so much hope in his wide grin, one would have thought Christmas had arrived early this year.

Perhaps it had for their family.

Maverick held up a hand in greeting, then placed a finger to his lips. "Mom's still sleeping," he whispered.

Jesse eagerly nodded, looking more like a young boy than the teenager he was fast becoming. He waved, then disappeared from the doorway.

Maverick must have fallen asleep because some time later, he woke up to find two identical pairs of blue eyes staring at him. Bella was awake at his side, a smile playing on her lips. Jesse stood by the bed, holding a wooden breakfast tray. On it were two plates piled high with scrambled eggs and toast and bowls of colorful O-shaped cereal in milk.

"What's all this?" he asked groggily.

"Jesse made us breakfast." Bella patted his chest as she sat up. "Come on, sleepyhead, it's time to eat."

Maverick eased himself up and settled his back against the headboard. He took the tray and placed it on Bella's lap. Then he gestured for Jesse to sit down. "I can't remember the last time we had breakfast in bed. Thank you, Jesse. Why don't I say grace for us?"

After the prayer, Maverick saw Jesse still standing. "Have a seat and eat with us, son."

"I already had cereal and I need to change before Aunt Sophia comes. Enjoy!" Taking a step back, Jesse stared at them for a second as if he were committing this moment to memory. Then before they could insist on him staying longer, he turned around and ran out of the room.

"Can you believe how thoughtful he is?" Bella exclaimed as she took a bite of her toast. "He's so amazing, Mav! I can't believe he's my son—*our* son."

"You better believe it 'cause it's true. I saw the whole thing go down." He chuckled. "That was the most crazy, unbelievable day of my life. You were so strong through it all. Jesse came out so fast, there was no time for an epidural. But you took it all in stride. The nurses and doctor were so impressed. So was I."

She pursed her lips, her expression thoughtful. "I wish I remembered that day. There's so much I want to know about Jesse, like what he was like as a baby and his first word and when he took his first step. I'm missing so much, Mav. Do you think I'll ever get those memories back?"

"I don't know," he simply answered, knowing how conflicted he felt about the whole situation. If Bella did remember the past and what had transpired between them, it would ruin their present and possibly their future. But was it fair for her to be kept in the dark like this? He took her hand in his and squeezed it. "I know it's not the same, but I can tell you everything you want to know. We can also go through Jesse's scrapbooks after breakfast."

"Scrapbooks? Did I put them together?"

“You did, and you did a wonderful job with them. You kept detailed notes about how much he grew each month, all the things he learned to do and say, and so much more. I used to joke that you could be—”

“A detective or a spy!” she cut in gleefully.

“Right! How’d you know I was going to say that?”

“For some reason, I just knew.” Her laughter filled the air. “I think my memory’s starting to come back!”

“Yeah?” He swallowed hard, his appetite fading. “That’s great.”

Bella gazed up at him with the same hope he’d seen in Jesse’s eyes earlier. “You know the thing I was worried about yesterday? It doesn’t bother me anymore. I know what we have is the real deal. I know you married me because you wanted to.” Then she leaned over and placed a soft kiss on his cheek. “I’m really happy to be your wife.”

Maverick sat still, savoring all the happiness filling his heart. If only there were a way to capture this moment and multiply it so it would never end. He feared it would only be a matter of time before everything came crashing down on him when Bella remembered he had asked her for a divorce.

Bella

This was the life.

Bella glanced out the passenger window of Maverick's pickup truck as they cruised along the dirt road leading up to Redemption Ranch the following Monday morning. After a restful week spent at home with Maverick, it felt good to be out of the house. Her head no longer throbbed, and her vision had cleared up quite a bit, so she was almost able to see as well as she used to. She had no problem making out the mountain range in the distance and the blue skies above as well as the herds of cattle grazing along the road.

Having her eyesight back had certainly thrown her for a loop—mostly in a good way. After the initial shock, she had come to terms with how much she had changed. Her body bore the effects of pregnancy with bumpy, discolored streaks across her abdomen and thighs. While she didn't appreciate having stretch marks, she was grateful for the son they reminded her of. Her face, on the other hand, was more or less the same, apart from some fine lines on her forehead and at the corners of her eyes.

She loved being able to see Jesse's features clearly for the first time and marvel at the different ways he resembled her and Maverick. The warmth and enthusiasm she could hear in his voice now shone in the smiles he gave her every day.

The biggest surprise came when she saw her old friend who was all grown up now. She had felt the strength of Maverick's arms and the firmness of his torso, but to see them up close was something else. His frame was slightly taller and much wider than she remembered. And if it were possible, his

face was even more handsome. Sometimes she found herself sneaking a look his way, only to find herself blushing like a fool. Her attraction to him was even stronger than before. Her husband really was the whole package with his heart, character, and good looks.

Being able to come to work with Maverick was an unexpected treat. Dr. Stillman had agreed that going to a familiar place might help jog her memory and that as long as she stayed off her feet, she could tag along. The only thing missing was having Jesse with them, but he needed to be in school. He hadn't seemed to mind though when she had told him their plans for the day. Their son was so pleasant and agreeable, she wondered if he was really an old man trapped in a preteen's body. She was truly enjoying getting to know him and couldn't wait to have dinner together again as a family tonight.

They soon passed through the main metal gate that had been etched with the outline of horses and a mountain range. She recalled these details rather from memory than from sight; she had spent so many days of her childhood at this place, it almost felt like a second home. This was where she'd learned to ride horses during the summer and attended the annual Christmas barn dance during the winter. And this was apparently the place where Maverick had proposed and they had gotten married.

As they drove up the dirt road leading to the parking lot behind Redemption Lodge, Bella turned to Maverick. "Tell me about our wedding day, Mav. What was it like?"

"Well, you were adamant about having the ceremony at the Triple R Chapel, and the only day that we could reserve it on such short notice was Christmas Eve. Sophia was your maid of honor and Milo was my best man."

Bella sighed happily. The small chapel with its tall steepled roof and floor-to-ceiling glass windows was something out of a fairy tale. "I still can't believe we were able to get married there. That was always my dream as a little girl to have a ceremony at sunset and to be surrounded by all those pretty colors. I bet it was breathtaking."

“The sunset was amazing, but the real beauty was you.” Maverick picked up her hand that had been resting on the center console and kissed it. “You came walking down the aisle and the first thing Jesse said was ‘Mama pretty.’”

“He is such a sweet boy.”

“He was right. You wore your mom’s wedding dress, and Nora did your hair and makeup. Lottie, of course, did your nails. Everything about that day was magical. The cutest part was when Jesse came down the aisle in his little tux, carrying our rings. It was a good thing the rings were tied down to the pillow he was holding because he pretty much sprinted the whole way to the front.”

“He could run? For some reason, I was under the impression that he was a baby when we got married.”

“He was two, almost two and a half by then.” Maverick grinned as he reminisced. “He’d been walking since he was eleven months old, but he never wanted to leave your side. That’s why he was so eager to make it down the aisle. You weren’t at the front of the chapel yet, but he saw me standing there and wanted me to hold him. He only let me carry him when you weren’t around.”

“I’m curious about something, Mav,” Bella began hesitantly. “Why did we wait so long to get married?”

“Well, the truth is...” He paused, then continued, his tone turning wry, “We had been broken up for a while after Jesse was born.”

Bella was stunned silent for a few seconds. “Broken up? Why? What happened?”

Maverick found a space to park, then turned off the engine. He returned to holding her hand as he explained, “It was my fault. I wasn’t very mature then—not that I’m all that mature now—but I think I’ve grown some since. I had my priorities mixed up and thought I could continue playing football and raise a child at the same time. I learned the hard way that I was wrong.”

“Was I the one who wanted to break up?”

He nodded. “I didn’t blame you. You had every right to question my commitment to you and Jesse. If only it hadn’t taken me so long to come to my senses.”

Bella’s chest tightened to hear the regret in his voice. “I wish I remembered what happened between us. It’s not fair that you have to carry the burden of the past while I don’t. I’m sure it was a difficult time for you.”

“Nowhere as difficult as it was for you, babe. You had the hard job of taking care of Jesse by yourself. I tried to help on the weekends when I could, but since I didn’t spend as much time with him, he didn’t feel as close to me.”

“Was that why he didn’t want you to hold him as much?”

“Yeah.”

“But you guys seem so close.”

“It took a lot of time and effort to get to where we are now.” He undid his seat belt. “Sorry to cut the conversation short, but I have a Pony Patrol class starting in fifteen minutes. I’ll walk you to the lodge and find you a place to get settled in for the next hour. After my class, we can go see the chapel if you’re up for it.”

Bella brightened at his suggestion. “I’d love that.”

A moment later, they walked hand in hand up the stone pathway to Redemption Lodge. The luxury resort was busiest during the holiday season when families came to visit and learn about the workings of a real ranch. The rich brown color of the building, with its adobe style architecture, contrasted well with the lush green lawns surrounding it. Many of the employees who worked here had grown up in town. When they and their peers were younger, the boys, including Maverick, had dreamed of becoming wranglers while the girls had dreamed of marrying one. It turned out that both Maverick’s and her dreams had come true.

When they stepped through the front doors, they were met by a woman holding a plate of delicious-smelling cookies. Her red-and-gold striped sweater matched the ornaments on the tall Christmas tree standing in the lobby behind her. She waved in

greeting. “Hi there, lovebirds! It’s not a surprise to see you, Maverick, but what brings you by, Bella? You’re not working at Flapjacks today?”

As soon as Bella heard the woman’s friendly voice, she recognized her as Connie Reynolds, wife to the ranch’s owner. The last time she remembered seeing her, she didn’t have graying blonde hair nor the fuller figure she had now. Connie’s welcoming personality hadn’t changed a bit though. “I’m taking some time off from work. I don’t know if you heard, but I was in a car accident recently. I’m supposed to take it easy for a while, but the doctor said I could come hang out here with Mav.”

“Oh my, now that you mention it, I do see a little bruising on your forehead. Poor thing, let me get you a place to sit. How about by the fire? That’ll keep you nice and toasty.”

“Thank you, Connie,” Maverick piped up. “I appreciate you getting Bella situated. I need to get going to my class, but I’ll come get her after I’m done.”

“Of course, leave her to me.”

“I’ll see you soon, babe.” Maverick kissed Bella on the forehead before he took off, leaving her in Connie’s care.

Bella followed Connie to one of the leather couches and sat down. She also took an oatmeal raisin cookie that the older woman offered her. “Thank you, Mrs. Reynolds. I can’t wait to taste this. I remember you make the best cookies.”

“There’s no need to be so formal, dear. You haven’t called me Mrs. Reynolds since you were a child.”

“Oh, right.” This was the first time she’d needed to explain her current situation to someone outside the family and she wasn’t sure what their reaction would be. But given how sweet Mrs. Reynolds—Connie—was, she didn’t hesitate to share with her. “I should probably mention that the car accident left me with some memory loss. That’s why I forgot I used to call you Connie.”

Connie gasped and dropped onto the couch beside her. “Are you saying you have amnesia?”

“Yes, but it’s hopefully only temporary.”

“You don’t say! I thought something like this only happened in books or movies!” She placed a hand on Bella’s arm. “That must’ve been quite a shock for you to discover. How are you doing?”

“I’m feeling better, but you’re right, it was pretty surprising to find out that I’m a wife and a mom. The last thing I remember about my life before the accident was being in high school when Mav and I were just friends. It’s like I time traveled without knowing it.”

“Wow. And here I was thinking Cassie’s spur-of-the-moment marriage was a wild idea.”

This was the first update she’d heard about Connie’s daughter who was about four years younger than her. “Your daughter Cassie? She’s married? When did that happen?”

“Just last month around the middle of November. It was a surprise for all of us, but not as much as your marriage was for you, I bet. How are you adjusting to married life?”

“Um, do you mind if I ask you a question about that?” Bella found herself wanting to open up to Connie. Her offer to chat was like a life preserver thrown out to her as she treaded water. She was in desperate need of answers and support. Normally, she would ask Lottie for advice, but seeing as she’d never been married, she wasn’t the best person to talk to. But Bella knew Connie understood what it meant to be a wife.

“Of course not,” Connie replied as she bit into one of her own cookies. “What’s on your mind?”

“How long did it take you to learn how to be a wife? Being a mom comes so naturally to me, but I don’t really know what it’s like to be married,” Bella admitted with a soft sigh. “I love Mav so much as a friend, but that’s all I’ve ever known. What does it mean to love him as his wife?”

“Well, learning how to support your husband and love him unconditionally comes with time. It’s a choice you make when you say your vows and continue to make every day of your

marriage. I think your struggle comes because you don't remember making that vow to Maverick."

"That's a good point. Although I would have married him in a heartbeat if he'd asked me. I always had a crush on him, ever since middle school."

"You're fortunate that the two of you had such a close friendship for many years. Just build on that, Bella."

"What about the"—she lowered her voice—"romantic side of marriage? What do I do about growing that?"

"I see what your real question is now." She patted Bella's arm. "The physical side of marriage will happen naturally the more you trust him and feel comfortable with him. Take time to get to know him again. Go out on dates. Hold hands and kiss. That'll get the ball rolling."

Kiss Maverick?

Bella's cheeks flooded with heat. It was one thing to sleep in his arms and to be able to hold his hand, two privileges she couldn't believe she had now that they were married. But it was a completely different matter to think about doing something as intimate as kissing—which she knew was ridiculous considering they had a child together. But everything in this post-accident life was new and foreign to her. What would kissing him be like? Would she be any good at it? What if she disappointed him?

She let out a shaky breath. Sooner or later, she would need to find out the answers to these questions.

Maverick

Maverick threw on his cowboy hat that he'd grabbed from his locker in the main barn and headed over to the riding area. The black Stetson was miles different from how a football helmet felt on his head, but he'd gotten used to it. There were aspects of his ranching job that he had learned to value as much as the rush of adrenaline he used to get from scoring a touchdown. The looks on his students' faces being one of them and another was being able to work with his favorite animal.

Before his life had become all about football starting in middle school, horses had been his passion. He'd been fortunate to take riding lessons as a child at Redemption Ranch; it was a rite of passage that practically every kid in town went through. He had however stuck around after lessons were over, earning riding time by helping the wranglers out with their chores. The scents of leather, hay, and tack were so familiar, he felt at peace with each breath he took. His job in particular had become a refuge for him this past year when he and Bella had been at odds in their marriage. But for the first time in months, he didn't carry the same burdens to work as he used to.

If only the freedom and hope he felt didn't have to come at a cost.

Why did Bella have to suffer in order for them to have a second chance? How much longer would it be before her memory returned?

Maverick pushed these questions aside as he strode toward a small group of school-aged kids who were waiting for him,

wearing jeans, boots, and helmets. They sat together on a wooden bench outside the rectangular arena that was a little less than half the length of a football field. Four rows of lights hung from the slightly steeped roof, illuminating the sand that was dragged daily to ensure a level surface. Two ranch hands stood at one end of the arena, along with a few sorrels and a little Paint awaiting their riders.

“Good morning, boys and girls!” he greeted his students with a tip of his hat. “My name is Maverick, but you can feel free to call me Mav. Welcome to Redemption Ranch. Why don’t we go around and say your name, age, where you’re from, and how much experience you have with horses.”

“My name is Hope, and I’m eight,” a little girl with pink boots spoke up first. “I’m visiting from California, and this is my second time getting to ride a horse.”

“I’m Jesse,” a little boy with dark hair said when it was his turn. “I’m six and I live in New York. I’ve never been on a horse before. I don’t like wearing helmets, but my mom said I need it to protect my head.”

“Your mom is right,” Maverick agreed. “I have a son named Jesse, too, but he’s twice your age, which makes him twelve.”

“Wow, that’s old.”

He held back a laugh, imagining their shocked expressions if they knew what an old man he was. Children at this age were so interesting. He marveled at their curiosity and honesty; it was refreshing to be around individuals who could let their guards down so easily. These students reminded him of his own son who seemed to be taking the recent turn of events in stride.

Jesse wasn’t upset that his own mother didn’t remember him. On the contrary, he was happy to give those memories up for the sake of Bella’s happiness. Talk about sacrificial. Maverick could learn a thing or two from him about loving people. This Jesse was right; his son Jesse was old, but in a way that was mature beyond his years.

He turned his attention back to his eager students as they finished their introductions. “All right. Before we begin our lesson and actually get on a horse, we’re going to talk about how to fall off one. This doesn’t mean you *will* fall off one, but if it ever happens, you’ll know how to do it safely.”

“That’s what my teacher taught me when I learned how to ice skate,” Hope piped up with one hand raised. “She always said, ‘Don’t be afraid to fall because you can always get back up.’”

Maverick’s brows rose. Those were wise words for life, if he’d ever heard of any, especially the latter part. They reflected his own journey well, how he’d messed up time and time again, but God had always caught him and helped him back up. This situation with his and Bella’s relationship was no different.

He smiled at the young girl. “That sounds like a smart teacher. It’s the same thing with riding. You want to learn how to create a safe landing, so you can get back up and onto the horse again. So, the first step is to relax your body. Stay calm and don’t fight the fall; just go with it. Next, you want to tuck yourself into as small of a ball as possible. That will keep your limbs—your arms and legs—safe. Third, once you hit the ground, start rolling yourself away from the horse. Now, repeat after me: relax, tuck, and roll.”

“Relax, tuck, and roll,” the class echoed.

“Great! Any questions so far?”

Jesse bounced in his seat with excitement. “Can we start riding now?”

“Sure thing,” Maverick said with a grin as he led them into the arena.

The remaining fifty minutes of class passed by in a blur. The students left in good spirits, as did Maverick. However, the moment he stood outside the lodge’s back entrance, a harsh dose of reality hit him. His heart lurched in his chest as a black pickup truck zoomed by, kicking up dirt as it headed down the road. The police believed a vehicle of that same color and size

had rear-ended Bella, based on the damage her car sustained. Seeing the truck in person reignited the urgency within him to protect his family.

He realized what he needed to do before picking Bella up. He headed for the security office to have a conversation with Milo, a task which needed to be done without Bella's knowledge. He hated keeping secrets from her, but he wasn't ready yet to tell her everything. She had shared her concerns and uncertainties with him earlier that morning; he couldn't dump more worries onto her shoulders right now. No, he would find a way to take care of his problems first—with the Lord's help this time. And once he figured things out, he'd let Bella know and hope and pray that she would still be happy and proud to be his wife.

With his hands tucked into his coat pockets, he walked down a long hallway past several offices with their doors open. The lodge's Southwestern style decor could be seen in the rich shades of reds, blues, and greens in everything from the paint on the walls, to the rugs, and to the furniture. The only room that was exempt from this theme was the last one on the left. He used his employee badge to enter a large room with cream-colored walls and black carpet.

Dozens of small monitors took up one of the large walls, showing footage from every security camera on the ranch's property. Seated at the long table facing the screens were several employees, one of whom was a man with short, wavy red hair.

Milo noticed Maverick approaching and greeted him with a wide smile that was framed by a mustache and beard. "Hey Mav, what're you doing here? I thought you weren't ready to come back to work yet."

"I'm not." Maverick took a seat in the black swivel chair to Milo's left. He rested his elbows on his thighs and leaned forward to speak. "I have a personal matter I hope you can help me with."

Milo furrowed his brows as he also lowered his voice to keep their conversation private. "Is this about you and Bella? I

thought you said everything's turned a one-eighty now that she doesn't remember anything about the divorce."

"This isn't about the divorce. It's about Bella's accident." Maverick believed he finally had an idea for a possible way out of his current mess. He just needed the right connections to put his plan into action. Unfortunately, from what he'd learned about his creditors over the past few months, not everyone on the police force could be trusted. He hoped Milo would be able to point him to one person he could confide in. "I know who's responsible for it, and I have proof. I need to talk to someone trustworthy who can help me bring the guy to justice. I was hoping you might still know someone from your days on the force?"

Apprehension clouded Milo's hazel eyes, making them look more light brown than green. He leaned over and placed a large hand on Maverick's shoulder. "Does this have something to do with your needing to make more money recently?"

Maverick nodded with a sigh. "Some things have gone down that I've been keeping my mouth shut about, but now that Bella's been targeted, I can't stay quiet anymore. I need to step up and make things right, once and for all. Will you help me?"

"I wish you'd told me about this sooner, Mav. I hate to think that you've been dealing with this all on your own."

"I know I should have." He was grateful for a friend like Milo, one whose words Maverick didn't hesitate to put stock in. "It's not that I don't trust you; it's not that at all. I didn't want to get you involved in my mess."

"Don't even worry about that, man. My life could use some excitement," he stated with a lopsided smile. He thought for a moment before replying, "I'll put you in touch with my old partner. But first, I want to hear about everything that's been going down."

Bella

Butterflies took flight in Bella's stomach the moment she saw Maverick walk toward her. He must have entered the lodge through a back door instead of the front she'd been staring expectantly at for the past fifteen minutes.

Her talk with Connie had awakened something inside of her. The attraction she'd had for Maverick was still as strong as ever, but with it now was a longing for more. Her teenage wishful thinking had become a reality, and the thought that she could act on all her feelings made her giddy. She jumped to her feet and ran over to meet him.

"Mav, you're back!" Bella threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. The scent of Maverick's cologne mixed with traces of hay hit her with a sense of nostalgia. "Your scent—I remember it."

Maverick held onto her as he kissed the top of her head. "I hope that's a good thing."

"It is. You smell so good."

"You always did love the smell of horses." The sound of his laughter rumbled in his chest as she leaned against it. "Sorry to keep you waiting. I stopped by to talk to Milo. How are you feeling?"

"Good. I had a nice talk with Mrs. Reynolds—I mean Connie." She took the hand Maverick offered her as they walked through the lodge. "My mind is still getting used to this time jump. I have to keep reminding myself that I'm already an adult. It's such a strange thing to wrap my head around."

“It is strange, this thing they call adulting. Even when you do make the transition normally, it’s not an easy adjustment. I can’t imagine what it must be like for you, babe. You seem to be handling it well. But then again, you’ve always handled challenges well.”

Bella walked with Maverick out the back exit toward the main barn. Once outside, she buttoned up her coat and adjusted the scarf around her neck. A chill in the air nipped at her skin. She huddled closely to Maverick as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Glancing up at him, she remarked, “I really don’t remember facing anything challenging, except for when my mom got sick. I’m guessing another challenge was when we had Jesse?”

“That was a dozen challenges rolled into one,” Maverick replied, his tone wry. “Those first few months were brutal. Way worse than training for football. We used to say we didn’t know what the meaning of tired was until we became parents.”

“Maybe it’s a good thing I don’t remember any of the hard times we went through with Jesse,” she joked. “I feel like being his mom is the easiest thing in the world. It’s only been a week though, so I may be speaking too soon.”

“He’s a really good kid. Once he was able to talk and tell us what he needed, it made life a lot easier.” He opened the barn door for her and ushered her inside. “Let’s go see an old friend of yours.”

A couple of young ranch hands tipped their hats in greeting when they walked in. Bella and Maverick said hello as they passed them on their way to the opposite end of the barn. The familiar smell of hay, combined with the earthy scents of leather and wood, hung in the air. Seeing the horses in their stalls nearly brought tears to Bella’s eyes. Most she didn’t recognize, but a few she did, especially the one in the last stall.

“Is this who I think it is?” she exclaimed as she held her hand out to the majestic horse. This Appaloosa had been her favorite one to ride when she was in high school. She used to

say his unique appearance with his white body and black spots made him look like a leopard. “Inky, is that you?”

The horse neighed in response as he nudged Bella’s palm.

“He remembers me, Mav!”

“Of course, he does.” He laughed as he walked to the stall beside Inky’s. “You come see him whenever Jesse has lessons. When he used to have lessons,” Maverick corrected himself. “He hasn’t had them recently.”

“Does he not like riding anymore?”

He hesitated before answering, “He does. You just haven’t been bringing him by the ranch lately.”

“Why not?”

“The restaurant’s been busy. Business picks up this time of year with all the tourists coming around for the holidays.”

“I see. Well, I’ll definitely make it a point to bring him when I can start driving again.”

“I’m sure he’d like that. Come on, let’s go for that walk.”

Bella wondered if there was more to the story than he was letting on. She could sense an uneasiness about Maverick in the way he’d rubbed the back of his neck when he’d answered her. She’d known him long enough to pick up on his quirks and habits, but maybe she was reading too much into things.

He wasn’t the exact same person he was in high school. He seemed more grounded and responsible and much more serious. The younger Maverick had loved to joke around and have fun. He’d been all smiles, all the time. This older Maverick wasn’t as carefree, which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. The challenges he’d been through—losing his dad and taking on the responsibilities of a family—had to have changed him. He was a husband and father now, a reliable and dependable one. Bella appreciated this mature side of him; it made her feel safe. From what she’d seen of him the past week, especially in his interactions with Jesse, she trusted that he had only the best intentions in mind for them. That’s why

she decided to let go of her concerns and not make a big deal out of something so insignificant.

Because Maverick wouldn't hide anything from her ... Would he?

Pushing aside any more questions, Bella focused on the present. On the brisk, cool air that filled her lungs and made her feel alive. Also, on the privilege of living in such a beautiful place like Redemption that reminded her of God's handiwork wherever she looked. And the way her fingers felt so at home intertwined with Maverick's.

They strolled hand in hand outside, taking a long path that led away from the barn. Bella took in all the sights and sounds of their surroundings with a new appreciation. Seeing the small animal pens on their left brought such joy to her heart. She recalled coming here to see the goats, pigs, and chickens with her parents when she was a child. Had they brought Jesse here too when he was little?

She turned to Maverick with a smile. "Tell me about when Jesse was younger. What was he like? What did we do together as a family?"

"He was special—still is. I know all parents probably say that about their kids, but Jesse's not like other kids. He's always been an old soul. That's what my dad used to say about him." His expression grew pensive. "When he was laid up in bed the last few weeks of his life, Jesse would sit with him and read books to him. He would be careful to keep his voice low in case my dad fell asleep, and he'd just stay by his side for as long as possible. And after my dad passed, Jesse didn't even cry. He said Pops was happy now because he was with Jesus."

A lump formed in Bella's throat when she heard his voice break. "I'm so sorry. I wish I had been there for you when he passed."

"You were, babe." He smiled, despite the sadness in his eyes. "You may not remember it, but you were. You've always been there for me."

“I’m glad to hear that. I really hope I would have been.” She squeezed his hand. “You’re my best friend, Mav, and now my husband. There’s no one else I’d rather spend the rest of my life with than you.”

He stopped and turned to face her. “Thank you, Bella. I don’t know what I did to deserve this, but I’m so grateful.”

“Me, too.”

Bringing her hand to his mouth, he placed a kiss on the soft flesh of her palm. The warmth from his lips sparked a rush of tingles along her skin. They traveled up her arm, giving her a heady feeling. She’d never felt this way before. Was this what romance was all about?

“You’re shivering. Let’s get you inside the chapel.”

Bella was too shy to tell him that she wasn’t trembling from the cold; on the contrary, her body was reacting to the heat building up inside of her. If there were snow on the ground, she’d probably melt the entire surface around them. She bit back a laugh thinking about this new superpower of hers that Maverick had brought out.

“What’s so funny?” he asked as they walked up the stone steps leading to the glass-paned doors of the Triple R Chapel. “You want to let me in on this inside joke of yours?”

“It’s nothing much. I’m just happy.” Stepping through the chapel doors, she gasped in delight. It was just as she’d remembered but better. She let go of Maverick’s hand and ran toward the chancel where a large wooden cross hung on the wall. With floor-to-ceiling windows on all sides, the whole room was bathed in sunlight. She couldn’t tear her gaze away from the beautiful view outside. Tall Aspen trees towered in the distance, looking like a gathering of white candlesticks on top of a birthday cake. She didn’t even notice Maverick’s presence beside her until she heard him clear his throat.

“I thought we’d have lunch here.” He gestured to a wooden picnic basket that sat on the floor in front of the pulpit. “What do you say?”

Bella blinked in surprise. “When did you have time to do this?”

“I had some help from Connie. It’s nothing fancy—just sandwiches and cookies.”

“No, it’s perfect! Thank you, Mav.” Her heart full, she threw her arms around his neck and embraced him. “You are so thoughtful and sweet and giving. I love that about you.”

“I just want to make you happy, babe,” he murmured in her ear. His hands splayed across her back as he held her tight. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted, to see you happy.”

“I am happy, so happy.” Pulling back to meet his gaze, she was surprised to see his eyes wet with tears. She’d never seen Maverick cry, not even when he’d lost his mom. Worried, she cupped his face with both hands, running her thumbs along his beard. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Everything’s amazing. I’m happy you’re happy.” He tipped his chin down and rested his forehead against hers. “I love you, Bella. Always have, always will.”

The vulnerability in his husky voice unlocked a memory inside of her. He’d spoken these words to her before in this very place. She could almost hear them echoing in her mind as glimpses of their wedding day flashed before her eyes. She recalled holding onto her dad’s arm as they entered the chapel with the wedding march playing in the background. Seeing Jesse struggle to escape from Maverick’s arms so he could run down the aisle to meet her. And exchanging vows with Maverick in this very spot where they now stood. She didn’t remember much else, but what she did was enough.

There was no denying how much he loved her, and she loved him. The adoration in his eyes made her stomach dip in the most delicious way. She felt such relief and gratitude for the pieces of the past that she remembered, she wanted to laugh and cry all in the same breath. But there was one thing she couldn’t wait to do.

Overwhelmed with emotion, she did what she'd done a decade ago at the end of the ceremony. She stood on her tiptoes and closed the space between them.

The instant they kissed, she immediately recognized the feeling of his lips on hers. Any nerves she'd had about being romantic with Maverick disappeared. This man was her husband, and she was his wife. And this intimate act they shared was as wonderful as she remembered.

His mouth moved over hers, gently at first, then with the passion and urgency of a man who needed more. He pressed her body to his, cradling her head with one hand and the small of her back with the other. Bella felt her body heat up as his fingers tangled themselves in her hair, touching a sensitive spot behind her ear. Her knees, already shaky, grew even weaker as Maverick deepened their kiss. He offered her a sweet taste of his love, one which she returned with a soft, tender sigh.

This kiss felt like their first, yet also their hundredth. There was a newness about it as well as a familiarity she couldn't deny. The connection left her feeling as light as air. She wanted to hold onto this moment forever, to enjoy being so needed and longed for and cherished. Maverick cherished her, she knew that without a doubt. That's why it was so surprising when he suddenly broke off the kiss and pushed himself away from her.

Pain wracked his features as he uttered, "There's something you should know, Bella."

Maverick

Maverick stepped away from Bella, his mind and body reeling from his split-second decision. What was he doing? Why did he have to go and stop their kiss? Why couldn't he leave well enough alone? Because the kiss had been so good and pure and perfect.

And a reminder of everything that he wasn't.

"What is it, Mav?" Bella asked, her voice laden with worry. "You can tell me."

He clutched his chest, feeling his guilty conscience prodding him like a hot iron. The way Bella had given herself to him in that kiss was everything he longed for yet didn't deserve. She trusted him and believed the best about him. In her mind, he was the ideal husband and father. That was only because she didn't realize all the many ways he had failed their family. She didn't remember the countless times he had let her down. He couldn't go on letting her believe he was someone he wasn't.

It was time to come clean.

Taking her by the hand, he led her to the closest pew. Once they sat down, he turned to face her, racking his brain for the right words to say. *Have mercy on me, Lord. Please help me make things right. Help Bella understand.*

"What's wrong, Mav?" she pleaded with him again. "You're making me worried. Please tell me what's going on."

"The thing is"—he took a deep breath—"I haven't been completely honest with you. I'm not the man you think I am.

I've been selfish and inconsiderate and reckless. I don't deserve your trust."

Her complexion paled. "I-I don't understand. I've seen you this past week, Mav. I've seen how kind and patient you are, both to me and to Jesse. You always put us first. I don't know why you would say those things about yourself. They're not true."

"Unfortunately, they are true. Before your accident, we were in a bad place. We barely talked. When we did, we ended up fighting. That's why you weren't bringing Jesse around the ranch for riding lessons. We weren't happy, Bella. We hadn't been happy in a long time."

She blinked, her blue eyes looking his way but not fully seeing him. Doubt and confusion seemed to cloud her vision as she held his gaze. He couldn't imagine the thoughts going through her mind, nor did he want to. She had every right to be upset at him. But her silence was killing him.

He lay his fingers lightly over hers. "Say something, please. I can answer any questions you have. I need to know what you're thinking."

"Why were we so unhappy? What happened to us?"

"I've asked myself that question a lot. I think there were several factors, but the biggest one was probably disappointment. We'd been trying to get pregnant again, but it just wasn't happening. The doctors didn't know why. They said we were both young and healthy and there was no reason why we couldn't have another child. But month after month, year after year, all the negative pregnancy tests wore on us. Then when we stopped trying, I think we stopped caring, too. We should have helped each other through the hard times. Instead, we withdrew to our own corners and took our pain out on each other." His throat tightened as the painful memories of the past came to mind. "I'm so sorry, Bella. I should have been there for you. I should have known you were hurting, too."

Maverick hung his head, fearing the disappointment she was surely showing on her face. Gone was the fairy tale of a life that Bella thought she had woken up to. He had ruined it

for her, though not with this sole confession. He'd ruined it years ago when he'd shut her out. Then again this past year when he'd kept his financial problems a secret. If only he'd been honest with her from the beginning or even when things had gotten out of hand. Because now that he'd gotten a reminder of what a peaceful and happy life with Bella was like, the thought of losing it again felt even more unbearable.

He withdrew his hand from hers and stood up. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, making it impossible to sit still. He paced the length of the chancel and ran his hands through his hair. A new weight fell on his shoulders as he realized what he'd done with this confession. He'd not only ruined his and Bella's future happiness, but he'd also ruined Jesse's as well. All their son had wanted was for Bella to be happy. And now Maverick had taken that happiness away—again.

Why did he keep messing things up?

The only sound in the chapel was of his footsteps as his boots hit the wooden floor. Bella hadn't said a word, and Maverick had stopped hoping she would. With his back to her, he paused and leaned his arm against one of the window frames. Closing his eyes, he rested his forehead on the cool glass and tried to think. What would happen to him and Bella now? How would he explain this turn of events to Jesse? What would become of their family?

“Mav?”

He suddenly felt Bella's arms come around his waist as she hugged his back. Shock held him in place, unable to process what was happening. What did this mean?

“Thank you for telling me the truth,” she continued, her voice gentle. “I know it must have been so hard to do. I'm not sure I would have been as brave if I were in your shoes.”

“Brave?” He shook his head sadly as he turned around. Shame kept him from meeting her gaze. “I'm anything but brave. I was a coward this whole week when I let you believe everything between us was fine. I wanted to sweep our problems under the rug and pretend they'd never happened. I even thought that maybe you losing your memory was God's

way of giving us a second chance. I was so desperate to make it happen, not just for us but for Jesse, too, that I was willing to let you believe a lie. It was wrong of me to do that. I understand if you don't trust me anymore."

"Mav, stop!" Bella grabbed hold of his arms. She angled her face beneath his, so he had no choice but to look at her. "Stop beating yourself up. I get why you did what you did. You wanted a fresh start. You didn't want us to be unhappy anymore. You were doing what you thought was best for us. I don't hold it against you. I still trust you, Mav. You could've kept this hidden from me, but you didn't. I may trust you even more now."

A lump formed in Maverick's throat, making it hard to swallow. How could Bella be so forgiving? It didn't make sense. "I always knew you had a big heart, but this is too much. I don't deserve your trust or your forgiveness."

She smiled, her blue eyes growing teary. "None of us deserve anything good, Mav, but that's what grace is all about. I've been thinking a lot this past week and wondering how my life turned out the way it did, even with the mistakes I made. I think it's just God choosing to be good to us because He can't help but be anything but good. He's our dad and He wants to take care of us. I believe there's a reason for everything that He allows to happen. Maybe you're right that God's giving us a second chance. I kind of think losing my memory has been a blessing."

"You do?"

"Sure, there's a lot I wish I could remember, but I don't miss not knowing about the hard times and the struggles we went through. I don't miss the pain and the sadness I must have felt. I'd rather not remember those parts of the past. What I want to hold onto are the good memories and the hope that we can make even more happy memories together." Wrinkling her nose, she asked, "Do you think I'm being optimistic or naive—or maybe both?"

"You're just being you. You see the best in people and try to make the most of every situation. That's called having hope."

There's nothing wrong with that.”

She chewed on her lower lip, then sighed. “Maybe, but I hate that you remember all the bad times we went through while I don't remember a thing. It doesn't seem fair. I almost wish you could lose your memories, too, or that we could switch places.”

“No offense,” he replied, keeping his tone neutral, “but I don't think I could handle switching places. I'm pretty attached to my beard.”

Grinning, Bella rolled her eyes. “That's not what I mean!”

“I know.” The sound of her laughter flooded his body with a sense of peace. He appreciated how thoughtful and giving she was. Even though her wish was impossible to fulfill, he knew she meant every word. “I know you would trade places with me if you could, Bella, but I wouldn't want that for you. I want you to be happy and carefree. I don't want you to have to worry about anything. I'd rather carry the burden of the past than have you carry it.”

“Oh, Mav, you are so good to me.” She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. “I don't know what to say.”

“You don't have to say anything.” Maverick rubbed small circles along her back. “Just enjoy the memories you're making every day. That's all you need to do.”

“I am. Thank you, Mav.”

He held Bella tight, feeling a huge weight lift from his shoulders. Coming clean to her had been the right thing to do. He no longer felt guilty about keeping the details of their relationship under wraps. Now that he knew Bella didn't want to know about the bad memories, he would keep those to himself. He would ensure that she only made good new ones from here on out. They could have that new beginning they both wanted ... as soon as he helped the police take care of one last problem from the past.

Bella

Ignorance truly was bliss.

Bella settled into her cushioned chair and smiled at Nora who sat beside her. Her friend had offered to take her out for some girl time, complete with lunch at El Cresta for the “best tacos in the Rockies,” dessert at The Cakery, and some pampering at Polished Perfection. She couldn’t think of a better way to spend a Friday afternoon than making good memories, just like Maverick had told her to.

It was a packed night at the nail salon with ladies coming in to get their nails done for various Christmas events. Lottie had so many back-to-back appointments to take care of, she hadn’t even had a chance to stop by and say hello. Two other employees had helped Bella and Nora with their manicures, which they had just finished. Now they were waiting for their polish to dry under the fans.

Nora grinned as she inspected her freshly polished fingernails. The light purple shade she’d chosen matched the flowers on her cable knit sweater. “I love this color. How do you like yours?”

“I like it.” Bella glanced down at her hands and admired the way her silver glitter polish sparkled under the light. She’d been inspired to choose it when she’d heard the song “Silver Bells” playing in the salon as they’d walked in. “It’s not something I’d usually pick, but it reminds me of the holidays.”

“It’s funny to hear you say that. You chose something like it last Christmas, a gold glittery one.”

“I did?”

“Yep, you did. Maybe those colors weren’t something you would have chosen in high school, but you’ve changed a lot since then, even if you don’t remember doing the changing.” Nora gave Bella a sympathetic look. “It’s been two weeks since the accident and you still haven’t gotten your memory back. Are you sure you’re doing okay? I know you said you are, but I don’t see how you can be so calm.”

Nodding readily, Bella reassured Nora. “I’m fine, all things considered. I mean, what’s there to be upset about? I’m married to the boy I had a huge crush on for years and we have the best kid in the world. I couldn’t be happier.”

“You and Mav do seem a lot happier than before—not that you guys weren’t happy before your accident,” she quickly added. “I didn’t mean it like that. I mean—never mind what I mean. I’m just glad you’re handling everything so well.”

Nora’s hesitant tone told Bella all she needed to know. Ever since Maverick had come clean about their past relationship, Bella had been wondering if she’d confided in anyone about the state of their marriage. She’d assumed she’d told Nora, but she hadn’t wanted to open a can of worms by bringing it up in case she hadn’t. It was a relief to have someone to talk to about the topic. “It’s okay, Nora. Mav told me about what it was like for us before, how we hadn’t been happy.”

Her jaw dropped. “He told you that? What did he say exactly?”

“That we had been having trouble getting pregnant again and how everything we went through caused a rift between us.”

“Hmm. It’s hard to pinpoint when the problems started, but I can see how that would have been a big factor. That and just the fact that you guys kind of stopped talking.”

Bella’s chest ached to hear Nora say those words so matter-of-factly. She couldn’t imagine not talking to Mav. All she’d wanted to do this past week was talk to him and hold his hand whenever possible. On their drives to and from Redemption Ranch when she’d accompanied him to work. At

dinnertime when they would catch up with Jesse, then spend the evening playing board games or watching a movie. And especially at night when it was just the two of them snuggled in bed together. She loved hearing his deep, rich voice resound in his chest as they reminisced about their childhood days.

She shook her head sadly. “I’m so glad that’s all in the past. I don’t need to or want to remember the bad times we went through. All I know is that Mav and I are happy now and Jesse is, too. That’s all that matters.”

“So, you’re okay with the fact that he—”

“Nora, don’t,” Bella pleaded with her to stop. “Please don’t say anything more. Mav told me enough. I don’t want to talk about the past anymore. Okay?”

“Yeah, of course.” She made a zipping motion over her mouth. “It’s like that verse in Philippians, right? The one about forgetting what’s behind and pressing on toward what’s ahead. This is like God giving you guys a chance to make things right. He’s redeeming your marriage, Bella. Isn’t that amazing?”

“What’s amazing?” Lottie’s cheerful voice chimed in as she walked up from behind. She gave both women a quick hug before taking a seat in the chair across from Bella’s. “I finally have a break before my next customer comes in, so get to talking, girls. Fill Lottie in on what’s so amazing.”

Nora smiled. “I was just saying how amazing it is that God’s redeeming Bella and Mav’s marriage.”

“Redeeming their marriage,” Lottie repeated, her eyebrows raised in Bella’s direction. “Does this mean you’re starting to remember things that happened before the accident? Things that happened between you and Mav?”

“Not really,” Bella stated. “I had a flashback to our wedding day when we went to visit the Triple R Chapel last week, but other than that, it’s still all a blank. But Mav told me a little bit about the hard times we went through before my accident, how we couldn’t get pregnant again. I did wonder why we didn’t have more kids after Jesse. Now I know why.”

“I’m so sorry, dear.” Lottie reached across the desk and gave Bella’s hand a pat. “That was such a heartbreaking time for you. I always knew by the look on your face when you walked in here whether you’d had a negative test or not.”

Bella winced. Hearing the sadness in Lottie’s voice made the situation even more real. Over the past week, she’d thought often about the news of their infertility, but she hadn’t let herself dwell on it. She’d reminded herself to be thankful instead for the child they did have. But if she were being honest, there was a void inside of her that couldn’t be filled, and that void seemed to be growing every day. As much as she tried to trick her mind into thinking happy thoughts, she couldn’t fool her heart.

Don’t let me drown, Lord, she prayed silently. I don’t want to feel sad and disappointed about something I can’t change. Please fill the emptiness with Your peace and joy.

She squeezed out a smile for Lottie’s sake. “I’m glad you were there for me during those times, Lottie. You, too, Nora. Thank you both for being there for me.”

“Of course, dear. Lottie’s here for you anytime.”

“That’s what friends are for,” Nora agreed. She cocked her head and studied Bella’s face. “Are you feeling okay about not having more kids? It must have been a shock to hear that.”

“I’ve been trying not to think about it too much.” Bella released a shaky breath as she blinked her tears away. “I know if I do, it’s just going to bug me more and more and distract me from what I already have. It’s like what my mama used to say, there’s nothing perfect this side of heaven. There’s always going to be something we long for here on earth. But it’s that longing that pushes us to go to God and look to Him for comfort. That’s what I’m trying to do.”

Lottie and Nora exchanged a lingering glance that Bella didn’t understand. Puzzled, she looked from one woman’s raised eyebrows to the other’s and asked, “What is it? Why do you guys look so surprised?”

“We haven’t heard you talk about the Lord like that in a long time, that’s all,” Lottie explained. “It’s so good to see your faith returning, dear.”

“You’ve been pretty upset at God, actually,” Nora added, her tone wistful. “Not to the point that you didn’t believe in Him anymore, but you’d kind of given up on trusting Him. You even stopped wearing your mom’s necklace.”

Bella instinctively touched her chest where the cross pendant should have been. “I thought it was strange that I wasn’t wearing it after the accident. I assumed I’d lost it.”

Nora shook her head. “I’m pretty sure you didn’t. That necklace was really important to you.”

“Do you know where it might be?”

“There’s a box under your bed where you keep all your keepsakes in. Maybe it’s in there?”

Later on that afternoon, Bella held onto Nora’s words during the drive home from the nail salon. After Nora dropped her off, she went to find the box. An urgency propelled her steps forward, moving her up the stairs, down the hall of the second floor, and to the master bedroom. Just as Nora had said, there was a wooden box stored under the bed. Taking a seat on the carpet, she pulled it out, eager to see its contents.

The house was quiet and empty with Maverick and Jesse at the ranch for Jesse’s riding lesson. Bella knew she had a few minutes before they returned, and for that she was thankful. She didn’t know what this box held, but she didn’t want to be rushed as she looked through it.

Once the cover was off, Bella saw several items stacked on the top—newspaper clippings of Mav’s short-lived football career, their wedding program printed on cream-colored cardstock, and some homemade Mother’s Day cards from Jesse. Under the cards was a black velvet cloth drawstring pouch. And inside the pouch was her mom’s necklace.

She gasped, then cried out, “Thank You, Lord!”

As soon as the gold chain was around her neck, she felt a sense of peace wash over her. It didn’t matter what Lottie and

Nora had told her about her faith before the accident. What mattered was where her heart was at now. She trusted God and knew that He was in control of this whole situation. He had not only given her and Maverick a fresh start, He'd renewed her faith as well. It was as she'd told Mav—losing her memories had turned out to be a blessing. She had full confidence in His plan, as strange and unexpected as it was. Like the verse in the book of Hebrews said, God had not left nor forsaken her.

With a grateful heart, she returned everything back into the box, then pushed it under the bed. That's when she spotted the corner of a brown manila envelope sticking out. She took it, surprised to see her name written on the front.

“What's this?” she murmured under her breath as she pulled some paperwork out.

As soon as her gaze landed on the words *Divorce Agreement: Maverick Knight vs. Annabella Knight* across the top of the first page, her body froze. Air got trapped in her lungs as she struggled to breathe. This wasn't real, was it? Where did these divorce papers come from? There had to be a mistake.

She dialed the number that was listed on the document for Attorney Ruby Hayes. The chances were low that she would pick up calls on the weekend, but she had to try.

After the fourth ring, a woman answered, “Ruby Hayes speaking. How may I help you?”

“Ms. Hayes, my name is Annabella Knight. I need to ask you about some paperwork that I found. It's a divorce agreement between my husband Maverick and myself. Can you tell me about it?”

“Oh right, I've been meaning to follow up with you about that.” Her voice softened with sympathy. “Your husband had us file it a few weeks ago. I believe they were served to you at your workplace. Are you ready to move forward with the divorce proceedings? If so, you can have your attorney contact me to begin.”

Bella's heartbeat pounded in her ears so loudly, she could hardly make out the lawyer's words, but she'd heard enough. Enough for her to question everything that she thought she knew about Maverick and their relationship these past few weeks. How had things between them gotten so bad that he didn't want to be her husband anymore?

Maverick

The minute Maverick walked through the front door, he sensed something was wrong. The house seemed quiet, too quiet. His pulse shot up as he ran from room to room on the first floor.

“Jesse,” he called over his shoulder, “stay with me.”

“What’s going on, Dad? What are you looking for?” Jesse followed him closely, repeating his questions when Maverick didn’t answer. “What are we doing?”

The kitchen and dining rooms were both dark. Maverick flipped on the lights one by one everywhere he went, until the whole downstairs was lit. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but he still didn’t feel at peace.

He wouldn’t until he found Bella.

That ominous text he’d received a week ago flashed through his mind. He’d taken every precaution possible to keep her and Jesse safe, including upgrading their home security system with cameras at the front and back doors. The alarm should have gone off if a door or window had been breached, which would have notified him and the police. The only message he’d received was one about half an hour ago informing him that the front door had been opened. When he’d checked the footage, he’d seen Bella enter their house alone. But where was she now?

Maverick nodded toward the staircase. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“Are you looking for Mom? Maybe she’s taking a shower and didn’t hear us come in.”

He hoped that was the case and nothing else. Taking the stairs two at a time, he led the way to the master bedroom, flipping on the hall light as he passed the switch. He popped his head into Jesse's room, the guest bedroom, and the bathroom, and saw that they were all empty. That only left the last room at the end of the hallway, which had its door shut.

"Maybe she's taking a nap?" Jesse said as he came up behind Maverick.

What he'd suggested was possible, but Maverick's imagination was too riled up for him to think logically. What if his creditors had gotten wind of him being at the racetrack this past week? If that were the case, they'd be bent on revenge. All the worst-case scenarios he could think of came to mind, making his blood run cold. He should never have gotten involved with the gambling scene. No amount of money was worth sacrificing his family's well-being.

"Are you going to go in?" Jesse whispered, seeming to understand that this was no ordinary situation.

Maverick answered with one finger held to his lips. He had no idea what awaited them on the other side of the door, but he'd rather err on the side of caution. Keeping his voice low, he urged Jesse to heed his instructions. "I want you to go to your room and close the door. Don't come out until I come get you, okay?"

"Why?"

"Please, son. I need you to trust me."

Jesse nodded and did as he was told. As soon as he closed his bedroom door behind him, Maverick proceeded to open the one to the master bedroom.

Pitch darkness swallowed him up the moment he stepped inside. His hand searched for the light switch on the wall before turning it on. That's when he saw Bella sitting on the floor beside the bed, her knees pulled up to her chest. Her red-rimmed eyes stared up at him, blinking quickly as they adjusted to the light.

He rushed over and fell on his knees before her. “Bella, are you okay? Did someone hurt you? Talk to me!”

She hung her head as she released a shaky breath. “I ... no ... I don’t know.”

He drew her to his chest and held her tight. When he felt her body trembling in his arms, a rush of anger surged through him. “Tell me what happened,” he demanded. “Who hurt you?”

She pulled back to face him, then pointed to some papers on the carpet. It took Maverick a moment to register what he was looking at, but as soon as he did, his heart sank to the pit of his stomach. The divorce papers! No wonder Bella was in such bad shape. She’d just learned the ultimate truth about their marriage.

He was the one who had hurt her.

“Babe, please let me explain—”

Shaking her head, she cut him off. “Before you do, I need you to promise me you’ll tell me everything. *Everything*, Mav. I don’t want to be in the dark anymore. I don’t want to pretend we’re okay when we’re not. I need to know what happened to us. Please promise me you’ll tell me everything.”

Maverick ran a hand down his face as the weight of Bella’s request filled him with dread. He understood why she’d want to know everything about their marriage, but he couldn’t bear the thought of how much the knowledge would break her heart. How it would create a huge rift between them, after it had just been repaired. But one look at her sorrowful face had him nodding. Bella deserved to know it all. Only then could she make up her mind whether or not to forgive him.

“I promise,” he replied. Then he took a seat next to her and started from the beginning.

He relayed the events of the past decade without leaving out a single detail. From their time as a dating couple to their early days as parents. Then the years they had tried to get pregnant again, to his recent gambling habit, including how he ended up selling his wedding band to help pay back his debt.

The hardest part to talk about was the day she had been served divorce papers and the fight they had had that evening. But he didn't mince any words. There was no use hiding the fact that he had played a part in her car accident, how she'd been targeted because of him. He may have gotten a brief reprieve in facing the consequences of his actions, but it was time to take responsibility for the choices he'd made.

Even if it meant losing Bella all over again.

"I don't expect you to forgive me," he uttered as he forced himself to meet her gaze. "I've hurt you and our family. There's no excuse for what I did. I may have started out with good intentions, but those intentions went out the window as soon as I started winning. Then it became about chasing the high of each win. I'd convince myself that I could do it again, and again, and again. Even when I lost, I went right back. It was a vicious cycle. The worst part was what the gambling did to us. I not only lied to myself; I lied to you. I'm so sorry, Bella. I promise you, I will not let myself get involved with any of that anymore. You have my word."

She listened intently, her eyes never leaving his face. Her shock had seemed to dissipate little by little over the past twenty minutes as he shared. There was still a guardedness to her expression, which he expected. He'd just unloaded a large weight onto her shoulders. It would be nothing short of a miracle for her to accept and forgive him for all the ways he'd hurt her.

Lord, please have mercy on me, he prayed. I know I don't deserve a second chance, but I would be so grateful for one.

"I know this is a lot to take in, Bella. If you have any questions, please ask them."

She sighed softly. "Thank you for being honest about everything, Mav. I do have one question."

"Of course. Ask me anything."

"Do you still want a divorce?"

His brows shot up. "No, of course not! I never wanted one in the first place. I thought I was doing the right thing by

cutting off ties, that it would protect you and Jesse from my mistakes. What I should have done was come clean and tell you everything that I just told you instead of shirking my responsibilities. I'm ready to deal with the fallout. I want to make it up to you, Bella, if you'll give me the chance. You don't have to answer me now, but I hope you'll think about it."

Sighing, Bella closed her eyes. She touched the cross hanging from her neck, her fingertips running along the surface. Maverick wondered when she had found her mother's necklace; he hadn't seen it in years. She had stopped wearing it when she'd stopped hoping for miracles.

Perhaps they hadn't seen their last miracle yet.

When she opened her eyes, her countenance changed. She picked up the divorce papers from the carpet and, with one swift motion, tore them down the middle. Maverick sucked in a sharp breath. The act reminded him of a sermon he'd heard once about the curtain in God's temple being split in two from top to bottom when Jesus died on the cross. The torn veil showed that the Lord had provided a way for people to return to Him. Did this mean Bella was giving him a chance at redemption as well?

"What are you doing, Bella?"

A small smile curved her lips. "I'm forgetting—*again*—that this ever happened. I don't remember much of anything that happened the past thirteen years, but one thing I do remember is our wedding. That day when we went to the chapel, I remembered making my vow to you. I remembered saying I would love you and be faithful to you through the good times and the bad. I'm so sorry I didn't keep the vow I made to you and to God when life got hard. I want us to start over, Mav. Can we please start over?"

It took two seconds for her words to register, but when they did, Maverick couldn't stop beaming. "There's nothing I want more. Thank you, Bella. I love you."

Her eyes sparkled with joy. "I love you, too."

He wrapped her up in his arms and held her tight. Having her lean into him and rest her head against his chest felt a thousand times more meaningful and perfect now that they were united. He kissed the top of her head, completely satisfied. “God is so gracious to us.”

“He truly is. He really does work everything together for good. This accident not only brought us back together, it deepened my faith. I know we’ve made a lot of mistakes, but God never gave up on us. I just feel so grateful.”

“I feel the same—”

Ding!

The front doorbell rang, cutting him off mid-sentence.

Bella looked up at him, curious. “Are you expecting someone?”

“No. Let me see who it is.”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and checked the front door’s security camera. His jaw clenched at the image of an older man standing on the porch with his arms crossed. The disgruntled look on his face was enough to erase all the positive emotions of the moment.

What was Bella’s dad doing here?

Bella

“Jesse? It’s Mom. I’m coming in,” Bella called out as she opened her son’s door. One glance around his empty room made her heart leap into her throat. “Jesse? Where are you?”

“Over here.” His voice came out muffled from inside his closet. The door slid open, revealing a pair of blue eyes identical to hers. “Can I come out now? Dad said I was supposed to stay here until he came back.”

“Yes, it’s fine. He told me to come get you.”

With his hands in his jean pockets, he stepped out with a cautious look on his face. “Is everything okay? Why was Dad acting all weird earlier?”

Now that Maverick had shared everything with her, Bella understood the motivations behind his recent actions. How he had been adamant about changing out their home security system and also why she’d seen a black car drive through their neighborhood several times this past week. He’d confessed that he’d asked Milo to keep an eye on her the few times she was home alone. As much as she disliked how he’d kept this information from her to protect her, she now found herself doing the same thing.

Bella sighed, wishing there didn’t have to be so many secrets. “It’s a long story, Jesse, but all you need to know is that we’re safe and everything’s going to be okay. You don’t have to worry about a thing.”

He slowly nodded, his expression serious. “Where’s Dad?”

“He’s downstairs talking with grandpa.”

“Grandpa’s here? I want to say hi.”

Bella held up a hand to stop Jesse from rushing out the door. “I think they have some stuff to talk about. Maybe later?”

“Yeah, sure.” He furrowed his brows and leaned against the doorframe, craning his head as if he were trying to hear what was going on downstairs.

“Jesse, are you eavesdropping?” Bella shook her head with amusement. “I would hope I raised you better than that!”

He shot her a sheepish grin as he stood up straight. “You did. I’m just curious, that’s all. I’ll stop now.”

Bella had to admit that she was curious about her dad’s visit, too. Maverick hadn’t told her much when he’d asked her to check on Jesse, just that he would go and talk to her dad first. She turned to Jesse and asked, “Does Grandpa come by often to see us?”

“No. We mostly see him at the restaurant. He only comes over when he wants to talk to Dad.”

“I see. I wonder what they’re talking about,” she murmured. Maverick had told her so much about things that had occurred between them but not many details about anyone else. She wished she wasn’t still in the dark about so many things. “Do your dad and Grandpa get along well, Jesse?”

“They’re okay”—he ducked his head to avoid her eyes—“most of the time.”

She sensed his hesitation to say more, but she needed to know. “So, they don’t always get along? It’s okay, you can tell me, Jesse. I know our family went through some hard times before my accident. Dad told me everything.”

“Everything?” His tone reflected the shock on his face. “Why did he do that? Now you’re going to be sad again, and he’s going to move out and you guys are probably going to get a divorce.”

Bella's heart lurched in her chest as she watched Jesse's posture slump over. He plopped down onto his bed, looking hopeless and lost. She immediately sat down beside him and hugged him. "Jesse, sweetheart, no one's getting divorced. I'm not sad, and your dad's not going anywhere. We've forgiven each other. We both want to stay married and work on keeping our family together. I promise you that things aren't going to go back to the way they were. God's given us a second chance to make things right. We're not going to pass that up."

"Are you serious?" He pulled back to look her in the eyes. "You're not just saying this stuff to make me feel better, are you? 'Cause you don't have to lie to me anymore. I can handle it."

"I'm not lying, Jesse. And I'm very sorry if I did lie to you before about what was going on. Grown-ups are supposed to have it all together, but we aren't perfect, as I'm sure you know by now."

"I guess. But kids aren't perfect either. I didn't want to tell you the truth about how much you and Dad used to fight or about how much Grandpa doesn't like Dad. I wanted you to believe everyone was happy and that we all got along." He grimaced as he rubbed the back of his neck. "It didn't feel right lying to you. I'm sorry, Mom. I'm glad Dad told you the truth and that you guys want to stay married. I'm really happy about that."

"I am, too. Thank you for praying for us. Dad told me you've been praying hard."

Jesse nodded. "I've been praying for Dad and Grandpa, too."

"Keep praying. God's always listening, even when we're not sure if He is or not." She cupped Jesse's chin with one hand, feeling deeply proud to be his mom. "He answered your prayers for me and Dad. I know He'll answer your prayers for Dad and Grandpa, too, in His time."

"I will, Mom."

“Thank you, Jesse.” Rising to her feet, she took a deep breath. “I’m going to go see if I can help them out.”

Bella padded her bare feet along the carpet as she tugged her cardigan closed around her torso. She took a deep breath and prepared herself for whatever lay ahead. The day’s events had her feeling like a yo-yo, bouncing from one emotion to another. While she was physically spent from crying, she also felt lighter than ever. God was working to heal their family; she was sure of it. She had hope that He could do the same for Maverick and her dad.

The moment she reached the top of the stairs, she heard their deep voices. They spoke quietly, although her dad’s tone sounded more forceful than usual. She supposed it wasn’t a complete surprise that the two men in her life didn’t get along, even after all these years. Both could be opinionated and protective to a fault and just as stubborn. Was there any chance she could help them see eye to eye?

Moving slowly in the shadows, she headed downstairs. With each step, she prayed for wisdom. The last thing she wanted to do was take sides, but if she were forced to, her loyalty would have to lie with Maverick. She was his wife now, and they were a unit. She hoped her dad would understand.

When she got to the first floor, the situation was as she’d expected. Both men sat opposite each other, her dad on the sofa and Maverick in the recliner. Their stony expressions remained unmoved as they faced off in an unofficial staring contest.

“Hi, Daddy.” Bella walked over and greeted the older man with a small smile. “What are you doing here?”

“Annabella, sit down, please.” He patted the space beside him. “There’s something you need to know.”

Her shoulders tightened. It couldn’t be a good sign for her dad to be using her full name. She stole a look Maverick’s way, only to find him with his head bowed. Was he avoiding her for some reason? She sat down, not knowing what to expect. “What is it? Is something wrong?”

“I’m afraid so. I’ve been waiting for Maverick to come clean on his own, but I cannot in good conscience sit around and wait for him to do the right thing. I just can’t. Not when my baby girl is being kept in the dark about the real state of her marriage.”

Maverick finally lifted his head. He looked exhausted, as if he’d been in a literal battle. With a weary tone, he stated, “Trevor, with all due respect, this matter is between Bella and me. I know you’re her father and you care about her, but I’m her husband and she’s my wife. We will work through this matter ourselves.”

“How?” he spit out in frustration. “Tell me, how can you work on anything when you won’t tell her the truth? She deserves to know the truth!”

“Daddy, take it easy,” Bella pled as she noticed her dad’s face reddening. “Whatever this is about, we can talk it through. Please don’t get upset.”

“All right, let’s talk then.” Pointing a finger at Maverick, Mr. Kelly gave him a pointed look. “Why don’t you tell her about your separation? How, before the accident, you didn’t care enough to be a husband and father to stick around for your family?”

Bella winced. Hearing her dad call Maverick out like this made her heart hurt. It wasn’t fair when he didn’t know the whole story. “Daddy, it wasn’t like that! I asked him to leave.” She blinked in surprise to hear herself say this with such certainty. Suddenly, a faint memory of her and Maverick arguing came to the forefront of her mind, confirming her statement. “I remember what happened. *I* was the one who told you to go, Mav. Why didn’t you tell me? Why did you make it seem like you were the one who wanted to move out?”

Maverick shook his head. “It doesn’t matter who said what. I don’t want the past to define us. What matters is that we’re doing our best now to work on our relationship.”

If her dad hadn’t been sitting here, Bella would have jumped up and run over to Maverick to show him how much his words meant to her. Instead, she simply mouthed *I love you*

to him. He mouthed the words back to her, his eyes bright with gratitude.

Bella then turned to her dad, eager to reassure him. “Daddy, please don’t worry. Mav and I are doing well, so much better than we were before the accident. He told me everything that happened between us. Every hard, sad, and regretful thing—Mav shared it all with me. But like he said, it’s all in the past. We’re committed to making our marriage work. God’s given us this chance, and we’re not taking it for granted.”

Mr. Kelly crossed his arms, undeterred. “Are you sure he’s told you everything, Annabella? What about the things he’s been doing at the racetrack this week, meeting up with those so-called businessmen? Did he tell you about that?”

Her throat constricted as she glanced at Maverick. Just moments earlier, he’d told her he was done with gambling, that he hadn’t placed a bet in months. She’d believed him, of course. He had come clean about so much, there was no reason why he’d withhold this bit of information from her. Her dad had to be mistaken.

Bella turned back to her dad. “I don’t know what you heard, but it’s not true. Mav doesn’t gamble anymore, he told me so—”

“Babe,” Maverick cut in quietly, “actually, what your dad said about me going to the racetrack is true. But I can explain.”

Bella gripped the edge of her seat cushion, feeling as if she were one heartbeat from falling over. Whatever Maverick’s explanation was, she prayed she’d be able to handle hearing it.

Maverick

Maverick could see it, the confusion in Bella's eyes. He didn't blame her for doubting him, but it still hurt to think that she didn't fully trust him.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the first time his father-in-law had come between them. Trevor had blackballed him from the moment he'd found out he and Bella were dating; the situation only worsened when Bella got pregnant. Maverick had long ago given up on trying to get on Trevor's good side. He remained cordial and gave him the respect he deserved as Bella's father and Jesse's grandfather, but he didn't expect much in return.

One thing was for sure, he certainly didn't expect to be spied on.

Maverick paused to take a breath and rein in his emotions. He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. As a father himself, he understood why Trevor was so concerned and why he had outed him to Bella. But did he have to do it right here and now, especially when his and Bella's relationship was so fragile? Had they only rebuilt their foundation to have it broken again?

Unclenching his fists, he lifted his gaze to meet hers. In that moment, he realized what little control he held over the situation. All he had were good intentions, but were those enough? He hoped God would hear the prayers of his heart and help him honor the commitment he'd made to keep his family safe.

“I did go there this week,” he confessed, “but it wasn’t to gamble. I’ve been working with law enforcement officers on a plan to expose the racetrack’s corruption ring. It’s a big case. We’re talking embezzlement, racketeering, money laundering—the whole nine yards. I went there to collect evidence that will be used to help bring it all down.”

Bella’s jaw dropped. “That’s so dangerous! Why would they ask you to do that? Don’t they have undercover police for those kinds of things?”

“It would take months for a cop to get on the inside. I was the best candidate. I already have connections there and can get in and out without raising suspicions.”

“But these are dangerous people, Mav!” Her complexion paled, removing the pretty pink color from her cheeks and lips. She shook her head, her eyes filling with tears. “Why would you put yourself at risk like that?”

“I had to, babe. I had to do my part to make sure they get these guys and put them away for good. I can’t risk you getting hurt again or having Jesse be in danger. You guys are too important to me.”

“You should’ve at least told me.” Her voice trembled as her tears fell. “You said you’d tell me everything, but you kept this from me.”

Maverick swallowed hard. He’d made Bella cry far too many times recently. Guilt crashed down on him yet again. Having his father-in-law witness this conversation didn’t help matters either. At least Trevor was staying silent and allowing him and Bella to talk.

“You’re right, I’m sorry. I should have told you. I just didn’t want you to worry about something that already happened.”

“But it should be my choice whether or not I want to worry!” Bella shot to her feet, fully sobbing now. Her breaths came out in short bursts as she struggled to speak. “I don’t want you to keep things from me anymore, Mav. I’d rather know the truth and get upset than not know what’s going on.

How am I supposed to trust you when you won't tell me every ___”

Ding!

Maverick's cell phone sounded with an incoming message, cutting off Bella's words. Two more texts followed, then a call. The high-pitched ringtone cut through the uncomfortable silence in the room.

“You should answer it,” Bella stated in between her sniffles. “Someone's looking for you.”

Maverick conceded, thinking it was better to listen to Bella than to go against her. “Excuse me,” he murmured as he took his phone from his pocket. One glance at the screen showed that it was the precinct calling. Any other time, he would have stepped to another room to take the call, but not this time. There would be no more hiding information from Bella.

He switched on the speakerphone and answered, “Maverick Knight speaking.”

“Knight, it's Officer Hughes,” the solemn voice on the other end greeted him. “I hate to call you up like this when I told you we wouldn't need your help anymore, but there's been a change in plans.”

The officer continued to relay his request to Maverick. Where they needed him to go the following morning, and what he would need to say and do. The number of police officers who would be waiting outside the venue, armed and ready in case anything went awry. And lastly, the final piece of evidence he would need to collect so justice could finally be served.

“I know it's a lot to ask of you, Knight,” Officer Hughes stated. “If you're unable to commit to the job, I understand.”

Maverick clenched his jaw as he debated the offer to back out. If Bella weren't staring at him with fear clouding her blue eyes, he would never consider saying no. But here she was right in front of him, looking so vulnerable. He couldn't bear to see her this way. That's when he knew exactly how to respond.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I can’t do it this time. My family needs me at home. If there’s any other way I can help out that doesn’t require me being at the racetrack, let me know.”

A loud sigh came over the line. “I understand. I do appreciate the help you’ve given us. We would never have gotten this far without you. If you change your mind, Knight, you know where to reach me.”

The call went silent, leaving Maverick to stare at the black screen. He couldn’t help feeling regretful that he’d let the officers and, in turn, the community down. But this decision was better than disappointing his family.

He was determined not to do that ever again.

He raised his gaze to find Bella and her father regarding him. Her expression was easy to decipher. She looked conflicted with her brows furrowed and her lips pressed together. His father-in-law’s face, on the other hand, was a surprise. The scowl that he usually had for Maverick had been replaced by an impartial, almost thoughtful look. Maverick didn’t know what to make of it.

His first inclination was to reassure Bella, so he turned to face her. “I want you to be able to trust me. I’m not keeping anything from you anymore, Bella.”

She nodded, her features softening with relief. “Thank you for telling him you’re not getting involved. I know you want to help them catch those guys, but it’s too dangerous. I don’t even want to think about something bad happening to you. There’s already so much to deal with...”

Maverick’s heart ached as he watched Bella struggle to keep her composure. He quickly jumped up from his seat and went to her, kneeling at her side. Clutching her hands, he gave them a gentle squeeze. “Hey, I’m here, babe. I’m not going anywhere. They’ll figure out another way to get the job done now. I’m staying right here with you and Jesse, okay? You don’t have to worry.”

“I know. It’s not just about that. I feel like all my emotions are finally catching up with me now that I know the truth about everything. Things aren’t as simple or as easy as I thought they were. Like I hate the fact that you guys”—she gestured to Maverick and Trevor—“don’t get along. I love you both so much and it breaks my heart that the two men in my life can’t stand being in the same room together.”

Maverick blinked in surprise. “That’s not true—”

Bella shot him a wide-eyed look. “You said you wouldn’t keep anything from me anymore.”

“I did say that, didn’t I?” he answered with chagrin.

He stole a look at his father-in-law, wondering what he was thinking. The bright and happy red Rudolph sweater he wore, one that Jesse had picked out for him last year, seemed so out of place given the topic of conversation. It did however serve as a good reminder for Maverick to choose his words wisely. The Christmas season was about God extending grace toward mankind. It was his turn to do the same with Trevor.

“The truth is,” he told Bella, “your dad and I aren’t very close, but we do our best to get along for your and Jesse’s sakes. I’m grateful he allowed me to marry you and that he’s a good grandfather.” He shifted his gaze to Trevor as he spoke directly to him. “You stepped up in a big way to spend time with Jesse after my dad passed. I never got the chance to thank you for doing that.”

Trevor cleared his throat, his cheeks pinkening from what seemed to be embarrassment. “I appreciate that, Maverick. I, uh, if the two of you don’t mind, I think it’s time I spoke my piece, too.”

“Of course, Daddy,” Bella encouraged him.

“I won’t lie, pumpkin, I haven’t been a fan of Maverick’s since you were kids. Because of that, I didn’t try to get to know the man that he’s become.” Trevor nodded in Maverick’s direction as he continued, “I realize now that I should have been there for you when your dad got sick. You were already a husband and a father, but in a lot of ways, you were still a

child. You didn't have a parent to go to for advice anymore. I could've stepped in, but my pride held me back. And for that, I apologize. I also apologize for earlier, for trying to accuse you of something you didn't do. I'm sorry."

Shock overwhelmed Maverick so much to hear this apology, his tongue seemed frozen in place. If Bella's face didn't show the surprise he felt, he would have thought this was all a dream. But there was no denying the remorse in Trevor's frown. Maverick could only shake his head and utter, "There's no need for that. I know everything you've done was to protect Bella. I get it."

"You're a bigger man than I am, Maverick," Trevor admitted with a mild-mannered smile. "I underestimated you and your character. I should've listened to you, pumpkin," he said to Bella, "when you told me to trust you about Maverick."

Bella grinned. "I don't remember what I said, but I'm sure I had good reasons. Thank you, Daddy, for opening your heart up to Mav. You don't know how happy and grateful I am right now."

"You're not the only one. I have a friend who got involved with those loan sharks at the racetrack; that's how I knew Maverick was down there. I know he'll be relieved to know the police are one step closer to stopping the corruption. So, thank you for doing your part to help, Maverick."

"I did it to make sure Bella and Jesse stay safe and to help clean up our town. I know you would've done the same, Trevor."

"Regardless, it couldn't have been easy, putting yourself in harm's way like that. It shows a lot of bravery on your part. I'm proud of you, son."

The genuine joy in Trevor's voice caused a lump to form in Maverick's throat. For the first time he could remember, he felt seen and accepted by his father-in-law, enough for him to call him by a more personal title. "Thanks, Dad."

He blinked back tears as a wave of peace washed over him. This had to be a miracle, their very own Christmas

miracle. It may not have been as powerful to change the world like Christ's birth did, but it was enough to start healing their family.

It was also enough to stir a desire within him to help their town. To help finish what he started. But he would only do so if he had Bella's full support.

He turned to her and said, "Bella, there's something I need to talk to you about."

Bella

Bella couldn't believe she'd agreed to Maverick's request to help the police out one last time. She was essentially sending him off to the lion's den in the morning. How either one of them would get any sleep tonight, she didn't know. She, for one, had been lying in their bed, staring at the ceiling ever since Maverick turned off the light ten minutes ago. Pulling the covers up to her chin, she forced her eyelids shut. Anticipation coursed through her veins as if she were a little girl on Christmas Eve who couldn't wait for the sun to rise—except that she wished for the opposite. All Bella wanted was for time to stand still, so her family could stay safe and secure.

But life didn't always go the way she wanted, did it?

"You're frowning, babe," Maverick whispered in her ear as he rubbed the space between her brows. "What are you thinking about?"

Bella felt her tension ebb away as his gentle touch spread warmth and tingles along her skin. "Just how I wish we could all stay here together where nothing bad can happen to us ... to you."

"Are you having second thoughts about me going to the racetrack?"

"Not only second thoughts, third and fourth thoughts, too." She turned to face him. In the moonlight streaming through the sheer curtains, she could see worry lines appear on his forehead. "But I know how important this is to you. I'm proud of you for standing up for what's right and being so brave

about it. I support you going, Mav. I'm just trying to convince my heart to support you, too."

"I think your heart does. It's all the worries running through your mind that you need to convince."

"You're right. Thinking of all the worst-case scenarios isn't helping." She snuggled closer and rested her head on his chest. "You would think I'd have more faith by now after everything that's happened to us these past few weeks. I have no doubt that God's in control. Nothing that's happened has surprised Him, but I can't help but think we're pushing our luck now. Not that I believe in luck, but ... Do you know what I'm saying?"

Maverick wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. "I get it. You wonder if we're asking for trouble by walking into trouble. But there are risks with just about anything we do. That's why we should always rely on God, no matter how much we feel like we're in control of a situation. When it all comes down to it, there's actually very little that we can control."

Bella groaned, wishing he weren't right. "I know. That's why I can't wait for tomorrow to be over."

"Me, too. After tomorrow, I'll be able to rest easy knowing these guys can't hurt you or Jesse anymore. So many others, including your dad's friend, will be able to sleep easier, too. This has been a long time coming, babe. God will bring justice and work everything out for good. He's already done so much for us. There's nothing He can't do."

"Aren't you a little scared though?"

"A little, but I feel more eager than anything. I can't wait to wrap this up and start focusing on more important things."

"Like what?"

"Our family, of course, and Christmas. With Jesse home for break the next two weeks, I was thinking we could go all out for the holidays this year. Get a real tree, put up lights around the house, get some inflatable decorations for the front yard, and whatever else he'd like. We could even take a trip

over to Freedom and enjoy the snow there. What do you think?”

“That sounds wonderful, but can we afford it?”

“We sure can. The police chief let me know I’ll be receiving some reward money for helping them bring the offenders to justice. And after this case goes to trial and we receive the restitution money, we’ll be able to do even more. We can finally go on a honeymoon, maybe someplace tropical. Whatever you want to do, babe, I’ll make it happen.”

The hope in his voice moved her to tears. “We really don’t need to do anything or go anywhere special, Mav. I’d be happy with a Charlie Brown tree and a weekend at home watching movies and baking cookies. As long as we’re together—you, me, and Jesse—that’s more than enough for me.”

“You never ask for much, babe, and that’s why I want to give you more. Let me do something for you. Please.”

Bella smiled, knowing he meant every single word. Maverick’s love for her was as strong and sure as his heartbeats resounding in her ear. She still couldn’t believe that the boy she had fallen in love with was now her husband. Being his wife was one thing she wouldn’t take for granted in this new lease on life that she’d been given.

She clutched the front of his shirt and lifted her head to look his way. “All I want is for you to come home safe and sound tomorrow. I know you can’t promise me that, but will you try your hardest? Please, Mav? I want to grow old with you—very, very old. I want our family to create new memories together to make up for the ones I lost. I want us to spend the rest of our lives making the most of this second chance that God has given us. Which means you have to do your best to be safe tomorrow, okay? Because if anything were to happen—”

She choked back the rest of her words, afraid to say them out loud. It was just as well because Maverick put a finger to her lips, stopping her from finishing.

“I’ll be careful, babe, I promise. God willing, you’ll have to put up with me and my snoring for many, many more years to come.”

His joking tone put a smile on her face. “I wouldn’t mind that at all.”

“Good. I don’t mind yours either.”

She gasped. “I don’t snore! Do I?”

He tapped her lightly on the tip of her nose. “Did I say snore? It’s more like loud breathing.”

Groaning, she hid her face in her hands. “How embarrassing. I can’t believe I snore.”

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about. I think it’s cute. I think you’re cute.”

“You have to say that because you’re my husband.”

“No, I get to say that because I’m your husband.”

Maverick took her by the elbows and pulled her onto his chest. When she lowered her hands, she was surprised to find herself nose to nose with him. Every inch of her skin heated as she lay flush against his body. Their warm breaths mingled in the air between them as he cupped her face. The tender way he ran the pad of his thumb across her cheek made her head spin with a deliciously familiar desire.

“You’re so unbelievably beautiful, Bella,” he murmured. “I can’t believe I get to call you mine.”

In that moment, Bella knew what Maverick said was true. He had her heart, her whole heart. She trusted him with every fragile, vulnerable part of herself because she knew without a doubt that he would take care of her.

“I’m yours, Mav, all yours,” she murmured against his lips, before she showed him with a heart-stirring kiss just how much she meant it.

* * *

The moment Bella woke up, she sensed Maverick's absence. His side of the bed was empty, save for his pajamas which he had placed beside his pillow. The scent of his spicy aftershave lingered in the air, letting Bella know that he hadn't left too long ago. Oh, how she wished he had woken her up so she could have said goodbye. She had wanted to pray with him before he left, but now she'd have to intercede for him alone.

Or maybe not.

Soft footsteps sounded on the carpet as Jesse ran over to the bed. He looked around and asked, "Where's Dad?"

Bella patted the bed and gestured for him to sit down. "He has something important to do for the police today. He'll be back in a few hours."

"The police? Is Dad in trouble?"

"No, quite the opposite. He's helping to put a stop to trouble. He's doing a very brave thing for our town. I was just about to pray for him. Would you like to pray with me?"

"Together?" His blue eyes lit up in surprise. "Yeah, of course! What do we pray about?"

"For God to watch over Dad and keep him safe. For justice to be served. For all the people involved that they would know that God is a God of second chances. And anything else you want to talk to God about is good, too."

Jesse nodded his understanding, and the two of them began praying. With unified hearts, they presented their requests to the Lord. Soon enough, God's peace flooded Bella's heart, so much so that tears of relief filled her eyes. By the time she said "In Jesus's name, amen," she had a genuine smile on her face.

"Thank you for praying with me, Jesse."

"Sure thing, Mom. Do you feel better now?"

"I do. But I'll feel even better when your dad's home. In the meantime, it'll be good to keep busy until he does. How about we make pancakes for breakfast?"

"Yes, I'm starving!"

Bella watched Jesse run off, her mood brightening. The weight on her shoulders felt lighter, buoyed by the hope in her heart. There was so much to be thankful for.

God had taken the broken pieces of their family and put them back together. She and Maverick were doing better than ever. They had expressed their love for each other with more than words last night, and it was more beautiful than she could have imagined. Perhaps that was why the longing in her heart was so great. She'd gotten so many sweet tastes of what loving Maverick and being loved by him was like, she didn't want to consider the possibility of life without him.

Lord, please bring my husband home to me, she prayed yet again.

Maverick

Maverick winced at the bright light shining in his eyes. His body was still on edge from an adrenaline rush and his right hand ached, but he was relieved to be in one piece. But he would be far from relieved once Bella got a look at him.

At least he had made good on her request. By God's grace, he'd be going home to her soon.

The redheaded doctor who had been checking his eyes, along with his vitals, sat back on her stool once she was finished. He recognized her as Dr. Stillman, the same doctor who had helped Bella in the ER after her accident. She tucked her penlight into the pocket of her white coat, then smiled. "Everything looks good. I think it's safe to say that you had some angels watching out for you today, Mr. Knight. I heard about the showdown that went down at the racetrack. You did a very brave thing for our town."

"The police are the real heroes. I'm grateful they were there when things started to get out of hand." He wiggled the fingers of his right hand that was starting to swell. Pain radiated along the bruised and broken skin of his knuckles, evidence of the fistfight he'd found himself in the middle of when his cover had been blown. "At least I didn't break any bones."

"At least not on yourself. I was going to ask how the other guy fared, but I have a good guess," she stated with raised brows. "You'll want to take it easy with that hand for a couple of days. I'll get you an ice pack to help with the swelling."

“Thanks, that’d be great.” He patted the pockets of his jeans for his phone, only to come up emptyhanded. “I must have lost my phone in the tussle. Could you have someone call my wife? I was supposed to be home an hour ago. She’s got to be worried sick by now.”

“Here, why don’t you use mine.” Dr. Stillman handed her phone to him. “I’ve been meaning to ask how the two of you are doing. I don’t mean to be nosy—well, maybe I do—but I’ve been thinking about your situation a lot. Has she regained her memories? Are you still on good terms? How did you deal with the fallout from the past?”

Maverick couldn’t help but chuckle. With the way the doctor was talking, one would assume she was referring to a storyline from a movie or a book. Yet, he and Bella had lived it, were living it. It’d only been a couple of weeks since she’d gotten amnesia, but it felt like much longer. Telling their story would take more than a few minutes, minutes that would prolong Bella’s worry. Holding up the cell phone, he remarked, “I’d be happy to answer your questions after I call Bella.”

“Of course,” she replied, chagrined. “I’ll go get that ice pack for you.”

Once Maverick was alone, he quickly dialed Bella’s number. Warmth flooded his chest as soon as she picked up. “Babe, it’s me.”

“Mav! Where are you? I thought you’d be home by now. Are you okay?”

“I’m good, just a little banged up. I lost my phone; that’s why I didn’t call you sooner. I’m sorry to keep you waiting. Things didn’t go quite as planned, but we got enough evidence to put them away.”

“Banged up?! How badly are you hurt?”

“Not bad at all. It’s nothing that your kisses can’t fix.” He smiled, remembering their precious time together last night. “I’m sure you’ll have me nursed back to health in no time.”

“Maverick Knight, how can you joke at a time like this?”

“Is that Dad?” Jesse’s voice came over the line. “Is he okay?”

“He seems to be since he still has a sense of humor,” she answered Jesse before talking to Maverick again. “I’m so glad you’re okay, Mav. I tried hard not to worry all morning, but when you didn’t come back when you said you would—” She cut herself off with a sigh. “Are you coming home soon? I can’t wait to see you. Jesse, too.”

“Soon. I’m just waiting for the doctor to get me an ice pack for my hand.”

“You got hurt bad enough to go to the hospital? Are you really okay, Mav?”

“I’m fine. Officer Hughes wanted me to come by and get checked out just in case. I promise I’m not keeping anything from you.” Movement at the door caught his eye. He glanced over and saw Dr. Stillman walking back into the room. “The doctor’s here. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“We’ll be waiting. I love you, Mav.”

“I love you, too, babe. Let Jesse know I’ll see him soon.” He ended the call and returned the phone to the doctor. “Thanks for letting me make a call.”

“Of course.” A grin played on Dr. Stillman’s lips as she handed him a blue ice pack. “From the sound of things, I’m guessing that you and Bella are doing well.”

“We are. God has been so gracious. She hasn’t recovered all her memories yet, but she knows about our past and we both decided to start fresh. We’re doing well.”

“So, this bout of amnesia really was a good thing then. Our God sure works in mysterious ways.”

“Amen to that.” He hopped off the exam table and grabbed his jacket. “Are we about done, Doc? I’d like to get home to my family.”

“Yes, you’re good to go. If any issues come up, just come on back.”

“Will do, thanks!”

Maverick jogged out to the hallway, anticipation coursing through his veins. He was back in his car in no time and on his way home. It was only a matter of minutes before he was parked in the driveway, then running to the front porch. Before he could get his key out, the front door swung open, and Bella jumped into his arms.

“Mav! You’re home!”

“Oof!” Completely thrown off by Bella’s enthusiastic greeting, Maverick stumbled backwards, taking Bella with him. He used his good hand to steady her as the porch railing stopped them from falling. In the next heartbeat, she was flush against his torso, her eyes open wide in surprise.

“Sorry! I didn’t mean to tackle you, Mav! I just got excited to see you.”

“I can tell.” Laughing, he held her closer and touched her forehead with his. “You might’ve tackled me harder than the bad guys did.”

“They tackled you?!” She ran her hands along his chest and arms, checking him out thoroughly. “Are you hurt?”

“I was kidding, love. They didn’t stand a chance.” He held up his injured hand for her to see. “And even if I did get tackled, I would’ve been okay. I went through worse playing football.”

“That was so long ago, Mav!”

“Are you calling me old?”

“Not old, just out of practice,” she teased. “Let me see your hand. You need some kisses, don’t you?”

“I sure do. Kisses are just what the doctor ordered.”

“I think that can be arranged.” She inched closer and nudged the tip of his nose with hers. “Starting with this one—”

“Dad, you’re home!” Jesse appeared at their side, a wide grin on his face. His excitement faded to mild disgust when he realized the act he’d just interrupted. “I never thought I’d say this, but do you guys have to kiss all the time?”

“Not all the time, sweetheart.”

“I’m afraid so, son.”

Bella and Maverick replied at the same time yet so differently, Jesse laughed out loud. “You guys are hilarious. Just please don’t kiss in public, especially not in front of my friends.”

“How about hugging?” Maverick asked as he held his hand out to pull Jesse into their embrace. “Is this allowed?”

Jesse rolled his eyes as he hid a smile. “Maybe. I’ll think about it.”

“My two men. It’s good to be together again. My heart is so full.” Bella beamed as she wrapped her arms around both of them. “Come on, it’s time to start our Christmas festivities! Should we get a tree first or put up lights on the house? Or we could buy matching pajamas and take family pictures! There’s so much we can do!”

“I vote for the tree! I’m gonna grab my jacket. Be right back!” Jesse squirmed out of their group hug, then ran for the front door.

“I guess it’s been decided.” Bella laughed as she took Maverick’s hand in hers. As they walked into the house, she turned to him and whispered, “You’ll have to take a raincheck on those kisses, Mav. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. You know why?”

She smiled up at him, looking content. “Why?”

“Because, love,” he stated with full assurance, knowing that the next words out of his mouth were the truest ones he’d ever spoken, “you are worth the wait.”

Epilogue

BELLA

Bella glanced around the long rectangular table where she and her loved ones were seated on New Year's Eve. Her dad had closed Flapjacks early, allowing them to gather for a homecooked dinner. All the fixings were on the table—honey-glazed ham, garlicky roasted broccoli, cheesy baked mashed potatoes, and several delicious desserts. Conversation abounded and the mood was bright and cheerful as everyone filled their plates. The only thing fuller than Bella's stomach was her heart.

Having her family and friends together made this evening all the more special. Sophia and her husband were there, along with Nora, Lottie, and Milo. Maverick sat to her right, and the image of him laughing with her dad was everything she could have hoped for.

Jesse, who sat on her other side, saw the change in their relationship as well. "I think God answered my prayers about Dad and Grandpa!" he whispered to Bella. "It's so cool to see them talking like friends."

"It is cool. They're definitely proof that God can do miracles." She dabbed at the corners of her eyes as a sense of awe washed over her.

"Totally," he replied with a knowing twinkle in his blue eyes.

There was no denying how many miracles the Lord had done for her family recently. Some of them were unbelievable, like the one she'd found out about at the doctor's office earlier that day, but she supposed that's what the definition of a

miracle was—God doing what people thought was impossible. The best part was that they were able to witness these miracles. Her faith and trust in God had grown so much as a result.

That's why she could honestly say her amnesia was an unexpected blessing. Even though she hadn't recovered all her memories, she still had peace in her heart. As she had learned these past couple of weeks, it wasn't so much about what she had lost after her accident but more about what she had gained. A deeper faith. An amazing son. A renewed marriage. And, most of all, hope. The new year before them presented so many more possibilities, she couldn't wait to discover them all with the people around this table.

As the group wrapped up their meal and got ready to dig into the desserts, Maverick set his fork down and stood up. He cleared his throat and called for their attention. "I'd like to say a few words, if I may. First of all, a big thank you goes to Trevor for making this wonderful meal for us. Thank you, Dad."

"It's my pleasure, son." Trevor smiled and raised his glass in acknowledgment.

Bella noticed Jesse watching the interaction between his dad and grandfather. The joy welling up inside of her matched the huge grin on his face. She had a feeling her mama's heart would never get tired of seeing her son smile like this.

She was so caught up looking at Jesse, she didn't realize everyone had fixed their eyes on her until Sophia waved from across the table.

"Sis, it's your turn!"

"Hey, love," Maverick spoke up at her side, "I have something I'd like to say to you."

When she turned to face him, she found him on one knee. "Oh! What's going on, Mav? What are you doing?"

The corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled. "I know you said no more secrets, but I only kept this one for a few days so I could surprise you with it. I hope you don't mind."

She shook her head, wondering what he was going to reveal. Dressed in a white button-down shirt and dark jeans, he looked so handsome, she couldn't tear her gaze away. But it was his tender expression that completely captured her attention. "Of course, I don't mind. But I'm dying of curiosity now. What's the surprise?"

He gestured to himself and replied, "Me. All of me. As cheesy as that may sound, I want you to know that I'm all in. I'm here to renew my vow to you. I want you to know that I'm fully committed to you and to our marriage."

She gasped in delight at his declaration. Her hormones were already such a wild, beautiful jumble of a mess, she didn't know how she'd be able to keep it together. She quickly nodded her understanding and smiled through her tears.

Maverick took her hand and began. "Once again, I take you, Annabella Knight, as my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward. For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, I promise to love and cherish you, till death do us part." Maverick glanced at Jesse with his hand outstretched. "The rings, please, son."

Jesse walked over and handed a small black velvet box to Maverick. He shot Bella a mischievous grin before sitting back down.

Maverick opened the box to reveal two gold bands, one bigger than the other. They appeared simple at first glance, but a closer look revealed a meaningful design. Both rings had small grooves in them that, when aligned together, formed the shapes of a heart and a cross.

"I chose these rings," he explained, "because they remind me of how important it is to have faith and love as the foundation of our relationship. I'm renewing my commitment to follow the Lord as I lead our family and to love you like Christ loves the church." He put the larger band on his left hand and stated, "This ring symbolizes the vow I'm making to you in front of our family and friends. Annabella Knight, will you say 'I do' again to being my wife?"

Joy overwhelmed Bella to the point where she didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Too moved to speak, she held out her hand to receive her ring. Once Maverick had slipped it on, she rose to her feet to pull him up. Standing on her tiptoes, she tilted her head up and placed her mouth on his. This act, while a reflection of their closeness, was a shadow of the connection they shared. A connection that had developed over the span of decades and, after having been put through the fire, was now stronger than ever.

This kiss felt different to Bella—more precious and hard earned and satisfying. She sensed Maverick's tenderness and care in the way he cradled her head. He took his time, translating his devotion into a language her lips innately understood. This man loved her with his whole heart, and she loved him the same. And with the Lord's help, they would continue to live out the vows they had renewed today.

Bella could have gone on kissing Maverick if not for the cheers that started up around them. They broke apart to find their family and friends clapping like they'd just won the Super Bowl.

"It looks like the two of you could use a honeymoon!" Lottie remarked with a wink.

Maverick laughed while Bella's face flushed with embarrassment. The smiles on everyone's faces, including her dad's and Jesse's, put her at ease. This was a night of celebration, and it was time to add her surprise to the mix.

She took a seat and gestured for Maverick to do so as well. After searching through her purse, she took out the box she had prepared and presented it to him. "I have a surprise of my own for you. Go ahead, open it."

His brows shot up high on his forehead the second he lifted the lid. He was truly speechless for a good five seconds as he stared at the contents, then at Bella, and back again. "This is a pregnancy test. Is this *your* pregnancy test?"

"Jesse can help answer that question." She motioned for their son to approach. "You're up, sweetheart."

As they had planned for him to do, Jesse took off his sweatshirt to reveal a T-shirt underneath, one with the words *Big Brother* in bold block letters. The instant Maverick saw the shirt, he lost his composure. Tears fell down his face as he asked Bella, “You’re pregnant?”

Bella nodded. “I thought something was off, so I went to the doctor’s yesterday and they confirmed it. We’re having a baby!”

Maverick blinked quickly, still in shock. “How?”

Milo chuckled. “I think we all know how, man. There’s no need to get into the details.”

Everyone around the table laughed along with him, except for Jesse who looked like he was looking for a place to hide.

“From the stork, of course,” Bella joked in an attempt to ease the awkwardness. “Well, we all know the real answer is God. He did a miracle, one of many that He’s done for our family.”

“He sure did,” Maverick chimed in as he placed a hand on Bella’s midsection. “We’re having a baby. Guys, we’re having a baby!”

Milo was the first to raise his hand. “Don’t forget our deal, Mav,” he said with a wink.

Bella glanced at Maverick, who wore a sheepish smile. “What deal is he talking about?”

“I, uh, may have promised to name our next kid after him.”

“You did what?”

“Don’t worry, Bella,” Milo cut in, “I’ll settle for a middle name.”

Excitement hung in the air as their family and friends began chiming in with their own suggestions for the baby’s first name.

As everyone talked, both Bella and Maverick turned to Jesse and exclaimed, “I can’t believe you kept two secrets!”

“I did good, didn’t I?” he touted. “I’m so excited to be a big brother.”

Bella smiled proudly. “I’m so excited for you. You’re going to be an amazing one, sweetheart.”

The three of them shared a hug before Jesse got pulled away by Lottie for a piece of pie.

“I can’t believe you’re pregnant,” Maverick remarked as he took Bella’s hands in his. “This is the best surprise. Thank you, love.”

“Thank you for *your* surprise, Mav. I love the bands, and I’m so glad you have a ring to wear now. And the vow you made was perfect. I can’t think of a better way to start off this new year.”

“Me either. This may be our most memorable Christmas season ever.”

“It definitely is for me, which I know isn’t saying much considering the fact that I have amnesia,” she joked. “But this one will be hard to beat.”

He tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. “It’s been a month since the accident. I thought you’d remember more by now. Will you be okay if your memories don’t come back?”

She nodded with certainty. “I’ll be okay. I have the rest of my life to create new ones. That’s what I want more than anything, to make memories with you and Jesse and our little one.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” Maverick confirmed, drawing her into his arms once again. “We’ll make the best memories possible and enjoy every moment we have together.”

“I love the sound of that. And I love you, Mav. I’m so happy you’re my husband.”

“And I’m so happy you’re my wife. I love you, Bella.” Then Maverick murmured in her ear a promise she would never forget: “Always have, always will.”

* * *

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Liwen Y. Ho works as a chauffeur and referee by day (AKA being a stay at home mom) and an author by night. She writes sweet and inspirational contemporary romance infused with heart, humor, and a taste of home (her Asian roots).

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Sign up for Liwen's newsletter to receive an exclusive free book, news about her upcoming releases, giveaways, sneak peeks, and more at: <http://liwenho.com/free-book>.



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