



The
Mountain
of **Regret**

BOOK ONE OF THE FULTON RIDGE ESTATES SERIES

LAURA DOMINO

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The Mountain of Regret

BOOK ONE OF
THE FULTON RIDGE ESTATES SERIES

LAURA DOMINO

The Mountain of Regret

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A Note from the Author

Fulton Ridge, Texas is a fictional small town northwest of where Houston, Texas actually is. This fictional setting is big enough for the poor, the rich, and everything in between.

It's a place where parents do everything they can to raise their kids right. It's a place where flawed characters learn spiritual growth. It's a place where both good and bad people live and work and play.

The community-minded characters will look after others. These character sometimes pop in from one book to the next. So keep your eyes open for the generous acts of the Fulton Ridge residents.

1 John 4:19-20

We love because he first loved us.

Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.

CHAPTER ONE

Gina stood at her kitchen sink after a full day of work at Paige's Bridal Boutique, wishing her charming prince would sweep her off to his castle where she would live a worry-free life. If her fantasy ever came true, she wouldn't have to bring home an income, make dinner, or clean house. With a sigh, she picked up the last of the dinner dishes from the sudsy sink and rinsed it off.

Correcting herself for her grumbling thoughts, Gina made an effort to recount her blessings. First, she enjoyed her job. Her boss, Paige, made it easy for her to be home on Sundays and a couple of evenings each week so she could be available for Ma. Although at twenty-seven years old, Gina really should be living on her own by now.

Gina lowered her eyes at the second blessing that came to mind. Her relationship with her mother had been close for years. That, paired with the struggles of Ma's dementia symptoms, made Gina grateful to God that she was able to spend time with her in these last months, hopefully, years.

Todd, her brother, shared responsibilities with her for Ma's close supervision since both of them still lived with her. On good days, Gina sometimes forgot that Ma was losing some of her memories. She cherished those moments when they could still enjoy good times together.

And the third blessing that came to mind was that, although old and filled with decades-old furniture, her home was comfortable.

She didn't have anything to complain about.

The front door opened unexpectedly, letting in some noise and the last cool breeze of spring. "Gina! Gina, where are you?" Jack's voice rumbled through the house so loud that Ma came to the kitchen to find out what was going on.

Gina dried the dish and put it away. "Jack, stop being so dramatic. I'm in here." She hung up the damp towel to dry. "By the way, did you remember to bring the ten dollars you owe me?"

Being the oldest of her two brothers, Jack sometimes ordered her around like he was the man of the family, even though Gina was officially the head of the household. He entered the kitchen. "Hi, Ma. It's okay. I'm taking Gina to the big fundraiser at the Turner Pavilion."

Ma frowned and said in a sweet voice, "I don't know that place. Is it here in Fulton Ridge?"

Jack took a step back and looked at Gina and then back at Ma. "We're going to a dance. Do you want to visit Mrs. Dixon? I can walk you next door."

Ma nodded, no joy in her expression.

Jack hugged Ma. "I'll call her and tell her you're coming over." He kissed the top of Ma's head and pulled out his phone.

Gina took her mother aside. "You don't have to go anywhere. I'll stay home tonight."

Ma turned away from her and pulled out a soft drink from the fridge.

With her face flushed with frustration, Gina found Jack in the living room. "I'm staying home. You didn't call, did you?"

Jack put his phone back in his pocket and moved to stand in front of the living room mirror, straightening his shirt collar. “Mrs. Dixon said she’d be happy to spend the evening with Ma.” His hands fidgeted with his hair as if that was more important than their conversation.

“No, Jack.” Gina’s thoughts flew to the last time he sprang a blind date on her with no warning. Not wanting to alarm Ma, she held back all the disapproval she was tempted to unleash and kept her voice low. “A girl feels more confident when she’s had time to prepare for an evening out.”

He glanced at her face and did a double-take. “The angry face needs a little lipstick. Otherwise, you look great. You’re not staying home tonight in an empty house.”

Todd walked by and spoke as he went through the front door. “Come on. You’re late.”

Jack returned his gaze to the mirror. “Todd’s going with us.”

Gina rubbed her forehead. “Am I always the last to know?” She couldn’t believe Jack would do this to her again. “You know, an invitation in advance would be nice.”

Jack checked his hair one last time. “Come on, Gina. It’s Friday night.” After a wink in the mirror, he turned back to her. “Time to relax.”

Raising her eyebrows, she asked, “Did you bring my ten bucks?”

“No. I left all my cash in my apartment.” He pulled out a thin wallet and showed her his driver’s license and a credit card. “I’ll get it to you later.”

Gina gave Jack the last ounce of her patience. His carefree attitude was like skin. It grew with him as he aged. At twenty-

five, it was nice that he wasn't worried about anything, but he'll regret not spending more of his free time with Ma. Gina loved her brother but wished he would show a little more responsibility.

"Come on. Todd's waiting." Jack looked at her clothes and squinted.

"I know. I can't go in these clothes." Surprised that Jack was trying to convince her to go to the dance, Gina looked down at the dress she wore to work and knew it wasn't what she should be wearing to a fundraiser. "A little too business casual?" She tilted her head and squinted right back at him. "Did you set me up with someone?" She added a little suspicion in her tone to send Jack the message that she would not be dating any more of his friends.

Jack put a hand to his chest in an attempt to create a moment of sincerity. "Clearly, you didn't have a great time last month." He used that charming smile that had gotten him out of trouble so many times. "I'm sorry that didn't work out."

Wishing for unfinished chores to give her an excuse to stay home rather than embarrass herself by wearing a too-casual dress to a fundraiser, Gina quickly checked the furniture and floor. The house was flawlessly maintained. Ma didn't have a lot to do, and she sometimes forgot that she'd already cleaned.

Gina didn't have any excuse not to go. Jack was right. The night was young, and so was she. But she didn't want to be stuck at a party where she didn't know anyone. Jack would ditch her the moment a pretty girl came along, and Todd would slip away and hang out with his friends.

Jack, the middle child, was more like an older brother to her. "It's a new day. It's a new month!" His pestering was just a show of love. "There's a whole world of opportunities out

there for you.” His infectious grin started to work on her, quieting her inner grumbling. He knew exactly how to build her expectations.

Ma emerged from the bedroom hallway with her favorite sweater in her hands.

Gina said in a gentle voice, “Ma, you’re going to be indoors. And besides, it’s not terribly cool outside.”

Ma, engrossed in the soft cream-colored sweater, tapped the green embroidered leaves. “You know where I got this, don’t you? My girlfriend and I went shopping at a couple of garage sales that Saturday. They wanted five dollars for it, but I got it for fifty cents. Then I bought a chair for fifty dollars, and they threw in a broken lamp for free. I should’ve paid the five dollars and left.”

Jack shook his head at Gina. “Leave her alone. I’ll walk her next door. You get in the car.” When Gina hesitated, Jack continued, “You look fine.”

“I do not look fine.” Would she feel awkward if she came face to face with boutique customers wearing the party dresses she’d recently sold them? She’d heard about the party when three girls stopped by last Friday to see if any of the boutique’s dresses caught their eyes. One of them spent her daddy’s money on Gina’s favorite dress in the store.

Waiting on her decision, Jack shifted his weight. “You know you want to, but hey, it’s your decision.” He raised his eyebrows to hurry her along.

With the question of who would take care of Ma out of the way, Gina accepted that getting out of the house for a dance would be a great way to blow off some steam. “I’ll need a smaller purse and a pretty—”

“No, Gina. We don’t have time for you to switch purses. Don’t change anything. Just go like that. The lighting is dim anyway.”

“What does that mean?” Gina hated being late to a party, but she didn’t like the sound of Jack’s *lighting is dim* comment.

“Why do you hide from fun? Please, Gina, please be fun tonight. What am I saying? You are fun.” He calmed down slightly and took a breath. “Gina, it’s been too long since you’ve been to a dance. Let’s go.” He started dancing with absolutely no music playing anywhere in the house.

“Stop. Okay, I’ll go,” Gina said. “Let me get my license. I don’t have any pockets, so you have to carry it for me.” She patted his shirt’s chest pocket.

“What? No.” Jack turned to Ma standing in the driveway. He whipped his gaze back to Gina. “Okay. Change purses or clothes. Do whatever you have to, but be in the car by the time I get back.” He headed out the door to take Ma to Mrs. Dixon’s house.

Since Jack would make sure everything was okay before going back to his car, Gina took advantage of the few minutes she had. She fast-walked down the hall to her bedroom and closed the door behind her. Switching to her old stand-by LBD would be fast and easy, so she hurriedly pulled off her work dress and slipped into her little black dress.

Gina grabbed the jacket that was dressy enough to wear with it and put it on. After unpeeling her work purse, she pulled out her driver’s license and a credit card and put them in the interior pocket of her jacket. Her phone gave a notification beep that the battery was down to two percent.

Why hadn't she plugged it in as soon as she'd arrived home?

Having her phone with her tonight was a matter of safety. If she became separated from her brothers, she'd need her phone to get a ride home. Two percent battery? That made the phone totally useless. Thinking through her options, she decided to leave her phone at home this one time. What was she going to do with a phone that had a dead battery? She plugged it in.

The time on the phone urged her to hurry up faster. A glance in the mirror showed that she'd have to grab her small cosmetics bag and touch up her face on the way. The pressure to be ready quickly had given her skin a glistening sweaty sheen. With her mind plagued with her imperfections of appearance and timeliness, she sat on her bed and took a deep breath. When she released the breath slowly, she focused her mind on God, the giver of peace. Not wanting to be upset with Jack anymore, she prayed for God's protection for Jack, Todd, and herself.

After another breath, she put some gardenia-scented lotion in her hand. "Jack?"

"Gina?" His voice carried through the house from the front door.

She rubbed lotion into her hands and hurried to get outside before Jack whined about her making them late.

Jack drove his gray Toyota Highlander to the parking lot of the Turner Pavilion. When the three siblings walked inside, Todd disappeared quickly into the crowd. Gina knew she'd see him before too long.

Jack took Gina's hand and led her onto the dance floor while an upbeat crossover song from a Christian band played.

When she'd heard about the fundraiser for the Fulton Ridge Volunteer Fire Department from the girls who came into the bridal boutique to buy dresses for it, she didn't think she would be able to attend. Gina remembered overhearing the college girls chatting about trying to get a date with one of the cute volunteer firemen. Since she had been persuaded by her brother to come, the decision had largely been taken out of her hands. Now she could relax and enjoy the party.

Allowing the music to melt away the day's stress, she moved to the rhythm.

Jack seemed interested in a blonde who stared back at him. "I'm going to get us a couple of drinks. Don't go far." Then Jack took off in a hurry in the direction of the girl.

As Gina left the dance floor, she noticed a tall, dark-haired man she might like to meet. She looked away, hoping he hadn't seen her interest. After a few more steps, she peeked at him from over her shoulder and saw a woman standing next to him. He was probably at the party with his girlfriend. She turned in the other direction and scanned the crowd to see if any of her friends were there.

She stood near the bar and watched the dancers who seemed to be more athletes than music fans. She wouldn't go dance in the crowd by herself no matter how the upbeat music called to her. The crowd ebbed and flowed as the music changed to something more mellow. She scanned the area searching for Jack and Todd. Her brothers were nowhere in sight. Why had Jack insisted she come to the dance? Did he intend to introduce her to someone, and did that someone

forget to show up? When she turned back to watch the dance floor again, Todd walked up to her.

“I brought drinks.” He handed her an icy glass with clear liquid. “Where did Jack go?”

Gina tasted it. No alcohol. “I think he found an old girlfriend. If you see him, remind him he can’t leave without us. I don’t have another ride home.”

“He’ll take us home.” Todd grinned. “If it makes you feel any better, I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“I’m not worried about him being drunk. I’m worried about him letting a girl distract him enough that he slips away and takes a girl for a midnight swim. I don’t want to pay for another ride back home.”

“Wow, Gina. What is all this worry?”

“I’m just saying... Neither of us knows how this day will end.” With an eye roll, she drank her soft drink and tried to stop thinking about all that could go wrong tonight. Glad she put on a jacket with pockets, she at least had a way to pay for a ride home if it came to that.

“You’re needlessly anticipating trouble,” Todd said. “We need to find you someone to dance with.”

“Most of the guys on the dance floor are too young for me.” Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of the man she’d seen earlier. He was checking her out. “Todd, do you know that guy?” She let Todd follow her gaze to the man.

“Nope. Want me to shoo him away? Has he been bothering you?”

“I don’t know who he is, but he’s been staring.” She’d like to know his name. And his number. And why was he so

disarmingly handsome? “Actually, you could get me another drink. Do you mind, Todd?” She gave Todd her plastic cup.

José enjoyed the sparkling light dancing on the smile of the woman who arrived at the party with two men. Neither of them seemed to be her boyfriend or husband. If one was romantically involved with her, he wasn't showing it.

Keeping his distance, José was content to wait for more information before introducing himself.

He turned his back to her to whisper a quick, but very important prayer. “Father, nudge me toward her if she's the one for me. Otherwise, I'll know she's a distraction. I would rather not date a distraction like that.”

After a breath to steady himself, José turned back around to find her again.

She smiled at him and then looked away.

When the connection of her smile was replaced by the hollow absence of her gaze, he knew. *Father, I'll take that as a nudge. That was definitely a nudge from You. Thank You, Father. She's beautiful.*

He looked away and remained nonchalant. Then after looking again, he noticed she was alone. He couldn't let her be bored at such a great party. Stepping at a casual speed, he came alongside her and turned at the right time to fake an accidental touch with his elbow to hers. “Excuse me. I didn't make you spill a drink, did I?”

“No. Don't worry. I don't have a drink. You're fine,” she said.

“Then would you like me to get you a drink? What would you like? Soft drink? Or not. I hear the Margaritas are good here.”

Her smile lit up her face. “Actually, my brother is on his way to get me a drink. I’m Gina.” She held out her hand.

He took her hand in his. “You have an enchanting smile, Gina. I’m José.”

“Can I help you, José?” The tall gruff-voiced man, a different one than the man who just left, gave her a plastic cup filled with a clear liquid.

José let go of Gina’s hand and took a step back.

The guy was either a protective brother or a bodyguard. His attitude and frown warned that she would not be easy to talk to, if he had anything to say about it.

“Sure.” José smiled at him. “I’ll have what she’s having. Thanks.”

“No. Get your own drink.” The man gave a very practiced, intimidating stare. “I’ve got my eyes on you.”

Gina laid a hand on her brother’s shoulder. “Jack, this is José. José, this is my brother, Jack. I have another brother around here somewhere.”

“Very nice to meet you, Jack.” He patted Jack’s other shoulder.

Other than shirking away from him and giving a dim sneer, Jack didn’t respond.

José nodded to the dance floor as he spoke to Gina. “Would you like to dance?”

She handed her drink to her brother. “Love to.”

Gina's innocent smile gave him the impression that she was enjoying being with him. The overhead lights glittered in her eyes as she relaxed on the dance floor. She moved well to the beat and appeared classy, not too flirty.

As they let the music guide their movements, José could see them as a couple. He'd have to ask her out to prove himself right.

When the music changed to a slow song, José pulled Gina closer. "Do you know anyone in the Volunteer Fire Department?"

She danced easily with him. "I don't think so," she said. "I was going to stay home tonight, but my brother Jack, insisted that I come to the dance."

"I'm glad he did." José noticed her brother glaring in the direction of the dance floor. "He looks upset."

Gina tilted her head. "Don't give it a second thought. Do you have a sister?"

"No," he said.

"If you did, you might understand that protective stare. It's because he doesn't know you."

José noticed Jack's position hadn't changed. "His mind must be busy."

Gina looked over her shoulder at her brother. "Why do you say that?"

"His gaze isn't following anyone." José waited for her to turn back and then asked, "Is he always this protective of you?"

Gina shook her head and glanced back at Jack before answering. "No, not at all. Honestly, he's done a one-eighty

tonight. The only reason I agreed to come here was that he was being fun and charming at home. Something must have happened.”

“Do you think he’ll be all right?” José didn’t want to lose the opportunity to get to know her because of her brother.

“Sure, he’ll be fine.” Her head wasn’t turned toward her brother, but her mind was obviously still on him.

The next song, the most popular song on the radio, gave everyone not dancing a chance to race to the dance floor. “You’re a good dancer.” José glanced around the room. “Can’t say that about everyone out here on the floor.” He laughed to encourage her to relax. Hopefully, she wasn’t still thinking about her brother.

When the music changed to an energetic beat, they started jumping with the rest of the crowd. When he had Gina’s attention again, he yelled, “Best song of the night.”

Instead of yelling a response back to him, she smiled and let her eyes tell him how much fun she was having.

When the song changed again, Gina took José’s hand and led him back to Jack. “Where’s my drink? I’m parched.”

Jack’s gaze bored into José. “You heard her, get her a bottle of water. No, make that two *unopened* bottles of cold water. We’ll wait.” Jack crossed his arms over his chest and bounced his chin slightly to the beat of the music.

Gina frowned. “Jack, behave yourself. José, you don’t have to. All that obedience training and he still doesn’t know how to act in public.” She laughed and leaned closer to talk without yelling in his ear. “Seriously, he’s a little off tonight. Something must have happened to upset him. I don’t know what it could be.”

When he noticed Jack didn't apologize to Gina for getting rid of the drink he'd held for her, José said, "Why don't we run off to get those waters?" He raised his eyebrows at Gina.

She took his hand and led the way. "Sorry about Jack."

He grinned at Gina. "It's understandable. I can appreciate his protective attitude. If I had a sister, I would want to make sure she didn't get mixed up with the wrong guy."

"Okay. Your name is José, and you have no sisters. I wonder what else I can learn about you tonight." Gina stopped with her face close to his, listening for his answer as they stood in the drink line.

"What do you want to know about me?" He wanted to tailor his response to her interests, but he needed to know more about her first.

"I'm the manager at a bridal shop," she said. "What do you do?"

"I'm a business owner." José stepped up to the bar and ordered three water bottles. After he paid, he carried two bottles away from the bar, hoping Gina would get her bottle and follow him. He pointed her to an empty table. After she nodded, he put the water bottles on the table and waited for her to choose a chair. He held the chair as she sat, and then he sat next to her.

"José, I'm intrigued. Which business do you own?"

As she opened her bottle and sipped, he subtly mirrored her movements. Both the atmosphere and the music were hot. The cold water was just what he needed to cool him down.

"Do you like Mexican food?"

"I love Mexican food." Her voice held a noticeable spark of interest.

“I’m the proud owner of José’s Beans.”

“José! Of José’s Beans? Outstanding. Are you kidding?”

“I am not kidding. Have you eaten there?”

“Many times,” she said. “But I never thought about complaining to the owner. The food’s too good.”

José couldn’t hold back his laughter. “Stop, stop. You’re embarrassing me. I guess you could ask to speak to the owner to compliment him on the great service and great food.”

Her eyes twinkled in the dark room. “Now I will.” She stopped smiling long enough to drink more of her water. Then she touched his arm. “Don’t look now, but Jack’s on his way over here. Would you like to dance with me?”

“What a great idea.”

Gina waved at her brother as Jack reached the table. “Thanks for bringing me to the party. I hope you’re having a good time.”

“Here’s your water.” José handed the unopened bottle to Jack and followed Gina to the dance floor.

CHAPTER TWO

José drove home from work the next day for a light lunch away from his crowded restaurant, relinquishing control to Kiki, the manager on duty. Satisfied that Kiki was handling everything while he was on his break, he made a tuna sandwich, adding a few avocado slices, and sat in the recliner for a few minutes to rest his feet.

Even though he didn't think he was acting strangely, his mood at work caused a couple of employees to comment about his elevated level of happiness. He wasn't doing anything differently than he normally would. But he hadn't been able to get Gina off his mind.

Gina's persistence last night at the fundraiser made it easier to get to know her. She didn't just dance with him once and walk away. She really seemed to like him.

What was it about her relaxed smile that he couldn't get enough of? When she leaned in to talk, he wanted to touch her skin. Something about her stayed with him even after they went their separate ways. Was it the way she grabbed his hand and kept him with her?

If there was anything wrong with that picture, it was her brother.

That brother of hers was wary. Why was Jack not very trusting of him?

José had to believe Gina. It was only because Jack didn't know him yet. He needed a plan to win Jack over. He wouldn't be able to give Jack coupons for his restaurant. That wouldn't

work. He'd have to find a different way of making friends with Jack so he didn't cause any difficulties for Gina.

Should he give up the idea of dating Gina? Was she too much trouble, or was she worth all the effort? José would have to determine that in the coming days. He'd hate to miss out on a love of a lifetime because she had an over-protective brother.

José decided to tread carefully and see if there could be a happy ending to what might be a love story with great potential.

The worst thing he could do was rush the relationship with Gina. If he could remain calm and have patience, then he could win her trust. Anything worthwhile required hard work and endurance. He knew that from his experience in the restaurant business. He'd view the relationship as a work in progress.

One thing that made him pursue her was the hard-to-get act she pulled when she wouldn't tell him her phone number. He'd never met a woman who refused to give out her number.

Since Gina seemed to want to see him again, he would work on that as his next step. He'd leave his restaurant a little before her boutique closed for the day and ask her for her number again.

After a few more hours at the restaurant, José drove to Paige's Bridal Boutique. At least he'd gotten the name of her workplace out of her at the dance. He checked the time before turning off his car. Leaning to see better, he caught a glimpse of her at the front of the store. She was in customer service mode with an emotional woman. He knew from experience that it was a delicate dance to make sure frustrated customers go home happy. He'd give her a few minutes before surprising her with his visit.

He watched in silence as Gina carried a gown to the back of the store. The woman's hope-filled gaze proved Gina knew how to turn the situation around.

That was his cue to quickly step up to the plate and swing with his heart set on a home run. He left his car and stepped into the store as Gina returned to the front of the store.

“José. This is unexpected. Looking for a dress?” Her eyes held the silent laughter of enjoyment.

“No, just looking for a friend. Ah. I found one. Hello, friend.” He grinned. “You forgot something at the dance.”

“Did I?” She looked away for a second, thinking. “I'm pretty sure I didn't forget anything.”

José tried to keep his face serious. “You forgot to get my phone number.”

She seemed to enjoy his humor. “I didn't have my phone, remember?”

“But you have it with you now, don't you?” He gave her a hopeful smile.

Gina glanced back at the dressing rooms. “Well, actually, I'm working right now. I'm not on my phone while I'm working.”

José didn't want her to perceive him as being pushy, so he backed off. Shifting his gaze to the mannequins, he asked, “Which is the most popular style of wedding dress?”

“For this store, the full skirt is more popular than the straight skirt at the moment.”

José touched the plastic bag that held a slender white dress with a lot of extra fabric at the bottom. “What about this kind?”

“The mermaid style is low in popularity these days. We’re actually ordering dresses for fall weddings right now, so the new winter bridal dress samples should be delivered any day now. It’s always fun when we find out what Paige ordered for the store. It’s like Christmas when the new dresses arrive.” Gina’s expression as she looked at the dresses convinced him that she knew exactly what she was talking about.

“Do most brides order dresses or buy off the rack?” His intention was to keep her talking so he could stay as long as possible, listening to her soothing voice and watching her shine in her comfort zone.

Gina shook her head. “How do you have time to come visit when you have a thriving, busy restaurant to run?”

José smiled at the realization that she’d figured out his plan. “How are you able to do anything outside of work with brothers texting you all the time?”

A brief glint of pleasure in her eyes matched the slight curve of her lips. Gina tilted her head. “How do you know my brothers text me?” If she was trying to hide her enjoyment of them being together again, it was not working.

A boost of confidence surged through him. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

A boutique employee rolled a vacuum cleaner to the front of the store and plugged it into the wall.

Gina got her attention with a wave and said in a low voice, “Not yet. Wait until the last customer has left, please.”

The girl nodded and went to straighten the floral headpieces in the glass case.

Gina answered, “Yes, my brothers do keep me in the loop if anything important is going on with the family. I’m good at

juggling as long as there are only a manageable amount of balls in the air.”

He laughed. “Ah. Juggling. Yes, I remember juggling. But now I hire people to juggle for me. It has worked out really well.”

Gina squinted in disbelief. “Don’t tell me you don’t still juggle. I’m guessing you have a lot going on at work. You have a full plate—so to speak—every day, right?” She took her eyes off him for a minute, pulling her phone out of her pocket.

“Smart woman,” said José, excited at her willingness to let him stay while she was busy at work. He had to balance his delight with courtesy. “Yes, I do have a lot to take care of at work, and I still juggle.”

She looked up at him occasionally while she tapped on her phone.

“But instead of doing all the bookkeeping and managing by myself like I used to, I’ve decided to relax my list a little so I can allow others to take on important duties and participate with me in the success of my business.” José watched her eyes flicker around the room and then return to her phone. In spite of not having her full attention, he continued. “For instance, I’m in charge of a good number of things, but I don’t hire and fire the waiters. Having too many balls in the air makes managing the business more difficult.”

“I’ll be right back.” Gina left him to check on the bride who was changing. She helped her to the large mirror at the back of the boutique.

The bride didn’t seem happy. But when Gina showed her a picture on her phone, the bride’s face showed interest. She

asked, “Do you have that here for me to try on?”

Gina shook her head. “No, but I can order it and have it here in three months.”

“Are you sure?” The bride’s frown gave her worry lines on her forehead.

“This vendor is very reliable.”

The bride’s interest improved, but her voice showed caution. “What if it doesn’t fit me very well?”

Gina grinned. “First, we’ll order it for your size. Then when it arrives, we can do any alterations necessary. We have the best seamstress in town. She can make it fit all your beautiful curves.”

The bride looked again at the photo. “I’ve been in five bridal shops, but nothing I’ve tried on is working for me. I haven’t seen this one anywhere. It’s spectacular.” She pointed at the image and nodded. “This is what I want.”

José enjoyed how Gina did her best to meet the needs of her customer. *Father, I pray for Gina to receive even more of Your wisdom. Just like her, I’m trying to be there for my customers and employees. Please help me be a blessing, just like I’m witnessing Gina blessing her customer, and make my presence at work and in life comforting and joyful.*

The woman smiled at Gina. “You’re sure you can order it?”

“I’m sure. We work with this vendor all the time. I’m confident that this style of dress will fit you. The skirt has enough gathers that it can be let out or taken in. Our seamstress can make the bodice fit you very comfortably.” Gina waited for the bride to make the final decision.

“Okay. Then help me order it. How much is my down payment?”

Gina finished helping the bride and then walked her to the door. When she locked the front door, she waved the employee back over to the vacuum cleaner and turned to José. “Last customer out the door.” She gave a big smile. “Is this what you feel like when all your customers have left and your staff is cleaning up?”

He couldn’t look away from her face. “The relief of doing the closing tasks is a great feeling. Yes, one more thing we have in common.” He wanted to reach for her hand and feel its softness, but it wasn’t time for that yet.

“And now I have closing duties to perform.” She smiled and held her hand toward the door.

José knew she was tired and wanted to finish and go home. He raised his voice over the sound of the vacuum cleaner. “I can wait outside and walk you to your car, if you like.”

She turned to the window. “Well, it is dark out there, and it is Saturday night.” She headed to the door. “You can wait for me, if you like.”

He grinned at her echoing his words back to him. He nodded and allowed her to have the final words. For now.

José’s instincts had always been good, and he had a feeling about Gina. She would be good for him.

After a few minutes, the boutique door opened and the two women stepped out. Gina locked the door and double-checked it. She turned to the other woman. “Where are you parked?”

She pointed to a car not ten feet away. “See you next week, Gina.”

“Yes, and thanks for your hard work tonight.” Gina stood with José on the sidewalk as the woman sat in her car and started the engine. “Well, I’m parked under that light.” She gestured to a large light in the center of the parking lot with a dark red Toyota Camry under it.

He stepped off the sidewalk and slowly walked with her. “I’ve got to hand it to you. For someone who claims to not be on her phone at work, you made it work for you tonight.” José didn’t want to let her think he didn’t catch her change of heart about pulling out her phone in front of him, especially when that was her excuse for not giving him her number. “I’m glad I got to see you shine like a star in your workplace. You were in your element.”

She smiled and crossed her arms over her chest. “Like a star?”

“Sure,” he said. “You turned an unhappy customer into someone begging you to take her money.” He shook his head. “Like a star.”

She pulled out her phone as she walked. “Fine. Give me your phone number. I’ll text you, and then you’ll have mine. You’ve earned it. You’ve been patiently waiting a whole day.” Her grin brightened up her face even in the darkness of the night.

He couldn’t keep his smile from spreading across his face if he’d wanted to. “I’m a patient guy.”

She typed his number as he gave it. Then she typed a text to him and gazed at him with delighted eyes, waiting for him to read it.

His phone buzzed the notification, and he read her text.

You win!

He said, “I win? This means I get to call and ask you out.”
He quickly tapped his response in a text.

I love winning.

Gina read it and smiled at him. “Is that what it means?”
She hadn’t stopped smiling since they left the sidewalk. She
leaned against a car. “Now I have to go home.”

The unmistakable attraction in her eyes was all the
response José needed. With a glance over his shoulder, he said,
“I’m parked over there. I’ll be on my way too. Don’t be
surprised if I call tomorrow.”

CHAPTER THREE

After Gina came home from church with Ma and Todd, they ate and finished cleaning their Sunday lunch dishes. She and Ma sat down at their kitchen table for their weekly manicure appointment.

When Ma saw that the last nail was finished, she tried to get up.

Gina stopped her. “Ma, how would you like to watch a little TV? I’ll set it up. How about an old movie?”

Ma squinted, considering whatever other options were going through her mind.

Gina continued. “Let’s see what’s on.”

Ma stood and almost crossed her arms over her chest, wet fingernails and all, but Gina took her wrist and gently pulled her over to the couch in front of the TV.

With a smile, Gina gave Ma a minute to choose where she wanted to sit, knowing Ma always sat on the right side of the couch. Allowing her to choose her place on the couch was giving her some much-needed control over her life. After she started up an old movie, she grabbed a few things from her room, went down the hall, and leaned on Todd’s doorway. “Hey, you busy?”

“Maybe. Why?” He lifted his gaze from his laptop.

“I need to know if you have any plans.” She didn’t draw attention to the fact that she was already wearing a backpack with a water bottle, a rolled-up blanket, and a book inside.

“Because you want to take off. It’s fine. Go ahead. I’ll be here.” His undemanding expression confirmed to her that he understood she needed to get away.

“Thanks, Todd.”

“Let me do this one last thing here.” He tapped the keyboard. “And save it. And I’ll go watch a movie. I can hear it, but I don’t know which one. Have I seen it?”

“Don’t worry it’s not *Steel Magnolias*. I’ll save that for when you’re not around.”

“Thanks. Too much crying.” He closed his computer.

“It’s *My Fair Lady*.”

“Good. Not as much crying.”

Gina laughed. “Not nearly as much crying. Text me if you need me.” She finished her sentence halfway down the hall.

Her habit of keeping her body moving by riding her bike down the pathway along the river that separated The Estates neighborhood from the north part of downtown was as good for her body as it was for her mind. She wasn’t as in shape as a person with a gym membership, but she tried to stay active. Riding to the river to read was a lot more exercise than reading in her bedroom. The bonus most days was soaking up all that brilliant Texas sunshine.

After arriving at the bench on the far side of the river, she laid her bike down in the grass and pulled her book out of the backpack.

As soon as Gina sat on the bench, her phone beeped and notified her that it was a text from José.

Busy? Want to talk?

Today was her day off, and she had the freedom to talk as long as she wanted. She quickly responded to his text.

What's the matter?

No sports on TV today?

Plenty of sports on TV.

I was thinking about talking to you instead.

Instead? That was sweet. His text warmed her heart. She didn't know what to expect from him, but it would be fun to hear his gorgeous voice again.

I accept phone calls. Unless you're in a library.

(Laughing emoji)

He'd been texting quickly, so her ringtone surprised her. When his name came up on her screen, she answered his call right away. "I guess you're not in a library."

"I read all the books already. What are you doing?"

"I haven't read all the books. In fact, I am trying to read one now, but sadly, a very handsome man is interrupting my reading time."

"Just handsome? Don't you mean handsome, charming, lovable, and sexy?"

She laughed. Could his confidence be merely a performance or had he been like that his whole life? Gina would enjoy dating him. As long as it didn't turn into arrogance, a man with confidence was definitely appealing.

"Watch it or next time it might be just *interesting*."

Punctuating her words with a giggle, she couldn't wait to hear his response.

José hesitated and seemed a little more thoughtful. “I really don’t mind interesting. I’ll add that to my list.”

“Your list?”

“The list of all the ways I can make you notice me and like me and fall in love with me.”

Gina thought about what he did for a living. “Are you kidding? You have one of the best restaurants in town. Everyone notices you.” He had a right to be proud of his restaurant. It wasn’t some trendy restaurant that was crowded for a month and then ignored when people found a new place. The restaurant had been popular for years. “Why don’t you put your list away and come ride your bike over here?”

“Where’s here?”

Gina savored the lush landscape by the river. “I’m sitting in the grass, so there’s no actual address to give you. I can give you directions. Where are you now?”

“At work. I’m clocking out now.” José was definitely a successful restaurateur, but he seemed to be having fun as well.

“You’re clocking out?” She laughed. “You’re probably as driven as Paige is.”

“Paige, as in your boss?”

“Yes, Paige as in the owner of Paige’s Bridal Boutique. She’s there all the time. Even when she’s not on the schedule, she steps in to help with something. Owners don’t clock out.”

“*Au contraire,*” José said. “I have to let them know I’m off the clock so they will know to handle whatever comes up without my input. Owners have to have a life outside of work; otherwise, they won’t be able to serve their customers to the

best of their ability. See? You're helping me be a better person."

"You're already a better person. I didn't do that for you." It was always nice to see a man enjoying his work. A grumpy man who let his work problems color his home life would be difficult for her to like. José's passion for people made him interesting. Definitely interesting. Thinking about the two of them together made her wonder if they'd make a good pair. What if her inability to match his passion got tiresome for him after a few weeks?

Fifteen minutes later, José texted that he was on his way. The big Texas sky seemed to smile down on her. With a heart full of gratitude, Gina silently prayed. She'd been enjoying her book, but the fact that José was about to show up put a spark of excitement into her day.

When she heard his bike stop by the bench, she looked up from her book. "Took you long enough."

He slid his sunglasses to the top of his head and winked at her.

A warm blush took over her face as she saw his sun-brightened smile.

José tried to get the bike's kickstand to hold the bike up, but the bike kept falling over. He shrugged. "I don't know what you did to this bike, but it seems to be falling for you."

She smiled, enjoying his charming response.

He laid his bike on the grass and sat beside her on the bench. "I don't remember you saying what you were reading."

"I'm pretty sure I didn't tell you." She put the bookmark inside and closed the book. She showed the cover. "It's *Little*

Women. I think I must have read it in high school, so it's been a while."

"It's a classic." He eyed the narrow river nearby. After an obvious yawn, he made a not-so-subtle move to put his arm behind her on the bench and then around her shoulders.

She laughed. "I brought a blanket. We can sit in the grass and watch the ducks."

He turned to the river. "I didn't see any ducks."

"They'll be here sooner or later. I always see ducks." She put her book in her backpack and spread the blanket out wide enough to give each of them plenty of room.

"I hate to use a cliché, but do you come here often?" He grinned and sat beside her on the blanket, watching the water flowing downriver.

"Not every week." She laughed. "But, yes. I try to get out and go bike riding when I can. It's good for me." When he turned to look at her, she let her gaze follow the lines of his face and the curve of his smile. If she wasn't careful, she could get lost in his eyes. His dark, thick eyelashes stood out against his light brown skin.

When a breeze blew a strand of her hair out of place, José's gaze flicked up to her forehead. His hand blocked her view of his face for a second as he moved the tendril off her forehead. "Can't have anything covering this exquisite masterpiece." His fingers caressed her cheek and slid into her hairline as he smoothed more of her hair away from her face. Gently touching her chin, he tipped her face up slightly. He slowly moved closer.

"José, I, um." Feeling a strange tingle in her stomach, she moved back from him and looked out at the river.

He sat up straighter and paralleled her gaze. “Yes?”

“This is a public area, and I’m not used to public affection.” She wasn’t embarrassed to kiss him, just not in public.

“Fine. I won’t kiss you.” He turned and grinned, holding up a finger. “But now, you know I want to.” As his friendly grin melted into a passionate gaze, he let out a wistful sigh.

She could easily give in to his affection, but this wasn’t the place for it.

A breeze swept his hair forward, ruined his tidy hairstyle, and traded it for a sexy tousled look. His eyes peered out from under the fringe that lay across his face. He smiled. For a second, he watched her hands and then turned his gaze back up to her face.

If he wanted to hold her hands, that would be less of a show of affection. She wanted his kiss and was almost sorry that she told him not to kiss her. A quick change of subject would help her find something else to think about. “I’ve been curious about why you named your restaurant José’s Beans. It doesn’t sound random.”

“Oh, that’s a good story,” José said as he turned back to the river. “My grandfather opened the restaurant when I was a boy. While he was preparing to open it, he taught me about what he was doing. He was always teaching me about the food industry. Since my father didn’t want to be involved in a restaurant and I did, I spent a lot of time with my grandparents.”

“They lived near you here in Fulton Ridge?” Gina leaned on her side to listen.

“They lived here, but I only visited when I wasn’t in school. I worked in the restaurant every summer. It was good for me.” José watched the water gurgling past them. “Anyway, he was preparing to open his restaurant, and he needed to settle on a name. He asked me what I would name it.” José laughed. “I was little.”

“What did little José say?” she asked.

“José’s Beans, of course.” His eyes sparkled with delight.

“Why?” She imagined him as a little boy with a precocious grin.

José tilted his head and leaned a little closer to her. “I was little.” He sat up straighter, laughing. “My world was all about me. Beans were my favorite food, and her cooking was outstanding. In my mind, they were my beans because my grandmother cooked them *for me*.” His emphasis showed pride in his grandmother’s cooking, but it also showed a close connection with family from a young age. That made him even more appealing. “If we were going to share her cooking with other people, they needed to know these beans were the best in the world. If people didn’t eat my grandmother’s beans, they didn’t know what good cooking was.”

Gina laughed with him. “That’s very generous of you to share your beans with the world, José.”

“I’m not certain, but I think my grandfather named his restaurant after me to help me feel ownership. I believe he was trying to give me a connection to him that would last beyond his years. I’m grateful for that.”

She adored the look in his eyes as he stared at the water. His good memories showed a deep respect for family.

José kicked off his shoes and lay across the blanket on his belly. Resting his head on one hand with his gaze directed at her, he said, “If you could pick out what will happen in your future, what would be your dream-come-true future?”

“Good question,” she said. “I don’t know. You go first.” She didn’t want to go into the fairy tale life she’d dreamed of since it was so far off from reality.

“Okay.” He gazed off into the distance like his future was so real he could see it. “I’m a restaurateur, right? So you know that’s going to play into my dreams for the future.”

“Of course,” she said, urging him to continue.

José peered down at the blanket. “I’ve actually been building up a substantial savings account—because that’s what one does when one has big dreams.”

Gina smiled. “Of course.” She paralleled him on the blanket with her chin propped up by her hands.

“So my dream is actually underway.” He grinned at her with laughter in his eyes and raised his eyebrows. “Don’t tell anyone my secret dreams. I’m trusting you, Gina.”

She stared into those deep brown eyes and whispered, “I won’t tell.” She put her finger to her lips. “Shhh.”

José took another breath but kept a relaxed gaze directed at her like they were the only two people on the planet. “It’s another restaurant. I’ve already hired an architect to show me what my dream is going to look like. I’m ready to invest in a location and make it mine.”

Gina tingled with excitement, amazed at this man who was already a big success. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” he said as he turned his gaze to the river. “I can’t wait to see the finished product, people making reservations, and corporate parties. It’s going to be for affluent customers. I’ll have high-end finishes and a Michelin-star chef.”

She let her gaze follow the river bank downstream, speechless at his big dreams. Wanting José to be encouraged, she couldn’t just repeat *Wow!* She closed her gaping mouth, and then she quickly responded, “I’ll be one of your first customers. Definitely.”

He turned back to her. “If you want to go bike riding, we have to make it fast. I’m borrowing the bike from a neighbor, and he wants it back before sunset.”

She sat up. “That’s so cute. His bike has a curfew.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Tuesday was a surprisingly busy day at the boutique. Gina had new customers, repeat party dress customers, and brides coming in for a fitting with Sofia. A dress delivery came in while Paige was away. And one of the employees left early because she became ill.

Knowing there were people who felt stuck in jobs they didn't enjoy, Gina took a moment to appreciate the fact that she didn't feel that way at all. She loved working with Paige. She especially relished helping the young brides who were having the time of their lives picking out all the dresses for their upcoming weddings. When those girls came in, Gina could tell which one of the group was the bride because of the enjoyment on her joyous face.

But now that she was home, it was time to rest from the hectic day. Ma was asleep, and everything was quiet. She was tired enough to drift into a peaceful sleep, but one person had stayed on her mind all day. When she walked into the boutique in the morning and again at lunch, she thought about the charming way José caught her attention at her at the dance where they met.

She remembered how his dazzling smile melted her. When they spoke, his voice energized her. Over the past few days, she hadn't lost any of the infatuation. She still smiled whenever José's face popped into her mind.

On a whim, Gina picked up her phone and started typing a text to José, but she changed her mind and put it back down on

her bed.

José might be busy at work. He might not get the text until much later. What if he texted a response right when she fell off to sleep? That would be annoying. She was tired and needed her sleep.

Something about him was energizing. He was one of the most appealing guys she'd ever met, but he was also gentle and sweet. She definitely wanted to see José again.

Tomorrow after work, she could show up unannounced at his restaurant at dinner time. Should she tell him she was coming over? Should she go with a friend to his restaurant and ask to speak to the owner? One thing was for sure. She was definitely going without her brothers.

Her gaze danced across her bedspread, landing on the darkened screen of her phone. Maybe she'd text him. She picked up her phone. Noticing heat in her face and a sudden tingle in her fingers, she put her phone down and rubbed her hands together.

Why was she nervous? It was obvious that José liked her.

She picked up her phone again and made herself type in a message. Breathing through the excitement, she hit send.

How was your day?

After a few very long seconds, his response finally came through.

What are you doing up? It's late.

Shouldn't you be in bed?

Her heart sped up. Now Gina had to respond.

I was closing down the day and about to put my phone away when all of the sudden my phone started texting you. Sorry if you were trying to sleep. I'll have to give my phone a stern talking to.

Only three seconds after she hit send, her ringtone got her attention. Of course, it was José. She answered in a playful, surprised tone. “José? What are you doing?”

“Gina, I’m glad you texted. I wanted to hear your voice, but I wasn’t sure I should call you every day. I didn’t want you to get tired of me.”

“Aww. That’s sweet.” How could she get tired of him?

“And I’m doing my laundry, to answer your question.”

Even listening to him talk about laundry was worth staying up for. “Laundry? At this hour?”

“A man has to maintain his spotless appearance somehow.” In José’s brief pause, quiet guitar music played in the background. “What would you do if I brought you a gift tomorrow?” His voice sounded tired. The low and undeniably sweet rasp in his voice made him even more desirable.

“I’m not sure. It depends on the gift.” She didn’t want to tell him how excited she would be to get a gift from him. Her pulse sped up. She could feel the adrenaline surge. Now she’d never get to sleep.

José’s voice rose in pitch as he asked, “What kind of gift would make you the most surprised and delighted because that’s what I’m going for.”

Gina laughed. “Well if I tell you what to bring me and you show up with it tomorrow, it won’t be a surprise.”

“Oops. You’re right. It won’t be tomorrow, but it will be sometime within the next two weeks. Or more. It could be later.”

A gift in the next two weeks? She couldn’t wait. Trying to keep her voice calm and low, she said, “But not tomorrow.”

“Not tomorrow,” he said with a laugh.

Unable to keep her calm façade, she giggled again. “So this surprise gift will have to be either a trip to Hawaii or a simple vase of flowers. Either one’s fine. But let me warn you. I love flowers.”

“What kind?”

“What kind of a Hawaiian trip? Or what kind of flowers?” She listened to see what his sense of humor was like.

“I can tell it’s late, and we need to end this conversation.” Even though there was a slight rejection in his words, his voice had a charming tone, and it sounded like he wasn’t ready to get off the phone yet.

“Okay, okay.” She didn’t want him to leave their conversation too early. “I like carnations and roses. Carnations seem to last longer than roses, but roses smell better.”

“*What kind* of Hawaiian trip? Really,” he mumbled. And then his voice became more animated and excited. “The *best* kind of Hawaiian trip. You have to show up in the spring when the flowers are in full bloom.”

She wasn’t expecting that. It sounded delightful. “Aww. Thanks. Now I can go to sleep with a vision of Hawaiian flowers in my head. See? You surprised me with a gift tonight that thrilled me. Mission accomplished.”

The weekend had come too quickly. As the rain tapped against his windows, José wondered what Gina was doing. Were Saturday nights often busy in the boutique?

Gina had settled into a permanent place in his heart. He silently counted how many days ago he'd met her. Had it been eight days?

He'd been with her on three occasions, but he couldn't call any of those events a date. The realization that he'd never asked her out for a proper date surprised him. It was time to make her aware that he had romance on his mind.

José looked at the time on his phone. Was she working? He could call to find out. Or he could call and listen to the sound of her voice. He cleared his throat and walked to his bedroom recliner and used a voice command on his phone to text her.

He spoke his text, "Wasn't sure you were working tonight period. If it's too late let me know period."

Gina's response took only two minutes, but it felt like forever.

Too late for what?

I'm about to leave work.

He forgot to say why he was texting. "I am so smitten by you, girl." Oops. He found that his words were ready to send as a text, so he quickly deleted them and tapped a new message.

It's raining here.

Want me to pick you up and drive you to your car so you don't get drenched?

So sweet. No rain.

Leaving now.

After he read her quick response, his Latin music ringtone started up and Gina's name slipped onto the screen. José raised his eyebrows in surprise. Gina was calling? He lowered his voice intentionally since she seemed to like that. "Good evening. I thought you were about to start driving."

She laughed. "You were texting, and I didn't want to be distracted while I was driving. I had to call to finish talking to you before starting the engine."

"Are you in your car?" he asked.

"No. Just a minute." The sound of metal rattling and clanking against glass came through the phone. "Okay. Sofia has locked the door, and we're going to our cars now."

"I haven't checked the weather app or radar or anything," he said. "So I don't know if the rain missed you completely or if a bigger rain cloud is about to break open in a few minutes."

"José, I appreciate your considerate attention to detail, but it's still muggy in this parking lot from all that afternoon heat." She let out a delightful giggle. "I've been working here for a while now and never had anyone worry about whether I'd get a raindrop on my head." Her joyful voice melted him.

He wanted to be there with her, holding her tightly against him, walking under an umbrella to ... anywhere. "It's important for you to know you can call me if you need an umbrella."

"Aww. Nice. I think I'll be needing one soon. Not that it's starting to rain, but I kind of ... I like that you care."

Glad she couldn't see his goofy grin, he laughed with her. "I do care." The joy coursing through his heart was enough to

make him laugh at anything. “You changed my life. You made me care about you.”

Silence from her end of the conversation worried him a little. Then the beep of her car unlocking relieved his worries. She said with a giggle, “I think I’m going to like being around you, José.”

“Good. I’m glad.” He would burst open with pride with her as his girlfriend. Of course, she would enjoy being with him. She would love it. What’s not to love? “I want you to have lunch with me.”

Her music turned on in her car. “José, I put you on speaker. I’m going to drive home while we talk. Otherwise, I’d be in the parking lot alone. I’d rather be at home. Anyway, what were you saying?”

His invitation had been completely missed. “Gina, I asked if you could have lunch with me tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Her long pause made him worry. “I can do it. But it will have to be later. Not right after church. Do you want me to meet you?”

“Let’s say two o’clock at my restaurant. Will you let me choose your meal?”

“Hmm. Yes. That sounds mysterious and wonderful. I’ve eaten there enough. I know I’d be happy with anything on the menu.”

“Good. I’ll surprise you.”

“I can’t wait.”

When José ended the call, he took out a notepad and scribbled out a special menu just for the two of them. He’d have to make sure to let the staff know to keep all the guests

downstairs at the normal tables, not on the roof. The rooftop seating would have to be marked as a Private Party. He couldn't wait to see Gina's face when she realized his rooftop dining room was as romantic as any restaurant in town.

CHAPTER FIVE

Last night after José had asked her to meet him at his restaurant for lunch, Gina had second thoughts about letting him choose her meal. What kind of meal would the owner of the restaurant plan? She probably wouldn't allow any other man to pick out her meal for her, but José was different. The fact that she'd never had a bad meal there relieved her worries.

When Gina finished painting her mother's nails at their kitchen table, she hoped Ma felt the comfort of their Sunday routine. She checked the time on her phone. She still had plenty of time, but she hurried so she wouldn't be late for the special meal.

She plugged in a tiny electric fan and pointed it at Ma's hands. "Ma, don't move. I'm setting the oven timer. When you hear the timer, then get up and turn it off. Don't move until you hear the timer."

Ma grimaced. "I'm not a baby. I know to let my nails dry. Have a little respect, please."

The fact that she could never predict Ma's mood swings made her worry. Gina took comfort in the fact that Todd would stay with her today and keep her amused.

Gina stuck her head in Todd's room. "I'm leaving. Text if you need me."

Todd nodded and closed his laptop.

She waited until Todd had Ma's attention and involved her in a conversation before she walked out with her purse and

keys in hand. Her drive to the restaurant was filled with anticipation of how the meal would go.

Would José serve her or sit and let his employees serve? Or would happy customers drop over to visit with him? She hoped he'd be able to relax and enjoy the moment.

She parked and noticed there were more empty spaces dotting the parking lot than she'd expected. Were they experiencing a slow afternoon? For his sake, she hoped traffic to the restaurant would pick up soon.

Inside the front door, the hostess greeted her and invited her to the bar where she was immediately served a glass of cold water.

José walked up to her and smiled. "Hello, gorgeous. If you'll come with me, I'll show you to our table."

Gina followed him upstairs to the roof of the restaurant and noticed she was the only person on the roof who wasn't the owner or an employee. The lattice wall at the top of the stairs was filled with bright pink flowers. "I've never been up here before. Do you usually have a lot of customers eating up here?"

He held her chair while she sat. "This is for private parties and overflow. It's our special hidden room that we don't advertise. Those who know about it take advantage of the fresh air when the weather's nice."

Her view of the Fulton Ridge rooftops gave her a different perspective. She turned from the view and studied José's face.

When she turned, he smiled. He'd been watching her. His eyes spoke to her about his interest. His body language gave no suggestion of nervousness. He was at home here.

“So, lunch.” Gina stared at him, making sure he noticed the curiosity on her face. “What are we having?”

He leaned forward with elbows on the table, his gaze intensely focused on her. “Since you like everything, I chose a variety. First, the appetizer. We’ll be served a plate of Jalapeno Poppers, along with the expected chips and salsa. Then, the entree. But I’ll let the anticipation build before I let you in on that secret.”

“Sounds good so far.” She was sure he’d picked out the best of what his restaurant offered.

Soon the chips and salsa were delivered to their table. They enjoyed discussing trivial subjects as their gazes stayed fixed on each other. After the appetizer plates were picked up, the waiter brought a teddy bear whose arms were wrapped around a mug filled with white carnations. José didn’t seem at all surprised.

“Thank you for the carnations. And the cute bear. I’ll be using the mug all year long.”

“You’re welcome.” He appeared completely mesmerized. “I wanted to give you a gift to commemorate our first date.”

“Don’t worry,” she said with a grin. “You’re memorable all by yourself. But this is so sweet.” As she looked up from the flowers, another waiter carefully stepped toward them with their meals.

The food’s aroma was as good as expected, even on the roof. She didn’t know how she’d attracted a man as romantic as José, but she was glad his interest hadn’t waned. “Are all these recipes from your grandmother?”

“No. I’ve tweaked some of them to give them my own special take. How do you like it?”

“I don’t have adequate words,” she said. “The food’s good. Describing how special this meal made me feel is difficult because the flavors and ambiance are good, as expected. And the view is very good.” She didn’t look away from him, hoping he would see appreciation in her eyes. “But you’ve gone above and beyond. This doesn’t feel like you’ve done this for all your past girlfriends. You’ve given me a treat, an experience that tells me about you. This feels distinctly unique. Thank you.”

After they finished their meals, another waiter came out with two plates of flan. Gina didn’t remember seeing it on the menu before. “This is new.”

José grinned. “I’m responding to a customer request. A few weeks ago, someone complained that Mexican restaurants don’t do desserts. So I’ve been tweaking this recipe until it’s different enough to be a level above a regular custard dessert.” He lowered his voice. “Go on. Taste it. How did I do?”

She dipped her spoon into the caramel-covered custard and tasted the warm vanilla right away. “Creamy texture, but you’ve added a little something extra. I can’t tell what that flavor is. Unexpectedly good.” She scraped her spoon across a couple of decorative swirls on the plate. “The chocolate sauce is fresh and warm, but it’s different. I taste a berry-something.”

“I appreciate your kind words,” he said with a slight nod and sincere eyes. “I plan to add it to the menu next month.”

Gina didn’t want the date to end. His restaurant’s food wasn’t the best part of the date. The high point of the date was the generosity in his treatment of her and how he’d made her feel valuable.

José stood and walked her to her car as he caressed her hand in silence.

She leaned back against her driver's side door and waited for his kiss, hoping her gaze conveyed her euphoric state.

José caressed her cheek. "I enjoyed our time today. Please allow me to cook for you at my house sometime next week." He spoke confidently about the difference between their first real date and the date they'd have next week.

She smiled at the promise of another good meal. "I'd love that."

"Then we'll set it up." He allowed his gaze to dance across her face. Then he turned and walked back inside.

Gina hesitated getting back in her car, disappointed that he didn't want to kiss her after their date.

José's eyes couldn't have been lying. He was definitely interested, but there was no kiss. *What happened?*

"Everything was fine. It went well," José told himself as he drove home to his friendly, middle-income neighborhood. In his modest one-story home, his furnishings were well-used but acceptable. He would replace a lot of it one day soon. Once he'd decided to marry, he would let his future wife make decisions with him about living room furniture and dishes. He'd been saving a lot of money by waiting on that one woman who would share his home for the rest of his life.

Was Gina the one?

José worried about Gina's reaction to his respectful end to their date. She'd already warned him that she didn't want a kiss in public. He'd wanted to end the date with a quick kiss, but he was afraid he might get carried away.

Did she feel okay about the date? Was it enough?

He had debated over and over. Should he kiss her? Should he not kiss her? He didn't want to be too forward. If he was getting too close to Gina too quickly, what would happen the next time he went out with her? Would she have unhappy brothers as bodyguards? Would they post fake photos on social media with mean captions?

José realized for the first time that he was experiencing a real fear of getting a bad reputation. Social media had been good for business for the past few months, but what about if he makes a dating mistake. Would it affect his restaurant? The success of his business was extremely important, not only for him but also for his employees.

If his romantic forward progress stalled because of this sudden fear, he didn't know what he would do.

He could be overthinking and needed a little perspective.

He took a breath and went to the kitchen for a drink of water. He took his glass with him into the bedroom and sat in his recliner. The surprising fear was a false threat. It was all about the "what if" scenarios. He decided not to listen to it anymore.

He prayed and thanked God for his first date with Gina. Trying to focus on what was real in their relationship, he remembered how she acted the first time they were together at the Turner Pavilion.

She had been interested in him then. And she acted interested in him again this afternoon. He needed to make another date with her, get it on her calendar, and make it spectacular. She deserved to know how special she was.

The restaurant was a safe venue for a first date, but José would rather not continue with that trend for a second date. He

wanted her to go with him somewhere adventurous and exciting. And then ask her to go with him some place someplace quiet after that.

It would take a little time to research before he could pick out the perfect spot.

He scratched his head, thinking about the possibilities. Did she like sports? Did she like to travel?

Wisdom from within popped up as he thought.

Keep an open mind. That was a nudge from God. It made sense to start slow. They just had their very first real date. Give her time.

However, he was agitated and filled with adrenaline over getting their second date scheduled.

José pulled out his phone and texted Gina.

Would you like to get together again?

She didn't respond. She might be busy.

How could he make it easy for her to respond? He tapped on his phone.

Call me if you want to discuss a day and place.

José set his phone aside and wished he'd asked her for another date while she was still with him on the roof. When her name came up on the phone screen, José blew out a calming breath before tapping to answer her call. "I wanted to say that I enjoyed being with you."

She said, "Thanks. I enjoyed our date too. You want to get together? Do you mean like before next weekend?"

"I don't know your schedule." He paused for a moment of indecision. "I have tomorrow night free."

“Let’s see.” Gina drew out her words much longer than necessary and then became quiet. “I have tomorrow night free. Are you thinking dinner? I’ll need to eat after work.”

José quietly brainstormed for a restaurant she might be excited to go to.

Gina interrupted the silence. “I’m going to be tired, so nothing strenuous.”

His plan for an adventurous second date was not working out. He remembered God’s nudge to be open-minded. It might be better to suggest a place where she wouldn’t have to be dressed up. Casual was best. “If you’re tired, your house would be the easiest for you. Of course, we don’t have to.”

“Oh. My house?” When she didn’t jump at the opportunity to brag about her cooking, it almost sounded like she didn’t want him to come over. “I can have dinner with you at my house.” Gina’s tense voice sounded defensive.

“Also, I didn’t know if you wanted to cook for me. If it’s a bad idea, I can bring a meal.” Not sure if he should speak the thought gnawing at him, he took the risk. “Can you cook?”

“Excuse me? Yes, José, I can!”

José laughed, relieved that his worries were for nothing. “Good. I’m ready to be impressed.”

She added, “I’ll proudly cook for you at my house tomorrow night. Be on time. If you’re not there by seven-thirty, I’m not keeping a plate warm for you.”

“Okay. I’ll be there.” José ended the call and laughed to himself at her tone. She seemed a little feisty about his questioning whether she could cook. He would enjoy dinner at her place. He couldn’t wait to see what happened.

Then he wondered if her brothers would be there as her protectors. If they were, he would make an effort to win them over too. If Gina was the one for him, he'd have to make friends with her brothers eventually.

Did Gina like the challenge of cooking for him? Or should he not have done that?

José shook away all the fears flooding back. He would have a good time. And he hoped she would too.

Gina rushed home from work to get started in the kitchen. It was date night, and everything had to be perfect. She quickly texted Jack to see if he'd take Ma out of the house tonight so she could make dinner for José.

After a minute, Jack texted that he'd think about it and get back to her.

After one of the side dishes had been started, Gina went down the hall and stood in Todd's doorway. "Got a minute? I might need your help."

He scrolled through his phone while he said, "What's it about?" His voice seemed agreeable, but his body language showed his disinterest.

She didn't have time to wait for his full attention. "I've asked Jack to take Ma out to the mall or a restaurant or a movie theater in a little while. I'm making dinner for someone."

His head remained still, but his gaze popped up at her. "What are you making? Can I come?"

"No. It's a special dinner. Anyway, I need to have the house." She held up a hand to stop him from overthinking or

misunderstanding. “I mean, if Jack takes Ma out tonight, you can stay here, but you can’t eat dinner with us.”

According to the spark in Todd’s eyes and the excitement in his voice, her news energized him. “Ooooh. It’s a date. Congratulations. Gina has a boyfriend.”

“I’m just cooking dinner, but I’ll never be able to make an impressive dinner if I have to deal with Ma too.” She smiled sweetly to soften the request. “Can you be available to take Ma tonight if Jack bails?”

Todd shook his head. “He’s not going to bail. If Jack said he would, then he will. But to ease your mind, I’ll do it if Jack backs out.”

“Thanks,” Gina said. She pointed in the direction of Ma’s bedroom. “I’ll go see what she’s up to before I start meal prep for the entrée.”

“Who’s the guy?” Todd raised his eyebrows and grinned.

“He’s a decent guy. I’m not settling for just any single guy. I’m not desperate.”

“Nobody said you were desperate. Make sure you have enough dinner leftovers. I’ll need to eat something.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make enough to share.” She headed for Ma’s room and sat on her bed. Gina noticed the crossword puzzle on the bed. It was usually put away on the bookshelf by the window when Ma wasn’t busy working on puzzles. Ma loved her puzzle books and seemed to be more reasonable when she was using her mind. “What’s going on in here?”

Ma glanced at her out of the corner of her eye and continued dusting the books on the bookshelf by the window. “Dusting.”

“I can see that.” Gina smiled at her, hoping for more of a conversation than just repeating the obvious.

“I thought you might. What’s going on with you?” Ma dusted the lampshade on the lamp next to her bed.

Todd joined her in Ma’s bedroom. “I’m going to see a movie tonight. Want to go?”

“Sure. What’s playing?” Ma picked up little picture frames and dusted the dresser under them and set them back down.

Todd gave the name of the newest PG-13 movie in the theaters.

Ma appeared confused. “I haven’t seen that one. Will I like it?”

“You might,” Todd shrugged.

“Not if it has Hollywood morals. Movies these days aren’t made like the ones when I was younger. Movies used to be great fun. Now, it’s a gamble.”

“If you decide you don’t like it, we’ll leave and find an ice cream shop or go eat hot dogs or something.” Todd kept his voice high-pitched, faking his excitement.

Ma sat on the bed beside Gina. “Why don’t we all go? We should call Jack to see if he’s busy.”

Todd nodded. “I’ll call him. Can you be ready in twenty minutes?”

“Let me see.” Ma stood to look in her dresser mirror. “Nope. I won’t be ready in twenty years. You’ll just have to take me as I am.” She smiled at Todd.

It didn’t matter if she stepped out of routine once in a while. The important thing was that Ma seemed to be in the

here and now. Todd and Gina gave each other the nod that meant Ma sounded coherent. She'd be fine tonight.

Gina went to the kitchen to think about which of the two entrées she had in mind would make the best impression on José. He was a restaurateur, after all. He'd be hard to impress. She checked the freezer first to see if any additional ideas came to her. She'd considered canceling the date twice in the short time she'd had it on her calendar.

Behind her, Ma walked past and pulled the ironing board into the kitchen. She left and returned with the iron. After she plugged it in, she headed for the bedroom hallway.

Gina pulled a loaf of homemade bread out of the freezer to let it thaw while she started her meal prep. She smelled something burning and turned to see the iron on top of one of Todd's shirts. How had she missed seeing the shirt there earlier? Quickly picking up the iron, she saw the burn mark on his shirt.

Ma never burned clothes.

She unplugged the iron and set it aside. Then she took Todd's shirt down the hall to his room and held it up for him. "When did you start ironing?"

He stared at his shirt. "I didn't." The knowing look, along with the low-pitched groan, showed his concern for Ma's developing symptoms of dementia.

Gina touched the burn mark on the shirt. "I saw her setting up the iron, but I let her do her thing. When has she ever ruined a shirt?"

"She's an expert," Todd quietly grumbled. "We've seen her ironing half-asleep while making our breakfast and lunches for

school. If ironing had been an Olympic sport, Ma would be a gold medalist.”

Gina nodded and took the shirt into Ma’s bedroom. At a loss for words, she simply held up the shirt.

“Oh. Do you need help with that?” Ma laughed in a loving way. “I know how to iron. I’m pretty good at it.” She put her crossword puzzle down and took the shirt. “This one’s a bit too far gone, but we can use it to show you how to avoid burning the next one.” Ma took Gina’s hand and led her to the kitchen. “Oh. You set the ironing board up in the kitchen. Good. That’s the best place for it.” She saw the iron and swiftly tapped the hot surface with a fingertip. Smiling, she said, “Okay, it looks like you’ve had a lesson or two. You already know to unplug the iron when you leave the room. Good for you.”

Gina played along and let Ma teach her how to iron. Again.

Todd peeked around the corner of the hallway with a sad expression. As soon as he turned back down the hallway, his exasperated sigh was loud enough for Gina to hear and empathize with.

As soon as Ma finished teaching the ironing lesson, she went back to her bedroom.

Gina was ready to get back to meal prep, but then her phone alerted her to Jack’s text.

You want me to rescue you from some guy?

No.

Can you eat dinner out with Ma tonight?

I’m cooking dinner here.

What are you making?

I want some.

Please Jack.

Go somewhere with Ma so I can make dinner for José.

The guy at the dance?

Is he still bugging you?

I can get rid of him for you.

No! Let me have a quiet kitchen tonight.

Todd's going to help you.

1 condition.

Text me if I need to rescue you.

No rescue needed.

He's very nice.

1 text. I'll be there. Lightning speed.

No, Jack. (eye roll emoji)

He won't be able to run fast enough.

Jack. (no smile emoji)

I'll text Todd to see where he's going.

Thanks.

You're a helpful brother, and I love you for it.

With Jack's agreement to cooperate, Gina could stop worrying about Ma. If Todd and Jack could be out with Ma long enough to give her some space for her dinner with José, the dinner could still be a success. She hoped the cooking wouldn't get interrupted again.

CHAPTER SIX

José arrived at the address Gina had given him. The small one-story home with a garage in front fit in with most of the others on the street. The only splash of color was the red brick on the lower half of the home. The cream-colored planks on the upper half showed off the few windows trimmed in white with charcoal-gray shutters nailed on either side. The gray door and doorframe were a little too dark to be welcoming. If this had been their lifelong home, the dark gray may have been the color chosen decades ago to cover up dirty fingerprints as the boys ran in and out of the house.

He texted that he'd arrived and walked to the door to knock.

Gina opened the door, appearing a little frazzled. "Hi, José. Come in." Her eyes found the small bouquet of assorted flowers he'd brought.

José walked in and noticed the unmistakable aroma of garlic and fresh bread. He couldn't wait to find out what she'd cooked.

Her gaze traveled from his eyes down to the bottle in his hand. "What did you bring?"

He handed it to her. "I wasn't sure what you were making for dinner, so I took a chance on a good Cabernet Sauvignon. I hope it's okay."

She smiled. "I'm sure it will be fine. Very thoughtful. I still have a few things to do. You can come visit while I finish in the kitchen. What else did you bring?"

“Oh, this?” He grinned and held out the flowers. “I hope you like flowers.”

She laughed. “I hope you like giving me flowers.” Her delight-filled eyes said she approved. “They’re so pretty. I have a vase. You can help me get it.”

A buzzer sounded on her phone. “That’s the buzzer reminding me that you’re about to arrive.” Glancing over her shoulder at him on the way to the kitchen, she said, “The rice was timed to be ready when you walked in.”

He found the table, already set with two plates and two cloth napkins, to be the perfect size for the room.

“The big pan is our dinner. Now I have to fill plates and pour drinks.” She opened a cabinet and pointed at one of the top shelves. “That’s a good vase. Can you get it?” Her tense forehead and darting gaze tipped him off that her mind had to be rechecking her mental list of things to do.

José wanted to greet her with a passionate kiss, but he could see that she needed him to be attentive and helpful. “You look like you need to do two things at once. Let me take care of the flowers, and then I’ll help with something else.”

“Thanks.” Gina seemed to enjoy having his help, rather than appearing stressed because of it. “Glasses are over there. Use the filtered water in the pitcher over there.”

After he filled the vase with tap water, he pulled down two glasses and set them by the water pitcher. “I love it when a beautiful woman makes the kitchen smell good,” he said, unabashedly flirting but giving her plenty of space.

“Thanks. I might have overdone the garlic, but it really makes the dish.” Gina brought the two plates to the stove and grabbed a serving spoon.

José noticed a faint burning smell. “Is there something in the oven?”

She gasped with a wide-eyed look. “The timer was also for the bread. It needs to come out.”

He grabbed the oven mitt from the counter by the stove. “Where do you want them?”

“Here.” She gestured toward the stovetop.

José set the foil-lined cookie sheet on the stovetop to let the bread cool. “No real damage.”

Gina looked at him with appreciation. “Thanks for saving my bread. Nothing worse than burned garlic bread.”

“I’ll do whatever I have to do to save ... bread, ... people, ...” He grinned. “Whatever I love.”

She turned her head away but not far enough to hide an expression that wavered between surprise and delight.

José wasn’t sure how to ease her tense forehead, except to continue getting everything in place for dinner.

Not two minutes after they sat down to eat, Gina rose. “I need to get a pitcher of water to refill our glasses without having to get up later.”

“Need any help in there?” José followed her into the kitchen.

Gina stood in front of an open cabinet and turned her head to the stove and oven, probably making sure the heat was turned off.

José put his hands on her elbows and caressed her skin until he was holding her hands.

Her calm smile of acceptance proved he wasn't going too fast for her. "I thought you might need help reaching a pitcher."

"I've lived here a long time. I know how to get anything I need."

José's heart warmed at her teasing resistance. "I'm sure of it." He smoothed his thumbs over the tops of her hands, enjoying the thrill of their closeness. "But if you need anything, I'm here." He leaned a little closer, testing her response. Slowly he lowered his face to hers.

She didn't move away. Her smooth, serene forehead was no longer tense. Her eyes glistened like this moment was as important to her as it was to him.

With one hand, he touched the side of her face and smoothed his fingers into her hair. He slowly lowered his lips an inch away from hers. He let the anticipation build between them for a second, and then he gently leaned to kiss ... when a noise caused Gina to stiffen and pull away from him.

Gina appeared as surprised as he was. "It's the garage door. The boys are back." Metal creaked loud enough to come through the kitchen wall as if the door was old. If the intrusion was just a misunderstanding, it might be brief. He could be flexible.

A man who looked like he could be her younger brother shrugged at Gina as he opened the back door by the kitchen.

Gina turned to José. "My brother Todd."

He remembered seeing him at the dance with Gina. "Hi, Todd. I'm José."

Although José couldn't see her, an older woman spoke in the garage, "Mmm. Garlic. I haven't had that in a long time."

Let's eat, boys." The older woman came through the door. She stopped and stared at José with startled eyes and a protective frown.

Todd stood behind her, noticing Gina's discomfort. He mouthed "I'm sorry" to Gina.

Gina took a breath and smiled at the woman. "Ma, this is my friend, José." She turned to José and used a more formal tone than she'd been using with him. "José, this is my mother."

José remained where he was and gave his warmest, most charming smile. "Very glad to make your acquaintance. Your daughter must get her beauty from you."

The woman's face transformed from cautious to a schoolgirl's grin. "Very nice of you." She turned and noticed dinner was on the table. "Perfect timing, boys. Did one of you call ahead and order for us? It smells amazing. I used to make this very recipe. My favorite. How did you know?" She sat at the table with a wink in his direction. "Who's joining me?"

Gina smiled at her mother. "Let me get a few more plates, and we'll all join you."

José noticed Gina's reserved smile that resembled something she might use at work with her customers. The smile, sober and cheerless at a family dinner, seemed to satisfy her mother. The woman sat back in her chair and gave a patient nod.

Gina turned to José. "This is my brother Jack." She motioned to the other man who came into the house through the same door.

Yes, who could forget? "Hello, Jack. I think we met at the Turner Pavilion. I'm José."

Jack ignored José and looked beyond him to see what his mother was doing.

“Welcome, José,” Todd said as he closed the door to the garage. His greeting seemed a bit agitated and forced: like he was making the best of the situation.

Gina kept her composure. “Jack, you can wash your hands and set three more plates on the table. I’ll cut up some fruit for another side dish. Todd, drinks, please.”

José stopped her with his hand on her shoulder. “I can cut up the fruit, Gina. Set it out for me and show me which dish you want to serve it in.”

Gina lowered her voice. “Thank you. That’s very kind.” She pulled out a cutting board and handed it to him. “The knives are in that drawer,” she said, pointing.

José picked out the knife he thought was the sharpest and cubed the two apples uniformly and quickly. He asked for cinnamon and a few other ingredients for the sauce.

Gina finished putting everything else on the table and checked on him. “Beautifully done. Have a seat.” She took the dish and set it in the center of the table. She prayed over the meal and smiled as her brothers wasted no time digging in.

Jack eyed José with a quietly protective stare. Obviously, they were a very close family, and they all might need time to adjust to the idea of him being around Gina.

José knew this was only one step of a journey with Gina, and he would take things slowly with her.

He wanted to stay with her long after dinner was over to ask about her family and tell her how enjoyable it was being with her and her family for dinner, but since he was hesitant to

rock the boat, he wouldn't push too hard. And he wouldn't ask to go to church with her yet.

Everything in its time. He knew from experience that it would all happen as God's plan unfolded.

After a quiet prayer from a heart filled with gratitude, José made mental notes of all the things he wanted to talk to her about later.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gina unlocked the front door of the boutique and waited for Sofia to get to the front of the boutique. It had been a long day. Saturdays usually were. “Have a good night, Sofia.”

“Good night, Gina. See you Monday.” The seamstress waved as she walked out the door.

After locking the door, Gina watched through the glass as Sofia got in her car. Taking a deep cleansing breath as she took quick strides to the back of the store, she was ready to finish cleaning the store and put away the vacuum cleaner.

A light tapping on the boutique’s door caught Gina’s attention. That was unusual. She stepped closer to the front to see if it was Sofia. Gina frowned as she peered through the locked glass door. She didn’t see anyone at first, but then José’s face moved forward into the light. The sight of him caught her a little off-guard. She waved and laughed.

His smile was adorable as he stood on the sidewalk and waved back at her.

After she unlocked the door, she said, half-giggling, “What are you doing here?”

“Trying not to sound creepy, but are you alone?” José grinned. “I’m waiting to walk you to your car.”

“Thanks for looking after me. So sweet,” she said with a head tilt. “Come on inside and join me.”

José said in a tender voice, “I figured you’d be alone, and I was right. Since I was worried for your safety, it seemed like a

good idea to walk you to your car.”

“Aww. That’s so nice. You don’t have to be worried.” Gina gathered her purse and keys and locked the door behind them as they left the boutique.

“I’ve been here for about ten minutes,” José said as he walked her to her car. “It’s Saturday night. What would you do if a car full of misguided teenage bullies stopped to harass you as you left the store?”

Gina leaned back against the driver’s door. “I’d either go back inside the store and call 9-1-1 or lock myself in my car and call 9-1-1. I also have a left hook you wouldn’t believe.” She smiled, wondering if he realized that her brothers taught her a few self-defense lessons.

With a squint and a head tilt, he said, “Gina, your claim of being able to take care of yourself doesn’t make me feel any better.” His dark brown eyes weren’t focused on anything in the parking lot but her. “Can we discuss this later?”

She nodded silently, lost in his gaze.

“Right now, I just want to kiss you,” José said with his words and with his eyes, but he wasn’t close enough.

If she was going to get the kiss she wanted, she had to do something, so she moved closer to him. “When you didn’t kiss me in your parking lot after our first date, I thought you weren’t interested.”

His eyes searched her face. “You can’t be serious. I was definitely interested. I am interested.” His arms engulfed her in a warm embrace.

She pulled back enough to see his face and kissed his lips gently. “Is this what you’re interested in?” She kissed him again.

“Yes, Gina.” His lips caressed hers, and then he kissed her solidly.

Gina smiled at him and said, “I want you to go out with me again.”

“You’re asking me out?” He gave a slight chuckle. “I would love to go out with you. Which day should we schedule it for?”

She moved in for another kiss, and then she leaned against her car. “I have tomorrow night off. We should go somewhere. How about the museum?”

“I love the museum.” He slowly touched her arms, gently caressing them, sending goose bumps across her skin.

“When are you free, José?” She watched his eyes. It would be easy to lose all track of time, gazing into the depths of his dark eyes.

“Early afternoon sound good? We can have dinner together after the museum.”

Gina nodded and kissed him again.

Late Sunday afternoon at the Turner Museum, José walked with Gina through rooms of paintings and sculpture. He knew at the start he’d have a hard time appreciating the paintings on the walls when her smile and the sparkle of her eyes would have his attention.

Determined to allow her to show him her comfort level, he held back his desire to scoop her into his arms and kiss her whenever they were the only people in the room.

Gina led him into a room of photographs, black and white images on one side of the room and color images on the other. “What do you think the artist was trying to say with these images?” She appeared to be seriously interested in the art.

He was dumbstruck at times by this beautiful woman holding his hand, mesmerizing him. How would he be able to have a conversation as they walked around the museum? “The artist was obviously trying to say that no matter what his camera focused on, he’d never be able to create art as beautiful as you.”

Giving him a side-eyed glance, she said, “José, did you even see any of the art we’ve been looking at?”

“I’ve seen it.” He nodded. “The landscapes and seascapes told emotional stories.”

“I was worried there for a minute.” Gina laughed. “I thought I’d have to take you through the museum again, and it’s very near closing time.”

“I’m trying to pay attention to the art, but my heart’s only interested in you. We can come back another time,” he said. “Whenever we do, the women in the paintings will still whisper to each other about how jealous they are of your beauty.”

“Stop, José.” She turned to stand in front of him, a smile of enjoyment on her face. “I don’t want to leave yet because I’m awestruck by this place. I’m amazed at the intricate detail and the color combinations.”

“Absolutely.” Trying to hold his focus on the art, he said, “And the ability these artists have shown. Their technique. All the variety of styles. It’s impressive.”

Her face beamed with pleasure. “I’m glad we came here together.” Taking his hand, she led him outside to the garden where they could enjoy the statues even after the museum closed. “What was your favorite thing in the museum?”

He wanted to keep her laughing and talking for as long as possible, but she probably already knew what he would say. Looking into her eyes, there was only one thing he could say. “Want me to be honest?”

She turned away and pulled him to the garden bench. “Sit with me.”

Beside her on the bench, he quickly examined the garden. A breeze swished through the leaves of the nearby tree. Not far away, a small fountain lent its soft bubbling to the garden’s appealing murmuring. It wasn’t loud enough to cover the sounds of civilization, but it created a welcoming peacefulness. The tranquil atmosphere was perfect for a couple of lovers.

Gina’s gaze followed the curves of a three-foot-tall stony brown face. Its powerful stare at the sidewalk told of failure and despair.

José put his arm around her, resting it on the back of the bench. He touched her chin and curved down to kiss her forehead. “I know you don’t like public affection, but I’m sitting in an awe-inspiring place with a gorgeous woman. I don’t know how I’m supposed to sit here and not touch you.”

She put her hand on his face and slid her finger down his jawline to his chin.

He caught her hand and kissed her finger. “See? You can’t keep your hands off me.” Releasing her hand, he rested his forehead on hers, waiting to see who would back away first.

After only a couple of seconds of enjoying their connection, he leaned back to relish the beauty of her face.

“We should go.” She didn’t look away from him.

“Where?”

“A quiet place. On the edge of town, there’s an abandoned business with an empty parking lot.” She stood. “I think we need more time with each other.”

He couldn’t agree more.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Relaxing in her bedroom and reading on her mid-week day off, Gina heard the front door. The house was small enough that she could hear Jack's loud talking in the living room. If she was more interested in her book, she would get up and close her door. But at the moment, Jack's attitude toward José had prompted her to listen to her brother.

"Hey, Todd." Jack's voice seemed agreeable toward his brother.

Todd's nurturing tone made him seem focused on Ma. "Here's your glass of water." A few seconds later, he acknowledged Jack. "Hey."

Ma grumbled as the sound of the TV channels changing became more agitated. "It's not here. Which channel was it on?"

"What's wrong?" Jack sounded like he was trying to be patient.

"The movie. I got up and came back. It's gone. I wasn't finished watching it." The channels kept changing as Ma spoke. "Why is it gone? I wasn't finished."

Jack asked in a calm tone, "Which movie was it?"

"The one with the beautiful gowns and big hats. Lots of big hats. There were horses. One of the women was yelling her head off." When the TV turned off, Ma stomped down the hall to her bedroom.

“She’s not talking about *My Fair Lady*, is she?” Jack sounded confused. “I was here watching it with her, but that was ages ago. Were you watching that with her today?”

“No, not today, but that is one of her regular requests,” said Todd. “She was watching game shows, and then she got up and walked around.”

Jack’s voice took a more serious tone. “I think we need to have a talk about Gina.”

Tempted to stand by her open door to hear better, Gina remained quiet so they wouldn’t stop talking about her. This was something she didn’t want to miss out on.

“Gina? Something happen?” Todd’s tired voice made him sound uninterested.

“Not yet,” Jack said. “But I don’t know about that guy she’s been seeing.”

“José.” Todd said without a hint of worry in his voice.

“Yes. José. We have to do something about him.”

Gina’s interest perked up. What was Jack planning?

“Like what?” Todd didn’t seem to be interested in the conversation.

“We have to make him see that Gina is more valuable than he realizes. We have to protect her. We can’t let some guy—”

“José,” said Todd.

“Right. We can let José get her all worked up and then drop her like a hot potato.” Jack sounded more protective than Gina had ever realized he could be. It would be very sweet if he weren’t being so meddlesome. “If he breaks her heart, he has to answer to us. Better for him to know that now than later.”

“I don’t know, Jack. I’m kind of happy that Gina’s found someone special. She’s been putting off dating for too long.”

Gina kept herself from going out to argue with Todd’s comment that she’d been putting off dating. If she’d found the right man, she would’ve dated seriously before now.

“Right,” said Jack. “But will José work out? How long-term is he thinking? Is she a fling or the real thing?”

Todd laughed. “Wait. Wait. You’re my brother, and I love you. But you’re starting to worry me. Back off. Let Gina have these dates.”

Gina’s appreciation for Todd grew. Jack definitely needed to back off.

“If they get close,” Jack’s voice paused. “She’s not going to want to raise his kids by herself.”

“You are freaking me out.” Todd sounded agitated enough to leave the house before Jack was finished talking. “This is our sister you’re talking about.”

“I know,” said Jack. “We have to protect her at all costs.

“You can’t do that. Leave them alone,” Todd sounded like the older brother. “This isn’t being protective. It’s a radical intrusion.”

“Fine.” Jack stopped talking.

Both brothers were quiet, which worried Gina. Was Jack giving up?

Then Jack spoke again but in a curiously offended tone. “Then how about I leave them alone from a distance? Sound good?”

“You lost me,” Todd said in a weary voice.

“I think I have to get out of here, so we’re going on a trip.”

“Sorry, Jack? A trip? Like a road trip or a two-hour drive? To Galveston and back?”

“No, not Galveston. Colorado.”

“Seriously, Jack?”

“Yes, I’m serious. Get your calendar,” Jack said. “Find a date so I can plan this trip. When we get all our supplies ready, we’ll take off.”

A knock on the door interrupted her brothers. When the door opened, José’s cheerful voice rang out. “Hey, guys. I’m here to see Gina. Is she home?”

Gina didn’t remember having a date.

Todd spoke first. “Have a seat. I’ll see if she’s here.”

When Todd got to her door, she shushed him quietly and pulled him inside her room. “I heard you two out there,” she whispered. “Don’t say anything. We’re going to give Jack and José a little time for a conversation.”

Todd gave the frustrated, bulging-eye look that said it was a stupid idea.

Gina stood by the door and listened.

José’s voice sounded appealing and friendly. “What’s up, Jack?”

“Nothing.” Jack’s voice was the complete opposite. He couldn’t have been more unwelcoming.

José tried again. “Do you think your family would want to go with Gina and me out on the lake north of here? I’ve been invited to a barbecue in a couple of weeks. I was planning to

invite Gina, but your family can come too. It'll be fun out on the lake, right?"

"Sorry, José. I can't. Todd and I are going on a trip. Maybe next time." Jack sounded like he'd have an excuse next time too.

"A trip? Where?" José sounded excited.

"Colorado," said Jack.

"I want to go. How long is the trip?"

"No, José. It's a road trip. We're not flying."

"Jack. Come on, buddy. I'll pay for part of the gas. I'll do some of the driving. It'll be great."

When Jack didn't answer right away, Gina wondered if he would be coming down the hall to get Todd.

Jack, still in the living room, said, "Okay."

Todd took a step back in surprise. "No, no, no," he whispered. "Gina, Jack's going on the trip to give you and José some space. He's trying to be absent as a gift to you."

"I know," she said.

"Go out there and stop this crazy plan before it actually happens." Todd's eyebrows pinched together in concern.

"Shhh." Gina wanted to wait to see what happened first.

José spoke with gratitude in his voice. "Thanks, man. Wow. Colorado. Ah, the magnificence of nature. This is so exciting."

After a loud, frustrated sigh, Jack said, "The more, the merrier."

Gina whispered to Todd, “Go to your room. Quietly. Stay out of trouble. I’ll handle this.”

Todd rolled his eyes and tiptoed into the bathroom.

Gina picked up her purse and walked into the living room as if she’d heard nothing of their plans. “Hi, José. Todd said you were here. Want to go for a drive?”

“Love to.” José looked at Jack. “See you soon. Thanks again.” He opened the door and gave a friendly nod to Jack as they left.

“I didn’t know you were coming by,” she said as he drove down the street.

“I took a risk that you weren’t busy because I wanted to walk through the park with you.” José glanced at her as he turned out of her neighborhood.

“Which one?”

“You’ll see. I drove by it after I left the restaurant. They had a wedding there this morning, and they hadn’t taken down the decorations. You’ll like it.”

Gina nodded. “Can’t wait. By the way, while you were talking with Jack, was he on his best behavior?”

“He was great,” José said. He grinned. “I found out some helpful information. And we’re going somewhere.”

Gina let him see the worried look on her face. “What are you two cooking up?”

“I think you’ll be happy.” José found a parking space near Morrison Park.

Walking hand in hand with him, Gina glimpsed the plastic spheres in translucent pale pinks and purples, and then she

focused her gaze on José. “Bubbles in the trees? I’ll bet they had a bubble machine too.”

He put his arm around her. “I thought you’d like it.” He walked with her to an area away from the parking lot. The grass was well-maintained and soft. “Sit with me.”

Sitting next to him in the shade of the old oaks, she watched his eyes and asked, “Do you have something on your mind?”

There was an energy behind his subdued smile that she could feel without touching him. “Is this out of the public’s eye enough for me to kiss you?”

She slipped her arms over his shoulders and kissed him. “How’s that for an answer?”

“That’s the kind of answer I was looking for.” His fingers caressed her cheek, and then he took advantage of his opportunity for another kiss. He lingered with her out of view of anyone else, kissing and cuddling.

She enjoyed the fresh scent of the grass and the kisses, but she wondered about José. When was he going to tell her about Jack’s trip? Certain a little encouragement would do the trick, she asked, “Is there something you want to tell me? You seem a little distracted.”

José nodded. “What does it mean to you when I say I’ve invited myself to go on a trip with Jack?”

“What?” Gina faked an expression of amazement.

His face shone with delight. “I’m going hiking in Colorado with Jack.” He raised his eyebrows and smiled like a little boy. “But you already knew about this announcement, didn’t you? Did Todd tell you or did you hear Jack talking with me?”

“You look thrilled, and I have to say I’m surprised that you wanted to go,” she said. It wasn’t important how she found out about the trip. He had some questions to answer first. “Why would you want to go anywhere with him? He hasn’t been extremely kind to you.”

“Don’t worry about that, Gina. I think he just needs to get to know me. This trip isn’t about Jack. It’s about us. I want to be with you. I want to spend a lot of time with you. The best way for us to be together and have the support of your family is to let them get to know me. If I have to prove myself to Jack, then I will. I want you to know I’m not playing with your feelings. I have serious feelings for you.” His eyes had a new intensity.

Gina didn’t know how to respond. Should she quietly let the guys work all this out by themselves? She leaned in and kissed him again.

José cupped her face in his hands and leaned back far enough to speak. “I guess you feel the same way. Please tell me if you don’t.”

“I want to spend a lot of time with you too.” Gina kissed him again. She couldn’t help herself. She was drawn to his kisses. His caresses made her feel like the moment would last forever.

He pulled away and chuckled. “I think we need to walk around for a bit. The whole world could stop, and we wouldn’t know it.” He stood and held his hand out to help her up.

She took his hand and stood.

“I need you to do me a favor.” His eyes filled with hope as he waited for her response.

“What do you need?” Gina wanted to do whatever he needed. She also wanted to kiss him again, but she held herself back.

“Give Jack my number so he can keep me updated as the plans develop. Gina, I’m so excited. I think he’s finally accepting me as your boyfriend.”

Gina laughed. “He’s not the one you have to impress. I am.”

José put his hands on her shoulders and caressed her neck. He pulled her closer and kissed her. When she didn’t push away, he kissed her again. “It’s too hard for me to leave here without one more kiss, but I must get you back to your house. I have to work tonight.”

She put her hand on his chest, pushing away as she stepped back from him, still feeling the warmth of his kiss even after pulling away. “Let’s go, José.”

CHAPTER NINE

Gina sat on her bed that evening, thinking about why José would join Jack on a trip that would last several days. Why would he want to spend so much time with Jack and Todd?

Remembering how her relationship with him began, wouldn't José try to avoid Jack? Did José see Jack as a challenge?

She'd never dated anyone like him. None of her earlier boyfriends had been as interesting to talk with or as attentive as José. She had to trust that José knew what he was doing.

José seemed confident and excited to go on this trip. He was good at managing people at work, and that might come in handy with her brothers.

Gina thought about José's intentions. He seemed like someone she could see herself with in a long-term relationship. His kisses were great. His patience was even better. She wanted to give her relationship with José a fair chance.

Should she give José all the advance information he would need to stay afloat when her brothers try to drown him with scary family stories that might be made up if her brothers have any teasing in the plan? He probably would be able to handle her brothers, but she wanted to call him anyway.

She tapped her phone to call José. When he picked up, she said, "You're not still at work, are you?"

José said, “I just got home. Actually, I just opened my door.” The sound of a door closing interrupted their conversation. “And now, I’m inside. How can I help you?”

Gina spoke in a playful, innocent voice. “I wanted to hear your voice.”

“What did you want to hear me say?”

Her curiosity put an end to her playfulness. “Something’s been bothering me. I can’t figure out why you’re excited to go on this trip. Why would you be happy to go with my brothers if I’m not going?”

“Really? That’s what’s bothering you?” José said, “Gina, I told you I want to get to know you better.”

Her heart melted at the love in his voice. “So stay and be with me.”

“I hear you,” he said. “I’m not trying to get away from you. I’m trying to have a better relationship with you.”

“By going on a trip with my brothers?” Gina wasn’t sure that was going to work the way he wanted it to.

José said, laughing, “I’m sure it’ll be fine. You saw Jack standing over me, trying to intimidate me. My goal for going on this trip is to help your brothers get to know me so they’ll relax.”

“If I can’t stop you, then at least I can help you. I’ll give you ammo for all the campfire stories. If they tell stories that aren’t true, you’ll know better than to believe their shenanigans.”

“Hmm. By the tone of your voice, I guess I should take notes.” José’s voice sounded like it would be hard for her brothers to scare him away.

She caught herself wondering if it was really love, and if so, would it survive her family's situation? If she couldn't be there for José because Ma needed her to put in extra effort as her health declined, would José back out of their relationship?

She decided to give him a couple of generalities about her brothers, starting with Jack's job at a car dealership. Gina didn't want to end the conversation, but footsteps down the hall cut her short. "I didn't give you very many details, but it's enough to help you out a little. José, I need to check on Ma. Can I call you back tomorrow? I need to go."

"Sure," he said. "I'll be thinking about your sweet smile tonight. Maybe we'll see each other tomorrow."

"Maybe," she said. "Good night, José." After putting her phone away, she went down the hall to see if Ma was in her room. Her door was open and her bed was empty. Gina headed to the living room and found Ma in her robe, staring out the window. "Ma, what's the matter?"

Ma walked to a different window and peered out at the street. "Mrs. Dixon got a new car."

How was she going to deal with Ma in the coming months? Her memory was hit-or-miss lately. Mrs. Dixon didn't get a new car, but it must be different than the one Ma remembered.

"Couldn't sleep." Ma went to the couch and sat in the darkened room that was brightened only by a touch of moonlight and the nightlight they left plugged into the kitchen wall.

Standing in front of the couch, Gina spoke in a soothing tone. "I can bring you a cup of warm milk. Would you like some?"

Ma nodded.

When Gina came back to the couch with the warm cup, Ma had a book in her hands. “What do we have here? The Bible? Would you like me to read to you?” Gina sat by her and traded the cup for the book. She opened to Matthew 10:29. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

Gina wasn’t surprised Ma wanted to read. Lately, *Pride and Prejudice* had been Ma’s consistent choice. But when Ma’s face showed signs of inner turmoil and confusion, her Bible was always what she searched for.

José pulled Kiki aside. “Good morning. Do you know what day it is?”

After careful thought, she said, “I’m hoping it’s not your birthday. I didn’t miss that, did I?”

He grinned. “No. It’s the last Monday of the month.”

Kiki blew out a breath. “Thank goodness. I knew that.” She nodded. “And you need me to give the talk today before we open.” After a quick glance at the table with three female employees wrapping silverware in a napkin, she asked, “You have the frame?”

José whispered, “In my office. Got it yesterday.”

“Hidden? No one can walk in and spoil the surprise?”

He chuckled. “Yes, Kiki. Our secret is concealed. You know what to say. Right?”

“Don’t worry, José. I’m getting better at it. I’ve practiced it on my kids. Twice. I think they liked it.”

“They’re two years old.” Grinning, he folded his arms over his chest. “Of course, they liked it.”

Kiki shifted her weight. “All I know is I have a good feeling about this.” She put her hands on her hips and a confident look in her eyes. “The super-boring, too-long speech I gave three months ago is ancient history.”

“True. Ancient history. I won’t bring it up again.” He looked at the clock on the wall. “It’s time.”

“Fine,” Kiki said. “You get the frame. I’ll round up everyone and meet you in the kitchen.”

José entered his office and closed the door behind him. The wall in front of him displayed team photos of kids’ soccer teams he’d donated money to over the last several years. This year’s team photo was near the front door and wouldn’t come back to his office until he got next year’s photo.

The opportunity to encourage people actually encouraged him more than the recipients. After a quick prayer of gratitude, Jose returned to this morning’s moment of encouragement for his own team.

He picked up the frame that was face-down on top of the filing cabinet. He loved to surprise an employee every month for a job well done. The winner usually liked the appreciation of peers, but they always enjoyed getting the fifty-dollar cash reward for their efforts. The framed certificate that stayed on the hallway’s Nail of Honor for a week was a reminder of achieving the goal of setting a good example for others. After the celebratory week was over, that employee would take the certificate home.

It was José’s way of giving them an unspoken contest to see which employee ended up with the most certificates. A

little competition wasn't a bad thing.

In the hallway, he locked his office and headed to the kitchen with the frame under his arm.

Kiki had already started her speech. "The Employee of the Month must show the following qualities," she said. She paused, moving slightly to make sure she had everyone's attention. "Number one: Understanding your duties. Plus the follow-through and attention to details." Her strong, confident voice gave everyone no other option but to take her seriously this time. And by the expressions on all their faces, they did. "Number two: Concern for the customer. Make customers happy. If they're not happy, they won't come back. If they don't come back, the restaurant will close. If the restaurant closes, you don't have a job. So make the customer happy."

José scanned the faces of his employees. Everyone was focused on Kiki.

"Number three: Loyalty to the restaurant—and ultimately to José who gives all employees more than just a paycheck. José gives us reasonable wages, an opportunity to upgrade our skills and therefore the ability to earn more money, a positive work environment, and an opportunity for all of us to be respected because of our work ethic and dedication. Loyalty to the restaurant simply means that you want to make this business look good. You do that by making sure you look good. You show up on time. You dress appropriately and are neatly groomed. This is a restaurant, so there are expectations."

With the exception of a couple of impatient line cooks, everyone else kept their eyes on Kiki, waiting to hear the winner's name.

“And finally, respect for all other teammates. Humans perform best when they have positive work relationships. When each one of us is unencumbered with all the drama and gossip and backstabbing, then we can move on to the task at hand. Let it go, right? Give me a peaceful workplace, and I’ll give you my best effort.”

José stepped beside her. “Let’s give Kiki a hand for her inspiring speech.” He waited until the noise quieted. I’ll be quick because the cooks are a little crowded right now. But I couldn’t leave them out of this important announcement because Lily is our employee of the month.” José raised the framed certificate for all to see.

Everyone cheered for her and appeared surprised as Lily put a hand over the top of her apron and shouted, “Thank you, José.”

“You’re welcome, Lily. I appreciate all your dedication and hard work. You can come to my office to get your framed certificate when you’re ready to hang it on the Nail of Honor.”

Kiki shouted, “Thank you all for your attention. Let’s get back to work. We have customers to feed.”

The crowd cheered again for Lily as they filed out of the kitchen and went back to what they were doing.

José stopped Kiki once more. “Can I speak to you in my office?”

“Sure, boss man.” Kiki followed him and shut the door behind them.

With a grin, he said, “Good speech. I imagine your kids were as impressed as I am.”

Kiki laughed. “No, they were not. They’re very demanding.”

“I’m seriously proud to have you as my right-hand woman. How would you like to improve your status and title and income?”

Her eyes grew wider. “Yes, sir, I would. What did you have in mind?” She gasped. “You didn’t. José, did you put money down on that new restaurant location?”

“Not yet, but soon. I’m scheduling a couple of meetings with an architect about it. If you get a phone call from Colby Richardson, that’s my guy.”

“I’ll make a note of it. This is so exciting.”

“The ball is rolling on this project,” he said. “You’ll need to keep an eye open for the career-focused employees. I want your opinion about who can make the move to the new place and who must stay here.”

“Got it, José. And I’ll keep it quiet for now. I’m sure it will be a while before you’re ready for me to begin interviewing for all the new positions.”

He opened a drawer and pulled out a metal name tag. “Here. You don’t have to wear it unless you want to. I thought I’d give you evidence of our little talk.”

She held it like it was a trophy. “Nice. General Manager. I like the sound of that. Thank you, José.”

“You’re welcome. Also.” José pointed to a date on the paper calendar on the wall of his office. “I’m going to be away from the restaurant for four to six days. I need you to tell me if you know of any reason for me to stay and take care of things here.”

Kiki grinned. “I can handle it. We’ve trained our people well. I have a reasonable amount of respect from them. Go, José.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure?”

Her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. “Watch me shine, boss man.”

“I believe you will do just that, Kiki.”

“Where are you going? Out of town?”

José tried to tone down his excitement and keep his voice as professional as possible. “Colorado. That’s why I need to know if you’re every bit as fantastic as I think you are. If we’re suddenly short-handed, I won’t be available.”

“I understand, José. Hmm. Colorado. Sounds fun.”

“I think it will be.”

CHAPTER TEN

Gina turned off the music she was listening to in the car so she could think on the way home from work. It was Wednesday night, and she hadn't been with José since Sunday night. She wanted to talk to him, but she felt the responsibilities at home calling her. As soon as she arrived home, she checked with Todd to see how Ma had been.

Todd set his laptop aside. "I'm not sure about her health. I mean she's not sick with a fever or anything, but I can't really reach her sometimes."

Gina wanted to tell him everything would be okay with her soon, but they both knew that wasn't true. "Have you been okay today?"

"I'm doing homework for my class. Earlier I made lunch and then dinner for Ma. We played a game and started a puzzle. She took a nap in the middle of the day, and now she's asleep."

She'd done a little research and read that it's normal for patients with dementia to need a little extra sleep. "It's a little early, but if she needs more sleep then ..."

"Gina, I miss her already. I want more time with her."

She nodded. "I do too, Todd. We're doing our best."

The sad expression on his face broke her heart.

She couldn't fix the problem. She didn't know anyone who could.

Todd yawned. "How was work today?"

With a shrug, Gina said, “It was a long day. I enjoy helping the ladies pick out their special dresses, but I’m also glad when the day is over. I was thinking about calling José. I don’t even know if he’s off work.”

Nodding, Todd put his computer back on his lap. “I’ve got it covered here if you want to go out.” He looked up at her. “Seriously. I don’t mind.”

“Thanks. I’ll find out if he’s at work.” Gina went down the hall to her room and threw her purse on the bed. Tapping her phone and hoping she wouldn’t hear the restaurant noises in the background, she waited to hear his voice.

“This is José.” His voice sounded very professional. A noisy kitchen in the background answered her question right away.

“It’s Gina. You’re probably busy. I can talk later. It’s not urgent.”

“Your timing is impeccable. I’m leaving work.”

“Can you talk?”

When he paused, it sounded like he’d left the building. “I’d rather meet you in person. Do you want to meet at Morrison Park again?”

“At this time of night?”

“There are picnic tables not far from the parking lot. It’s fine. Or you could suggest a place.”

“Let’s try it. If it seems a little risky, I’ll suggest a place. I’ll meet you there.” She ended the call and told Todd where she’d be.

Todd grinned. “Don’t stay out too late, young lady. You’ve got to get up early tomorrow.”

Gina laughed. “I actually do have to be at work early. Thanks for being here for Ma. Text if you need me.”

After he nodded, Gina could tell he wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

When she arrived at the park, José's car was already there by itself in the parking lot. She got out of her car and walked in the grass to José, who stood with his hand out to her. She walked hand in hand with him to the nearest picnic table. They were out of the parking lot lights, but she still felt safe.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” Still holding her hands, José leaned against the table and pulled her around to face him.

Gina smoothed her hands around his waist and hugged him. Resting her head on his shoulder, she said, “I don't remember. Let me just be with you.”

His hands gently rubbed up and down her spine. “I'm fine with that. Take all the time you need.”

There was something on her mind, but being in his arms took precedence. After a few minutes, she started fidgeting because she couldn't stop thinking about what had bothered her at work.

“Gina, what's wrong?”

“I'm trying to settle down about something.” She'd been unable to ignore the doubts and questions that popped into her mind all day.

“Did something happen? You seem upset. Do you need to be consoled or encouraged?”

She had to admit the truth to him. “It's the trip you're going on with my brothers. Why can't you stay and be with

me?”

“Because I want your brothers to trust me.”

“I don’t want you to go.” So many what-ifs made her question the wisdom of this trip.

José spoke softly in a kind voice. “You don’t want me to go because you’ll miss me.”

“Maybe,” she said. “That might be it too.”

“I’m sure I’ll miss you. I’ll be thinking about you the whole time. You don’t realize how often you’re on my mind,” he said. With a finger to her chin, he drew her attention up and gazed into her eyes. “I think a little separation would make it so much fun when we see each other again. I’ll want to hold you and caress you and kiss you when I come back, Gina.”

“What exactly will you do?” She didn’t know if testing him like that was a good idea.

The smile in his eyes warned that he was about to show her what an “I’ve missed you” kiss felt like. He put one hand at her temple and smoothed it around to the back of her head and the other hand gently held her back as he leaned in to her. His lips nipped at her neck and kissed her skin up to her lips.

She squeezed him and kissed him. Was this a dream? What had she ever done to deserve a man who could calm her fears with mind-blowing kisses?

With her head spinning, Gina put her hands on his chest to hold him far enough away for her to catch her breath. Air pushed through her lungs like she’d been swimming at the bottom of the ocean. “We are in public.”

José laughed. “Yes. Did you want me to stop kissing you?”

She had to stop and think about that one. “Not really. Wait. I mean yes. Yes, stop.” Her head was still spinning.

“I’m giving you kisses to remember while I’m gone.” He kissed her sweetly one time and then leaned back to look at her.

“I need to go home,” she said. “I have to open the boutique tomorrow, and I’ll need to get some sleep.”

“Can we eat dinner together tomorrow?” José took her hands in his.

“I’ll be off work early enough. I could cook for you again.” Then another idea came to her. “There’s always fast food. We could do tacos. And I love Pizza Quest. Should we go somewhere after for a fun dessert?”

José looked through the fringe of hair that fell in his face. “That depends. Are we going in your car or mine?”

“I’ll drive ... unless it makes you feel awkward or less manly.” Gina grinned and watched him to see how he’d respond to some teasing.

“Letting a woman drive me around doesn’t make me any less manly. Don’t you worry,” José said. “I am fully masculine no matter who is driving.”

She laughed. “I wasn’t sure how you felt about that. Some guys feel like they’re not in control when they aren’t driving.”

José slid his fingers into her hair. His eyes intensified, full of energy, but he hesitated. “Gina ...” He seemed to tamp his passion down with a lot of self-control. “When we met, I knew I wasn’t in control of the situation. But just as a surfer doesn’t control the waves, I knew no matter what kind of waves came my way, I would be in for a wild ride. Being with you is as thrilling as surfing Hawaii’s north shore. You make my heart

soar.” José kissed her and then leaned back, gazing with eyes like fire. “Gina, love isn’t about being in control of everything. Love is like surfing. I can only control myself. For the ride to last a long time, I must adjust to what’s going on around me.”

She watched his emotional eyes and the rise in the curve of his lips. She kissed him and leaned back. “Love is like surfing? I didn’t know you surfed, José.” She moved her hands up to his biceps. “I guess you can do anything.”

He took her hand in his and walked through the grass back to the parking lot. “Not anything. But I can let you drive me around for our next date.” He stopped at her car. “Pick me up at my house. I’ll text the address. Get in, Gina. It’s time to go home.”

She wasn’t ready for him to leave, but she had to let him go.

A breeze rushed in between them as José backed away, smiling.

Gina sat inside her car and watched him as he entered his car. She turned on her engine and waited for him to start his car.

On the way home, she tried to stay focused on driving home safely. All she could think about was the warmth of his hugs and that piercing gaze that zinged her heart every time.

Love is like surfing. She could hear the echo of his voice in her mind. Did he really love her? Was he as crazy about her as she was about him?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Today was the day. It was about twenty minutes before five o'clock, and the much-anticipated departure was imminent. José was ready for the trip. Jack and Todd were treating him like he was a friend, not a stranger.

Jack was finally starting to act like he trusted him. It seemed a little sudden. If Jack was truly being honest with him, he was glad to have Jack's trust.

However, he didn't know if Jack was planning to double-cross him on the trip. José would be aware and keep his eyes open for anything weird, but mostly he planned to have fun.

José noticed the vibration of his phone and saw the text.

It was from Jack.

Last chance to back out of this trip.

I thought it would only be fair to give you a good taste of what it's like to be close to Gina. You don't get involved with just her. You get all of us.

If you can't take us being together on this trip, then Gina's not for you.

José realized it wasn't about Jack trying to be friendly. The trip would be a warning, Jack's way of drawing a line in the sand. He responded to Jack.

Thanks for letting me join you.

I'm on my way with a backpack full of supplies.

Campground with electricity? Or are we roughing it?

Jack wasted no time responding.

Def roughing it.

Apparently, Jack could tell that José wasn't just a three-date kind of guy. If the fact that José planned to stay around made him nervous, this could be a good family. Jack was right to put the family connections to the test on this trip. Whether Jack realized it or not, he was revealing his protective nature and showing loyalty. Good qualities for family members.

José planned to learn as much as possible about the family while he was with them. He packed clothes and snacks and a few camping staples like an extra phone charger. He made sure there was plenty of space in his backpack for water bottles. Getting dehydrated on a trip like this would only lead to disorientation. He sure didn't want to get lost.

When he arrived at Gina's house a little before five o'clock, both brothers were busy putting their bags in the back of Jack's gray Toyota Highlander. They shoved another man's backpack into the back of the car.

"I'm José." He shook the new guy's hand.

"I'm Gregory. So you're Gina's boyfriend?"

"Yes." José looked around. "I guess she's inside?" With no response from any of the guys, he moved on to other small talk. "I've never been to Colorado. We're going to see some of America's beauty up close. This is going to be great. Right, Jack?" José gave his backpack to Jack.

Jack motioned for José to look at the ice chest. "Grab a water to keep with you. We won't be stopping for a while."

Gina came out the front door with one hand holding her keys and purse and the other hand holding the hand of her mother. She was a beautiful woman, an older version of Gina.

Her mother took cautious steps through the door and out to the front lawn.

Todd spoke quietly behind José, hiding from his mother. “Stay quiet, please. No distractions.”

Jack walked to his mother and took over for Gina. “Mrs. Dixon told me she’ll be baking a pie today.”

The woman looked up at him, eyes glistening with interest. “What kind?”

Jack smiled and walked with her. “Let’s go see.”

She nodded and took careful steps across the street.

When they were at Mrs. Dixon’s door, Gina stood close to José and whispered, “Have fun on your trip. I hope this is a good idea.”

Although her concern felt good, José didn’t like the lines between her eyebrows. “Don’t worry. We’ll get along.”

Stepping to her car, she said. “I have to go to work, but I’ll be thinking about y’all.” She turned to him and kept her voice low. “It’s not too late to back out.”

He grinned. “Are you kidding? I haven’t been hiking in ages. It’ll be fun.” He smoothed a stray hair away from her face. “You have nothing to worry about.” He lightly stroked her cheek with his thumb. “Do you already know that I love you?”

Her gaze darted to the guys packing the car. When she refocused her eyes on him, she seemed nervous. “I can tell. But I won’t hold you to that because it might change on this trip.”

José laughed. “No, it won’t.” He held her closer, kissing the side of her head. When he pulled back from the hug, he

checked her mood. No change. “I love you.” He stroked her jaw, sliding his hand to the back of her neck, and kissed her.

Jack spoke from behind him. “It’s time to hit the road. Gina, have fun at work. Everybody, in the car. Let’s go.”

Gina shifted her weight. “I do have to go to work.” She stared into José’s eyes. “José?”

He didn’t want to pull away, but he took a half-step back, giving her space. “Yes?”

“Be careful.” Gina had captured José’s heart. She might actually be the one he’d spend the rest of his life with.

“I will.” His love for her fueled a fire in his heart. He hoped she could see that fire in his eyes. Their connection was real. It was the kind of love that could last.

After she hugged the other three men, she gave José a quick kiss and drove away.

As soon as Gina left, Gregory slipped down into the back seat, right side. Todd stood by the front door, passenger side and asked, “Want me to drive when you get sleepy?”

“No, Todd.” Jack checked the back of his car to see if it was tightly closed. He walked to the driver’s door. “Get in, José.”

José got in and settled into the small space behind Jack.

Jack slowly backed out of the driveway and said, “The driving schedule is already assigned. I drive first, and Gregory takes over when I’m tired. Todd’s next, and then you, José. Try to keep all the chatter away from the front seat so drivers aren’t distracted.”

Silently praying for God’s protection over their trip as he stared out the window, José included Gina and their mother

since the family relied on each other so much. This would be out of the normal routine for them, which might cause Gina to worry.

Jack merged onto the highway quickly, and Gregory pulled out his phone. “What kind of music do you like, José? I don’t want to brag, but I have a mildly extensive playlist. When we get to the mountains, I imagine we won’t be near a cell tower.”

“Yes,” José said. “Wi-Fi is probably spotty in the woods.”

Gregory happily arranged all the music and led the conversation about the bands they listened to. Then in a quiet moment, he turned to José. “Jack told me you’ve been dating Gina for a while. When did you two meet?”

José couldn’t stop the smile from stretching across his face even if he’d tried. “It feels like a long time ago, but it’s only been a few weeks. I went to an event at the Turner Pavilion. Jack and Todd suggested that she go there with them, which I’ll be forever grateful for, by the way.” He looked in the front seat for a response but didn’t get one. “They didn’t know me, and they didn’t know I was going to fall in love with Gina so quickly. It was meant to be.”

Gregory smiled. “She deserves to be happy.”

“I’ll do my best,” José said quietly.

From the front seat, Jack interrupted their peaceful conversation. “What does that mean?”

“Settle down.” Gregory’s frown showed he wasn’t used to Jack’s gruff manner.

José thought about what he could possibly say to put Jack at ease. “It means that when I get back home from this trip, I plan to find out if Gina wants to—and truly, I think she does —”

“Wants to what, José?” Jack’s voice wasn’t any less gruff. He had not settled down.

“I think it’s a good idea for me to propose, don’t you?” When José realized he was being ignored, he pushed for a response. “Well, what do you think? You’re going to be my brothers-in-law.”

“Fine. She’ll probably be happy.” Jack kept his eyes on the road and his voice unemotional.

Todd stared over his shoulder. “José, are you sure you want to join this family? Maybe you ought to hold off until the end of the trip to make that decision. You do know she’s very protective of her family, right?”

“Yes. I know. I’ll enjoy having all of you at our house for holidays and celebrations. Don’t worry. We’ll get along fine.”

After many long hours of driving, Jack fidgeted in his seat. His unflinching determination, fueled by burdensome regret, would keep him on his mission. He’d studied the map and knew exactly how long it would take to get to the entrance of Rocky Mountain National Park. He had planned the hike, the snacks in the backpack, every detail.

As José and Gregory sang along to songs on the playlist, Gregory messed up some of the words. He didn’t let that stop him from missing the same words each time the song came up in the 96-song playlist. Gregory didn’t seem to care that José had the better voice and the better memory for lyrics. “Sing with us, Jack.”

“No. I’m driving.”

Gregory gave him a look through the rearview mirror. “Come on. You can sing and drive. You’ve done that for years.” He turned to José. “He has a nice voice.”

“No, Gregory.” Jack wanted to focus on the road. It wouldn’t do to have an accident and be responsible for killing everyone in the car.

“Fine. I won’t bother you while you’re driving. Deep inside, I know you want to sing with me.” Gregory started up the next song.

Jack caught a glimpse of his own serious face in the rearview mirror. The others could easily see the contrast between his focus and their own relaxed playfulness. He hoped they saw that as a sign of being responsible.

Racing along the highway to Denver, Colorado, Jack clenched his teeth, anticipating the seriousness of every move he would make for the next two days. At least he wasn’t goofing around and putting the lives of the innocent in danger. Again.

With the mountains to the west and the back seat full of song, his plan was about to commence. He’d pull Gregory aside when they stopped for breakfast.

So far, Jack had driven seven of the sixteen hours they’d been on the road. Each driver had been able to get some sleep before and after their turn to drive. Everyone was pulling their weight. No complaints.

Jack peeked in the rearview mirror and saw Gregory pulling a water bottle out of the small ice chest on the seat between him and José. “Gregory, stay out of the water. We’re almost to Denver. You’ll need that in a few hours.”

“I’m trying to stay hydrated,” Gregory said. “I don’t want to get altitude sickness. Nothing will ruin this trip quicker than one of us getting sick.”

José pointed out the window. “We’re going to the Rockies. The most gorgeous place in the universe. How can anyone get sick looking at a paradise as beautiful as this?” José’s voice still had that lovesick tone. “I’m in heaven.”

“She’s not here. You can cut the act now.” Jack had grown tired of José’s mumblings about him becoming a family member long before they hit the Colorado state line. “Put her photo away, or I’ll ask Gregory to take it from you.” From the rearview mirror, he saw Gregory with hands in the air and shaking his head, acknowledgment that it was an empty threat.

Gregory put his hands down. “You can sing to her on the phone if you want. I’m not about to stop you.”

“Noooo.” Todd and Jack voiced their agony together.

José laughed. “You guys think I would actually do that?”

“Yes.” Again they joined in agreement while Gregory remained silent.

“Not yet,” José said. “Give me another five hours and we’ll see.”

“In five hours we’ll be out of cell phone range.” Jack wished he hadn’t said that. He’d spoken before he realized that could sound like encouragement to call her right away. He whispered, “Don’t call. Don’t call.”

The two in the backseat laughed.

Jack shook his head. “Okay, okay. Do you want to call her or not?”

“Are you kidding?” José’s smile shone in the rearview mirror. “I want to call her.”

“José, she works hard. She’s probably driving to work anyway.” Jack checked the mirror for José’s response.

“Tell me more, Jack.” José chuckled. “Gina is perfection. I love hearing about her. She’s changed my life.”

“We’re almost to Denver. Hang on. We’ll stop for breakfast in a few minutes. You can call then.”

“I’m getting my phone out.” José put on an overdramatic romantic hero voice. “Gina, my love, I’ve missed you. These days apart have been torture for me.”

Moaning in the front seat, Todd covered his ears. “It’s been torture for us. You make it sound like it’s been a week.”

Jack mumbled, “It feels like it’s been a week.”

“It hasn’t even been two days, José,” Todd said. “Give us a break. She’s our sister for crying out loud.” He looked over his shoulder to the backseat.

José laughed. “Todd and Jack, close your ears. Gregory, although you’re not related, you can close your ears too. I must sing love songs to my love, my one true love.”

Jack couldn’t take it. “José, give it a rest.”

“Sorry.” José laughed after messing with them. He’d been enjoying it too much. “I can’t help pestering you guys. You’re like brothers already.”

José continued singing along to the playlist with Gregory as Jack exited the freeway.

CHAPTER TWELVE

After breakfast, Jack pulled Gregory aside. “Can I trust you to keep a secret?”

With a mocking smile, Gregory asked, “Does a hen lay eggs?”

Jack shook his head. “I’m very serious. I want to ask you something, and I won’t get another chance. I need you to do something for me.”

Gregory took on a more serious expression. “Sure. Of course, Jack. What is it?”

“Promise me,” Jack said. “I know you don’t make a promise unless you intend to keep it. I need you to promise that you’ll do this for me.”

“I don’t understand.” Gregory frowned. “Are you low on cash? Is that why you didn’t eat much in there? I can spare some cash if you need it.”

“No. I need you to keep some information secret until a little later. I can’t write anything down. You have to remember what I say, and it won’t be difficult.” Jack put a hand on Gregory’s shoulder. “It’s for later.”

Gregory’s frown softened. “Yes, I’ll help out.”

Jack shook his head again. “No, promise me.”

“I promise, Jack.” Gregory waited, wide-eyed. “What’s the big secret?”

Jack saw Todd and José coming out of the restaurant. He'd have to be quick. He unlocked the car and said, "You two get in. I'm driving. Give me a minute. Be right back."

Walking several feet away, still on the parking lot sidewalk, Jack whispered to Gregory his clear plan for the next two days. It was impossible for Gregory to misunderstand or forget.

After a moment of stunned silence, Gregory whispered back, "You're messing with me. That's a horrible joke."

"You gave your word, Gregory. You're my best friend. You are an important part of this." Jack backed up from him and gave one of those business smiles that everyone has after a deal has been done. "You got this."

Gregory seemed nervous, which was reasonable. He was the only one who knew the truth.

Jack led the way back to the car in silence. Because he'd opened up and told Gregory the true reason behind this trip, Jack was accountable to someone. Now he wouldn't be able to back out of his plan.

Gregory's face seemed a little paler as he stared at the ground and walked slowly to the car. The new knowledge had obviously turned Gregory's stomach.

Jack rubbed his chin, thinking. Would Gregory be experiencing altitude sickness in addition to being under sudden stress? Gregory knew they'd packed the ginger gum in the backpack, so he could take advantage of it if he needed it.

Determined to follow through with this plan, Jack patted Gregory's shoulder on the way to the car. He was sure his plan would work out for the best. No one except Gregory would

ever have to know the truth. This would be the last time for him to ruin something.

When everyone had their seat belt on, Jack started the car and headed back to the highway. When an innocent question popped up about Gregory's mood change, Jack answered, "He'll be fine. Let's get to the trailhead and start hiking." He didn't allow any conversation about Gregory's sudden change of attitude. If he lied to Todd and José, Gregory would be unbearable.

After a while, Todd's white knuckles fastened onto the Yeti cup in his hands as he leaned toward the door.

According to what Jack was seeing in the rearview mirror, José had been jostled too many times, and the back seat was getting tiresome.

José turned away from his window. "I'm not one to complain, but it feels like you're driving faster than necessary, Jack. It's a narrow road. I know we're almost there, but can you be a little more careful?"

Jack nodded. They needed to arrive soon or discontent would spread to all of them. "It's not that narrow. I'm trying to get to the trailhead as soon as possible." Jack moved the car quickly toward his right and steered back just as quickly into the middle of his lane.

"We're all gonna die!" Still white-knuckled, Todd laughed at his own high-pitched panic voice.

Jack stole a look at Todd. "Not amused. I went around a rock in the road. And don't worry, I'm not planning to kill all of us."

"What a relief." Todd's face had the same dull, patient expression he had at the beginning of this trip.

“Okay, guys,” Jack said. This had been a long drive for all of them. Everyone wanted to be there already. Just a little longer and he wouldn’t have to put up with their complaints anymore. “Here it is. Right up here.”

Todd breathed out and relaxed in his seat.

Jack pulled into the trailhead’s parking lot and chose to park in a spot away from the trail and the bathroom.

After a quieter-than-expected two-hour drive, the trailhead parking lot was a welcome sight. Each of them climbed out and found his own backpack.

Stretching his limbs after the long drive, Gregory stared at Jack for a moment in that I-can’t-believe-you’re-doing-this look he’d developed over the last couple of hours, and then he pulled away so he wouldn’t be noticed. The others might freak out if they knew what Gregory was hiding.

Jack turned back to the car. He had to make sure everything got stashed in the pockets of their backpacks and cargo pants. They’d need all their surplus snacks and every drop of water they could carry. Jack pocketed the car keys and checked on Gregory.

Gregory’s hands were steady. He seemed a little better. His eyes were the only things giving away the fact high emotion was locked down in the inner vault. He stared at the ground. “I’m having feelings, Jack.”

He knew exactly what his feelings were, but he had to give him a chance to vent before rejoining the others. “What kind of feelings, Gregory?”

“I feel like we all need to take a breath and go back home.” Gregory’s stern gaze bored into Jack. “We need to go home, Jack.”

“Keep pushing down all the feelings. You’ll get through it.” Facing away from the others, Jack adjusted his backpack. It seemed heavier now that he was on the mountain.

“Whatever it takes, Gregory. You have to help me do this. Be strong for me.”

Gregory took a few stiff, slow steps toward the trail.

Jack ducked into the back seat and found three more energy bars that needed to be packed away in someone’s backpack. The ice chest was still on the seat. Jack grabbed two bottles to put in the side pockets on his pants and added another to the backpack. That would be quite a heavy load to carry. But he’d do what he had to do. He turned to José and said, using an undemanding tone, “Lover boy.”

José was staring at a flower ten feet away. His head snapped in Jack’s direction. His smile slowly unfolded, allowing a relaxed voice to come through. “Yes, younger brother?”

“When you’re through picking flowers, I need some help over here.”

José stood and spoke in a musical rhythm, “Never gonna be tired of the joy of seeing beauty all around me. Never gonna be tired of flowers.”

Jack didn’t know whether José did that to torment him or out of sheer weirdness. Gina was going to have her hands full with this one. She had a good head on her shoulders, so hopefully, she would know what she was doing when and if she agreed to marry him.

Jack stepped away from the car and knelt to re-tie his shoe. “Climb in and get all the food and drinks out. Check under,

over, behind, and beside to make sure I've gotten everything out. If you find anything, stuff it in one of your pockets."

José moved with the grace and agility of a ten-point buck. In no time, José came out of the car with a couple of small granola bars and a water bottle. "Tah-dah." In the car, he had told of being a soccer champion in his youth, so his flexibility and speed made perfect sense.

"See? I knew you'd be handy. Thanks, José." Jack walked over and pushed the car door closed. He looked for Todd who had already started toward the trail. Oblivious as usual. Good. Todd was fine.

After stashing the snacks, José sped ahead to walk beside Todd. Yep, they were fine. They hadn't noticed Gregory hanging back from the trail.

Todd asked in a voice that made it clear he needed a little assurance, "So we hike three hours into the park, pull out our dinner, take pictures of the sunset, spend the night on the mountain, and then we hike three hours back. Right?" His attention stayed on the brown and rust-colored patches of trees halfway up the mountain while he spoke.

"We'll see. Don't worry. You'll have a blast," Jack said.

Jack walked silently next to Gregory as the last two on the trail.

José seemed to frolic on the trail, scampering like a squirrel. He stopped and listened, his attention on the signs of wildlife. "We need to do this kind of trip every year. I'll kiss Gina goodbye and tell our children that I'll be on a trip with their uncles. And off we go to the wild—to be men, fearless and free." He let out a wolf cry and laughed with Todd. This was the perfect trip for José to find out if he could stand being

in this crazy family. José didn't quite catch up with Todd before he stopped and examined the tops of the trees. "Guys, listen. Can you hear the squirrels and birds calling out to each other?"

Jack replied in a softened voice, "Keep moving."

The wind pushed the tree branches around slightly. The occasional gusts loosened a few pine cones and needles. José hurried to follow Todd more closely. They seemed to have bonded over their music interests.

Only knowing him a short time, Jack's impression was that José wasn't strong enough. This trip should make Gina aware that she needed someone with the determination to take whatever came, someone who could roll with life's punches. Gina needed someone as strong as she was.

As Gina's brother, it was his job to make sure no one married her blindly, thinking life would be all sunshine and rainbows. This trip was Jack's last chance to take care of Gina. He'd make the most of the opportunity to watch their new brother-in-law-to-be, as José now saw himself.

Gina would soon see what José was really made of.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

José trained his eyes on the squirrel fussing at them from the top of a tree. “How many people come through here in a day?”

Todd shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You’d think that squirrel would get tired of fussing at people on this trail.” Fussing wasn’t something José wanted to do. Once he and Gina started their family, he’d probably have to fuss at the kids. It wouldn’t be often. He would raise kids with the kindness of his *abuelo*.

José glanced at Todd to see if there was potential for more conversation. He needed to bond with Gina’s brothers, and this was the perfect time for it.

Not much of a talker since they had arrived, Todd seemed intent on getting to their end goal for the day.

José stopped and looked up. “The squirrels need to give it a rest. This is going to be a good day.” His heart danced inside him at this hike and what it would do for his relationship with Gina’s brothers. The fresh air filled him with hope for the future.

Once he had them on his side, his proposal to Gina would be so much easier. This trip would give him the confidence to propose, knowing she had no reason to reject him.

José glanced back at Jack. “Rocky Mountain National Park. The most beautiful place in the world. I mean, just smell the air.” Their eyes connected, but there was no

communication. “We’ve just arrived, and I’m already enjoying it.”

Jack turned his attention to the trail. Todd hadn’t gone too far ahead. This early in the trip, José thought that Jack’s serious face should at least crack a grin to show he was trying to enjoy the hike. After all, he was the one who planned it. Then Jack focused on Gregory who was slightly behind him. They stopped to talk.

“Hey,” José called to Todd. “Stop. I think we have a problem. Let’s stay together.”

Todd turned around. “Stragglers? We’re burning daylight. Come on, guys.” He walked over to José and waited.

José wished he could hear what the two were talking about, but their voices were too quiet. “Gregory’s been walking slowly.”

“Yeah,” Todd said. “And not speaking. That’s not like him. Something’s up.”

José turned his attention back to the trail. “Maybe he’ll decide to share it later.”

“Oh, no,” said Todd, still watching Jack and Gregory.

José turned around to see what the problem was.

Bending forward, Gregory’s head went behind a tree. The sound of a liquid splat came from that direction.

Todd shook his head. “He’s sick. Just what we need.”

José sighed. “Looks like we’re heading back to the car. We need to get Gregory to a hotel.”

“He’s upset, which is odd,” Todd said. “If it’s a food reaction, we should treat it differently than a nervous reaction.”

Don't you think?"

"Is there any reason he would be upset?" José watched Todd for a clue.

"He's Jack's friend. I don't know him as well. I don't remember hearing him say anything about a fear of heights."

"He's worried about something." José turned back toward Gregory and Jack as he scratched his head. "Do you think Gregory would stay at a hotel somewhere around here tonight and meet back with us tomorrow? I know we passed a couple of signs for hotels on the way here, and I didn't notice any *No Vacancy* signs."

"I didn't ask," Todd said. "This trip was Jack's baby. I didn't get to have a lot of input."

Gregory got back on the trail and stood beside Jack. He stood still, hunched over, holding his belly.

Jack stood by Gregory and called to Todd and José, "He's okay."

Todd's voice was low. "He does not look okay."

José had to agree. "We need to get a room and try the trailhead in the morning." With his gaze on Jack, José started walking toward him, praying with each step. *Father, I know You can fix the problem, whatever it is. Help us to know how to participate in Your plan. I ask for peace and good health for Gregory and wisdom for the rest of us. Thank You for being here for us on this trip.*

Jack's hands were on Gregory's shoulders, both men facing each other. Jack's eyes had that reassuring, yet intense expression. Persuasion seemed to come easy for Jack. He looked as if he could convince Gregory to buck up and press on if he wanted to.

Gregory stepped back away from Jack and slipped the backpack off his shoulders.

Jack gave Gregory a wink.

In response, Gregory pressed his thin lips into a sad smile.

José waited a moment, then spoke up. “Everything all right now?”

After giving Gregory a pat on the back, Jack said, “Well, the plan could use a little tweaking.”

“I agree,” José said. “Let’s get a hotel. We can start again tomorrow.” Now that he was here enjoying the crisp mountain air, José didn’t want to leave. However, Gregory needed support. The car was about to get crowded again.

“Gregory’s going to be fine.” Jack nodded. “He’ll feel better tonight after some rest.”

José slipped his hand into his back pocket and pulled out a bandana. He stepped over to Gregory. “Here’s a rag,” he said. “When you’re ready, you can pour water on it and wipe your face.”

“Thanks,” Jack said as he took the bandana and held it. “We don’t need any help. He’s fine.”

Todd watched from a distance, apparently not wanting to interfere.

Gregory stretched a finger toward Todd. “Protect each other.”

Jack stood behind him, arms crossed over his chest. “I keep telling him that we’re not going to run into bears. There are so many tourists and hikers around here. The animals are used to seeing people. They’ll smell us and hear us and go the other way.” Jack turned to Gregory and patted him on the back.

“We’ll be fine. You should get a hotel and text us tomorrow after you’ve had some sleep.”

Gregory shrugged Jack’s hand off his back and didn’t look at him. “Don’t speak to me.”

“Gregory, come on,” Jack said. “You’re probably dehydrated and need some water. Go sit in the car and drink some water until you feel better. I know we still have a couple of sports drinks in the ice chest.” Jack pulled his keys out of his pocket and held them in front of Gregory. There was communication going on under the silence. Jack gave Gregory his keys and a sober look.

“Is he going to be okay?” José watched Gregory, unable to believe that leaving him alone was a good idea. “Really, Jack, we should stay with him until he gets medical attention. He doesn’t look good. We should cancel.”

Jack calmly shook his head. “No, we’re not canceling.” Jack’s carefree voice sounded like he believed what he was saying. “Gregory is a little tense. Altitude sickness and fear of wild animals. He was sure he could overcome that, but it looks like—”

“I hate you!” Gregory’s sharp voice made a few birds take flight. “Jack, you should’ve never put me in this position. I can’t believe you would do this to your best friend.” Gregory lifted his chin and stared at Jack with angry, terrified eyes. “I’m gonna tell—”

“You’re not telling anyone.” Jack interrupted. “You let me deal with it my way.” Jack reached for Gregory’s shoulder.

With a shove, Gregory yelled, “Stay away from me. How can you do this?” His gaze fully connected with Jack’s. “You can’t do this.”

Jack remained calm. “You’ll be fine. Go sit in the car for a while and cool off.” He turned to Todd and José. “Come on. Let’s go. He’ll be fine.”

José watched Gregory as Jack walked away. When he had Gregory’s attention, he mouthed the words, “Are you okay?”

Gregory shook his head and held José’s gaze with serious, terrified eyes. “Don’t let him be alone!” And then he walked away.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

At work, Gina checked to make sure all of the customers had been greeted before attending to the mannequins in the front window.

Standing at the front of the boutique, Gina swept her wavy brown hair into a pony tail. She needed to go outside to get an image in her mind of how she should arrange everything in the window for the new dresses. Stepping outside, she was suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of heat. The humidity made it harder to breathe. She needed to hurry or she'd start sweating.

She always kept the big picture in her mind when designing a new window. Imagining the boutique window from the perspective of a new customer kept her thoughts focused while taking care of mindless tasks like dressing mannequins.

Okay, enough of the heat. There's work to do. If she'd been wearing sleeves, she would've rolled them up after she went back inside. Gina reached for the mannequin nearest the door.

This morning when she had begun putting the window ideas together, she wasn't exactly clear on what the window should look like. Paige trusted her to bring in customers with fresh window dressing whenever the new dress boxes arrived. The three dresses she'd already pulled for the window were eye-catching jewel-tone dresses with different necklines. She'd set them in strategic piles on the floor, but something didn't look quite right. After she switched out the cream-

colored wedding dress for a white one with a shorter train, she began undressing the first mannequin. That should work better.

“Gina, you got a minute?” Sofia’s voice sounded gentle but serious.

A stubborn sleeve in Gina’s hand made her take off the mannequin’s arm. She turned to give Sofia her attention.

Sofia glanced over her shoulder to the back of the store and then back to Gina. “Nobody’s around. They’re all back there. I have to find out about the Nichols dress. When is it going to get here?”

Gina rolled her eyes. “Soon. Thanks for bringing that up. I need more stress right now.”

Sofia giggled. “I can’t wait to see it.” She glanced at the pincushion in her hands. “That poor girl’s wedding date is coming up soon. You have to alert me the minute it arrives so I’ll have time to schedule adjustments.”

Gina shook her head at the unexpected frustration in dealing with this supplier. They hadn’t had any problems with this company before. “First, I’ll check to see if it’s the right dress in the right size and not off-white this time.”

“I know,” Sofia said. “I can’t believe you’ve had such insane problems with this dress.”

Gina held up the stubborn sleeve and the loose arm. “I must get back to changing the clothes on my gorgeous models.”

“So gorgeous.” Sofia giggled and then strapped the pincushion onto her wrist with a Velcro closure. “Let me know so I can make room in my alterations calendar. Thanks,” she said in a quiet voice as she left.

Gina's plan had always been to undress and dress the mannequins one at a time. The neighborhood to the north of the boutique was getting a face-lift with some popular businesses and a couple of nice restaurants popping up lately. The clothes in her window had to reflect the type of customer she wanted in the store. The design couldn't appear cheap like a discount store or she'd scare away the affluent customers.

After putting the mannequin's arms back on, gently pulling her clothes to a snug fit, and securing the loose fabric with a large binder clip, Gina saw that it was lunch time. The window looked decent for now. She could finish the rest of the window after a quick break.

She went to the back to get her purse and made eye contact with one of her coworkers to let her know she was heading to lunch. With her purse strap on her shoulder, she started down the sidewalk to the sandwich shop. Her phone buzzed the familiar text notification before she got halfway there. Her first thought was that her brothers wanted to share a photo of their trip with her. Were they being nice to José? The message on her phone was from Gregory.

I need to talk to you.

This is not a drill.

She couldn't figure out what he meant. Before she could type in her response, another message came through from him.

EMERGENCY!

She tapped to call him. "What's this nonsense? Did Jack put you up to this?"

"Gina, I—" Gregory's words were shaky and garbled at first. He sounded like he was sick.

She appealed to him in a soft, gentle voice. “Can you speak up? I’m not sure I understood you.”

He slowed his speech. “It’s Jack. He needs you. Please. Come get him and take him home.” Gregory seemed beside himself in pain over Jack.

“Did he have an accident? Is the car damaged? Are you in Colorado? You should be there by now.”

“You’ve always been able to talk sense into him.” There was a new rough texture in Gregory’s voice that made him sound angry.

“Talk to him about what? Calm down. You sound a bit disoriented. Try drinking some water and call me back.”

“Gina, you have to fly to Colorado because Jack won’t do it if you’re involved.”

With some sweetness in her voice, Gina tried to help him focus so she could find out what was going on. “Gregory, are you still with him? Can you give Jack your phone?”

He spoke louder. “No. They went on down the trail. I couldn’t do it.”

“You couldn’t do what? What are you talking about, Gregory?” Gina tried to hide how mad she was at the boys. “If this is some kind of prank,” she said, lowering her voice so she didn’t attract attention. She looked around. No one was staring. Heading through the parking lot, she decided to finish the conversation in her air-conditioned car.

His voice still quavered. “What are you going to do, Gina? Are you coming?”

She opened her car door but heard his voice clearly with her phone away from her ear. One hand fanned her face before

turning on the engine. The other hand held the phone closer to her head. “I don’t even know where you are.”

“Don’t worry about me. Jack is in the park. He’s with Todd and José.”

“That’s not enough information.” She turned on the air-conditioner fan to full blast, adjusted the vents to blow directly on her, and held the phone closer to her ear.

“They’re going off the trail, so I can’t tell you where they are. You have to come here. Now. I’m serious.”

Gina couldn’t have been more confused. “Calm down. There are park rangers who can help with problems. Find some and lead them to Jack if he needs help.”

“There aren’t any park rangers around. There aren’t any cars in the trailhead parking lot except ours. Besides, Gina, he’ll only listen to you.”

Hoping he wouldn’t take offense at her calm tone, she spoke slowly as if to a small child. “Gregory, listen carefully. Go find a park ranger. Can you do that for me? If you’ll drive to a ranger station and ask for help, they’ll be able to find him quicker than I can.”

“Jack is determined and so calm it’s scary. If he sees that I’ve alerted park rangers, he might ... Please, Gina, come get Jack and take him home.”

In her car and now cooler than she was on the sidewalk, Gina tried to put the facts together. “Gregory, I need you to tell me where Jack is. I won’t be able to find him without your help.”

“The south end of the Rocky Mountain National Park. Don’t take time to pack a bag. Just come here!”

“Gregory, take a breath.” Gina took her own advice with a deep inhale. “Tell me what happened.”

“Jack despises himself. I don’t know why, but it must be about the girl he was dating. She broke up with him months ago, but they met somehow about a few weeks ago. After that, Jack was devastated. I asked him about it, but he didn’t give details, just silence.” Gregory’s voice had withered to a whine, and he was about to get too emotional to speak. He took a loud breath and cleared his throat. “You know how Jack used to sing with me? Well, he’s not singing anymore. He didn’t sing the whole way here. Something is wrong with him.”

She sighed and said, “You called me to say Jack isn’t singing with you?”

“You don’t understand, Gina.”

“All I know is there’s a girl who broke up with him, and Jack’s going to do something? You’re right. I don’t understand.”

Gregory’s intense voice slowed down again. “He needs you. You’re strong.”

What if Jack really did need her? She didn’t want to regret later that she ignored Gregory’s plea for help. Gina thought through her options as quickly as she could. “You know how far away you are from me. I can’t get there very fast. If all the airline seats are filled today, I can’t get there until tomorrow, and then I’d need to drive to the park from the airport. That takes time.” Her travel options seemed ridiculously slow.

“No,” Almost shouting, Gregory spat out words at twice his usual speed. “You have to hurry.” Gregory’s worrisome swallow and heavy breathing added to the desperation in his voice. He continued, “I warned José and Todd with a look as

serious as possible. I probably looked scared. Because I was. Still am. I said, ‘Don’t let Jack be alone.’”

“How did they respond to you?”

His answer came in a higher pitch. “Those two were having a great time. I warned them the best I could. I couldn’t say anything specific. Jack was standing there, staring at me. I was sworn to secrecy. I was terrified. He wanted me to go away ... and ... let him ...” His tearful whines turned into sobbing. “If you don’t leave right now, you’ll be too late.”

“Too late? Too late for what?” It was time to use her stern voice now. “Pull yourself together. What are you not telling me?”

“I’m sorry, Gina. I’m so sorry. I couldn’t do anything. You know your brother is going to do whatever he wants. No one will be able to stop him ... except you.”

Stop him? That did it, now she was crying. Gina pulled a tissue from her purse and wiped her cheeks. She took a sip from the water bottle in her console, refusing to allow her voice to mimic Gregory’s. After a breath, she agreed. “I’ll talk to some people and find a way to get there as quickly as possible. Where are you now?”

“I’m—” His voice cracked. “I can’t drive yet. I’m still in the trailhead parking lot.

José had watched Gregory leave without any explanation about what had happened between him and Jack. He took longer steps to keep up with Jack’s quick pace. “Slow down. I need you to tell us why you and Gregory were arguing. Is there something we should know?”

Jack slowed. “So here’s the deal. Gregory is fine. He’s going to drive to a bed and spend some time recuperating. We, on the other hand, are not fine. We are antsy to get up that mountain. We’re going to see the best sunset as soon as we get up high enough. Come on, guys! We’re in Rocky Mountain National Park. Gregory gets a bed tonight, but we’ve got a long way to go before we can relax.”

Todd’s eyebrows stretched up. “Please, Jack. No more talk about Gregory getting to sleep in a comfortable bed while I sleep outside on the ground.”

Jack ignored his brother but started a smile in the squint of his eyes and let it spread to his mouth. “I promised Gina I’d take care of you, José. Come on.”

José, uneasy about Jack’s borderline sinister smile, resolved to keep an eye out for Todd and Jack since Gregory was so worked up over something. As long as he was on the alert, he’d be ready for whatever lay ahead. He noticed Jack wanted to take the lead. “I’m with you, Jack. Right here with you.”

Todd stayed slightly behind Jack and kept his eyes on the trail since they were walking so fast.

Jack slowed at a turn in the trail and headed into a field.

“I knew it,” Todd said in a low angry tone. “We’re going off-trail.”

José stayed quiet and watched to see how this was going to play out.

Todd stumbled on a rock but caught himself and didn’t fall. “Jack, let’s get back on the trail. Where are you taking us? Do you even know?”

Jack nodded. “I studied the terrain before we left. There’s a place to spend the night up ahead.”

“Come on, Jack.” Todd’s voice didn’t sound like he trusted his brother, but he kept following him.

“You guys are going to be so surprised tonight. When we have experienced all this place has for us, you will never forget this trip.” Jack’s voice hinted at a calmness that wasn’t apparent in his gait.

After a speedy walk through the field, Jack led them up the side of a hill, winding back down the other side, and then he stopped at the edge of a bunch of trees. As they looked down into a valley, Jack’s gaze circled a small lake.

A distant splash came from somewhere below them. José scanned the area, trying to identify the source of the splash.

It caught Todd’s attention too. Todd stopped moving. “Do you hear that?”

“It’s called nature,” Jack said.

Part of the lake was overtaken by some kind of water lilies and taller vegetation along the far edge. José stopped moving to listen more intently. More splashing ended both their conversation and their movement. The trio had spent the last several minutes winding through the trees with what seemed like the normal amount of wildlife noise, but this was a different sound.

Todd kept his voice low. “How big is that lake?”

José searched the edge of the tree line below for moving branches. He didn’t notice any animals other than a few birds and whatever was splashing in the far side of the lake.

Jack craned his neck as he took another step closer to the edge of the hillside and the beginning of the rocky descent which included a couple of almost-straight drops that might kill a man, no matter how in-shape he was. “Not too big.”

“Big enough.” Todd’s whisper, accompanied by his frozen stare, gave away his discomfort.

Jack quietly nodded. He sat at the edge of the cliff, listening to the water splashing in the valley below.

José’s vision was good enough to make out a brown body in the water just barely coming out from the vegetation. It was too far away to see details.

“It’s a bear, Jack.” Todd frowned and whispered in a harsh, terrified tone, “You led us to a bear. Thank you so much.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gina called Paige to let her know she needed to go out of town to take care of a personal matter. Avoiding the word “emergency”, she asked for the next three days off from work.

Paige paused, leaving a gap of uncertainty in the conversation. “Are you sure you want to use vacation days? This doesn’t sound like a vacation. We should re-work the schedule. I think in this case I can be generous.”

Surprised at her boss’s response, Gina chose not to ask questions. “Thanks, Paige. I appreciate it so much. And I apologize for not giving details about when to expect me back since I don’t have any idea when I’ll get back. I don’t even know how I’ll get there.”

“Well, it sounds serious, so I want to do whatever I can to keep my best manager happy.”

Gina ended the call and put her phone down to think. Why would Jack act this way? Stop him from doing what? There was no reason to expect a problem that would have the word “emergency” attached. She had no answers to all the questions popping up in her mind.

The best she could hope for was that it was all just a big misunderstanding.

The explanation Gregory gave her left out a lot of facts. It was about a girl, that much was clear. Jack was devastated, but why? Apparently, she wouldn’t find out anything until she arrived.

And she had no clue how that was going to happen.

Taking a deep breath, Gina closed her eyes and tried to block the emotions she'd heard in Gregory's voice. She needed to be calm and think.

What had Gregory found out? Why didn't Jack tell her?

Jack needed her. Just the thought of her brother in danger drew her emotions. This was the brother who had been independent and successful. She'd always been available if he needed to talk something out.

Wiping a couple of unruly tears that wouldn't stay inside where they belonged, Gina lifted her head and prayed, "Help him, God. Help Jack go to You."

After another deep breath, she closed her eyes and focused on God. She'd prayed regularly for Ma, but not for Jack. She'd never needed to. He'd never asked.

A gut-wrenching sadness came over her. She pressed through the desire to weep and moan at the pain Gregory and Jack must be feeling. Instead, she doubled over in prayer. "Holy God, You are almighty and merciful. You are love. I need You."

She imagined God's throne room where the light that emanated from the throne at the far end vibrated with peaceful, powerful energy. Led by a longing in her heart, she imagined walking toward it. The thick light around her energized her steps. Stopping past the middle of the room, close enough to feel seen and far enough away to show more respect than she ever had, she knelt.

Her heart sang a sad melody. She didn't think there was anything she could do about the pain Jack and Gregory were feeling. With her eyes still closed, she was appearing before

God to get answers, kneeling before God in humility, waiting for the right words.

A song of gratitude flowed from within her. Words of thankfulness soared in her heart, thankfulness that she had a boss who would let her keep her job and handle her brother's problem—whatever that turns out to be. More thankfulness from a deeper part of her flowed in a rhythm she'd never felt before. The sadness ebbed away as triumphant praises took over the song. She filled the car with her voice. Singing aloud the music of true worship, her voice changed the atmosphere around her. Waves of words gushed from her in a melody of praises that seemed natural. It wasn't a rehearsed song. It was new. It was her heart breaking over what was going on with her brother and Gregory. At the same time, it was her heart connecting with a God who had already begun working out the solution.

Gina opened her eyes, fully charged, even though she'd given all of her passion and energy to the song. In the emptiness after the song left her, she listened. Her heart was full, but she still didn't have the details of what to do next. She only knew that she had to be there in Colorado soon so she could bring her brother back home.

First things first. She needed an empty seat on a plane.

She tapped her phone and scanned for the next available flight that would get her close enough to her brother for it to make a difference. She'd also need to rent a car.

When her phone's ringtone startled her, she immediately answered. "Hi, Paige. What's up?"

"I made a call. One of our customers is on the way to the airport. She'll wait for you to get there. She is offering you a

ride in her private jet. I wouldn't push the limitations of her generosity, so hurry before she changes her mind."

Gina couldn't think of anyone specific that Paige might have called. "One of our customers? Who is this?"

"It's Annabella Stapleton. Did you ever meet her? She's head of Stapleton Prosecco."

"What? I mean, yes. I'll go straight to the airport. What about the boutique? I've just started my lunch hour."

"I'll come in and take over your shift. Don't worry about a thing. Take care of your family."

Gina sent a quick prayer of thanks to God and asked Him to bless Paige and her business. Then she texted Mrs. Dixon and worked out some alternate plans for Ma for the next couple of days. Being out of town caused trouble for the whole family when it was just one of them. Now with everyone except Ma out of town, she'd be paying Mrs. Dixon a little extra. Gina whispered, "Almighty God, thank You for your protection over my whole family. Thank You for getting the guys to the park safely. Please, bless Mrs. Dixon with tenacity, patience, and creativity. Thank You for Mrs. Dixon's willingness and availability. Merciful God, You are bigger than all our problems, and I don't even know what all our problems are. Help me get to Jack today, and help Gregory with ... whatever is going on."

After she put away her phone, Gina tried to ignore her frustrations with her brothers. The prickly feelings bubbled under the surface as she drove to the airport. She couldn't imagine what she would say to them if she found out they were pulling a fast one.

If this was not an emergency but a horrible surprise that they were all participating in, she'd also be mad at José.

When she heard Gregory's voice in her memory, she knew this couldn't be a prank. Why was Gregory so emotional?

Jack has never been so despondent that Gregory's emotions would be out of control. Why would a grown man cry like that? Unless he wasn't pranking her.

Why didn't José call her with the warning? Was he unaware that there was an emergency right under his nose?

Gina turned on the radio. She had to crowd out all the bad thoughts bombarding her. But worry was hard to ignore.

It couldn't be a bear, could it? José wanted to help calm Todd, but he didn't know what to say.

Jack, perched at the edge of the cliff, hushed him with a finger in the air. He whispered, "We're too low to see a bear."

"There are bears in the park, but that's probably not one," José said in a non-committal tone.

"We're not going to see a bear, Todd." Jack stared in the direction of the splashing. "Bears live higher up in the mountains." He turned to Todd. "Not down this low."

"Right," José said, hoping no one would challenge his expertise. No point in scaring Todd when a good bluff was more calming. Jack would be the one who'd know. And if Jack was bluffing for Todd's sake, who was he to stop him?

"You're right. It's not a bear," Todd said, nodding with fear in his eyes. "It's *bears*, plural. Because where there's one,

there's got to be another." Todd turned his head to where the animal was making the splashes.

"See? Antlers." Jack pointed to a moose with antlers just above the surface of the water. It swam out of the lilies and stood at the edge of the pond, eating whatever grew there. "Not a bear."

"We're still not out of the woods. Literally," Todd said. "A moose is faster than me. Outrunning him is not a great option. We are not going down there for a closer look."

"There's a ledge." Jack stood and took a few steps along the cliff. Craning, he bent his knees, lowering himself to see around a branch that rose from further down the side of the mountain. "Want to check it out?"

That Jack. What a clown. José laughed. "Right."

Jack held onto a tree trunk and climbed down to the natural rock extension about five feet out.

"No! I meant no." José wished he'd taken Jack seriously.

The rock appeared sturdy enough, but José was certain the ledge was not built specifically for tourists to rest on and wait for animals to wander down to the lake below. One slip too far and Jack wouldn't be able to get back up: if he lived through the fall.

More splashing.

After the noise stopped, José shrugged at Todd and knelt by Jack's tree trunk. "Okay. That was a nice break. Let's get moving again."

Jack didn't answer. Didn't move.

Todd walked to the cliff and looked down at Jack's head, which wasn't pointed in the direction of the moose anymore.

“You see anything else down there?”

After a pause, Jack answered, “No. Just the moose.” Jack glanced up at Todd. “We’ll go around him.” He pointed to the pile of rocks next to a boulder. “We can climb up there and go over that hill. Then we’ll head west. If we get separated and you feel like you’re lost, remember to keep walking west until you hit a road.

Separated? José kept his thoughts to himself. Jack didn’t need a mutiny on his hands. And Todd didn’t need to feel any more troubled than he already was.

José stood with Todd and waited for Jack to join them, but he still wasn’t moving. Something wasn’t right. Was Jack thinking about how they left Gregory behind? Or maybe it was something else.

Todd stifled a groan as he sat and let his feet dangle. “Taking a break, Jack?” He reached for his water bottle and took a sip.

“Not tired.” Jack’s voice had a strange quality to it.

José’s gaze followed the mountain down from where Jack was sitting. There were a couple of sturdy trees to catch his fall, but nothing that was close enough to make wanting to climb down the mountain a real desire. How bad did he want to get down to that moose? Bad enough to risk his life climbing down the side of the mountain? That was the only thing he could think of that could be distracting Jack. José wouldn’t mention it out loud. He didn’t want it to sound like a suggestion. “I’m ready to get back on the trail now. How about you, Jack?”

Todd put his water back in its place and stood. “Yeah, the moose isn’t really that visible from here now. We could go up

and see what else we can find.”

Jack stayed silent.

“Jack?” José took a sip from his water bottle. “Jack, you need any help?” José peered over the edge of the rock.

Jack’s shoulders rose with a deep breath. He took a minute to answer. “I’ll get back up by myself.” His fingers reached the cliff edge. Was he tempting fate by not using the tree trunk?

“Use the tree, Jack,” Todd said.

One of Jack’s hands moved to the tree as he climbed back up. He rolled away from the edge of the cliff and put his feet under him in a place where he could regain his balance and stand. As Jack stood near them, he brushed off his pants. “Let’s go.”

José hoped Jack would confide in him when it was time to talk about what was bothering him. Until then, he and Todd would have to keep up with Jack’s pace.

The hike went upward at a fairly quick pace. They slowed down to let Todd catch his breath about twice every mile. Todd and José kept a conversation going, mostly about soccer.

There was enough flat space on the rocks and dirt to keep them well above the valley. Todd and José followed Jack’s footsteps, leaning toward the rising hill on one side and carefully avoiding the outer, downhill edge of their path.

After another hour of hiking, José had to stop them. “Is this a good place to stop for a break?”

Jack took a minute to study the area.

Todd sat and put his backpack between his knees. He pulled out a water bottle and took a sip. “Let me know if a

bear notices us. I'll throw my snacks in a pile and run the other way."

José sipped some water and rested his feet. "Thanks for stopping. Would you look at this view? I can't wait to find out where we'll spend the night. It should be beautiful."

"Beautiful?" asked Todd. "You apparently don't see the dark clouds over there." He pointed to the sky behind the mountain to their left.

Jack turned his attention away from the rocks and trees in the area where wildlife might be hiding and saw it too. "We're fine. It's south of us. The wind will push it off to the east. We'll miss it completely. Besides, a little rain won't hurt you."

The forecast Jack gave made José want to hurry to their goal. "Jack, you said there was a place for us to spend the night. How far away? And does it have an overhang to protect us from possible rain?"

"I knew it," Jack said. He looked at Todd. "He's not as strong as he lets on. Gina will easily get over him once I tell her he's scared of a little rain." Jack stared into José's eyes and spoke with a quiet fury in his voice. "If you can't take a little rainstorm, you won't stick around when you see real trouble brewing."

Stick around? José could tell that Jack had something against him. Hopefully, they'd get a chance to talk it out and resolve it in the next several hours. "It's common sense to seek shelter from the elements," José said.

"Okay. Come on, Todd." Jack started down the rocks to a plateau. "Let's find something really amazing."

Todd and José put their water bottles away and followed.

At the plateau, José monitored the mountain on their left. The storm wasn't moving as fast as Jack had predicted. Lightning flashed. José worried about the storm. If it came too close to them, they were in trouble.

Jack led them upward, climbing to an empty, shallow cave on a wall of rock.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jack kept his attitude cool as he led the others off-trail and up to the other side of the mountain. From what he could tell, they were almost to the place he'd seen on the online map.

“I can't believe it.” Todd shook his head. “I have to give up all my dreams to sit at home and take care of Ma until she dies, and then maybe, just maybe I'll be able to start my life over. No well-defined skill set. No upper-level education. Starting basically from scratch. José, do you know how hard it is taking care of your own mother? She forgot Jack's name once last week. I'm not sure she knows who I am half the time.”

Jack hushed Todd with a quick stare. “Not now. We have to get to that ledge.” He stretched his hand west as a reminder.

“Sorry. Just venting. I didn't mean any of it. I love Ma, and I wouldn't want strangers taking care of her. It's just that I thought I would be somebody by now. And I'm not. And I'm not really enjoying this trip yet, Jack.” Todd looked at where Jack had pointed and then focused again on careful climbing.

José appeared to be ignoring their conversation, possibly planning how to talk again about how they're going to be brothers as soon as he can get Gina to accept his proposal and marry him. José probably didn't know what Todd was talking about since Gina might never have explained why Todd was home more often than not. As far as he knew, José had only met Ma one time. That wasn't enough time to get to know a person. It didn't matter since José would never care to know

who Ma used to be. And getting to know who she was now was heartbreaking.

A rock formation forced them to turn at a bend in their path. As he climbed around the boulder to get up a little higher, Jack debated whether to let José in on their family secrets. It might not matter to him if he gets scared away from the family after this trip.

Jack stopped at the top of a small ridge. They weren't where they needed to be, but they were close. "Let's take a quick water break." Jack sat with the guys and sipped from his water bottle.

Todd looked at the storm clouds and then at his watch. "About what time do you think we'll turn around and head back to the trailhead?"

Jack shook his head. "Why would we do that? We can find shelter here."

Todd stared across at the clouds. "But the storm—"

Jack quickly interrupted. "That storm is mostly on the other side of that mountain, and it's moving east like I said before."

A flash of lightning struck a brown tree halfway down on the side of the mountain that faced them. Todd's eyes bulged. "Can we go back to the car now?"

"No," Jack said. "Gregory drove it to a hotel. Remember? Our best option is to stay in the rocks."

José stood. "Then let's go. Where are we going to take cover?"

With his hand outstretched, Jack said, "It's not even raining here."

“Jack,” Todd said in a worried whine. “That’s a forest fire.”

Jack looked at the trees that had been struck by lightning. Three of the treetops proved Todd right. “Calm down. The fire will go up that mountain, but we’re not on that mountain. We’re not in danger.”

Todd stood and adjusted his backpack. “I’m ready. Where are we going to take cover?” Todd and José wore the same serious, worried expression. Their toes pointed in the direction they’d been traveling, ready to continue.

He hadn’t shared his plans, so they couldn’t know where the overhang was. Seeing their need for leadership, Jack said, “Come on, guys. It’s this way.” He stepped around them, and then he led them up the mountainside.

When Jack found the opening to the overhang, he knew to keep the others behind him while he peeked inside. His flashlight didn’t shine on a set of eyes or anything moving, so he entered the tiny hole in the mountain.

Todd sat inside and looked out the opening. “It’s a cave. Good work, Jack.”

“It’s not a cave,” Jack said.

José took off his backpack and rested his feet. “Now that we’re at a good place to rest, let’s talk about your family. I mean, I’m going to be joining you on all the holidays and family events.”

“Once Gina agrees to let you.” Todd smirked. “You haven’t proposed yet.”

José grinned. “But we all know she’s going to say yes. Todd, you start. Tell me something you want me to know about the family.”

Jack raised his voice so they could hear him very well from the back of the shallow cave. “You don’t have to, Todd.”

“I know, Jack.” Todd leaned against the cave wall with his backpack on his side and answered, “My family has its challenges.”

José faced Todd and paid close attention.

Todd continued. “There are things you should know before you propose. For instance, Ma’s dementia.”

Jack took off his backpack and left it at the back of the cave. He didn’t want to share all their stories with José, but stopping Todd’s big speech would require energy he didn’t have. Jack listened, knowing José probably wouldn’t be around long enough to care.

“Yes, dementia,” José said. “Gathered that.”

Todd continued. “My family has the determination to keep up our strong bond. We communicate. We love each other. Gina’s really the heartbeat of the family. She’ll be loyal.”

José remembered the first interaction he had with Gina and her brothers. “I saw that right away the night we met.” The fact that Gina had gone to the dance with her brothers showed an affectionate loyalty.

“They’ve always shown me that they’re proud of me,” Todd said. “They’ve always encouraged me. It’s my turn to give back now that Ma needs me. Her symptoms are only getting worse.”

José seemed confused. “Give back? What does that mean?”

Jack couldn’t stop himself. He had to speak up. “He had been going to college and working to help with the family’s

household expenses, but Todd's love of family has driven him to quit his job so he can babysit his ailing mother."

Todd added, "I was giving Gina money because I live there. So now I'm the caregiver, and I can no longer do that."

With a quick nod of acknowledgment, Jack kept going. "Todd doesn't do anything for himself except go out occasionally when Gina's not working. He takes care of Ma basically by himself because Gina's managing everything else for the family. So if you're interested in a family that is centered around the needs of one person, then be my guest. Join us. But you won't be able to marry my sister and live separately from us so you can have the family of your dreams. That leaves Todd doing everything completely on his own with no help from anyone."

José shook his head. "I would never do that, Todd."

Jack steadied his gaze on José. "Gina would never do that. I want you to be forewarned. She's never giving up her family for you."

"Of course not," José said.

"When I moved out, Ma was fine," Jack said. "She might have had the occasional senior moment, losing things, trouble remembering a couple of things. We didn't give it a second thought. But in the last few months, it has gotten worse."

Todd stared at the ground. "I quit school after an incident with Ma."

Jack leaned toward Todd, wishing he could stop him from regurgitating his regrets. "You don't have to tell that." He frowned and lowered his voice. "He doesn't have to know everything."

Todd looked at Jack. “He should know.” Then Todd returned his focus to José. “Anyway, as I was saying, I had been going to classes at Fulton Ridge University. I was home in between classes to check on Ma while Gina went to work. The house was quiet, and I thought Ma was napping. I put on headphones and stretched out on the couch. Then when Gina came home, she woke me up and asked where Ma was. I went to see if she was in her bed. She wasn’t. She wasn’t anywhere in the house. Ma had wandered off, and we had no clue where she might be. Nothing was missing. She didn’t have her purse. She didn’t take the car or Gina’s bike. She just left.”

When Todd couldn’t talk anymore, Jack spoke up. “I found her. I was driving to a friend’s house, which was seven blocks away from where Todd was sleeping.”

“Your mother walked seven blocks away from her home?” José rubbed his chin.

“Yes,” Jack said. “You can imagine my surprise.” He wanted to stop the memory from unfolding before him, filling his emotions all over again. “I saw my mother walking down a sidewalk in a neighborhood she didn’t live in. And ...” Jack stopped to take a deep breath. He held back details he didn’t think he could say and remain strong. He swallowed and continued. “And she was crying.”

Todd nodded. “Jack brought her home, and we settled her down. We had to make changes after that. I worked with Gina on a schedule of things for Ma to look forward to so she wouldn’t be bored. We try to give her a routine with a few limited options. And just so you know, this is very hard for Gina.”

“I can imagine. It must be,” José said. “I’m sorry you’re all having to deal with this, but I have to say that you’re handling

it very well. I intend to let your mother get to know me too. I want to help out in whatever way I can.”

“That’s not a good idea.” Jack didn’t think José’s concern would last beyond his next sentence. “I’m not sure you should add to Ma’s confusion. We don’t want her to be around anyone new if it’s scary or frustrating for her.”

“Jack, I assure you that I’ll be flexible.” José turned to Todd. “I’m glad we have this trip to share important information like this. This is a good moment.” José looked out the opening of the cave. “And a good place. We should be fine in here tonight.”

Todd kept his eyes focused in the same direction.

Jack went to see what they were seeing. The wildfire was moving swiftly up the mountain across from them.

Todd’s expression turned sour. “What are we going to do when the fire gets here?”

Jack was tired of his brother’s whining. “Look, buddy. You stay here until I get back.” He stood at the mouth of their little cave.

Todd raised his voice at him. “Where are you going?”

“I’ll find another option that’s fire-proof. Anything to keep you from complaining.” Jack couldn’t look back as he left them, probably for the last time.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gina arrived at the airport as quickly as she could. She parked and followed the directions in the text from Annabella's assistant. When she arrived at the plane, a tall male flight attendant greeted her and showed her where to sit.

She didn't know whether to be excited about riding in a private jet or to allow herself to worry about her brothers. When the attendant came back, he poured a chilled glass of Stapleton Prosecco. As long as she was being pampered like this, she found it difficult to think about her brothers at all. Being on this elegant jet would be a good distraction. Her worrying wouldn't help them anyway.

The attendant stopped at the door at the front of the plane and greeted the next person to enter. "Good afternoon, Captain."

Oh. He's the pilot. Gina watched the pilot as he walked down the middle of the plane and shook hands with Annabella. After a few words, he stepped toward Gina. "We'll be in the air shortly. Enjoy your flight."

She thanked him and turned to look out her window. It was much larger than the windows on a commercial aircraft. She felt the texture of the buttery soft leather seats and wished she had a handbag that nice.

Gina looked over her shoulder at Annabella. She couldn't wait to meet the woman.

Annabella sat at a small table, using it like a desk. This might be her second office instead of just her transportation.

She appeared deeply engrossed with whatever was on her laptop.

Allowing her to catch a ride to Denver like this was Annabella's generous favor to Paige, so Gina focused on representing Paige well. She decided to have the mindset of a professional and not think about all the things that could be going wrong with her brothers and her boyfriend.

Gina examined the wood veneer panel by her knees. She saw a tall seam that looked like it belonged to some kind of hidden drawer. It had a sleek edge handle, so she pulled the handle to see what was inside the drawer. Two magazines, which appeared to be new because of the absence of dogeared edges, stood rigidly in the drawer. She pulled them out and read their covers. The first, a wine magazine, had an interview with an influential wine critic. The cover announced articles and profiles and ratings of different wines. She wanted to read the article about food and wine pairings, so she flipped it open and skimmed through the headlines and a couple of articles. The interview with the wine critic took up three pages with lots of images of grapes, plated with other foods and a glass of wine. According to the article, this guy's wine scores were used as a benchmark in the industry.

After the attendant came to pick up her emptied glass, the jet started to taxi toward the runway. Gina quickly put those magazines back where she'd found them. She watched out her window as the jet accelerated, gaining altitude.

The little jet leveled out above the tiny communities below. She no longer saw the farmland and winding rivers. Now her view included clouds that could be made of cotton candy and mist.

Gina glanced once more at Annabella. She had earphones on while she focused her gaze on her laptop. Would the woman be on her laptop the whole time? Would she even have time to talk?

How would she have a conversation with Annabella? What do billionaires talk about anyway?

With plenty of time ahead to think about what to say, Gina picked up the other magazine from the inconspicuous drawer and flipped through the pages. It was the Turner Museum's annual announcement of the new season's exhibits. It seemed to be directed at donors. The cover showed a small piece of jewelry that glistened against a black background. As she turned the pages, she saw French art and Italian art. The photography was excellent. The featured art was well-lit and showed off the vibrant colors in each piece.

The magazine articles kept her attention for the first half of the flight. She alternated reading and gazing out the window at the passing clouds and landscapes.

The attendant came by with a tray of snacks and set them on a small hidden table that pulled out from the wall. The ingenuity of the jet's interiors impressed her. She thanked the attendant and enjoyed the afternoon snacks.

After the attendant came back to pick up the tray and lower the table, Annabella sat in the seat across from her and peeked out the window. "Okay if I join you? We have about thirty minutes left before he begins the final descent."

"I'd love that." Not sure what to expect from Annabella, Gina valued her easy manner. "Thanks for the ride." She closed the magazine and clasped her hands on top of it, wishing she felt more comfortable visiting with a woman rich enough to have a private jet.

“I’m Annabella. It’s Gina, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Very nice to meet you. Annabella, you knew Paige well enough to offer this special favor,” Gina said. “I hope you don’t mind me asking. How did you meet Paige?” She’d already been impressed with her boss’s connections, but now even more so.

“I needed a dress, so I called her at the boutique with a desperate plea for a miracle. She provided a dress that was almost what I wanted, and then Paige offered help from your seamstress—the young lady with magical alterations talents. I just adore her. Anyway, she came to lift that dress up to the next level of elegance. I was appropriate for Fashion Week in that dress. So right away I knew I needed Paige in my life.”

Gina nodded. “I agree. Sofia, our seamstress, is amazing. She works so hard to please all our customers.” She wanted to brag further about Sofia, but she bit her lip. She thought about all the customers who were hard to please, but Sofia’s patience and talent won them over. If they paid Sofia what she was worth, Sofia would be as rich as Annabella. Of course, Gina wouldn’t let that slip out.

Annabella tilted her head to read the cover of the magazine on Gina’s lap. “Oh. You’re reading about the museum. Did you see my article?”

Raising her eyebrows, Gina couldn’t remember seeing Annabella’s name in it as she browsed. “No, I missed it.”

“May I show you?” Annabella’s hand opened and remained near the magazine, anticipating Gina’s response.

“Of course.” Gina placed it in her hand and waited to see the article.

After flipping a few pages, Annabella gave the magazine back and tapped on the headline. “Rare Italian Artifact Exhibition Coming to Fulton Ridge,” she said. Then smiling proudly, she sat back in her chair. “What do you think? I’m going to be a museum donor. I can’t wait to see how the feature wall turns out.” She seemed tickled at the idea of owning something people will come to see in a museum.

“How exciting.”

Annabella leaned forward and looked through the window again. “Paige didn’t tell me very much about your situation. I know that you have a family member in the Denver area who needed your immediate attention.” She sat back in her seat with her attention on Gina. “I was glad to help. So, tell me. Do you need a ride from the airport to a hospital or a neighborhood? I can set you up.”

“Oh, I wasn’t expecting that. That’s very kind of you.” Gina swallowed, thinking about how to graciously decline the offer. Paige hadn’t mentioned that was part of the deal. “This was all very sudden. My plan was to run off to the car rental counter and drive something, whatever they have, to pick up my ...” Gina didn’t feel like holding back the details when the woman had been so kind to offer help. “It’s my brothers and my boyfriend. They’re in the national park.”

Annabella’s eyes opened wider. “Are they hurt?”

“No,” Gina said. “I hope not. My brother’s friend was with them, and then he backed out at the trailhead and called me to go pick up the others. I don’t have the details. All I know is that it’s an emergency. He didn’t tell me whether he’d called 9-1-1, but he did sound very serious.”

“Oh, girl. You must be worried sick.” She turned away in thought. “I can get you an SUV. You’ll need room for their

hiking gear. How many people are you picking up?"

"Three of them." Gina tilted her head in thought. The offer was very inviting. "I can get a car. You don't have to bother. Thanks for your generosity. You're very thoughtful."

Annabella frowned. "You don't understand. I can have an SUV waiting for us when we land. You're dealing with an emergency. Waiting in line at the car rental counter will take too much time. You're already spending two hours driving there from the airport. Let me help." Her eyes softened as she waited for Gina's approval.

With a nod, Gina said, "You're right. I need to hurry and get over there to find the guys." She shook her head. "I can't thank you enough."

José stood at the mouth of the cave lit only by the afternoon sunlight and listened carefully for footsteps or any kind of man-made noise. He couldn't hear Jack anymore. "Todd, you stay here. I'll check to see where Jack went. Be right back."

With Todd and all their backpacks remaining in the shelter, José studied the ground for clues to help him find Jack.
Heavenly Father, I need a way to help Jack.

He couldn't tell if the shoe markings were put there as they arrived or if those tracks belonged to Jack. His gaze extended beyond where they had walked, and he found a set of tracks that looked fresh. When the tracks dead-ended at a boulder, José climbed over the boulder. Carefully stepping around a few smaller loose rocks, he located the dirt path where he saw more shoe prints.

Below the next boulder was a lower level of dirt where José saw the back of Jack's head.

José had found him. "Hey, Jack."

Jack sounded very annoyed as he called out, "Leave me alone. Get back to the shelter."

"We should stay together," José said.

"I'm going to climb to the top of that next small ridge." Jack said, "Maybe we can press on to another area and find shelter there." The last two of Jack's words faded out like he was in pain. He moaned.

Finding another shelter didn't sound like a good idea. "We have a cave. It's good enough. No need to look for another shelter." As José waited for Jack to think it through, he didn't feel confident that Jack would turn around and go back with him, but he had to ask anyway. "Wanna come back?"

Jack bellowed, "Go! Stay with Todd."

José saw Jack grabbing his face. "What's wrong?" José scooted down onto the rocks above Jack, trying to get closer without dropping down to where Jack was. "Look at me," Jose said.

Jack didn't look up. Drops of blood fell to the ground below Jack's head. He grunted with a hand to his forehead. "I can hear you breathing, José. Go back to Todd."

"Not yet. How did you get down there?"

"I fell." When Jack finally looked up, José saw blood dripping down Jack's hand.

"What happened?" José asked.

Jack said, “I fell off the rocks and cut my face above my eyelid. I’ll be fine.”

José tried to see between Jack’s fingers, but he couldn’t tell how bad the cut was. He wanted to get down there to help Jack, and then together they could join Todd back at the shelter. But he couldn’t see an easy way to get Jack out of the pit of rocks.

Jack could go through an opening in the pit, but that would be the wrong direction. That would take him further down the mountain and lead him closer to the fire.

“Stay where you are, Jack. I’m going to help you get out of there. We can use tree limbs and rocks to make a ladder.” José didn’t see any dead limbs lying on the ground, waiting to be used. They had come out of the trees a while back. It would take some time to get enough spare branches to do any good.

Jack wiped his bloody hand on his shirt and fixed his eyes on the opening of the pit.

“Wait. I have a water bottle in this pocket.” José patted the side of his pants. “Looks like you could use it, Jack.” José pulled out the mostly full bottle from the biggest pocket of his cargo pants and found his spare bandana. “Catch it. Ready, Jack? Here it comes.”

Still staring at the gap in the rocks, Jack ignored him. Whatever was on Jack’s mind was keeping him from turning around to face him.

“Did you hear me? I have water. You can wash off your face.” José held up his bandana. “You’re just not seeing this, are you?” José gave a fake laugh. “Eye injury. Not seeing. Very funny.” Getting no response from Jack, José persisted.

“I’m giving you my other bandana to use as a bandage. Keep your wound clean. Don’t let it get infected.”

Jack wasn’t looking at him, but he spoke in a controlled, anguished voice. “Take Todd with you and walk down to a ranger’s station. Tell a ranger to send help.”

José shook his head at the idea of leaving Jack alone. “We’re taking you with us. You only hurt your eye, Jack. You can walk.”

Jack stepped down through the opening, closer to where the fire was spreading.

“Stop!” José hurried to put the bottle back in his pocket and eased himself over the edge. *Merciful God, stop him. He’s going the wrong way.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jack's sudden departure tightened a knot in José's chest. He had to stop him.

José knelt by the edge of the pit, in a hurry to catch up with Jack. When he let go and fell into the pit, he landed off-balanced. The first leg that touched the ground didn't hold him up. Pain shot up his leg like a lightning bolt and kept him from standing. He screamed out in agony without holding back.

It was a stupid move. His jump to try to talk sense into Jack only brought injury and complicated any rescue he could've attempted.

His leg didn't appear to be broken, but it sure throbbed like it was.

José howled in pain, but then he focused on Jack. He couldn't lose track of him. "Jack," he called out. "Wait, Jack."

He wasn't coming back.

Throbbing pain in his calf kept José from trying to stand or limp his way down to where Jack might have gone. He didn't dare touch his leg below the knee.

José didn't want to move, but he had to try to get Todd to go for help. Isn't that what Jack had asked him to do?

He moaned and held his leg, looking up at the sky. No longer bright with afternoon sunlight, the sky darkened with the smoke from the wildfire. Surely the firefighters and park employees could put out the flames before he and Jack were in any danger.

The only thing he could think of were images of past wildfires that flooded the news broadcasts and social media. He remembered hearing that they sometimes let the fire keep spreading to get rid of some of the dead wood in the park. He'd also heard that the fire helps pine cones open up, allowing seeds to be planted in rich, ashy soil. Balancing his thoughts between the threat of danger and the hope of future pine trees kept his mind busy.

But his leg still throbbed every time he tried to move it.

José couldn't do anything to help out with Jack's condition. He could try to get Todd's attention, but he wouldn't know if he could hear him unless Todd answered.

"Todd!" He listened for a response.

Nothing.

An air horn would be handy right about now. As long as he was wishing, he might as well wish for a helicopter rescue. Then in his imagination, Gina arrived on a rope coming down from a helicopter above him.

Nope. Wishing didn't make his leg stop hurting.

"Todd!" José listened for him again.

Footsteps drew his attention, so he waited to see who it was.

Jack appeared with a large rock at the same opening of the pit that he'd exited from. He let it fall to the ground in the pit. He left and came back with a large flat rock and tossed it near the first rock. He left again and returned with two medium-sized rocks and threw them into the pit. One last time, Jack brought two more rocks into the pit. He sat near José and caught his breath.

José couldn't figure him out. "What are you doing?"

"I need some water." Jack swallowed.

Pulling the water bottle back out, José gladly handed it to Jack.

Jack pointed. "Those rocks over there are for you to stack into a tall pile. Use them for a stair step. Then you can climb back up and leave. You'll be fine."

José's leg still hurt too much. He wasn't going to make it back to the trailhead without riding on something. "You did all that for me?"

"I won't allow anyone to blame me for another death." Jack stood and wiped the blood off his eyebrows.

Another death? This was new. "Stop. Don't move. I need two things." José held his breath, waiting for Jack to ignore him and leave.

Jack held his ground and watched as José stared back in surprise. Clearly exasperated, Jack asked, "What?"

After a couple of seconds of regaining his composure, José spoke as calmly as he could. "First, you're still bleeding. Wash it off and then use my bandana."

"No," Jack said.

"Wrap it around your head to keep all the sweat and ash and dirt off your cut."

"No," Jack said.

José held up two fingers and hushed Jack who looked like he was about to interrupt. "Number two, who is blaming you for a death? You couldn't tell me that in the cave?"

“Todd doesn’t know.” His voice sounded dull, not that he wasn’t filled with pain anymore, but more like he’d adjusted to it. Jack took a deep breath. “Here’s your water.” He tossed it to José and stepped to the opening of the pit.

“Stop. Wait, Jack. I’m not through!” José used a lot more force in his voice than he normally would.

Jack stopped and turned. “I’m waiting.”

Thoroughly confused at why Jack was paying attention to him all of the sudden after being determined to go his own way up to now, José continued with his question. “Who died? And who is blaming you?”

“It’s not something you need to know.” Jack turned his head to watch the fire on the side of the mountain.

José lowered his voice. “Is it spreading?”

Jack faced him.

“The fire. Is it spreading in this direction?” José set his water bottle beside him and held out his bandana.

Jack nodded. “Keep the water for yourself. And the bandana.”

“No,” José argued fiercely. “No. The minute you walk away again, I’m dumping all this water out. If you leave me here alone, how am I going to climb out? You don’t really expect me to use my wounded leg to climb up some rocks and walk back to the trailhead. I don’t have any idea how to get back there. I don’t know how I got here!” José closed his eyes at the pain in his leg. The more he argued, the more he could feel it.

Jack turned his face away but not far enough for José to miss his expression. His face was the very picture of

discouragement, steeped in frustration, covered in failure.
“Then I guess we’ll die together.”

Deep inside José’s core, a fiery mix of disgust and disappointment boiled. “Is that what this was?” He wanted to slap some sanity back into Jack. “Is it? Is this your way of giving up? You came here to die?”

With a slight eye roll that José could barely see, Jack walked back away from the opening of the pit and sat by the rock wall.

José thought for a moment. “Wait. I thought you didn’t like me, but that’s not it at all. You don’t want Gina to marry anyone. It’s not about me. It’s about protecting Gina.”

José had to keep Jack talking, even if he was a little off-track. “Well, Jack, I have to hand it to you. Good job. If you die and Gina never marries, Todd is saddled with a huge responsibility. If he doesn’t come through, ... no descendants. The family line ends right here if Todd’s too tired of taking care of your family to have one of his own.”

With a slight frown, Jack answered, “He’ll have babies.”

“What if the worst happens? What if he doesn’t want a family of his own? What then, Jack?”

Jack looked away and remained still and silent. Jack’s unemotional reaction told José that his desperation wasn’t about Todd.

“Sure. Protect Gina. Make sure no one gets close to her. That’ll fix everything.”

Then Jack hugged his knees and stared into the dirt.

José could only guess, but Jack had to be protecting Gina because of something that had happened.

But Gina hadn't been acting like anything had happened to her.

Well if it wasn't about Todd, and it wasn't about Gina, then ... José raised his eyebrows and threw a pebble at Jack to get his attention. "That's it."

Jack turned to him.

Even though he'd already gotten Jack's attention, he threw another pebble at him. "It was a baby. *You* made a baby, and you encouraged the girl to get an abortion. Didn't you?" José's guess, based on Jack's silence and Gina's tips about Jack, would either enrage Jack or provoke an honest answer.

A loathsome silence separated Jack and José. Although Jack gave no words, he pressed his lips into a sad, straight line.

José could tell he'd hit a nerve. He tightened his fist as his voice rose. "Didn't you? And she hated you for it."

Jack got to his feet and stepped through the opening of the pit, but he stayed in the gap with his back turned.

"It was! A-ha!" José's bitter voice was a growl of triumph. He couldn't think of a more logical reason for Jack to act this way. But if Jack wasn't acting relieved at his ex-girlfriend's news, then ... Then the realization of Jack's truth warmed José's eyes and flooded him with compassion. "Oh, Jack," José whispered.

Jack knelt and lowered his head.

Tears rimmed José's eyes as he saw that Jack wasn't ignoring him. "I'm so sorry, Jack." He sniffed. "I'm so sorry."

Still turned away from José, Jack put his hands on the ground. His shoulders moved with heavy, jagged breaths.

“Come here,” José said in a calm voice. “Let’s talk. Let me apologize.”

Jack stayed where he was and spoke, pushing his message through his emotion. “It wasn’t like that.” His voice broke.

José saw the sky, already gray from smoke, had turned dark quickly, signaling the destruction of much of the forest on the closest, tallest peak.

“Tell me, Jack. When did she let you know? When did it happen?” José hurt for him, but his leg hurt even more. He knew this was the moment for God to show up. Things were getting dicey. Waiting for Jack to join him in the pit again, he silently prayed. *Thank You, Heavenly Father, for Your presence here. Have mercy on us. Jack needs Your healing. He needs a reason to go on. Give him hope. Have Your way here.*

Jack stood and wiped his face on his sleeves before turning around to José with an expression of confrontation. Looking over his shoulder at the fire, he put his hands on his hips. Then Jack’s attitude drained away and his gaze trailed to the ground. He walked back to José and sat down. He stared across the pit and wilted into a weaker version of the man who brought them out here. After a feeble breath, he said, “I didn’t know.”

José kept his silence and let Jack say what he needed to say. He probably hadn’t told anyone and needed to let it out.

“She didn’t tell me until it was too late.” Jack glared at José with an expression that merged desperation with his loss. “I would’ve stopped her. I would’ve kept the baby for myself if she didn’t want it. I can’t believe she thought I wouldn’t care.” His gaze cooled. “I can’t go back to that.”

José’s heart sank, and then he calmly said, “Well then, let’s stay here, Jack.” José didn’t mean it, but he wanted Jack to

figure out how much he wanted to live. He didn't know how to persuade him that living was a chance to keep someone else alive. Among the things Jack needed right now, purpose was very near the top of the list.

Jack's breaths were slow and mournful as if he couldn't speak without deep grief for the one he wasn't given access to.

"We'll figure it out." José let the smoky wind pass by without a care.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sitting beside José, Jack shook his head and stopped a second later, almost woozy from the pain across his eyebrow. The pain fueled his anger. He glared at José, not sure if his voice would last through a whole sentence. “I won’t go home. I would rather die here than face—”

“It’s beautiful out here.” José pointed his face at the wind blowing a veil of smoke across the sky. “Probably more beautiful when it’s not on fire.”

Jack knew José couldn’t see it from where he sat. “Todd was right. It’s spreading down the mountain and heading in this direction.”

José swallowed. “Then we need to talk faster.”

After a weak exhale that exposed more of his fragility and frustration, Jack focused his eyes on the wall of the rock pit. He wanted to name it The Pit of Despair. It should have a name if it might be his final resting place.

José showed no fear as he watched the smoke color the sky.

Gina deserved to have a good man like José. It wouldn’t be right to allow José to stay with him. He had to make him walk back, no, limp back to Gina. But what would be his statement? Would José lie and say there was an accidental death? Would Gina hate him for coming back alone?

Jack had to settle one important thing before doing anything else. “You’re going to marry my sister?”

“As soon as she’ll let me.” José rubbed the two days of beard growth on his chin. “I hope we have many more family camping trips.”

“But not like this one.” Jack hated that he might have blown up his sister’s plans. “I’m glad you and Gina found each other. I want you to promise me that you’ll watch out for her. Take care of her.”

With a serious look in his eyes, José softly said, “I can promise you that. I’ll take care of her.”

That settled things between him and José. Gina would be looked after. It was time for his final march into the fiery grip of death. Before leaving José and his Pit of Despair, Jack had to confront the reality he’d been running from. “You want to hear the story?”

“If you’re willing to talk or just need to vent,” José said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Jack didn’t want to replay his history to José. But if he was joining the family, he’d hear about his past sooner or later. He might as well hear the truth from him. “I have a reputation.” He saw José as someone wiser and more fulfilled than he could ever hope to be. “I’ve been called a ladies’ man for years.” The words soured in his mouth. “I never lacked friends. I’ve enjoyed countless excursions with friends on their boats, in their ski lodges, and in their beach houses. My job at the car dealership was all about sports cars and selling luxury.” He shrugged. “It was the perfect job for any guy.”

José said, “I know. Todd gave me a hint of your reputation while you were sleeping in the car before we got to Colorado. Todd’s voice had a note of jealousy in it when he said you made earning money look so easy. And fun.”

“Ignorance is bliss.” Jack leaned against the wall of the rock pit and rested his forearms on his knees. The thick smoke had ruined the sunny sky. The aroma of smoky ash had ruined the fresh scent of the forest. And Jack had ruined his own life.

“What’s her name?” José asked casually.

“Mara.” Jack began his story, feeling all the agony as if it were happening all over again. “I saw Mara recently at the dance at Turner Pavilion. Of course, I was happy to see her, so I walked over to get reacquainted.”

José’s serious face was all he needed to see to keep going with the story.

“She and I dated for like a month or two last year.” Whatever was in his stomach was curdling. Just the thought of telling this story, the purpose of this trip, made him sick. “Anyway, I hugged her and asked how she’d been. She didn’t respond to me like she had in the past. I gave some no-pressure small talk for a minute before I said, ‘I would apologize for not calling you, but I did call. You didn’t answer any of my texts or calls. If you found a better guy to be with, that’s fine. Talk to me and let me know to stop calling. I thought we had something special.’” Jack hit the ground with his fist, regretting it immediately.

José leaned forward. “Hey! This isn’t St. Augustine grass like we have at home. Not much cushion in dirt and rocks here, is there?”

Shaking out his fist, feeling the pain, Jack knew he deserved every bit of it. He massaged his hand, not to make it feel better, but to experience as much of the throbbing as possible and to remind himself that his misery was well-earned.

José rested against the wall of the pit. “She told you after it was all over.”

Jack nodded. “I think she’d had a few too many that night. She probably hadn’t meant to tell me anything, like it spilled out of her when she least expected it.”

José gazed at the pebbles near his hand. “She was probably still hurting from the emotional scarring. It was likely very difficult for her to avoid lashing out. She was surprised to see you.”

“I was standing there unknowingly reminding her of what I’d done to her,” Jack said. “If she was trying to forget all about it, my presence there wouldn’t let her. Of course, she would lash out at me.”

“No, Jack. Your presence reminded her of the decision she made by herself.”

“She had every right to hate me.”

“Jack, you had every right to know about it.” José threw another pebble at him. “No woman gets pregnant alone. I get it. But couldn’t she text you as soon as she found out? Couldn’t she give you a minute of her time before making that kind of decision?”

He swallowed and threw one of José’s pebbles back at him. “It’s over. A baby died because of me. I am the father of a dead baby. I cannot live like that. I can’t face going back, trying to live a normal life. If I see Mara again, how am I going to control my rage? How am I going to mourn? There’s no grave to put flowers on. It’s like it never happened. I can’t live like it never happened.”

“It did happen.” José stared into his eyes. “It did happen, Jack.”

Jack's head still throbbed. He couldn't go back home. But now that José knew what he'd planned for this trip, would he be able to have his accident? If he'd been able to go through with an accidental death, Gina would have access to more money.

He only told Gregory because he wanted him to promise that he'd be a witness to an accidental death, not a suicide. Jack made him promise, but Gregory had failed him.

José cautiously moved his fingers along his lower leg. "What are you going to do now, Jack?"

"You messed up all my plans."

"I didn't mess up your plans, Jack. You didn't come here to die. You came here to face yourself. You've done that. You came here to give yourself permission to grieve."

"That won't solve anything."

"I know what will."

"You know nothing. There isn't anything in the world that will take away my mistake or my heartache."

"You and I both have real, undeniable pain right now. And we can let it fester or we can let the healing process begin."

Jack wanted José to be quiet. He knew that healing was a process and a broken leg would heal over time. "Invisible pain isn't like physical pain."

José tried to sit up a little taller. "You're feeling it, aren't you? It's still pain."

"Your point, José?"

José groaned through a twinge of pain from his leg. He bit his lip. "My point is that you and I both have to wait on

healing to be completed, but we both have dirty wounds. We're sitting here not lifting a finger to speed up the process. Like we just don't care. As if we were enjoying our pain. Are you enjoying it, Jack?"

He didn't want to talk to him. José was on the verge of delirium. It wouldn't take much more pain for the poor guy to pass out.

"What you need, Jack, is a light switch."

"You've gone over the edge, haven't you?" Jack waved his hands in front of José's eyes. "Anyone home?"

"No, I'm all here. Nothing wrong with me. I have a light switch. Want me to share it with you?"

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about."

"I know." José raised his eyebrows. "I'm about to give you your own switch to turn on the light. It comes in handy in the dark."

Jack wanted to laugh at him. "You're talking like a madman."

"No, I'm very sane. Let me show you."

Jack nodded. "Let's see this switch."

José closed his eyes and took a breath. "Heavenly Father, I come to You in the name of Jesus, asking for healing for Jack and for me. We're sitting in the path of a wildfire, both of us in pain." José stopped to breathe through another twinge of pain. "I don't know how we're going to get back to a vehicle to get our wounds tended to. I don't know if Gina's going to marry me. I don't even know where Todd is. But one thing I do know. And one thing I'm sure of." José opened his eyes and saw Jack's interest.

“What?” Jack nodded to José. “Keep going.”

José turned his face to look straight ahead, and then he began to sing. “I’m tired and in pain, but I’m not too tired to praise Your name. I can weep, and I can moan. But anywhere I roam, I will praise You. Lord Jesus, I will praise You.”

Jack squinted. “You’re singing a song I’ve never heard.”

“I’m making it up as I go.” José smiled. “It’s just my heart praising God for His goodness. You should try it. It’s fun.”

Jack smirked and said in a slightly higher voice, “You’re grimacing. It’s fun?”

José lifted his voice again. “Anywhere I go, anything I do, I will praise You. I will praise You. Jesus, Lord of all, name above all names, You have rescued me. And I will praise You. I will praise You.”

Jack took a deep breath, trying to be patient. “I’m not singing with you.”

“Now you know how to turn on the light whenever you’re in a dark place. You can call out to God and let His presence fill the atmosphere around you.” José started singing again. “In the middle of the night, when I can’t hold in my fright, I’ll call to You. Lord Jesus, I’ll call to You.”

“Wait, José,” said Jack. “You switched the melody.”

José grinned. “That’s what happens when you make it up as you go.” He lazily lifted his pointing finger. “Your turn. You pick out the tune. And the words.”

“Nope.” Jack shook his head. “Not singing.”

“Why?”

“Really, José? This isn’t the time for it.”

José looked up at the sky, down at his leg, and then over to Jack. “If *this* isn’t the time for it, I’d like to hear you describe a better one.”

With a glance at his own bloody hands, Jack wanted to pray and plead with God for his own life. The pounding in his chest at the thought of God showing up at José’s request made his determination to die almost non-existent. Was he ready to face God or had that moment passed?

He could not pray, not after all he’d done. Of all the people who liked him, Jack knew that God would like him the least.

A bird flew overhead. Jack realized it didn’t take much to distract him and make him look up. In a flash, Jack remembered seeing people praying in church. Most people bowed their heads in submission to God.

José was looking up, probably praying. His posture didn’t look like submission, but he acted more submitted to God than anyone else he knew.

Jack had to respect José for his bravery. His response to Jack’s purpose for the hike was very different from Gregory’s. He wasn’t expecting José’s determination to get to the source of the pain that led Jack to design his own going away party.

After Jack realized that he was glad that he couldn’t stop José’s prodding, he thought about Ma. She had no control over the memory loss that was eating away the rest of her life. Like her, Jack was powerless to stop the grief that would probably plague him for the rest of his life.

But José was full of hope.

“I will praise You.” José started humming quietly, staring at the swirl of smoke in the sky.

Jack didn't see God or hear anything but José's ridiculous singing.

José didn't seem bothered by the fact that he couldn't leave the pit on his own. He was powerless too, but he was in a different place. His mind was made up about inviting God to what remained of the rage-fueled pity party that Jack had decided would be his last party.

Jack listened again. In his anguish, nothing made sense. There was a strange peace in the air, contrasting with the pain they both battled and the guilt and shame Jack had added to his grief.

It was time to move. Jack had to do something to help José since he'd been flexible and willing to make the best of the situation. Instead of completing his death walk, he had to create a rescue for José.

Todd might still be waiting for them at the shelter. If he was there, he could help get José out of the pit.

“I can't go off and leave you here, José.”

“What do you intend to do?”

Jack genuinely wanted to be rescued. He didn't know how José had made him change his mind, but he didn't have the inclination to walk into the accidental death anymore. “You'll need help walking back. I'm certainly not carrying you.” Jack stood. His head wasn't throbbing with pain as it had been.

The fire was moving in their direction. It still had a long way to go, but it would move more quickly once it hit the level ground that spanned between them and the fire.

José didn't move. He focused on Jack. “You're going back to the trailhead with me?”

Jack nodded without any intention of discussing it.

“Good,” said José. “I want you to know that no matter which direction you chose, you wouldn’t be going alone. I’ve been praying for God to show you that He’s here. How’s your head?”

Jack frowned. “It’s better.” He held out his hand. “Get up, José.”

“I prayed for your healing.” José still didn’t move. “God did that. I prayed for God to make your darkness flee.”

God did that. José’s words struck Jack’s heart like an arrow. José thought God was here in this pit.

If God did anything, it was because of José. Now Jack would have to listen to José. He’d have to start doing things José’s way because no one else on the planet had shown him that he mattered. Gina might have stopped him if he’d been honest with her.

With hands on his hips, Jack needed a plan to get José back to Gina. He couldn’t be careless with people anymore.

Jack felt stronger. Even though his hand was dirty, he touched his forehead. The headache was mostly gone, and the blood had stopped dripping down his face. Was it because José had prayed? One thing was sure. He’d do everything he could to get Gina and José together. That would be more valuable than any amount of insurance money.

“What are we doing, Jack? Are we going back? Or are we going to take our chances? Let’s see if the fire will reach us. Maybe it won’t.”

Jack realized how ridiculous he’d been in his quest for death. “Why would I allow you to stay here? Gina would drag

us back to the parking lot by our hair if she found us considering staying here.”

“Ouch. Is she that strong?” José’s wide eyes showed he was imagining his claim.

“I don’t think we ever want to find out. I’ll go look for a crutch for you.” Jack stacked the stones he’d brought for José to use. He grabbed the top of the pit’s edge and pulled himself out.

CHAPTER TWENTY

After Jack left, José breathed in deeply. He'd never been more scared in his life.

Intently praying and listening and watching God for guidance in this situation, he whispered a quiet prayer. "Okay, Father, I don't need just a nudge in the right direction this time. I need a word from You. I know Your word does everything You send it to do, according to Isaiah, chapter fifty-five. Help me speak Your words to Jack. His life depends on You. Please, speak Your words to Jack through me."

José wasn't exactly sure Jack wasn't going to pull a fast one and leave the family wondering what had happened. He whispered again, "Oh, Lord my God, I can't help him if he doesn't want my help. I can't wrestle him to the ground and make him trust You. I'm asking You to help him see Your hand in his life. Show him that Your plan is better than his."

Jack came back with a tree branch that had sharp splinters at the top of the two branches that formed the Y shape. It had a broken, jagged edge at the bottom. "It's not pretty, but it'll do."

"That looks like it's sturdy enough. Thanks, Jack."

Then Jack threw two medium size rocks into the pit. "Need one more to stand on?"

"I think it's gonna take more than another rock. You might have to help me get out of here." José allowed the smoky fragrance of the fire to motivate him to crawl across the pit to

the rock pile Jack had used. He took the two rocks Jack had just supplied and tried to balance them on the stack.

“Come on, José. The fire’s nipping at our heels.”

“I’m doing my best.” José steadied his balance and pulled himself to stand on one leg. He tested the other leg, but the pain was too much. He couldn’t stand on it. “Exactly how am I going to hop up the stack of rocks, Jack?”

“I could jump down and push you up the wall,” Jack said. “I can get you out of the pit, but I’m not sure I’ll be careful enough.”

“No, thank you.”

Jack showed him a six-foot-long tree branch. “Do you think you can climb up this?” It wasn’t strong like the makeshift crutch, but it could be used like a rope.

“I’ll give it a try.” José held onto the branch. “You got it?”

Jack showed his hands on the other end of the branch. When his head lowered out of view, he yelled, “I’m in position.”

On high alert, José prayed confidently, “Thank You, God, for Your powerful hand that lifts me out of trouble.” He leaned away from the wall to see if Jack could hold him up. With a tiny bounce, José lifted his foot off the ground and set it on a rock, pushing himself up enough to move his hands up the branch. He moved his foot to a higher rock, pushing to go even higher. With his hands almost to the top of the pit wall, he set his foot on the highest rock and climbed to where he could grab more of the branch and pull himself out of the pit. As he rolled onto the ground where Jack was, he saw Jack had used a boulder to brace himself and keep from being pulled down into the pit.

Jack stood and dusted off his hands and his pants. He lifted the crutch. “Here. See if you can manage this.”

“Thanks,” José said, grateful for Jack’s help. “Give me a minute. I’m hurting all over.” José showed Jack the scrapes on his palms that now stung both hands.

Jack studied José’s hands. “Sorry about that, José, but we don’t have time to lollygag.”

“I realize that. I’m getting up.” José grabbed onto the crutch and made an effort while Jack did most of the work, lifting José with his hands under his shoulders. José was about to put an arm through the top of the Y when Jack stopped him.

Jack took off his shirt and wrapped it around the intersection of the two branches where José would be leaning.

“Thanks, Jack.” José saw a more humble version of the man who had fought against his connection with Gina until now. “That’s kind of you.”

“I need you to move quickly. We don’t have all day.” Jack’s selfless act was proof that God was working. It didn’t matter that God hadn’t spoken from a cloud. It didn’t matter that Jack didn’t have his own Damascus Road experience like Saint Paul. This was enough.

José tried to keep his grin to himself. He could see that the transformation in Jack had begun. God would bring it to completion. He took a couple of steps. The crutch was usable.

Jack patted him on the back. “You got this.”

“You bet I do,” José said. “I’m ready.” He took a few more steps and then stopped. “Wait. Where’s Todd?”

“I went back to get him,” Jack said. “He wasn’t in the cave. Our backpacks weren’t there. He cleared out.”

José prayed aloud, “Heavenly Father, I ask You for calmness, comfort, and composure for Todd. Help him find the trail and the way to get back. Help him find a park ranger.”

“Amen,” Jack said.

José swallowed his words of surprise. He didn’t want to discourage Jack with his own astonishment. He simply said a silent word of gratitude to God as he hobbled through the park.

The two found the easiest way back into the woods, around the top of the lake, heading back to the trail.

The whole time, José leaned on God to keep his attitude positive. He prayed for their rescue since Gregory probably wasn’t still at the trailhead waiting for them. He prayed for Gina and her mother. Most of all, he prayed for Jack.

José easily saw the tenderness in Jack’s still-raw heart. He would need time to heal. This was the perfect time for Jack to allow that part of him that had started to trust God to wake up since God had already begun doing something in Jack.

After they found the trail marked by the park service, Jack seemed a little agitated. “Gregory was the only one I told.”

“Relax, Jack.” José had gotten used to using the crutch, but the sound of the animals above him in the trees had a calming effect. Breathing in the calming sounds of nature would help Jack think better and possibly surrender to God’s plan for his life. José hoped Jack was listening. “Do you hear the animals in the trees? Let the shade of the trees remind you of all the simple things we can enjoy.”

“No, José . I mean no one but you and Gregory knew about my plan. Gregory doesn’t know anything other than what I told him. He doesn’t know I’m coming out of the park, safe and sound.”

“Then when you get a chance, call him. He’ll be glad to hear from you. An apology and an explanation wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

Jack’s serious face pointed to the trail ahead of them.
“What if he told Gina?”

“When we get back, just tell her the whole story.”

“I think she already has enough on her mind,” Jack said.

José looked ahead. Coming up the trail was a park ranger.
Thank You, God.

At the ranger station, José was relieved to have all three of them back together again and safely away from the fire.

Todd had been waiting at the trailhead for them. He saw Jack’s forehead and gave a worried look from across the ranger station while Jack was on the phone.

Jack, now with his shirt back on and his wound cleaned and bandaged, had reached Gina. When he got off the phone with her, he joined Todd and José. “She’s on her way to take us home.”

Todd raised his eyebrows. “She’s coming here?”

Jack nodded without looking happy. “She’s been on her way since this morning when Gregory called her.” He gave José an I-told-you-so stare.

José’s shoulders relaxed at the thought of seeing Gina sooner than expected. “Did she say when she’d arrive?”

Jack silently shook his head.

“She at least knows where we are, right?” Todd frowned.
“I mean there’s more than one ranger station.”

“Yes, Todd. She should be here before too long, and no, I don’t know when that will be.” Jack acted like he dreaded seeing her.

José couldn’t wait. He looked out the window to the parking lot. She would be a welcome sight.

Sitting next to José on the floor of the ranger station, Todd nodded to José’s leg. “How does it feel now?”

José sat with his leg elevated on top of his backpack. His leg had been wrapped with bandages by a park ranger who said it was a bad sprain. José would get an x-ray after arriving back in Fulton Ridge, just to check for tiny fractures. “Better, but it’s still in some pain. I need to stay off it for a couple of weeks. This isn’t the kind of injury where you just walk it off.”

“Then be careful with it.”

“Thanks, Todd. I will.” José spoke in a gentle voice, “I was so glad to see you at the trailhead. How did you know we were hurt?”

“I waited for you to come back since you said, ‘Be right back.’ When you took too long, I thought I heard my name. I went to look for you and heard your voice. I didn’t see you, but I saw a glimpse of Jack with a bloody face. When his head went down below some rocks and I couldn’t see it, I realized you two needed me to find a park ranger and notify them of a possible medical emergency.” He shook his head. “I didn’t take the time to discuss it with you because I didn’t know if Jack was conscious or not.”

“I imagine that was frightening for you. Thanks for going ahead to get help.” José silently thanked God for Todd’s quick response.

They munched on the snacks in their backpacks while they waited, and José kept his attention on the door.

Jack didn't seem to be in a talkative mood, but he seemed much better than he was earlier. At least he was going home.

José saw the door open, and Gina came into view. He elbowed Todd. "She's here. Let's go." They all headed to the door to greet her. José used a pair of crutches a park ranger gave him. Still worried about Jack's condition, José slowed his movements and waited to see how Jack reacted. When he saw Gina's emotional state, José stopped where he was to let her reach them first.

Gina stomped toward her brothers, obviously furious with both of them, and said, "Why was I called to retrieve my brothers?"

They stopped, speechless.

She looked them over. "Nobody is in the hospital. I'm glad." Even though she tried to hold back her emotions, he could hear the anger in her words.

José stayed silent. He'd expected Gina to be calmer and more nurturing in her greeting.

"I'm sorry." Jack's face held an appropriately somber stare firmly in place.

"Okay," she said. "I know I'm generally nicer than this, but I have too many unanswered questions. Who's going first? Who can tell me why you fully-grown men are incapable of driving to the mountains, having a good couple of hikes, and then driving back home? Anyone?"

Since the brothers had more experience handling this new, fire-filled Gina than he'd ever seen before, he waited to let them respond first.

“Well? Jack, are you the only one with a voice?” She looked at Todd, but he wasn’t willing to answer. “Jack, tell me what happened.”

“We should talk about it later.” He walked around her and left the ranger station.

She followed him out the door and then led all of them through the parking lot to the SUV she’d driven. “Gregory said you needed me to come get you and take you home. Why did he do that?”

When she unlocked the vehicle, Jack leaned against it while José and Todd threw their backpacks inside. “I’m guessing because Gregory’s driving my car home, and we’re not in it.”

Gina gave him a look.

“Well, he’s not here,” Jack said with his arms stretched out to the parking lot.

Gina took Jack’s backpack from him and set it down in front of Todd. “I don’t know what happened between you and Gregory, but he doesn’t want to be around you right now. I told him to take your car and go home. At least someone does what they’re supposed to.” She looked at Todd.

Todd lifted Jack’s backpack into the SUV without a word.

Jack rolled his eyes and sat in the back seat.

José determined not to give away any details of what he knew about Jack’s condition in front of Gina. He was willing to talk about seeing the moose and the fire that rushed up the trees on the side of the mountain. However, he would have to change the direction of the conversation if it got too close to the secrets Jack was keeping. After José sat in the front

passenger seat, Todd took his crutches and put them in the back. José gave a casual glance in Jack's direction.

The two brothers were silent in the back seat as Gina drove out of the park.

Gina finally peered at José like she was too overwhelmed with the situation to sort through all the words.

“I know you're upset, Gina. I think we can talk some of this out on the way home.” He glanced over his shoulder at the back seat. “However, right now may be a good time to let them get some rest.”

She checked her rearview mirror and then drove to Denver. When she saw a decent casual restaurant, she parked in a convenient space and woke her brothers up. “I need to get a meal and some coffee to go. Everyone inside.”

After they all ate, Gina walked down the sidewalk next to José. She motioned for a private conversation with him.

He stopped limping on his crutches, opened his arms, and hugged her.

Her arms circled him and held on tight. Her breath warmed him as she buried her face in his neck. When she pulled back, she whispered. “What happened?” Her forehead ruffled with worry wrinkles.

He whispered, “We need to talk, but later.”

Gazing at him with weary eyes, she said, “You haven't been gone that long, but your scruffy face looks good to me. I'm glad you're okay.”

He smiled. “You like the scruff? I'm thinking of keeping the beard. Maybe. We'll see.”

She held onto his middle and kissed him. When everyone was back in the vehicle, she started the car.

José wanted to comfort her. “I’ll take the next turn as the driver. Let me know when you need a break.”

She acknowledged his offer with a quick nod to the back seat. “Thanks, but after the boys have had some rest, one of them will drive. For now, maybe play some quiet music.” She handed him her phone.

Todd silently kept to himself. Jack probably wasn’t going to be talkative.

José wanted to help them talk through what had happened in the park, but he knew this was not the time for it. Everyone needed to rest and recuperate.

While Gina drove, José thanked God for helping them get out of the park safely. After the crazy adventure he’d had with Jack and Todd, he couldn’t stop thanking God for saving Jack’s life and giving him hope.

Gina’s anger had subsided for the moment, but she still didn’t know the truth of Jack’s pain. José would have to give Jack time to tell her all about it after they arrived home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Friday, the day after they arrived back in Fulton Ridge, José waited until after Gina was home from work before he called to check in with her. “How are your brothers?”

“You know,” she said in a voice filled with worry. “They’re fine.” Her slow words hinted at the wish for them to return to the carefree days of laughter. “They’re both still tired, but Todd’s back in his regular schedule. It’s taking time for Jack to get over being so tired.”

José wasn’t planning to be the one to explain why they had been tired. It wasn’t just physical. For Jack, the whole trip from beginning to end was a huge emotional expense. José figured Todd was avoiding thinking through all his questions about why things turned out the way they did.

“I’m tired too,” José said.

“I’m sure you are. How’s your ankle?” Her voice had that caring, compassionate tone that he loved hearing when he had conversations with her.

“It’s better now. Thanks,” José said. “I’m being careful.”

“I can’t believe Jack let his problems get to the point where he allowed others to find themselves in danger.” Her sigh of frustration came through the phone and touched José’s heart.

“If you’re angry with Jack—”

“Yes, I am angry with Jack,” Gina said. “But I can’t talk to him because he’s clearly depressed, and he doesn’t need me getting in his face about his trip to the mountains. Todd hasn’t

said much. I can't talk to Ma or Jack or even you, José." Her voice had become higher-pitched as if she would start crying soon.

"You can talk to me. You should be able to talk with me about anything." José wanted to be there with her to hold her and comfort her. "When you have some time with Jack, ask him to explain what's going on with him."

She sniffed. "I did ask Jack, but he didn't want to talk about it."

José knew it wasn't for him to tell what had happened on the mountain. And now that he'd been lumped into the group of people she felt she couldn't talk to, he had to make sure he didn't get left out in the cold because of Jack. "How was your mother when all of you were gone? I know she's used to you being with her every day. Did she handle your absence well?"

"She could tell things were different, but she was fine. Mrs. Dixon said she didn't complain much. What did the guys tell you about her on the trip?"

"They only gave me a little information," José said. "I know that she's in need of constant supervision because of possible Alzheimer's symptoms."

"That's right. I am counting my pennies and dreading the day we have to put her in a memory care facility. The only reason she would not live at home is if we can't give her the kind of help she needs. I keep debating whether we're doing the right thing for her."

José had no other experience with dementia, so he didn't have any words of wisdom for her. "You're doing a great job. She's in the house she remembers living in. She has her family

photos around her and the furniture she's used to. She knows where she is."

Gina sniffed and said, "I know, but I'm not completely sure how long we'll be able to give her what's best for her."

"What do you mean?" José asked.

"I'm thinking about Todd." Gina's voice sounded like she'd stopped to dry tears from her face. She cleared her throat and continued. "He's doing everything he can for her. I just feel bad that he isn't living his own life. I don't know how to help him with that."

José wanted to be there to wipe away her tears during this difficult time. "Want me to come over? I like talking to you face-to-face."

"No. It's late. I'll do one quick walk through the house and then start getting ready for bed. Unless Ma's still up."

After José ended the call, he thought about what he could possibly do to help the whole family. Individually, their needs were so different. But if he could do one thing to help all of them, it might be to lighten the load where Gina's mother was concerned. He thought about possible connections he had in the medical industry. Did he know anyone who might give good advice?

God knew what would benefit them the most, so José prayed for several minutes and listened for answers.

After praying about receiving God's wisdom, he thought about the long-term effects their mother's condition would have on his love life. Was this family too much family for him or was he the perfect person to help Gina?

He tried to picture in his mind how his future would look if he and Gina were able to marry before the end of the year. If

her family was too much family for her to manage alone, he could help her with that.

He wanted her to see that his acceptance of her family would only bring the two of them closer.

Did Gina wish her family didn't have their issues? Probably. But they had many good qualities too.

According to what he'd seen, her brothers showed great kindness in support of their mother. Todd's complaining didn't hide the fact that he was generous to his siblings and his mother.

And Gina didn't normally complain. She usually responded to her life situation with a good attitude. She seemed determined to remain flexible and handle whatever came her way.

What exactly did she need?

She needed a bigger home and a way to keep an eye on her mother without limiting Todd's freedom or her own. Gina needed to keep her mother in a place where her memories were close at hand.

José considered moving his money around to purchase a large home that would have room to house Gina and her family, including Jack. If her brothers didn't want to live with their mother, they should at least have a room available for them when they wanted to come spend the night.

One expense Gina wasn't going to consider on her limited income was hiring a couple of home health workers as permanent staff as long as her mother lived there with them. It made sense to get live-in helpers at the new home to keep the woman's schedule steady and active.

He pulled out his phone and chose a couple of dates for meetings with a real estate agent. He'd need to work fast to relieve the pressure Gina's family was feeling.

After putting his phone down, José realized he needed to plan a proposal for Gina. It would have to be special enough that she would agree to live with him in the house he was about to buy.

José drove to Paul Ruddig's real estate office first thing on Monday morning, still hoping he could get everything to work out well for this project. Paul worked fast and knew how to put a deal together. He had found José the right home at a decent price. All he needed was to sign on the dotted line and fill the place with the right colors, lighting, and people.

In the real estate office lobby, dark green fabric chairs filled the room with the feeling of calm and comfort. He sat to wait for a receptionist or Paul to greet him. The door had been open for him to walk inside, so he knew someone was there.

After a five-minute wait, an office door opened and Paul walked out with a man who seemed to be about José's age. Paul stopped in the lobby.

José stood. "Hello, Paul."

Paul shook his hand. "José, good morning. I'd like you to meet Rudy. He's new in town." He turned to Rudy. "This is José, the owner of José's Beans, the best Mexican restaurant in Fulton Ridge."

Rudy stepped forward and shook his hand. "Nice meeting you, José. I'll have to come check out your restaurant."

José grinned. “I’ll be happy to introduce you to some of the friendly residents. We have some good people here in Fulton Ridge.” He handed Rudy a business card. “Just ask to speak with me, and I’ll help you all I can.”

Paul turned to Rudy. “You’re all set now. Let me know if I can help you with anything else.” After Rudy left, Paul ushered José into his office.

A woman sat with a stack of papers in front of her.

After closing the door, Paul motioned to the woman. “José, this is Mrs. Williams, she’ll be assisting us with the paperwork.”

José shook her hand and sat across the desk from Paul.

Paul set out brand new pens in the middle of the table and smiled at José. “You’re here for the final paperwork on the house of your dreams, aren’t you?”

“I have to say I’m kind of nervous,” José said. “I didn’t think I would be, but I am.”

Paul laughed. “Oh, you’ll be fine.” He looked at Mrs. Williams, and she flipped open the first page of the document.

Gina walked into her house after work on Tuesday night and found it empty. “Todd?”

No response.

She walked around turning on lights. Apparently, Todd had taken Ma somewhere. A movie? Too tired to do anything else, she washed her face and got ready for bed. She sat in her pajamas and house robe in the living room, scrolling through notifications on her phone. She saw a text from Ma’s doctor

that came through during the busiest hour at work. With everything that was going on, she'd missed it.

The text said Ma didn't show up for her appointment.

Todd hadn't texted at all.

Gina glanced over her shoulder, but she didn't see any note from Todd in the kitchen.

Massaging her forehead, she realized she should've taken her mother to the doctor's appointment. She could only guess what happened. Todd probably tried to get Ma in the car so they could show up on time for the appointment, but Ma didn't want to go.

She shouldn't have asked Todd to do it.

He wouldn't have been able to lie to her and suggest she go with him to get a treat at a candy shop. Jack was the only one of the three of them who could lie to Ma. Todd often took the easy road when it came to Ma. Todd would do anything to make her happy.

Where did he take her?

She scrolled through texts again, but she didn't see a message from Jack either.

She looked up from her phone when she saw headlights coming up the driveway. Wherever he'd been, he was back now and would have to answer some questions.

Todd and Ma walked in with smiles.

Gina stood and smiled at them, making sure her voice was free of any judgment. "How was your day, you two? It looks like you had fun."

“It was a full day. And so much fun.” He walked Ma down the hallway.

Gina followed them to Ma’s bathroom. “Let me help you with your shoes.” She waited for Ma to hold onto the wall and lift a foot. The shoe was very damp and smelled both salty and sweaty. Gina slipped off the other stinky shoe and held them, intending to get answers from Todd before she threw all the shoes and clothes in the washer.

After Gina set out a nightgown and a towel, Todd turned on the shower so Ma wouldn’t forget why she was in there. When Ma was settled, he closed the bathroom door and walked with Gina out to the living room. “I took her to the beach.” His shirt and hair held evidence that he hadn’t just been driving around.

“Instead of a doctor’s appointment? It’s an all-day trip. Did you call and cancel?” Gina wished she could clone herself so she could do all the necessary tasks. If she delegated to her brothers, she wasn’t sure it would get done.

“No. I was driving. You wanted me to be safe, didn’t you?”

“Really, Todd? You could’ve run through a fast food place so you could call the doctor’s office and let them know.”

His low voice showed his weariness. “I was having trouble with her today. She figured out she was going to the doctor and threw a fit. That woman.” He laughed and leaned with one hand on the wall. “She was more aggressive than I’ve ever seen her. It was like when we took our cat to the vet. Remember that? Going to the beach calmed her. We had a great day.”

Gina wanted Ma to take meds and be cured of this relationship-destroying disease, as if that were possible. Ma’s

dementia was getting harder for them to manage, but Gina couldn't bear putting her in an Alzheimer's facility. That might be the only solution later on, but it wasn't time for that yet.

In the past, they had paid Mrs. Dixon to babysit while the three of them got away for a sanity break. But Ma's condition was worsening. Mrs. Dixon wouldn't be able to manage her for much longer.

"Thank you for giving her a fun day, Todd. I saw a glorious smile on her face when she walked in."

"You're welcome." He went back down the hall to his room, leaving Gina the empty living room to think in.

She could see clearly all the details of her life in this room, which still remained the way it had been for years. They couldn't buy new art for the walls or new furniture. Ma would get confused. Changes were hard for her.

There was no way to tell the future. The disease would cause problems and shorten Ma's life, and it would certainly get worse over the next few months. She couldn't guess how long she'd be able to spend time with her mother.

If she only had a full-time job and a boyfriend, that would be enough. If she only had a job, a boyfriend, and Ma to take care of, that would still be manageable. But too many things spinning out of control were making her life more difficult than necessary. There was no time for her to date if managing her household, taking care of her mother, and finding a solution for Jack's problems became overwhelming.

She had to start letting go of all the extras.

However, nothing in her life was an "extra". Her job was a necessity since she was the only one paying the bills for her and Ma and Todd. Paige needed her to show up every day, able

to handle emotional brides and mothers of the brides. She needed Todd to stay home and be the full-time caregiver. That meant he didn't have time to hold down a decent job. Jack lived alone, but he needed the family's support now more than ever. She would welcome him if he decided moving back home was part of his recovery from depression.

If she wasn't juggling all of the other parts of her life, her relationship with José would make perfect sense. He made her happy.

Gina's thoughts turned in a disturbing direction.

She'd never be able to marry and have children as long as she was taking care of Ma in this house. Marriage is a precious thing that deserved time and effort, but those were two things she wouldn't have enough of.

Was her relationship with José too much for her right now? This was something she had to consider carefully. She wasn't having any boyfriend problems, but he was the only person in her life who didn't depend on her.

How could she ask José to help take care of Ma? It wasn't fair to him. She didn't see how she could drag José into more of her life.

She pinched herself, hoping to wake up from this nightmare.

Gina couldn't ask him to wait for her to get her life together. José might not be available later.

She needed to let him go.

He deserved to find someone better, someone who had less family baggage to take care of.

Arguing with herself was becoming a little more one-sided than she was comfortable with. She didn't want to even think about letting him go because if she did, he'd be gone forever.

But she had to do something.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

José noticed the vibration of his phone in his pocket. He'd just arrived home after leaving the restaurant in Kiki's capable hands. After his detour to the grocery store, he had bags of food to unload. When he saw Gina was the one who left a text, he stopped with two bags of nonperishable food on his counter and read it.

Can we meet?

I need to talk.

He quickly inspected his well-maintained kitchen and living room. It would be a welcoming place to talk.

Want to come over here?

I'll make us dinner.

Or dessert if you've eaten.

Her response was quick.

No. Meet me in a parking lot.

An empty one. Ideas?

From the sound of raindrops hitting the window, they needed a concrete parking lot, not a muddy or grassy one on the edge of town. José pictured the two of them kissing in his car in an empty parking lot. She must be missing him. He thought of a place she might feel comfortable with.

Your church?

No. Meetings and choir practice.

I don't want to have anyone around.

Then my church.

Musicians practice tomorrow.

José was excited to meet with her. What did she really want to do? Was it about talking or kissing?

Another of her texts came through.

Can you be there in ten minutes?

He looked at the time.

Sure. I'll race ya. (wink emoji)

When he arrived at his church, Fulton Ridge Community Church, he checked out the parking lot and saw that he'd won the race.

Not five seconds later, Gina's car splashed through a puddle as it pulled into the parking lot.

Since it was raining, he didn't mind getting in her car so she didn't have to get wet. He was ready to sit in her car to greet her properly, but she had to stop and park first.

Gina drove up with her driver's side window opening next to his window.

His heart sped up as he anticipated getting close to her again. "Gina, glad you wanted to meet. Go ahead and park. I'll come sit in your car so you don't have to walk from your car to mine."

Staying seated in her car, she spoke barely louder than the raindrops hitting the cars, "Don't get out. It's raining. I just needed to see you." Her face was oddly serious. Maybe she'd had a difficult day.

He smiled. "Good. I needed to see you too."

She shook her head. “No, that’s not what I mean. I couldn’t do this over the phone.”

A thunderbolt hit somewhere nearby, distracting him from their conversation for a second. “Do what?”

She hesitated with her eyes staring downward. “I think we have to break up.”

Did he hear that right? He could barely breathe. “No. No, Gina.”

Her face, wet from a gust of wind blowing the rain against her, was just as beautiful now as when she spoke words that made sense. “It’s for the best. We can’t...” She shook her head and looked down as she swallowed. “I wish you well. Find a girl. Get married. Make babies.” She pulled a paper napkin from the console and dried her face. When she stilled, she stared into his eyes. It was unmistakably the look of a goodbye.

This couldn’t be happening. What could he say to make her come to her senses? He raised his voice above the noise of the rain. “I love you, Gina.”

“Don’t.” Her pain-filled eyes told him she didn’t want this any more than he did.

He had to remind her or convince her that they belonged together. He could barely speak, but he pushed out words. “I know you love me too. Don’t break up with me.”

After flinching from another crack of thunder, she poured her soul out with a pain-filled gaze into his eyes as she said, “It’s important that I let you go.”

“Why?” It made no sense. She’d never given him any warning that this could happen.

“This is my gift to you. Let me do this,” she said.

Unbelievable. “No. Gift? This is not a good gift. We belong together. I love you.”

“Don’t.” She shook her head. “We can’t stay together. You know I have a lot of family issues to deal with.”

José couldn’t take it. “No!” She’d never been unreasonable before. Not like this.

In the dim light, her eyes seemed swollen and red. “You should’ve broken up with me already, but since you didn’t ...” She turned to wipe tears off her cheeks.

In desperation, José squeezed out of his car through the narrow space between them and bent his knees in the rain to talk to her. “Gina, let’s work through this. We can get through anything together. Talk to me.”

She gave a frown of determination. “Maybe we can be friends someday. No, you should forget me. You should move on.” She wasn’t even budging.

Why wouldn’t she listen to him? He raised his voice. “You don’t get to decide this on your own. At least give me the ability to make my own decisions.”

She drove away from him in the middle of his rant.

“Stop!” He yelled in the rain, knowing she couldn’t hear him. “I get to say when your issues are too much for me. You don’t get to do that.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Gina drove to her church, First Church of Fulton Ridge, and parked in a dark corner of the parking lot. She couldn't drive home in her state of mind.

What have I done? Gina's heart beat wildly as she remembered her own voice calling out to José. She didn't want to break up with him.

He didn't want to break up either. The panic in his eyes made everything she was trying to do feel so wrong. Why didn't she listen to him?

She wanted him to stay in her life. He's everything she'd ever wanted. He gave her flowers. He went bike riding with her. This was the man she'd been waiting for.

Without hesitation, her tears flowed. Her heart opened up and poured out the grief and pain she'd been swallowing back from the moment she'd decided to go through with it.

Her mistake was thinking she could pull off the bandage quickly, and it would be over. It would sting, and then the healing would begin.

But she was wrong. It had hurt worse than she'd imagined. She didn't know if she'd ever get over the pain.

"I don't want to break up." She heard how weak her voice was. "I want him back." She hated how she sounded as she cried through the words. "I want him."

The rain hadn't stopped. She welcomed the constant noise that muffled her sobbing. Her frustration changed to anger as

she regretted her actions. Would she survive the painful ripping away of the life she could've had?

She hit the steering wheel. "I want him!"

José's captivating face smiled in her mind, but she knew he didn't belong in her life. Pushing away the thought of being with him was hard. It wasn't what she wanted, but she was right to break up.

Tissues. She needed tissues. Opening her purse, she saw the small packet and pulled out a soft sheet of comfort.

José would be fine. He was strong and resilient. He could find someone better. Giving up José would allow him to finally stop thinking about her and find the woman he's been waiting for.

This was the hardest thing she had ever done. It's for the best? It was only for his best, not hers. She took a deep breath.

Her heartache would be worth it to see his life later on with his wife and kids. Seeing him thriving would be her joy. She pictured his smiling face, some woman at his side, and two adorable kids who looked just like him on a Christmas card photo. He should be happy.

Her heart broke all over again at the thought of living without him. She grabbed another tissue and allowed herself the moment to release as many tears as it took. Was this the lowest point of her entire life?

When she stopped crying, she tried to regain some semblance of normal breathing. She focused on the sound of breathing in and breathing out.

As she stared into the dark parking lot, she couldn't believe she actually went through with it. What was she thinking?

She had freed José for his sake. He wouldn't have a part in the family that was about to wear her out. She'd kept all the responsibilities for herself, like a family issues glutton.

How was she planning to take care of her family? With Jack in need of counseling, according to the talk she'd had with Gregory, and Ma teetering on the edge of needing professional care, Gina couldn't date anyone, especially not Jose. He was a good man who deserved better than to be shackled to her family's problems for the next several years.

Now that she had broken off her relationship, it was time to move on. What would be the right thing to do at this point?

Her focus would be on work and family. She could do it. She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Her head was starting to pound. Her heart was so broken. She didn't know if she'd be able to cry herself to sleep tonight.

What about tomorrow? And the next day?

How would she be able to hide her red, swollen, tear-filled eyes at work? She'd have to. She'd just bring a bag of makeup and reapply it as many times as needed to get through the day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

In his bedroom, José rested his head in his hands. It was time to stop moping. He sat up straighter in his brown leather recliner and looked at the keys to his new house that he'd thrown on the floor. He'd had those keys for four days, and he still didn't feel like making the move.

Plastic tubs, stacked five high, waited in the corner on the other side of his twin bed with ten flat cardboard boxes leaning against them. He hadn't had time to pack anything yet. And now he'd lost his excitement.

What was all this for?

It seemed like the point of having the new house had gotten lost in the last few days.

He pictured himself and Gina together in the new house, focusing on the fact that he'd tried to find a solution that would relieve the pressure Gina and her brothers were under. He wanted to give her a way to maintain her family connections without losing her job or her mind.

Was he too late to help?

José couldn't have imagined that going through all the effort of finding and buying the perfect house would have such a sad ending. How could he have lost the one person who would have made it all worthwhile? How did that happen?

He looked at the keys again. His empty stomach churned at the thought of walking into that house. How would he be able

to face the house where his dreams would have all come true. The keys only reminded him of a plan that had failed.

If he took two weeks to move everything over to his new home, that was okay.

The house was his. It was waiting for him to take ownership. Ignoring the move wouldn't make it any easier.

After a shower and a change of clothes, he finally drove over to the house and parked in his new driveway.

Still in his car, he breathed deeply, waiting for the sight before him to make him feel better. The yard was fantastic. No complaints. Green shrubs framed two benches in the front with a meticulously maintained row of flowers at the base of the trees. But he had no song of joy about it.

How could he move his belongings into his new house and not think of her? How could he be in a home big enough for all of Gina's family to live in together and not wish she was there?

Aided by his crutches, he hobbled into the house and stepped from empty room to empty room. It was just as he remembered. Nothing had changed since he bought it.

Except that everything had changed.

What was he going to do with all the bedrooms now? It was a 6,000-square-foot house. How would he fill up all of that space?

He still liked the color of the walls and the quality of the carpet. The built-in bookshelves in the living room were expertly made. The media room would've been a fantastic place for snuggles late at night.

The six-foot kitchen island would've been a great place to prepare a big family dinner. He and Gina could've shared the space easily as they cooked their meals together. Who would he have a holiday baking contest with now?

It was the perfect house, except now that she broke up with him, he was there by himself.

José sat in the middle of the living room and squeezed his eyes shut. "I don't know how to respond to this, Father." He shook his head. "I don't understand why Gina can't find enough love in her heart for me and her family too. I'm trying to be patient." He didn't want to hear his voice echoing in the emptiness. He didn't want to speak anymore. His voice seemed like it was getting weaker the longer he stayed there.

He took out his phone to look at the photos he'd taken of them together and pictures of her alone. He had everything he needed to make her happy. His only problem was, if she planned on being stubborn, he didn't know how he would ever be able to get her back. He scrolled through the images of her to pick out his favorite. His heart ached when he saw it. The close-up framed her face with her hair down. Her dark caramel eyes stared into the lens, exuding joy and laughter.

Gina might never accept him. Then again, what if she was just waiting for him to persuade her to change her mind?

Maybe he didn't know her very well yet. Maybe he should keep trying to get through to her. Maybe she wasn't the kind to keep saying no to him forever.

José remembered how long it took her to give her phone number to him. If he hadn't persisted, the relationship would've been over weeks ago.

He wasn't giving up so fast. She was worth waiting for. She was worth fighting for.

“Father, I'm determined to be patient. I am hopeful, living by faith in You, the God who brought Gina and me together. Gina will change her mind. And I'll be ready.”

He could endure this.

José closed his eyes and worshiped God. “In the middle of the storm, You are my peace. As the battle rages on, You are my victory. If it's so dark I can't see my hand in front of my face, You are my light. You are my love. You've won my heart. You are my everything. Holy God, Almighty Father, You brought me to Your embrace. You helped me see things differently. I praise You, Jesus, name above all names. I will trust You.”

Looking out the window to the backyard, he saw an old oak tree. The trunk was too big for him to put his arms around. It would give the house shade in the summer. It would be the playground of squirrels and songbirds. He listened to the silence of the moment. It was as if all of nature was in awe of the presence of God.

Along the concrete path to the pool, José saw small, smooth river stones. The stones reminded him of going to the wide part of the river a few miles north of town with his *abuelo*, his grandfather, and skipping stones across the top of the water. It was a good memory and a good surprise to see the stones today while he was in need of comfort.

When Paul had given him a tour of the house, José didn't pay much attention to the backyard. He'd been more interested in the square footage and the layout of the house. But seeing these stones reminded him of the victories of King David before he became king.

José knew, just like David did when he fought Goliath, that if God had helped him in his past, then God would help him with his future.

Just like David, he was certain of his success. Goliath wasn't the first opponent David defeated. He knew before he picked up his first stone that he had already won.

David recited previous wins while persuading King Saul that he was the right man for the job. He said that in his job as a shepherd, he'd killed a lion and a bear. David knew he wasn't alone when he fought for his sheep, and he knew he wasn't alone when he fought Goliath. He boldly told Goliath what was about to happen while looking at his target.

José knew Gina was overwhelmed. Fighting her own battles with little support had caused her to see the battles as too big for her. She was facing her Goliath, and she needed José to be her David.

David didn't win the whole battle by himself, he just took down the biggest problem and let the army handle the rest of it. When David held up the head of Goliath, the army found the strength to race after their fleeing opponents.

That's what he wanted to show Gina. He had to find a way to show her that he has cut off the head of her Goliath so that she can manage the rest.

José knew that Gina loved him. He'd seen her enthusiasm when they were together. She'd been disappointed when he hadn't kissed her on their first date. *Abuelo's* advice had worked. José remembered what he'd been told years ago. "If she really likes you, she'll be around for a second date. Kissing girls is fun, but it doesn't help you find *the one*. The relationship isn't about the kissing. The kissing is about the relationship. Let the important things come first. Get to know

her, and then kiss her if she's worth your time." José had hoped that his show of respect would be more memorable than the expected first date kiss. He'd wanted her to feel valuable and cherished.

Gina's interest in him built up to the point that he honestly believed they'd be married within a month.

José's heart hurt as he looked around the room where she should've been celebrating with him. She should've been telling him how she wanted to decorate it.

He swallowed back the pain and reminded himself that this was not over.

If Gina thought she was rid of him, she was wrong. Her struggles had weakened her focus and clouded her perspective. She couldn't see how perfect they were for each other.

If he stayed together with God, then he would find the courage to stand in the face of failure. When Gina broke up with him, it felt like a failure. However, that was the wrong perspective. It wasn't a failure. It was an opportunity to grow.

Two were always better than one. José had learned that when he accepted the fact that he and God together were more successful than fighting battles alone.

Now, with Gina, three would be better than two. All she had to do was accept him. Joining forces would strengthen both of them. No battle would be too much for the three of them.

God had never let him down. And He never would.

This was not the time for him to give up. This was not the time to weep. He could create an improved plan.

“Father, I need wisdom. You’re setting me up for a huge victory. Help me walk in the right direction. Help me find the victory You’re holding for me. The house is perfect. My love for her is strong. You hold the key to my win.” José put his hands up in surrender. “I submit to You.”

He was certain that the house was absolutely the right one for them. For all of them. Now that he was the new owner, he needed to move in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

José drove to his church with his Bible in the front seat. He'd been keeping it in his car so he wouldn't lose track of it while driving back and forth, delivering his boxes of possessions to the new house.

He sat in the parking lot, looking at the empty spaces around him. This was where it happened. This was where he yelled in agony as Gina drove away, taking his dreams with her.

With his heart still tender from their breakup five days ago, José had pushed himself to listen for God's guidance every day. He'd asked for God's wisdom. All day and night, he had been praying about what to do to get back into a relationship with Gina. He didn't have a plan yet, but he knew one was on the way.

José had never told her that he bought the house. She had no idea what that house was going to mean for her.

He was counting on the fact that when he revealed it all to her, she very likely would have tears of joy. When she finally saw all that he had done, not only for her but for her whole family, she would agree that this was inevitable. They belonged together. Their years as a happy couple were as sure as the next sunrise. He couldn't see it yet, but it was on its way.

He had the required tenacity. His new motto would now be "Never give up". The words sounded brave as he said them, "Never give up." He said it again in his car, "Never give up."

It would be his mantra every day as he packed more of his things for their new home. “Never give up.”

A family walked past him on their way into the church. Their happy gait reminded him that this was a day of victory. This was a day to celebrate the coming triumph.

He wanted to buy new vases and fill every room with flowers. Gina loved flowers.

But for now, he needed to walk in and enjoy the presence of God. He needed to praise God with his church family. He needed to hear the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as the pastor brought the message.

José parked in the same area of the parking lot that had left him aching and shaken less than a week ago. He sat down in the church but not next to anyone he knew. When it was time to sing, he gave praise to God from his heart. He worshiped and wailed in time with the music. The joy of God was in the atmosphere.

When the pastor began to preach, José wished he'd brought a notepad. The message was about the earthquake in the sixteenth chapter of Acts. He used a note-taking app on his phone and typed Scriptures as reminders about what was making sense to him. José had already studied the account of Paul and Silas preaching to the jailer after the earthquake. They had told the jailer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.”

Then God showed him an image in his mind of Jack with his bloody hands on his face, hiding his wounded eye.

What, Father? What about Jack? What can I do?

José's mind started putting Jack's situation together with the Paul and Silas story. Paul and Silas had wounds from being

beaten before they were confined with their feet in stocks in the inner jail. Even though they were in pain, they still prayed and sang hymns to God. That's when everything changed.

The pastor mentioned that Paul and Silas were in that jail because God was with them. He said the earthquake set them free temporarily so they could set the jailer free. Even though Paul and Silas were freed from their chains, they weren't really free from the prison yet. It wasn't until after the jailer and his family accepted the freedom that Jesus had died to provide that Paul and Silas were given permission to leave.

Gratitude filled José as he silently prayed. *Thank You, Holy God, for the inspiration to go to Jack. I'll ask him if he'd like to use me as his mentor. I'll ask if he wants to meet with me for support or just to keep him accountable.* José wanted to do for Jack what God had done for him. He wanted to help Jack find joy in the aftermath of his trials. He wanted to help Jack start a habit of praise, just like he'd shown him in the mountains.

After all, if Gina would let him, he would like to have Jack and Todd as brothers-in-law. It only made sense to begin treating them now the way he would treat them when he finally was their brother-in-law.

Thank You, Father, for my new family. I'm no longer defeated. I have changed. You have changed me.

After church, José sat in his car for a minute before starting the engine. His heart was full. His path to success stretched before him with lots of items to check off before he would reach out to Gina. He recited the fifth and ninth verses of Psalm 113 and planned to do so several times each day to keep himself focused on his spiritual growth and availability to God.

“Who is like the Lord our God, the One who sits enthroned on high?” No one is like You, Lord. You can settle Gina in our home as a happy mother of children. I praise You, my Lord.

He quickly texted Jack and asked to meet him for lunch.

Jack responded with a sense of humor that was doing better than expected.

Don’t worry. I’m still alive.

I’ll meet you at Blueberry Bakery.

Relieved when Jack entered Blueberry Bakery, José waved from a booth at the back of the restaurant and quickly prayed for wisdom.

Jack sat down in the booth. “I see you’re getting around okay.”

“The leg is working fine now,” José said. “Your face looks just awful, though.” He had to give in to the temptation for some good-natured ribbing, seeing that Jack’s forehead only had a tiny scar that would easily be missed by anyone who didn’t know it was there.

“It’s been that way a long time.” Jack laughed. “So what did you want a meeting for?”

“First, I want to thank you for being willing to meet me here. I haven’t seen you for ... what has it been? A week and a half? Ten days?”

“Sounds right,” Jack said.

José laughed. “And I thought you’d miss me.” After a pause, José’s voice became serious. “Have you had a chance to talk to Gina yet?”

Jack lost his amused smile. “No,” he said. “I’m not sure I need to do that.” He looked down at the table between them.

José thought about Jack’s motivation to share his story with his sister. What would make him want to tell her? “So you’re saying she thinks we were just goofing around in the mountains, and then we fell and hurt ourselves.”

“No,” Jack said. “Gregory told her that I was devastated.” He connected his gaze with José’s. “She asked me why Gregory was crying during his phone call with her. She asked me why Gregory couldn’t continue with the hike.”

“What did you tell her?”

Jack shook his head. “I thanked her for coming to get us. I thanked her for giving me time to think about my answer. And then I left.”

“Have you thought about your answer?” José could easily understand why Jack was postponing the inevitable, but he wasn’t sure that Jack saw it as inevitable.

“I thought about it.” Jack stayed close-mouthed for a while. “She has enough on her mind right now. I can’t come up with a reason to tell her why I went off the rails. I’m not putting that on her too.”

José wanted to be clear enough that Jack would choose to meet with him again, but he didn’t want to scare him off with his clarity. “I’m here for you, Jack. If you need to vent, let me know. I already know why you went off the rails. I already know your broken heart is what’s bothering you. I saw it in the mountains. Gina doesn’t have to know anything right now. Just come talk to me.”

“Okay,” Jack said.

“I’m serious.” José didn’t look away. He wanted Jack to realize their connection had a give and take. “Jack, I already showed you your light switch. Remember that? Now I’ll show you your new compass. Are you ready for this?”

“No singing, right?” Jack looked around the restaurant.

“Of course not,” José said, chuckling. “The compass is very simple. I could’ve used one in the mountains. You were leading us around, and I didn’t know where I was going. At sunrise and sunset, I can tell which direction I’m going. But when the noonday sun isn’t showing me the late afternoon shadows, I need a compass to keep me from getting lost. When you are in a confusing situation, how do you stay true? How do you avoid veering off your intended course?”

Jack’s expression showed that he felt lost in this conversation. “I don’t know, José. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Fine.” José put his elbows on the table. “I will. It’s easy to fall if your standards don’t hold you up.” His right elbow started to slide slowly away, lowering his shoulder. He put the elbow back in a sturdy position with no sliding.

“Uncompromising standards. That’s what will keep you from falling. Tough times will come and go. Don’t use difficulties as an excuse to lower the bar. Keep your standards high.”

Jack nodded. “Don’t worry. I am not the man I used to be.” He stared at the table again.

“I didn’t mean that,” José said. “I’m talking about relationship standards across the board. With Gina, me, and Todd. With anyone. With God.”

The message in Jack’s squint was clear. He still didn’t get it.

“Keep high standards in all your relationships. Then you’ll never get that same feeling again. I hate being disappointed in myself, and I know you do too. When a situation seems tough, you have to be tougher. When you’re tempted to lie, show that your honesty comes from the deepest part of you. You asked a lot of Gregory. Did you apologize to him yet?”

“We had a talk,” Jack said. “He didn’t want to speak to me at first when I called him. I texted and asked if he was going to return my car. He didn’t respond. I called him about four times and texted him twice more. Finally, he returned my call and showed up at my door with my keys. He came in to talk it out with me.”

“There. That’s what I’m talking about. You don’t want to hurt him like that again, right?”

Jack shook his head.

“Uncompromising standards. An unrelenting love for people. If you have high standards in your relationship with God, that will keep you strong. You can use your love for God to fuel your love for people.” José watched Jack to see if he was catching on. “Then because your standards are high in your relationship with God, you are building your devotion to God. And as a person who is devoted to God, you will never be lost. Your light switch is praising God and your compass is devotion to God.” He tapped the table. “Put that in your bag of essentials.”

Jack’s expression didn’t change. “I’ve failed in relationships with people. I’ll probably continue to fail in my relationship with God.”

“I want to show you something, Jack. This may help.” José tapped his phone and showed him a Bible verse that could

prove helpful for Jack. “This is Zephaniah 3:17. It’s powerful. I’ll text it to you, but for now, just read it.”

After a moment of hesitation, Jack took José’s phone and said, “The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves.” Jack paused and took a breath. “He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you but will rejoice over you with singing.”

José raised his eyebrows. “Powerful, right? God sees you and gets so excited that he starts singing.”

Jack smiled. “He’s the Mighty Warrior who saves.”

“Yes,” José said. “God saw you making plans to go to the mountains. He had his own plan, a plan to save you because he loves you. You’re that important. Now you have a story to tell others who need to hear about your God, the Mighty Warrior who saves. God will put people in your path. And out of your love for people, you’ll tell them what you’ve learned about God.”

With a look of acceptance in his eyes, Jack said, “Speaking of love for people, I saw Gina yesterday. She didn’t say anything about you proposing. Did you chicken out?”

José took in a deep breath. He felt kicked in the gut. “Putting me to the test right now, aren’t you, Jack?” He swallowed and smiled before answering him. “I have not proposed.” Apparently, Gina hadn’t told anyone about their break up. “I plan to propose, but I haven’t yet. She doesn’t know of my plans to propose, so keep it quiet. Okay, Jack?”

“Excuse me, *brother*, did you say you haven’t proposed?” Jack gave a curious stare. “Why? You were all fired up about it in the mountains.”

“I have a very good reason.”

Jack leaned forward with a frown. “And it is?”

“She broke up with me.”

“She did not,” Jack said.

José kept his composure. “She did.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Gina left the boutique Tuesday at six o'clock. Paige had scheduled herself to close, and Gina would be opening the boutique in the morning. She didn't need to do any errands, but she didn't feel like driving straight home after work.

Sitting in her car, she ran the air conditioner and turned off the music. She needed to think about something other than José. However, telling herself to not think about him was like telling herself to not think about a baby kitten. Just the mention of his name put the image of his face in her mind. She could see his hair falling in front of his eyes. She wanted to touch his hair and smooth it back from his gorgeous face.

He was all she thought about. His eyes. His touch. His kiss.

He had the strength that she needed in her life. His joy was a beautiful life-giving expression of love.

Not only did Gina want to see him again, but she also wanted to feel his embrace. She imagined the feel of his skin, her hand in his. The warmth in his eyes as he held her.

But first, she had to know if José was angry with her.

He had every right to be angry when he hadn't been given the courtesy of a decent conversation.

Did he still love her?

The question made her wince at the pain of what she'd done. Was she going to feel that pain forever?

Gina wished she didn't have the kind of curiosity that drove her to need answers that would only disappoint.

But it was more than curiosity. It was longing. She was unable to think about anything other than him. The longing in her heart pushed her to try to get him back.

The battle between her heart and her head raged inside her without either side winning the victory.

Gina wanted to see him. If she accidentally ran into him in his parking lot, she could talk to him or at least see him. She wanted to see for herself that he was okay.

It would be a mistake to talk to him with her heart still wounded and wavering. But she couldn't stop herself. After driving to his restaurant, she looked for his car. She drove through the parking lot a second time, but she still didn't see it.

Her first thought was to drive to his neighborhood to see if his car was parked in his driveway.

She argued with herself. Unable to talk herself out of satisfying her curiosity, she ended up parking in the street in front of his house.

She knew better than to go there.

Gina had been to his home before she broke up with him. They hadn't spent much time there, but she knew where he lived. When she couldn't find his car there, she looked up at his window. The curtain wasn't pulled completely closed, so she could see that it was dark inside.

In her weakened state, she turned off her car. She took a breath, building up her determination to allow him a moment to express to her whatever he wanted to say. If he was angry, he should be given the opportunity to let her know. If he wanted to get back with her, this was his chance.

She walked up to his door and knocked.

She waited, knowing this could be very embarrassing. When no one answered, she knocked again to make sure he had every opportunity to speak his mind.

No one was home.

Driving to see him was a big mistake. She took careful steps back to her car, regretting the curiosity that gave her hope that they could be together.

Not being able to see him was a disappointment. It served her right for wavering between her insistence that they can't be together and her longing for him.

She didn't deserve to get him back.

Texting him to find out why he wasn't at work or at home was out of the question because she was the one who broke up. She had no right to ask where he was. It was none of her business. He might be on a date for all she knew.

The idea that he might have moved on and probably was already dating someone else only stirred up her misery. If she didn't drive away soon, she might start crying again.

At least she wasn't a maniac ex-girlfriend who would drive to every restaurant in town to find out where his car was.

Finally, she went home, even more wounded than before.

Wednesday night after work, José's fingers were itching to call Gina. Just one text. If he worded it right, she might be persuaded that it had been an accidental text. Then he could call her to apologize.

Could that be considered harassment? It would definitely be considered lying.

The memory of her voice calmed him. He missed the delicate laughter and joy she shared with him when they had been together.

He could call Jack. Just to check in. Jack would want José to come back over for dinner soon, wouldn't he?

José thought about Jack's relationship with his sister. They were close. He'd at least know if she was ready to start seeing him again. Or if she'd moved on.

No, she wouldn't have moved on to where she'd be interested in other men. That was the whole point of the break up. She wasn't planning to date anyone.

José pulled his phone out, but he didn't call. He sat, thinking through what he wanted to say.

How would he persuade the family that he should have a chance to participate and be helpful?

José set his phone down. Nothing would be the right thing to say if she wasn't interested in his help. If he wasn't careful, he might only make things worse.

How would his grandfather have advised him? He leaned back and thought about all the words of wisdom God had given him through his *abuelo*.

It seemed like yesterday, it was so clear in his mind. José remembered sitting at the table across from his *abuelo* one day. "Wash your hands, José," Abuela said as she set the plates on the table.

He ran off to the sink, cleaned his hands, and then sat down again. He pulled a fresh, hot, aromatic tortilla off the center plate, put it on a clean plate, and pulled it closer to him. He buttered it and sprinkled a tiny bit of sugar and cinnamon on it

before taking a bite. That first bite, the first taste of the love his *abuela* put into those tortillas, was the best.

His *abuelo* took a break from running his restaurant for a day when José came to stay. That first day of summer break was their time to relax together.

“How long have you and *Abuela* been married?” Looking back after all those years, it sounded like a random question. But to an innocent boy, it seemed important.

“Many, many years. Good years. I hope you have such a good marriage.”

Often when José would ask important questions about life, his *abuelo* taught him something by comparing it to his restaurant. As a boy, he never caught on to the parallels, but he listened and tried to keep the memories alive as time passed. He never imagined that he would learn so many good things about life as his *abuelo* was teaching him about food.

“Don’t put too many things on the plate. Give the customers good things so they’ll want more good things. Give them a few things so they’ll keep coming back to feed their curiosity and order more. Give them a small dessert, but make it a good one. Give them a reason to bring their friends.”

As a boy, although he couldn’t understand then as much as he understood now, José took in as much wisdom as he could.

“Give them a chance to make up their minds. Let the customer be in control of ordering what they want. Then you be in control of how much it is and how good it is. It’s like when you find a woman you want, the way I was with your *abuela*. You make them feel in control and secure. When she feels safe, she’s able to be adventurous. If she’s worried or insecure, she’s not having fun—and you’re not having fun.

You make your customer feel in control by giving them the options you want them to choose from. When they've made a decision, you act as if they are the smartest customer in the room. Tell them they've made a good decision. Act like they've made a good decision. That confidence will help them have fun. When they have fun, you will too. And they'll be back to have fun again."

"With a woman, as with your customers, it's best to hold back a little. Don't ask them to try everything on the menu. Don't ask them to experience everything you've got. Kindness and patience are the keys to happiness. With customers and with women. Take your time. Give them time to build up confidence in you and what you can do. Give them decisions to make. Show them you trust them to make good decisions, but only give them the options that you're okay with. If you don't want to make Baked Alaska, don't put it on the menu. But if it's on the menu, be willing to make it so well that they cry happy tears when they eat it. Ask them to choose from what you're willing to give. Let them build up a desire for you. Make them want to come back to you. Making a customer happy one time ... is a failure. If they never come back and never recommend the restaurant to their friends, you'll run out of customers and go out of business. Kindness and patience, José. Always kindness and patience."

José tapped his phone to call Jack. "How are you doing, bro? I want to know when you're going back over to have dinner with your family."

"Why?"

"I want you to invite me," José said.

"How about Friday night?"

José thought about who was working on Friday and the chances of him being called with a problem. “Friday sounds good. Mexican food? Enchiladas?”

“And tacos. Bring a jar of your salsa too. I could live on that salsa.”

“I’ll bring two jars.”

“I’ll invite you on one condition, José. Please, tell me that you’re going to propose. If you wait much longer, I might let something slip.”

“We’ll see how dinner goes,” José said. “This meal with all of us together is a good way to show her that I don’t give up as easily as she expects.”

“Have you even spoken to Gina since she broke up with you?”

“No,” José said. “But I think she loves me and wants me back.” José worried that he sounded arrogant. “I mean, she seems sad, doesn’t she?”

“Living in hope, aren’t you, José? I’ll ask her. If she doesn’t want you back, then—and it hurts me to say this, believe it or not—no dinner on Friday.”

“Understood. I’ll expect to be there on Friday unless I get a call from you, explaining why you believe she doesn’t want to see me.”

“I’ll try to avoid saying that you’re coming over. I’ll work with you if I can.”

He would be reuniting with Gina in a couple of days. José felt like dancing. “I knew you’d be with me on this. Thanks, bro.”

José ended his call, feeling the fireworks of hope exploding in his chest. *Thank You, Father, for Your hand in this exciting weekend.*

Reciting all nine verses of Psalm 113, he put energy into the words to keep himself focused. He wouldn't allow Gina to stay sad if she wanted him back.

Keeping in mind both his spiritual growth and availability to God was important if they were to be the couple God desired them to be. They could be used by God to share how love can get a couple through the difficult times in life. They'd already had a few difficult times, but there would be more. There would always be more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

As she pulled her hair back to take off her makeup, Gina thought about how hard she'd been working to keep a smile at work. Today was the second Thursday since her break up, ten of the worst days of her life. Staring into the mirror at this sad woman made her think about how she was living her life.

Gina lived every day under the pressure of doing as much for Ma as she could while she still had her. She worried about Todd and his future. When she found out that she hadn't even noticed Jack's depression, her overwhelm grew even more.

She needed José, but her mind had been made up.

Gina wished she could stop thinking of his face, that precious face that broke her heart when she told him they should stop seeing each other.

She knew what it would feel like, but she did it anyway. For him.

If she didn't break up with him, he would eventually blame her and hate her. It was better for them to be apart. At least this way, one of them could be happy.

Gina decided she needed some warm milk to help her get to sleep. She didn't want to let her broken heart rob her of any more sleep. She heated the milk and took her small warm mug to the living room.

José had to be over her by now. He probably was sleeping fine.

The noise of the front door opening got Gina's attention. She wasn't expecting anyone.

Jack came in and closed the door quietly. "Hello," he softly said.

"What's up? Are you hungry?" Gina asked. "I have leftovers in the fridge. Did you need something else? It's kind of late for just showing up."

He sat with her in the living room. "How about an evening chat?"

"Ma already went to bed," Gina said. "Todd's out with friends, but he'll be back in a bit. I have time for a chat."

Jack asked in a considerate tone, "Are you still dating José? I haven't seen him around."

Gina focused on her warm mug. "That should give you a clue." She took a sip.

Jack widened his eyes and looked like he was about to back off, but then he changed his mind. "I don't mean to pry, but why did you break up with José?"

"I don't mean to be snippy, but how is that any of your business?" She heard her voice and judged for herself that her wounded heart had allowed too much defiance in her tone. After a quiet breath, she shook her head. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sound—"

"It's okay. I actually do understand."

She kept a soothing tone and asked, "Is there something else you need to know? I'm really not pushing you away from me. I'm just not interested in talking about my past boyfriends."

He gave a calm smile. “I’ll call José later. I wanted to talk to you about how you’re doing. How do you feel about the break up? This is one of the things I’m probably supposed to be doing. Talking about *feelings*.” His last word was a little over-dramatic as if this was the last thing on his list of One Million Things To Do Before I Die.

“I feel bad about the breakup.” She didn’t feel any better talking to Jack about it, but she knew she had to answer his questions. She hadn’t talked to anyone else about it. “I know he didn’t want to end the relationship, but I had no choice.”

Jack shifted his gaze in surprise. “Really? If you knew he didn’t want to break up and you obviously didn’t want to break up, why did you? And don’t give me that *no choice* cop-out. You had a choice.”

She pressed her eyes closed for a second, and then she looked at Jack. “I couldn’t do it.”

“Do what?” Jack’s soft voice prodded her to continue.

“I couldn’t keep up the pretense of the happy couple while everything in my little world was falling apart. It was enough for me to pour myself into my work and simply keep my income flowing in. Paige has been good to me. She’s been patient and gave me time to fly up to pull you boys out of the woods and bring you back home. She asked a client to give me a ride in her private jet. Although I could never pay back that kind of favor, I need to pay Paige back with increased sales and loyalty.”

“Wow. Private jet. Which client?”

“None of your business. Jack, the thing is ...”

Jack’s phone buzzed. He read the screen, and then he ignored it and set it face down on the couch.

When she had his attention, she started again. “The thing is —”

His phone buzzed again, and he looked at it. “I can ignore it. It’s nothing. Keep going. I’m listening. The thing is?”

“The thing is ... I can’t manage everything you guys throw at me. I have to make sure you’re getting counseling, Jack. I have to make sure you’re going to church. And I have to somehow get Todd to finish his degree and start interviewing. He can’t shut off his life just because Ma needs us more now than we’ve ever needed her.”

Jack nodded. “You feel guilty.”

Her face spun to give her sisterly stare-down. “Excuse me? Guilty? No, I’m not guilty.”

Jack rolled his eyes and started again. “I mean you feel responsible.”

“No. I’m not responsible for what happens with this family.” If she was being honest with herself, the layers of the responsibilities she was already holding up were heavy on her mind. Freedom from responsibility was not something she could even dream about. If anything else went wrong, she wasn’t sure she could stand under the pressure. “I’m sorry, Jack. I guess I’m feeling like so many things are weighing me down, but I’m not responsible for causing these problems. I know I didn’t cause Ma’s dementia ...” She avoided saying *or your struggle with depression*. Gina sighed, needing a break from the stress of it all. “But yes, I feel like I have to be the head of this household. That is my responsibility.”

“You see all the things that are going wrong, and these things have to be fixed. You can’t ignore all the things. And you feel like if you don’t fix it, no one will. Am I right?”

“No. I’m not sure anyone can fix any of this. That’s why I broke up with him. This is a broken family. I can’t run off and marry him and leave all of you behind so I can be happy. That isn’t going to happen.”

Jack hugged her and sat back with a doleful expression. “Oh, Gina. I’m sorry we’ve made your life a nightmare.” He leaned back against the couch with an elbow outstretched across the top, resting his head in his hand.

Gina looked at him again, and then she let her gaze drop to the floor. She didn’t want to think of her life as a nightmare. Is that why she had trouble sleeping?

“Want to know who was texting me? I can tell you now. Are you ready?”

She shrugged. “Sure.”

“It was José.”

At his name, her eyes stared across the room, transfixed. Her heart seemed to stop for a moment. She sat speechless, thinking, waiting for Jack to continue.

“He and I have been in communication. Not about you. Don’t worry. He has been checking with me about me. He apparently will not be breaking up with me just because you broke up with him. We are still friends.”

Keeping a calm voice, she looked down at her hands. “That’s good. Very kind of him.”

“Yes, it is. And I would like to tell you something you don’t already know about him. I’m confident he didn’t tell you what happened on our trip.”

She swiveled her head, eyeing him. “Gregory already told me that you were planning to do something desperate. I’m not

sure what he was talking about. He cried through half of it. Was José involved?"

Jack looked away. "I shouldn't have told Gregory. He was supposed to be my loyal and supportive friend."

"He was." Her quick words were intended to scold Jack. "Gregory contacted me like any true friend would."

"José was involved, but that was unplanned." At his last word, Jack's head drooped. His silence didn't explain the expression of grief on his face. Jack took a big breath and continued. "José didn't tell you that he saved my life."

"What?" She smoothed the prickles on her suddenly cold skin.

"I planned that trip as a suicide mission." He shrugged. "I didn't want to live." He turned to connect his gaze with hers.

At his words, a thousand explosions in her head almost stopped her from keeping a steady spine. She put a hand on the couch cushion to prevent Jack from noticing her slightly dizzy spell. She swallowed, hoping he couldn't tell that she wasn't taking this well. In an effort to keep him talking, she gave a slight nod. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words would come.

After a quiet sigh, Jack continued. "The only reason I'm sitting with you right now is that José wouldn't give up on me. I gave him all the right reasons to go on with Todd and leave me to die in the fire. If Gregory and José could have told everyone what I instructed them to say, no one else would know what was really happening."

"But they wouldn't have," she said.

"You're right. Gregory and José both messed up my plan. It was intended to be an accident. I was going to fall, be

knocked unconscious, and die in the park. Maybe a bear or wolf or something would come along and rip up my body so that no one would guess that I had been planning my own death.”

Gina wished she had the right words for her brother, some way of helping him grieve or cheering him up. She didn’t know what to say, only that she was now overcome by sadness on top of sadness, and that it didn’t feel like it was going away. She couldn’t tell him how she felt. How would that help Jack? Gina said, “I’m so sorry, Jack. I’m sorry that you felt like you had no reason to live.” She wished she’d been there for him. “You could have talked to me.”

“Yes, I know. There were lots of people I could’ve talked it out with. Instead of going on that crazy trip to the mountains, I could have sat down with Charissa and Gregory and made them aware of what I was dealing with. They’re my two best friends. They would’ve listened and would’ve been very supportive.” He shook his head. “I didn’t want to. I wanted to die.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, José gave me a reason to think it through. That stopped me. He saved my life.” The gratitude in Jack’s voice resounded with gripping honesty. “José’s intensity and passion, his zest for life won me over. He could’ve left with Todd, but he wouldn’t give up on me.”

“You went all the way out there to cover up a suicide attempt,” Gina said, squinting, unable to believe it was true. “What drove you to think like that?”

Jack drew in a deep breath. “There was a baby.”

She gasped. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that a girlfriend I dated last year became pregnant. And she didn’t tell me.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Jack.” Her limbs, restrained by shock, were completely immovable. Her quickly filling eyes made her force herself to blink. She knew his apartment was one of the ways he could live his own life out from under the notice of his family. She had already guessed he was spending the night with his girlfriends. Apparently, he thought, like many guys do, that he was being careful enough.

“And ...” Jack’s voice stopped short of the next word.

She turned and put her head against his chest and her hand on his shoulder, comforting him the best she could.

“And the baby was killed. I didn’t know until this past ... whenever it was. You went with us to the dance at the Turner Pavilion. I saw her there. I hadn’t seen her since last year. She told me I was the father ... of an aborted baby.” As he got his last words out, the two of them cried together, holding onto each other, grieving the loss of a family member.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Gina, it’s Friday,” Paige said quietly as she stood by Gina at the cash register. “The weekend has begun. I need you to be one hundred percent.” Paige touched her arm. “Are you all right?”

“Sure.” Gina smiled cautiously, hoping Paige wouldn’t ask her what she was thinking about. It was José. He’d been on Gina’s mind most of the day. “Of course. I’m waiting for a bride to change back into her clothes.”

“I know. I helped her onto the box in front of the mirror.” Paige’s hand swooped to guide Gina’s gaze to the back of the store.

“Ah. Great. Thanks, Paige.” Gina smiled and left Paige to join her customer at the back of the store. “So you decided to try the other one on once more? What do you think? Which one’s better?”

The young girl seemed a little confused. “I just didn’t want to say no to this one. I like both of them. Can I have a few more days to think about it?”

Gina stood where the girl could see a confident and considerate expression on her face. “You can, unless the wedding is this weekend. What is your date?”

The girl laughed and seemed to calm down. “It’s not this weekend. Wow. No way. It’s in three weeks.”

Three weeks? The girl was really cutting it close. “Oh. I see. Three weeks. Well, in that case. Why don’t you step down

off the box and change back into your clothes? When you come out we'll look at the alterations schedule to see if there is time to raise that hem. Our alterations expert is Sofia. She's the best. She'll do a very good job for you."

The girl frowned. "I didn't even think about that. I'll be right out."

When Gina had the girl unzipped and tucked away in the dressing room, she stood by the register to wait and to think about José again.

Paige stepped over and asked, "Is something going on with you?"

Gina shook her head. "No. Why?"

Paige said, "I heard you say you were going to schedule Sofia to raise the girl's hem. Do you remember our talk this morning about the fact that Sofia will be booked up for the next four weeks? This bride cannot get the hem done here. She'll have to find someone else for the alterations."

Gina touched her forehead. "Oh. Right. Sorry. I can fix this."

Paige gave a look of concern. "I know you can. Just sell her one of the two dresses. She's adorable in both of them, by the way. But tell her there are very good alterations businesses she can contact to see if they have openings in their schedule."

"Yes. Of course." It was no use. Gina couldn't focus on work. She argued silently with herself about how to talk to José. What would she say?

Jack's little talk last night about how José saved his life was eye-opening, to say the least. She couldn't believe Jack would keep a jaw-dropping story like that from her. If no one

tells her anything, then she doesn't have enough information to make good decisions.

She can't ask José to stay out of her family if he insists on saving her brother's life and continuing to check on him. If he wants to be in her family, then she might as well tell him she never stopped loving him.

But was she too late?

Should she text and schedule something? Would that be too confusing after breaking up?

Gina considered showing up at José's restaurant like Jack showed up at her house last night. It was effective. It got her attention.

While the girl was still in the dressing room, Gina asked Paige for one more favor. "Since it looks like we're not going to be super busy tonight, do you mind if I leave early?"

Paige pursed her lips. "I think that's a fine idea. On one condition."

That worried Gina a little. "Oh? What's that?"

Paige said, "Get some rest before you come back tomorrow. Unless you're sick. Then please let me know if I need to get someone to cover for you tomorrow."

"I'm not sick," Gina said. She didn't want to admit that she was lovesick. That was a totally different thing.

"Good." Paige folded her arms over her chest. "You've been off today. Your sales were down. If something is going on, please address your issues so you can come back here and give this your best effort."

"I hear you. I will. Thanks, Paige."

Since Paige had agreed to let Gina leave early, she drove straight to José's Beans and asked for a booth. An employee seated her near the front of the building. There were three other tables of customers in her general area. It wasn't as busy as it soon would be since the dinner rush wouldn't begin for another hour.

Gina skimmed the menu and thought she might order an enchilada meal while she waited to speak with José. When a waiter came by to fill her glass of water, she asked if she could speak to the owner.

"The owner?" The high school boy seemed to lose his confidence as if he expected Gina to complain about the service. "Our manager on duty is Kiki. Would you like to speak to her?" The waiter stood very still with an alarmed look on his face.

"No, thanks. I'll try to get him to respond to a text. But if you see him, let him know I'm here. Okay?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll let him know." He took the water pitcher to the back.

Gina pulled out her phone and texted José.

I am embarrassed at my attitude toward you. Please allow me to apologize to you in person.

I'm at your restaurant.

Waiting in a booth.

Within fifteen minutes, José was standing next to her booth. He didn't speak at first. He caught his breath and simply gave a tentative smile. Gorgeous, as usual.

"You've shaved," she said.

With one hand, he rubbed his clean-shaven chin. “I’m trying to come up with something to say.” His tone was cautious like he was worried about what she would say.

Gina said, “I’d like to speak to you privately.”

“I’m doing three things right now,” he said. He moved out of the way as someone tried to get by him. Then he licked his lips and looked at her with anxious eyes.

“If you don’t have time right now, I’ll wait.” Gina pulled her hair behind her ear, and then she saw José watching her hand. She put her hands in her lap to clear their conversation of all distractions.

José said, “Can you send someone to find me after you’ve eaten your meal? Have you ordered yet?”

“No, I haven’t ordered yet, but I will try everything on the menu if I have to. I need some time with you. Today, José.”

He nodded. “I will be back. Have you had the snapper? Try the snapper.” With his hands squeezed in front of him, almost wringing them together, he gave a slight bow. “I hope to see you later.”

Her embarrassment from breaking up with José without giving him a chance to talk was too heavy of a weight for her. She shouldn’t have bulldozed him like that. She couldn’t tell if he was simply putting her off when he walked away or if he really was planning to give her a chance to explain.

Within seconds, José came back to her booth. “On second thought, I have time for you right now. Why don’t we stop at the front and get you a complimentary coupon for the snapper? You can redeem it at your convenience.” His quiet, patient face warmed her heart. His purity and generosity were evident in whatever he did.

This was exactly why she didn't deserve to be with him. "Right." Confusing thoughts fought within her as she gathered her purse and followed him to the front.

José pulled a waiter aside for instructions, and then he slipped his credit card to the young man. José tapped his phone for a minute. He appeared to be texting someone. Then the waiter came back with a receipt and the card. José walked back to Gina and ushered her out the front door. "Would you like to follow me or go in my car?"

She didn't know what he had in mind, but she appreciated that he was doing his best to comply with her request. "Where are we going?"

"I have a place in mind. It's not far. Your car or mine?"

"Since you know where it is, José, why don't you drive." It made sense to get away from the hustle and bustle of his restaurant for the meeting. Since she didn't have a specific place in mind, it was easier to let him take the lead on picking a venue for their conversation. She only knew that she had to talk this out with him today.

He held her door open as she sat in his car. When he got in, he asked, "How's your family? Everyone's doing okay?"

What a strange question. He knew how her family was. "They're the same. We're all hanging in there."

He drove north on University Drive to Eighth Avenue and went across the Falling Leaf bridge into The Estates, the neighborhood separated from the rest of the town by the river and by enough money to fill the river with bags of one hundred dollar bills. He wound through the neighborhood and turned left into the driveway of a house set back far enough to

have an elegant, well-manicured front lawn. “Pretty, isn’t it?” José waited for her to walk with him to the front door.

“It’s gorgeous.” Stepping through the doorway, she touched the bare walls of the entryway, impressed with all the light coming in from the large windows. “Who lives here?” Was one of his friends on vacation and asked José to water the plants?

“Don’t worry about that. This is a good place for a private meeting.” He took a couple of steps toward the kitchen. “You have to see this kitchen.” He waited for her to join him. “It’s spacious and luxurious.”

When she noticed how big the island was as she walked around it, she said, “Wow. I could really enjoy this kitchen. Are you house-sitting?”

“You love it as much as I do, right? It reminds me of my grandfather. He taught me a lot when we were in his kitchen.” José patted his heart, staring at the six burners on the stovetop. He walked her back to the sparsely decorated living room where they could talk. “We won’t get interrupted here.” Holding his hand out to the recliner, he said, “Pick your chair. Recliner or green mid-century chair and matching ottoman.”

The pale green, softly-textured upholstery looked good against the beige walls. “This is fine.” Gina sat and rested her hands on the chair’s gently-sloped arms. “Very comfy. I love the color. Maybe I’ll get one of these for my bedroom. It’s like it had my name written all over it.”

“I know.” He smiled so big she could barely see his eyes. Taking his seat in the recliner, he relaxed into a comfortable position, studying her as he rested against the brown leather cushion.

“First, let me say thank you for agreeing to meet with me.” Gina focused on what Jack revealed when he came over last night. “I’ve been thinking about something all day today.”

“I’m happy to have a conversation with you. Anytime.” José’s curiosity showed in his face and in his voice.

“José, I had a surprise visit from Jack late last night, and he told me something that you knew way before I did.”

When José’s phone beeped, he read the screen and then ignored it. “Good. I wondered when he was going to tell you. I knew it wasn’t something that should come from me.”

“He told me you saved his life. Thank you.” She searched his eyes, trying to come up with words that could in some way convey her deep, inexpressible gratitude. “Thank you for your tenacity. I’m so glad that you wouldn’t let him have his way.”

José’s face filled with concern. “I couldn’t let anyone walk away from me like that with the intention of escaping the pressures of this life. He needed to find out that he could live through it. Living through it is the only way of dealing with it. Living through it makes us stronger.”

“I needed to see you to thank you in person. I couldn’t allow myself to go one more day without ...” As she lost her train of thought in his gaze, her voice drained away.

His face shone with the light of hope. “Jack has so much potential. I can’t let him quit. I intend for him to know that he can be very successful. We all can be. But we can’t quit.” José’s gaze wandered away as if he was reliving the moment with Jack again.

“I appreciate your patience with him, with me, with all of us. I’m sorry about the whole breakup mess. I should’ve given you time for a response. I was awful. I didn’t know about Jack.

I didn't know you were still meeting with him to make sure he was making progress and turning away from where his head was before."

His lips pressed together as he looked down. "I couldn't figure out why you wanted to break up." When his gaze found hers, he said, "I know that your family isn't the stereotype of a perfect family. But I think we both know that there isn't a perfect family anywhere."

Gina nodded. "I've been struggling terribly with Ma on my mind." She didn't want to delve into her family issues, but José had seen her and her family. He knew. "And with Jack's depression—I obviously didn't know why he was depressed—I was overwhelmed. And now that Jack needs more support than he ever has ..." She couldn't finish. She'd tried to express her gratitude and apologize, but she'd failed miserably. Gina saw him as a hero, not a man. He'd already saved her brother. He didn't deserve more of their struggles. She couldn't look away from José. "I don't know how to thank you enough for being there for him."

When his phone beeped, José read the screen and flipped it over so he couldn't see notifications on his screen. "I'll help Jack all I can. If God sent me to the mountains to be there with him at his lowest moment, then I can make sure Jack knows he has a friend for life. No matter what. I think he needs that from someone."

"I needed to break up so I could release you from all the chaos and neediness. It's not fair to pull more people in when we're so broken. I couldn't see how you fit in with all of us. My family has so many issues," Gina said. "It's not just Jack. It's all of us together, problems stacked on top of problems."

“I know.” With eyes full of compassion, José lowered his voice. “But you have a family to love.”

The way he said it touched her. It woke her up to the idea that he wanted a family, even if it was hers. Then she realized that he didn’t have one. “José,” she said, surprised that she heard desire for him in her own voice. She started again, trying to hold herself back from all emotion. “What do you want?”

“You.” His message shone clearly in his eyes. “You, Gina. I want you. I want to create a family to love and to grow with.” His eyes searched hers with sparks of passion pouring out with every word. “What do you want?”

Her temptation was to keep him at a distance for his own good.

His love for her pulled at her heart and urged her to let him get closer. How would she battle against that pull? How would she save him from the disorder of her family if he chose to involve himself no matter what?

José sat in his old recliner watching the woman he loved struggle with finding a balance in her life. The longing he’d ignored for weeks surged within him. When would he finally get to hold her again?

Love was drawing him closer to her in spite of her insecurity about her family’s problems.

With a pause in her voice, Gina said, “José.” She seemed unsure and unsettled. “What do you want?”

“You.” How did she not understand that she was what he’s wanted all along? “You, Gina. I want you.”

Her eyes widened at his true feelings.

He wasn't going to hide his emotion from her. She needed the truth. "I want to create a family to love and to grow with." He didn't know how to make it any clearer. "What do you want?" His phone beeped again. Taking a deep breath, he read the screen. It was Jack again. He'd texted additional menu items that he wanted José to bring to dinner. It wasn't an emergency or even a question. He pressed the button to turn off his phone. José hated to turn it off, but Jack was interrupting a very important conversation with Gina.

"What do I want? Gina asked. "To take care of the family I have." She shrugged. "I don't know how to do that anymore. I'm already doing all I can." Her voice seemed to trail away.

Unhappy that this struggle with her was still unresolved, he wanted to tell her everything. Looking away from her, José kept his silence. He could give her the truth and a tour of his new home. Why didn't he tell her? He stared into her eyes again. "Are you going to let me be a part of your life?"

"I'm not asking you to experience everything in my life." Gina's rushed response felt like she was still pushing him away.

José wondered how long she would cling to this idea of protecting him from her problems. He leaned toward her and said, "I won't stop meeting with Jack. He needs someone to nurture his strengths right now. If I'm around him and you're there, I won't apologize for looking at you with love in my eyes. But I can be patient."

It was obvious in the wrinkles on her forehead that she'd heard him. She wasn't unsure of his love for her, but something was holding her back from accepting him.

"I think I should get back to my car so you can get back to work." She rose and started to the door.

He walked with her. “Gina, go home and be with your family tonight. You and I can meet again. We’ll talk later.” His heart was calmed by the idea of seeing her again later tonight. She would definitely be surprised.

When she was back in his car, she said, “I guess I could’ve given you my thanks in the parking lot so you didn’t have to come out here with me.”

“It’s not very far away. It was good to see you.” He kept his eyes on the road as he left the driveway.

As he came to a stop sign, he noticed her eyes on him for a few seconds.

She said, “I will never forget what you’ve done. I’m still overwhelmed with gratitude.”

He took a little longer than necessary at the stop sign, entranced by her exquisite face. When he pulled into the intersection, he said, “I’m glad I was able to have a positive effect on Jack. It’s important to me to make him aware of opportunities for him to use kindness and patience with people. Those are the keys to happiness. That will be helpful for him. I’m also going to continue pushing him to remember why he’s alive.”

“Well, José, if kindness and patience are the keys to happiness, Jack will be happy for as long as you two are friends. Everyone who encounters you will leave happy.”

“Thanks. That’s nice,” José said. We’re probably going to run into each other, Gina. Soon. If you see me, come and say hello. I’d love to catch up with you, so don’t be in a rush. Take your time.”

She went back to her car as soon as he stopped in his restaurant parking lot.

José parked nearby and watched her drive away. He couldn't wait for her to be finally ready for him to propose.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

José was relieved to finally be at Gina's house again. Everything was riding on this evening going smoothly. Ignoring the pressure he was facing, he took a look at the people he was with and chose to believe that this was his moment.

Jack helped bring in the chips, salsa, and the tray of enchiladas, and then he set aside the empty To Go bag from José's Beans. He asked, "Where are the tacos?"

After an eye roll, José said, "Tacos! I knew there was something else. This is enough food. Have tacos another day, Jack. You can be happy without tacos today."

"Can anyone be happy without tacos?" When Jack had set the table and filled their glasses, he asked his mother and Todd to come eat.

José waited for everyone to fill their plates and sit in their usual spots at the table. He joined them and allowed Todd and Jack to lead the conversation. He was careful to not put any stress on their routine.

When Gina walked in the back door, she appeared surprised to see him eating with her family. She shouldn't have been surprised after their talk.

As Gina walked further into the room, Ma saw her and complained, "Well, go wash your hands. Your food is getting cold. We started without you. Go on. Wash up and get a plate."

Todd tilted his head toward José and said to Gina, “I know you love Mexican food. We saved you some.”

Gina set down her purse and washed her hands at the kitchen sink. She filled a plate with a small portion of enchiladas and joined them, sitting across from José. She turned her attention to Jack. “Glad to see you. Sorry that I’m home a little late.”

Jack nodded and shoved another bite of food in his mouth.

Without waiting on Gina to finish her meal, Ma and her brothers left the table. Jack went with Ma to watch a little TV. Todd said, “I’ll do the dishes when you’ve finished eating, Gina.”

“No, it’s my turn. I’ll clean up.” Gina smiled at her brother.

Todd touched José’s shoulder. “Thanks for the meal.” He turned to his sister and added, “You do realize that I only offered because José’s gift of food means there aren’t any pots and pans to wash,” he said with a grin as he left the kitchen.

Gina turned her attention to José and gave a warm smile of appreciation. “Thank you. You do a lot for us.”

“You’re very welcome,” José said. This was a good confirmation for Gina to see that even though they were not currently dating, José was not leaving her family. He kept his voice low and his manner calm. “I’m grateful for your time earlier today.”

She looked across the table at him. “I wanted to give you a chance to say what was on your mind. Although I don’t know if it really solved anything,” Gina said in a tentative tone.

“If that was your goal, it was a success,” he said, trying to keep his jubilation to a minimum. “You shouldn’t be surprised that I’m here.”

Her face displayed a mixture of emotions stirring inside. She quietly ate a few more bites. “I’m not terribly hungry.” She picked up her plate, went to the kitchen, and started loading the dishwasher.

Jack interrupted them. “FYI, I’m taking Ma and Todd out for some ice cream. You have the house.”

Turning abruptly, Gina said, “Jack!” She gave a glare that showed how much she hated not being in control of the situation.

Todd waved as he and Jack walked to the front door.

José joined her in the kitchen. He cleared and cleaned the table, and he threw away the foil containers he’d brought the Mexican food in. When she had loaded the silverware into the dishwasher, José touched her shoulder. “You can’t walk away this time.”

She frowned. “Why are you here?”

He shrugged. “Your family and I didn’t break up.”

“You shouldn’t be here.” She closed the dishwasher and glanced around the room for other kitchen duties that might be left undone.

In a calm, casual voice, José said, “Ma likes me.”

Her grimace showed how surprised she was by him calling her mother Ma. “I’m going to my room.”

“No, Gina. You can’t avoid me. Please, come with me. Let’s sit.” He started to the couch.

“José, this isn’t going to work out well for you.”

“Please, Gina.” José walked to her and stood a couple of feet away, wishing he could hold her.

“José—”

“Please, just talk to me.” He stayed where he was so she’d feel no pressure. Giving her space to think was the best way he knew of to help her feel in control of her decisions.

When Gina rinsed and dried her hands, he gestured for her to lead the way to the living room couch.

She patted the space beside her and kept her eyes on him. “I want the best for you.”

He sat close to her. “That makes two of us.”

She shook her head. “No, José. You need someone who has time to be everything you love.”

He sat quietly letting her listen to her own words. He smiled in agreement with her. “I want to be with someone who is everything I love.”

She shook her head. “Stop. You don’t know what your life will be like with me in it.”

“We never know what our lives will be like.” He stopped smiling. “Relax, Gina. Just breathe. Fighting isn’t necessary. I think you’re fighting a battle that isn’t real. The battle I will avoid until my last breath is trying to live without you in my life.”

She didn’t respond.

He couldn’t tell if he’d gotten through to her.

A commitment. That’s all José really wanted from Gina.

José wanted to give her an image so she could see what he was thinking. He needed to transport her into his vision of where their lives could go from here. He leaned closer to her. “I love being with you.” He touched her hair and moved a

strand away from her face. “You’ll never guess what I’m thinking about.”

“What?”

“Living with you.”

“What? No. There’s hardly enough room for the three of us.”

José gave her a lopsided smile. “Come on. Don’t tell me you haven’t imagined it too. Let me set the stage for you. Let’s say we date for a while, fall in love, get married, and live happily for a few days or weeks or months. After our honeymoon stage is over, then what happens? If you will let me, I will do my best to bring you flowers for every one of your birthdays and a few more times just for fun.”

She stared straight ahead, a smile tugging at her lips. “I’d be crazy to turn down flowers. But honestly, you could do better. You can find someone with a lot less of a mess, someone who won’t drag you down and fill your life with regrets.”

“Is that what you think? Maybe I didn’t tell you what matters to me. I love you. I know what your life looks like, and I love you. I want to be in your life, but you have to want that too.”

After a quick glance at him with sad eyes, she continued staring straight ahead. “Your life could be so much easier without me.”

“Easier? Every relationship has something to overcome. What are the problems we’ll have to address? And, yes, we both know we’ll have problems. That cannot be ignored.”

Gina held out her fingers and counted as she spoke. “Here’s a list of current known problems, starting with Jack’s

depression, then there's Ma's dementia, and you've already mentioned that you want to start a family with me."

"A family? That's a problem?" Did Gina have health issues she hadn't mentioned yet? He shook his head and moved on. "Solutions are available, but good solutions need our time and effort."

"I do want kids, but there's this whole timing issue with everything else going on." She took a big breath like she was overwhelmed by her family's issues. Gina's expression tugged at his heart.

He decided to stop pushing his viewpoint. She needed a break. José spoke in a sensitive voice. "We'll be a team. A good team. We'll do fun things together. You'll challenge me to go biking more often. And I will challenge you to expand your musical limitations. We'll dance together. Right? You like that."

"Musical limitations?" She couldn't hide her smile. It was the kind of smile that wrinkled the corners of her eyes and relaxed her forehead. But it was only for a moment. Overwhelm shadowed her face again.

Assuming she didn't have anything else to say, he continued. "You will bravely challenge me to a baking contest. And I will challenge you to tell me what's on your mind instead of you, on your own, trying to manage everything without me." He touched her chin and moved his fingers across her soft skin and into her hair. "Gina, I can help. Let me buy you things. Accept my gifts. They are given in love."

Gina shook her head. "I can't imagine why anyone would want to be a part of my mess."

“Mess?” he said. “It’s your life. We all have things we’d like to change in our lives. Some things cannot be changed, but some things can. Together, we can find solutions for things we can change, and we can manage things that can’t be changed.”

With weary eyes, she seemed ashamed. “You’ll get tired of *all of the things*.”

He refused to disagree. They both would get tired of all the things. “Two people can endure more than what one person can endure by herself. You’ve had to do a lot on your own. But now, you no longer have to tackle *all the things* by yourself. I’m with you. You have God and me to be your comfort and encouragement. I can lighten your load. Troubles are less heavy when more than one person is carrying them. Together, we can *enjoy* life.” José still only wanted Gina to make a commitment.

“I would enjoy life more with you than without you. I can’t deny that.” Gina’s eyes filled with tears that threatened to fall onto her cheeks with even the slightest blink. “My problem is that ...” Her shoulders bent with the weight of frustration, almost to the point of giving up. She looked down, sniffed, and blinked back tears before starting again. “My problem is that, if I was in your place, I’m not sure I would choose to be a part of this family.” Her voice held the sadness of a shattered heart. “I wouldn’t choose me.”

It was time to shake things up and get her out of that defeatist attitude. José leaned closer to her and took her hands in his. “Your hands are cold. Come on. Let me warm them.”

She allowed him to caress her hands as he gazed into her eyes. “I didn’t have the confidence that being with me was

worth it for you. I'm sure you'd get tired of all of the nights I go to bed overwhelmed."

"You're wondering how you'll have any time for me with all that you'll be doing for your family and your job. I remember what you said to me about your lunches. Do you remember?"

She shook her head and blinked back her tears. "When did we talk about my lunches?" She wiped her moist eyelashes.

He grinned and leaned back against the couch. "We were just getting acquainted, and I popped in to see if I could pull you away for lunch. I offered to make a run to my restaurant for some hot Mexican food and bring it to you. You said you had a soup can in the car for lunch, but it wouldn't ruin if you didn't eat it that day. You said you always prepare for lunch, but not with something that can't be put off until tomorrow."

"Why are you talking about my lunches?"

He rolled his eyes and smiled at her long enough to make her giggle. "There it is. That's the smile I dream about."

Gina tilted her head, trying to appear serious. But she could only smile at him. "You were saying?"

"Right. If you and I can prepare for upcoming challenges like you prepared for lunches, we'll be ready for anything. Even when we're busy with work. You know I'm right. Gina, we're both good managers. We're flexible. We can have a fulfilling and enjoyable life together."

Gina's expression said she wanted to believe him.

How long would she continue in her stubbornness? He stood and put his hands out to help her up.

When she reached for José's hands, he lifted her hands to pull her close faster and let the momentum push her hands to his shoulders. He caught her with his hands on her back.

Gina smiled at his flirtatious maneuver and stroked the hair on the back of his neck. "I believe you. I believe that you love me. I believe that my life would be better with you in it. What I don't understand yet is why you need me in your life. What good am I?"

José's eyes widened. He couldn't believe how hard it was to make her believe that his life had already changed forever. "You are valuable to me. You think I don't need you? If I have to list all of your positive attributes, we're going to be here all day. Can we agree that you are ... sooooo ... good for me? There are lots of other beautiful women in the world, but not one is like you. You light up my world like the sun peeking over the horizon at the break of day. The more of you I can get in my world, the more beautiful my world is."

"José, I love you, too." Her fingers played at the bottom of his hairline.

"You love me?" José swallowed. His heart almost stopped. Was this the first time she ever admitted that? He tipped his face down to let her have full view of his gaze. "Then marry me, Gina. If you say no, I'll be back again ... to ask tomorrow ... And the next day and the next. I'm not giving up."

CHAPTER THIRTY

José's words made Gina's gray and gloomy world suddenly full of color. She let his words sink in... . *the more beautiful my world is*. No man had ever spoken to her like that.

"You love me?" His serious face and the lack of a smile only added to the depth of passion in his voice. Hunger filled his eyes. The way he tipped his sober face down with an intense gaze made her heart melt and spill out like warm butter. She felt it all the way to her toes. "Then marry me, Gina. If you say no, I'll be back again ... to ask tomorrow ... And the next day and the next. I'm not giving up."

Her smile melted away as she thought about the seriousness of his proposal. She wanted to marry him and live in his world of joy. She wanted to live worry-free, but she had her own world to contend with. Remembering her heartbreak when she took matters into her own hands, she controlled her mouth. She regretted not listening to him before breaking up. No more speaking out without listening.

With a step back from her, José said, "Before we say anything else, there is something you should know."

Her gut clenched when she saw he was serious. What could he mean? "Do I need to sit down for this?"

"Maybe." He smiled with confidence and sat with his arm over the top of the couch cushion. "You know that house where we met today?"

She frowned and sat far enough away that he could only touch her with his fingertips. Why would he bring up that

house? “Yes. The one with the stunning front lawn and the green chair?”

“I own it.” José sat back, beaming proudly. “I bought it just before you broke up with me. After I began to have hope again, when I thought I might be able to get you back, I picked out that chair for you.”

Gina loved him even more. He knew her better than she’d realized. “It’s perfect.”

“I know.” His voice raised with exuberance. “You sat in it and confirmed that I did the right thing. Buying that chair for you gave me so much joy. I knew you would like it.”

Gina shook her head. “Why did you buy that house?”

José moved closer to her. He stroked her hair and picked up her hand. “For us. It’s big enough for all of us.” He caressed her hand. “Ma’s room is big enough to fit all her furniture. It can be painted a similar color. And her window is about the same size so she can use the same drapes. She won’t have to adjust very much from inside her room. Of course, the rest of the house might cause some confusion. So we can hire a couple of women to make sure she’s busy with activities that will keep her happy. They can take twelve-hour shifts so that Ma gets twenty-four-hour supervision. She won’t wander off and get lost.”

Gina didn’t know what to think. “You did this before I broke up with you?”

“Yes,” he said. “I knew you were overwhelmed. I was trying to persuade you to let me help. I want to be a part of your life, Gina.”

“What about Todd? Where will he live?”

José gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “Todd and Jack don’t have to live there if they don’t want to, but there is a room for each of them. We can all live under one roof. It’s 6,000 square feet. Plenty of room. We can all watch movies together in the home theater. I’m looking forward to our baking contests in that huge kitchen.”

She took a deep breath. The weight on her shoulders wasn’t completely gone, but it seemed lighter now. “I can’t remember ever meeting a man with such kindness. I love that you listen to me. Promise me that won’t change. If you stop being this gorgeous, I’m sure I could handle that much better than if you stopped listening to me.”

“Gina, I know I won’t be perfect.”

“We’ll see about that,” she said with a grin.

José’s confident smile left, and his face filled with an intense passion. “Gina. Marry me, Gina.” His voice sang out in a Latin rhythm. As he stood, his body moved to the beat of his tune. “Make me the happiest man in the world.” His bright, ecstatic smile showed off his handsome face. “Make me burst with pride with you by my side. Be my bride. Will you marry me?”

“Yes, I will marry you.” She loved the way he wouldn’t give up on her. That was a good sign. It meant they both wanted this relationship to work more than anything. She giggled as she spoke, “Yes! Yes, I will marry you.”

They laughed and kissed and held each other. José stopped his movements to let his hands follow the side of her face from top to bottom, ending with a brief caress of her lips. He leaned to kiss her slowly as his hands slipped to her back to pull her closer.

She couldn't believe how happy she was. She'd fought him off, trying to free him for a happy life of his own making. This was the kind of man she wanted. One who wouldn't accept her gift of freedom. One who needed her like she needed him.

José wiped happy tears from her face.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Gina walked over to hold José's hand at their engagement party. She'd worked with him for a week and a half to make this party a reality. With the Texas sun shining down on everyone on the rooftop of José's Beans, the guests were in full party mode with lively dance music blaring.

After a quick kiss, José turned to see the guests who had just arrived. He waved to his real estate guy, Paul who walked in with his wife, Pam. They took the lead in the conga line with Todd, Jack, Gregory, and Charissa behind them. Paige sat at a table with her husband, Colby.

Paige walked over and pointed out the TV that was set up against a wall. "Did you see the video we made of you two?"

"Some of it." José leaned closer to Paige to be heard over the loud music. "Thanks, Paige. Your guy knows what he's doing. It turned out great."

Gina had enjoyed meeting Paige's friend at the jewelry store where he recorded them trying on wedding rings. He'd put together a video using photos José and Gina had provided. The video ran on a wall adjacent to the photo booth area.

After hugging Paige, Gina said, "I saw that. It's a treasure. I love the quick clips of us preparing for the wedding." The pictures of them as children were scattered between the short video clips. Most of the pictures were recent.

José laughed. "You got me in there, trying on four or five different tuxedo styles for the camera."

Gina wished that Ma had been able to enjoy the special moment with her. Mrs. Dixon came through for them so her brothers could be at the party.

José took her hand as the music changed to the next song. “This is our song. Let’s clear the floor and show them how it’s done.”

As they took the center of the dance floor, the guests applauded and cheered for the happy couple.

José twirled Gina around and caught her in his embrace. He sang as he danced cheek to cheek with her to their favorite slow song.

Gina would never again doubt that she would have his love or that she’d have all the support from him that she needed as long as they were together. No matter the highs and lows they encounter from this day forward, she would begin every day aware of God’s unending love for her and José’s persistence with her.

Grateful that God had made it possible for them to find each other, Gina reveled in her newfound confidence in God’s provision. God’s generosity to both José and Gina was very clear to her now that she could look back on all they went through together.

No matter how many difficulties they faced in the coming years, all their tomorrows would be blessings from God for them to unwrap with joy.

Gina sat at Jack’s table and held out a cup of water to him since he’d been dancing non-stop for the last five songs. “Not that it’s my business, but does Charissa know that Gregory wants to date her?”

Jack smirked. “I think she’s the only one who doesn’t know, but it’s not my place to make that announcement. He needs to wise up and ask her out before it’s too late.”

When Gregory, Todd, and Charissa joined them at the table, Gina said, “I’m so glad all of you were able to make it to my engagement party. Looks like you’re all having fun.”

Jack took a sip. “Congratulations, Gina.”

“Thanks.” Gina was about to walk away and join José in his conversation with Paige and Colby when she noticed Charissa was distracted by her phone.

Jack followed Gina’s gaze to Charissa. “Looking for someone to show up?”

Charissa raised her gaze to Jack. “Sorry. I thought my boyfriend was coming.”

“Really? I didn’t know you invited anyone,” Jack said. “Which boyfriend?”

Charissa, red-faced from dancing with Gregory and Jack to two of her favorite songs, put her phone away and fanned her face. “Jack, you don’t have to be protective. I’ll be fine.”

“Were you supposed to go out with him tonight? You didn’t say anything to me about him.” Jack turned to Gregory for his input.

Gregory shrugged. “I didn’t know she had a boyfriend.”

“Yes, you did,” she said with impatient eyes on Gregory. “I tell you two almost everything.”

Gregory nodded. “Almost, being the important word.”

With a little attitude in her voice, she said, “I’m the one who’s been out of the loop lately.”

Gina put her hand on Jack's shoulder and whispered, "I'll leave you to talk to your friend."

Jack whispered, "She's a little stubborn. José's teaching me patience."

Will Charissa listen to Gregory and Jack about being more careful in picking out her next boyfriend? Find out in *The Mansion's One Flaw*, the second book in The Fulton Ridge Estates series. Coming Soon!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Domino writes Christian romance, nonfiction, and children's books about loving God and people. Having volunteered locally and internationally, she's enjoyed the thrill of serving others. Now she writes characters who find ways to serve in their community.

If you would like to know more about her novel-writing journey, you can contact her by subscribing to her Fiction Readers Group at LauraDomino.com/subscribe.html