



**JENNIFER  
SIENES**

**TANGLES  
and  
TINSEL**

A BEDFORD COUNTY NOVEL

**TANGLES & TINSEL**  
A BEDFORD COUNTY CHRISTMAS NOVELLA

**JENNIFER SIENES**

Copyright © 2023 by Jennifer Sienes

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

# CHAPTER ONE

*Kimberley*

Why was it people made such a fuss over the holidays? Seemed to me, even if you had a perfect family, which I surely didn't, it was still a crazy time when everyone one-upped each other. It was kind of like playing holiday poker. I'll take your worries over how to seat twenty of your closest relatives and raise you one need to order a pre-cooked meal because I can't even find time to shop. Of course, the shame of not having a homemade Thanksgiving supper raised the ante quite a bit, so I generally won.

Because Daddy and me would have a couple of kids with us this year, I vowed things would be different. I was even willing to shop, cook, and bake, which was the trifecta of disaster as far as I was concerned. I had nothing against shopping—it was part of my everyday life. Hunting down great deals on vintage furniture was in my job description. But food? Only as a source of survival. Spent too many years cooking for Daddy after Mama left us, and baking was downright messy and time consuming. I'd never be held up as a great example of a Southern lady. But I'd push through it for Nora and Chandler. And if I was going to be completely honest, maybe a little for their daddy, too.

Never could see myself with my own children. For one thing, though it might stretch the imagination of most to believe it, I was a traditionalist. Even if I hadn't stepped foot into a church since I was fifteen, there was an order to life and love that shouldn't be forsaken. Since I hadn't been on a date

for more months than I could count on both hands, it wasn't likely I'd be getting married anytime soon. Might be my lack of culinary skills played into that some.

For another thing, I'd heard a couple of the older ladies in my apartment complex refer to me as a spinster. It would appear, unless God miraculously plopped Mr. Perfect-for-me on my doorstep this very day, I'd be too old to have kids even if I ever did get married. At thirty-five, I was already stretching the limits of my biological clock. Add to that a year or two of dating, then a proper engagement, and I might as well accept my lot in life—once I figured out what that was exactly.

Daddy's kitchen windows were steamed up from the potatoes boiling on the stovetop and the turkey roasting in the oven. The smells had my stomach rumbling like the rolling thunder of a summer storm, but it was still more than an hour before supper time. I got the potatoes mashed up and put into the crockpot to keep warm, pulled out the green bean casserole from the fridge, and started on the cranberry sauce. Daddy said I should just get the store-bought stuff, but the thought of it jiggling out of the can was enough to make me gag.

"You want me to help?" Daddy peered over my shoulder as I swiped the back of my wrist across my sweaty brow. Never did have that problem when I bought the pre-cooked meals.

"Shouldn't Jax and the kids be here by now?" If that man bailed at the last minute, we'd have more food than we could eat in a month of Sundays. I even went so far as to bake three pies, because Nora wanted apple, Chandler wanted sweet potato, and Daddy insisted on pecan. I'd been running around like a chicken with its head cut off all week. Getting back to work would be a vacation.

"He'll be here. Where else is he gonna find a looker like you to fix him a home-cooked meal?" He reached around me and tucked a spoon into the mixture of cranberries, sugar, and orange zest then popped it into his mouth. His smile along with the wriggling of his eyebrows was enough to convince me I'd made the right choice.

“You need to wipe those romantic ideas right outta your head. And then you and Jax’s daddy need to stay away from the Hallmark Channel.”

“Hallmark Channel?” He snorted. “You wouldn’t catch us watching that sissy stuff, even if we was dead.”

I slid the pot of cranberries from the burner and turned to Daddy with a smile. “No, y’all just make it up in your heads. Jax and I are just friends. Neither of us has time for more.” I stepped around him so he wouldn’t catch the disappointment in my eyes. If I was going to take a leap into crazy and get married, Jax *might* could fit the bill. “Besides which, he’s still hung up on Callie.”

Daddy put an arm around my shoulders and gave me little shake. “That’s where you’re wrong, Kim. She’s been gone more ’an three years.”

Time didn’t matter. Mama had been gone near twenty-two years, and the pain of that loss still stung every bit as much as the day she left. Only difference was, Jax’s wife was snatched from them, and Mama chose to leave us.

“You gonna tell me you went to all this trouble cookin’ just for me?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time, Daddy.” Hadn’t I been taking care of him since Mama left? Up until he got sober two years ago, I was doing a lot more than cooking and cleaning. Even dragged him out of a bar a time or two. “But honestly, I also wanted to make it nice for Nora and Chandler so they might want to spend Christmas here, too.” Kids always made the holidays brighter, and Jax was certainly easy on the eyes.

“Jax is takin’ them to see his folks for Christmas.”

I scowled, even though Daddy couldn’t see my face. “Christmas in Florida? What’re they gonna do, decorate a palm tree with ornaments and tinsel?”

“We can go, too, if you want. They invited us. Might be nice to see their place.” He nudged me on the shoulder. “Think I hear his car pulling in now.” Daddy reached around me and dropped his taste-testing spoon into the sink then left the

kitchen as I cleared the steam from the window and peered out.

Couldn't help but smile as seven-year-old Nora tumbled from the backseat of Jax's SUV. Curly blond hair, big blue eyes, and a smile that never seemed to slip. She was the spitting image of her mama. Then there was Chandler. Same blond hair, but his green eyes and dimpled chin were all Jax.

"Keep it together, girl," I whispered. Didn't know why Daddy had to go and plant the notion in my head that Jax saw me as anything more than what I was—which wasn't marriage material. It was a full-time job I had no time or skills to take on. I'd heard once that a housewife should get paid something like a million dollars a year for all the work she did—cooking, cleaning, car-pooling, doctoring. The one about taking care of her man in the bedroom had my cheeks burning, and I flung the window open to let the fall air cool my face. *Foolish girl.*

"Kim!" Nora flew into the kitchen, arms spread wide for a hug.

I caught her up with an *oomph* and gave her a squeeze. The scent of her flowery shampoo tickled my nose as joy filled my heart. The girl could charm the ugly off a Christmas sweater. "I'm so glad y'all came to celebrate Thanksgiving with us." I stepped back and offered an arm to Chandler as he meandered into the kitchen, nose high as he sniffed like a hound dog searching for food.

With an eye roll and slight grin, he allowed me to pull him into a three-way hug. "Did you make us a sweet potato pie?" Leave it to a ten-year-old boy to get right to the point.

"Yes, sir. I sure did." I held my hands up and wriggled my fingers. "Been baking these little babies clear to the bone just to make sure y'all got what you ordered."

"You got one of them for me?" Jax's deep voice drew my focus. He was standing with Daddy in the kitchen doorway, his perfect posture making the best of his six-one-frame.

I dropped my gaze from his twinkling eyes. "A pie?"

“No, ma’am. A hug.” He ambled over and gave me a quick, one-armed side hug, the kind that reminded me we were just friends. Now if my heart would get on board, I’d be able to get through this evening without making a fool of myself.

---

*Jax*

The weather was mild for late November, which wouldn’t have made one whit of difference to the kids. Could’ve been pouring cats and dogs, and they’d still wanna be outside tossing the football with Kimberley. Wasn’t another woman alive, including their nanas, they liked to be around more than her. Suppose that was proof right there she was someone special. Just too bad no one had taken notice and snatched her up.

I sat myself down in the chair alongside Bob. The Christmas lights strung across the porch overhang were on, even though it wasn’t yet dark enough to get the full effect. It’d be a miracle if I could get any decorations put up this year. Just like last year and the one before. Setting aside my failures for the time being, I focused on the antics happening on the front lawn. Chandler was doing his level best to tackle Kim, even though I could’ve sworn we’d agreed it’d only be touch football. Good thing she was too quick for him.

Bob shifted in his seat and leaned toward me. “Can I get you anything? Kim brought some apple cider I can heat up.”

“Are you kidding?” I patted my full belly. “Couldn’t eat or drink another thing.” Chandler tripped over his own feet, hit the grass, then popped up like it didn’t hurt a bit. Bet it did, though. “Talk to my dad lately?”

He eased back into the chair with a nod. “Yep. Gene and me had us a good conversation just yesterday. Sounds like he and your mama are settling in real nice. Invited us down for Christmas, along with y’all. Kim doesn’t seem all that keen on the idea. Said something about tinsel on palm trees or some such.”



I chuckled. “I think they’ll get their hands on an honest-to-goodness Christmas tree. The kids are lookin’ forward to it.” And so was I, even though it’d mean shutting down the practice for a week. Learned the hard way that money wasn’t everything. Didn’t buy back time with my kids or heal their mama.

“Bet you miss them.”

It took a blink for me to realize he was talking about Mama and Dad. “That I do.” Depended on them too much after Callie passed. Best thing for them was to get on with their plans, even if it meant I was staggering through parenting without their help. Speaking of which, Chandler yanked the ball from Nora’s hands and had her toppling to the ground. Before I could reprimand him, Kim had the girl back on her feet.

“Time out.” She held her hands up to form a T, hair loose and wild about her flushed face. Looked so much like Nora, they could’ve been related. “Y’all, this is supposed to be a friendly game of touch football. That means no yanking,” she punched a finger toward Chandler, “and no tackling. I’m too old for this rough housing. You land me on your daddy’s adjusting table, I’m gonna make you pay for it.”

Bob chuckled. “Think maybe you should be down there supervising this motley crew?”

“She’s got it covered.” Although, sure as I was sitting there, she’d be needing my chiropractic services after Chandler’s antics.

Bob grunted. “Seems to me, you think a lot of my daughter.”

Warning bells sounded. Bob and Dad needed a hobby other than trying to wrestle Kim and me into a relationship. Being eight hundred miles apart didn’t seem to deter them any, either. “Yep. She’s a fine woman.” Needed to implement the strategy I used on the kids when they were little. Distract and dissuade. “Speaking of which, how are you and Ms. Amy gettin’ on?”

Didn't have to look at him to know he threw me a scowl. *Ready. Aim. Fire.* "That woman needs to find herself another target for her affections. If she thinks I'm gonna change my ways to appease her sensibilities, she's got another thing comin'."

Kim, football tucked under one arm and breathing hard, ambled up the steps with the kids tagging along at her heels. There were grass stains on the knees of her jeans, thanks to Chandler's misunderstanding the basics of touch football, but both kids looked to be more tuckered out than she did. Could tell the second she caught onto my conversation with Bob, because her lips twitched.

"What're y'all talkin' about, Daddy?" As if she didn't know.

I didn't give Bob a chance to answer. "The admirable qualities of Ms. Amy. Seems your daddy's havin' a hard time deterring her."

Chandler plopped onto the top step. "Deterrin' her from what?"

"Is she your girlfriend?" Nora snickered at Bob.

"No, little miss, she ain't my girlfriend," he said.

Nora's eyes went wide. "Daddy says we're not allowed to use the word ain't." She patted my knee. "Ain't that right, Daddy?" Then she giggled like she'd just pulled off the joke of the century.

Bob shook his head. "You're just a barrel of laughs, young lady." He pushed out of the chair. "You kids come with me, and I'll fix you some bowls of ice cream."

Kim's mouth dropped open. "Ice cream? Daddy, we just finished us enough food to last till Sunday."

Chandler hopped up. "Well, I want ice cream. What kind is it?" He and Nora filed behind Bob as he led them inside. Seemed he had tactics of his own, leaving me and Kim alone in the waning evening light. With the Christmas lights now glowing above, some might get it into their heads it was romantic.

“Can you believe him?” Kim plopped into Bob’s abandoned chair. “As if the two pieces of pie he had wasn’t enough.” She waved her hand in front of her red face like it was a fan.

“He’s doin’ real good, Kim. Better a few extra pounds than being drunk.”

“Two years sober.” She dropped her hand and shifted so she was facing me. “Thanks to you and your daddy.” She was offering credit where it didn’t belong.

“Nothin’ to do with me. Nothin’ to do with my dad, either. We can’t force someone to get clean if they’re not ready to do the work. You had the most influence on him, Kim.”

She grunted. “If that’s true, why’d it take twenty years of me harping on him before he got the message?” Bitterness laced her words and gave them a sharp edge.

“Grief’s a funny thing. Just when you think you got it licked, something comes along to knock the wind out of you again. Didn’t matter your mama left him, he still grieved the loss.”

“Not just him,” she murmured, almost to herself. A bird rustling in the trees and the muffled sounds of Bob and the kids drifted into the silence of the night. Her eyes cut my way. “The holidays must be hard for y’all.”

I folded my arms against the sudden chill. Didn’t think it had anything to do with the weather. “Last year was easier than the one before, and I imagine this year will be easier yet.” It’d been more than a month since I heard either of the kids crying. Progress, as far as I was concerned.

“You think it’ll take you twenty years of grieving like it did Daddy?”

Grieving, no. Guilt, maybe. “With two kids and a busy practice, I don’t have a lot of time to wallow. It’d be best for all of us if we could move on. I think a change of scenery for Christmas is just the thing, too.”

“I’m sure you’re right about that. Besides, Nora said something to me about missing your mama like four times

during supper.”

“There’s plenty of room for you and your daddy.” She brought out the best in the kids, and it’d be a shame if she wasn’t there.

“Even if I could wrap my head around Christmas in Florida, I gotta work at the shop.”

“Thought you did the interior decorating part of things.” Didn’t know much about Kim’s job, but I knew she’d put a load of time soaking up everything she could from Charlie Van Cleave—Bedford County’s interior whiz kid.

“I do, but I volunteered to cover at the shop since Charlie and Jenna have families. It’s too much for Darlene to do on her own.”

Wasn’t ready to study too close at why the thought of Kim not being with us at Christmas didn’t sit well with me. “Surely Charlie’s not gonna have the shop open Christmas day.”

Kim ran her fingers through her hair and combed out the tangles. “It’s not like a quick trip to Florida, Jax. Flights’ll be almost impossible to get this late, and even if I could, it’d cost me a kidney to afford. Driving would eat up two days alone.” She had me there. “I’m guessing you and the kids already have your tickets?”

“Bought ’em two months back.” I frowned. “If your dad decides to come down, that’ll leave you alone for Christmas.”

She quirked an eyebrow at me. “There’re worse things than bein’ alone, you know.”

Seemed to remember a few years back Dad had to help Kim haul Bob out of a bar on Christmas Eve, and that was one of his better times.

She slapped my arm with the back of a hand and huffed out a laugh. “Don’t look so glum. I got plenty of friends I can spend Christmas with. There’s Charlie and her family or Bekah and hers. It’s not like I’m a little orphan girl that needs looking after, Jax.”

Didn't matter what her words told me, her eyes said something altogether different.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Kimberley*

Since Labor Day, a body couldn't walk into a store like Hobby Lobby or even a Home Depot without being bombarded with Christmas decorations. Commercialism gone plumb crazy. I had to suppose some people took a liking to it, but I wasn't of the same mind. It seemed to me that when we blurred the lines between one holiday and another, they both suffered for it. Especially Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Vintage Decor & More was different. Charlie had very definite ideas about how her shop would be laid out. More than a shop, really. It was once an old farmhouse owned by her grandparents, which she'd converted into what it was today. Each room was a step into the past with vintage furniture, antiques, and decorations—all for sale. It was like the live version of a Pinterest board, changing with the seasons.

From mid-September until the Monday after Thanksgiving, the focus was autumn. Not one little hint of Christmas was acceptable, including the music. We'd placed wooden signs painted with "Thankful" and "Blessed" throughout every room, and nestled among them were pumpkins, gourds, sunflowers, and fall gingham. The whole place smelled of apples and cinnamon, on account of the scented candles and potpourri we had strategically placed.

Although it would take several days to put up the decorated Christmas trees, garland, and stockings, we first had to pack up autumn. It wasn't part of my job anymore—not since Charlie'd had me apprenticing alongside her to learn the

interior design end of the business—but I volunteered to come in that Monday after Thanksgiving. The busier I stayed, the less I'd be thinking about a certain green-eyed man. Why I couldn't shake the image of Jax was a real head-scratcher. I'd known him most of my life, and although Callie had been gone for a few years, I'd never even entertained a thought there could be something more between us than friendship. Why would I? Jax was still grieving, wasn't he? I blamed Daddy and his romantic notions. It was as if by the mere power of suggestion, I was no longer in control of my mind.

“I appreciate you coming in today, Kimberley.” Charlie's voice right behind me pulled me from my thoughts. She'd been working on the other side of the parlor, her large German-shepherd mix, aptly named Dog, sleeping in the corner. He was an added level of security and company.

I tucked the folded, wired gingham ribbon into the growing box of decorations and offered her a smile. “I'd never know it. You've only told me three times since I got here.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I just feel bad you had to come in on your day off.”

“Well, don't. It was either hang out with you or stay home and clean my apartment. This is much more fun, especially since I don't get into the shop much anymore.” Most of my hours were spent working with clients who wanted their homes to be as beautifully adorned as this here farmhouse.

She plucked two burnt orange candles from the mantle above the fireplace and hugged them as her gaze swept the parlor. “Sure doesn't look like it did back when my nana and pawpaw were here.”

It was hard to imagine Vintage Decor & More was ever just some old place she'd inherited. When I first started working here, Darlene told me what it was like back then. Charlie had gotten it into her head she could take what everyone else saw as a passel of lemons and turn them into some sweet-tasting lemonade. Seems like she helped a lot of people along the way, too.

“Tell me, Charlie.” I waited until her gaze had meandered its way back to me. “Did you have any idea this dream of yours would impact so many others?”

She reached for a sheet of packing paper. “I think it’s the other way around. The people God’s brought into my life impacted my dreams.” She wrapped one of the candles. “If I had all this, but didn’t have Derek or my babies,” she shrugged, “or even Jenna and Darlene in my life, it wouldn’t account for much.” She smiled at me. “And now you, too, Kim. The real dream is the people we have in our lives, you know? And of course, the love of the Lord is the glue that holds it all together.”

My own smile wavered as her words took root. I had friends, sure, and Daddy. But there was a void so large it had me lying awake some nights wondering if there shouldn’t be more. Sometimes I convinced myself it was loneliness. If only the right man would come along...That didn’t sit well with me, though. I hadn’t depended on anyone to take care of me since I was fifteen, and I wasn’t of a mind to start now. I’d heard it said once that all of us had a God-shaped hole in our hearts, and until it got filled with the love of Jesus, it’d always leave a person feeling somewhat bereft. Hadn’t Charlie just implied as much?

“Did I say something wrong?” She reached out a hand and touched my arm. “I didn’t mean to offend you, Kim.”

It wasn’t offense, but rather dejection. “You didn’t. Seems like most everyone I’m close to has a testimony to share, but I’m not there yet.” If God had been part of my life, surely he wouldn’t have put me and Daddy through what He had. And what about Jax and the kids? He was forever talking about God as if He’d done him a good turn, even after Callie died. How was that good for anyone?

A knock on the door had both Charlie and me whipping our heads around. Dog jumped up, a low growl coming from deep in his throat. The closed sign in the window along with the posted hours should’ve dissuaded any shoppers.



“Come on, Dog. Let’s go see who’s here.” Charlie and Dog crossed the parlor.

“Holler if you need me,” I yelled after them.

I tucked the candles Charlie had been working on into the box and did a quick visual assessment of what else we’d need to get done before we could call it a day. I had a chiropractic appointment with Jax in just over two hours, and my heart skipped a little at the thought of it. “Quit playin’ the fool, Kimberley Sue,” I whispered with a shake of my head.

“Hey, Kim?” Charlie stood at the entrance to the parlor, and it didn’t take but a split second to know something wasn’t right. Her eyebrows were drawn together, and her hands were fluttering around like a couple moths that couldn’t make up their minds where to land.

“What’s goin’ on?” I tried to peer past her, but all I could see was Dog standing guard. Lowering my voice, I leaned toward her. “Do I need to call the sheriff’s department?”

She rubbed her forehead. “You got yourself a visitor.”

“A visitor?” Anyone I knew wouldn’t just stop by without calling. “Well, who is it?”

“Says her name is Sue Ellen Saint John.”

“Sue...?” The blood shifted from my face to my feet so fast, black shadows slithered across my vision. It couldn’t be.

“Says she’s your mother.” Charlie stepped forward and grabbed hold of my arm. “Breathe, Kim. Maybe you should sit before you fall over. Your face is white as a sheet.” She led me to the wingback chair in the corner before I could find my voice. “Put your head between your knees.”

“You don’t need to make a fuss, Charlie. I’m fine.” Or I would be as soon as the earth stopped pitching. “How’d she even find me?”

“Said she stopped by your daddy’s place, and he told her where you were.” She kneeled in front of me. “I can send her away if you want.”

“She saw Daddy?” My stomach cramped, and I had to swallow the bile that rose up my throat. All the years he’d drunk himself near to death, and I finally had him back again. My hands shook as a hot arrow pierced my heart and put steel to my backbone. “I’ll send her away myself.”

I pushed out of the chair and walked past Charlie and Dog on shaky legs while words tumbled through my head. Angry, scathing accusations I wanted to fling at her. *Honor your mother and father*. The command somehow found its way past the red I was seeing, but I flicked it aside like a pesky gnat. I’d waited years to lay into her, and nothing was going to stand in the way. Not even my conscience.

I slowed my steps as I reached the foyer where a woman I’d have never recognized as Mama stood. She was smaller than I remembered, dwarfed by a red peacoat, and her once lustrous blond hair was now dulled with gray. The moment she spotted me, she pushed her shoulders back like she was preparing to withstand an assault, but the rebellion I knew lit my eyes was absent in hers. It should’ve stopped me or, at the very least, slowed the tide of ugly roiling within in me. Instead, it was like gasoline thrown on an already blazing fire. One that’d been fueled more than twenty years before.

“I don’t want you here.” I couldn’t even bring myself to call her Mama. Any mother who’d abandon her child lost the right to be named as such. Ignoring the flicker of pain in her eyes, I continued. “And I don’t want you seein’ Daddy again, either. Go on back to wherever you came from. You got no place here.”

She raised her head and stuck out her chin. “Least you can do is give me a chance to explain, Kimberley. Ten minutes is all I’m askin’ for.”

Tears bit at the back of my eyes. “No. I don’t owe you anything, and I don’t want anything from you. Don’t you come back, you hear?” I turned from her and walked away. If she had the sense God gave a goose, she’d disappear off the face of the earth never to be seen again.

---

*Jax*

Monday after Thanksgiving marked a victory. Three years without their mama, and for the first holiday since, neither of the kids had a meltdown. I'd call that progress. Found myself whistling along with the Christmas music the front desk staff piped in through the speakers as I tended to patients. I had Kimberley to thank for it—and for the lingering fatigue that struck whenever there was a lull. She'd haunted my dreams the night before, which woke me around three o'clock. Unable to go back to sleep, I got up and collected the boxes of decorations from the basement and hauled them into the garage. Might get some lights strung this year after all.

It was while I was doing charts on lunch break, Kim showed up again—this time on the schedule for later that afternoon. I jotted a note to myself to have Chelsea no-charge the visit since I had me a notion it was Chandler's need to show off his athletic prowess that brought her in today.

Was just finishing the last chart when Chelsea knocked on my open office door, tablet and a notepad tucked against her chest. "Hey, Jax. You wanna go over the afternoon schedule?" It was a rhetorical question since it was part of our daily routine. We discussed the morning schedule before the day started, and the afternoon at end of lunch.

"Sure thing." I pulled up the schedule on my own tablet and swiveled my chair to face her as she sat. "I see Kim Saint John's on the books. Make sure she's a no-charge, will you?"

Chelsea nodded and noted it on her pad. "Yes, sir."

Should've just left it at that, but I didn't want her, or anyone else in the office, to get the wrong idea. "We spent Thanksgiving with her and Bob."

Her eyebrows rose. "Oh?"

"What's that look for?"

“No look.” Her expression was deadpan, but it didn’t take a mind reader to know what she was thinking. “I didn’t know y’all were so close.”

Should’ve kept my mouth shut. “Friends is all.” Although I couldn’t remember a time a friend haunted my dreams. “Her dad and mine go way back. And I’m no-charging her because Chandler got a little rough with touch football, which I’m sure is why she’s coming in.”

“If you say so.”

That was the risk I took hiring my own cousin as a front-desk receptionist. The boss-employee line was more a suggestion. “It’s not like I don’t ever no-charge people.”

“True. Fact is, you probably shouldn’t be so generous with your services.” She tapped her notepad and quirked a brow my way. “You see Kenzi Anne Reynolds is also coming in this afternoon?”

“Yeah. There a problem?”

She twisted her mouth. “I think we need to make sure she’s put in the open adjusting room from now on.”

There was a hint of something in her tone that pulled a frown from me. The only time I used private adjusting rooms was when a patient was in excruciating pain or had just suffered a loss that’d make them emotional. “What aren’t you telling me?”

She leaned forward as if sharing a dark secret. “Word around town is that she’s lookin’ for her next meal ticket, if you know what I mean.”

I threw her a scowl. “Gossip and innuendo, Chelsea? We don’t trade on that.”

“I’m just tryin’ to protect you. You’re too naive for your own good, and there’re some who’ll take advantage.”

An office full of women, and I didn’t stand a chance. Had me more mamas than a blended family twice removed. “There’s no reason for her to be in a private room anyway, so let’s just go on as usual.”

“I’m not tryin’ to spread gossip, Jax. Just letting you know to use some discernment where Kenzi’s concerned.” She shrugged. “Where most women are concerned, actually. You’re attractive, successful, and available. And now that you no longer seem to have a cloud of grief hanging over you, it makes you a hot commodity for women of a certain age.”

Couldn’t help the bark of laughter that escaped. “Thanks. I think.” And they say women were treated like pieces of meat.

“Kind of hoping there was more between you and Kim. Having a girlfriend is at least a layer protection, even if it’s kinda thin. A wife is even better.” She pointed her pen at me. “Although, truth be told, there are those out there who don’t care whether a guy is hitched or not. They’re the most dangerous.”

I rubbed my brow with a sigh. “Can we just put off this little teachable moment for the time bein’? We got us a busy afternoon.”

And it was. Always paid a price when I closed the office for a holiday or vacation. Everyone and his uncle needed to be seen, so it was an hour past Kim’s appointment before I realized she hadn’t come in. When Chelsea brought Earl Davies in and set him up with a heating pad to his back, I motioned her to give me a minute in the hallway.

“Did Kim cancel her appointment?”

“Nope. Just now showed up.” A frown marred her brow. “She appears to be real upset about something.”

Kim upset? The thought of it had my gut clenching. She had nerves of steel, that girl had. Never before had I seen anything faze her. “Put her in the private room, okay?”

Ten minutes later, I stepped into the small adjusting room expecting to find Kim face-down on the adjusting table, warming up under an oversized heating pad. Instead, she was standing at the window, her back to me. Her shoulders were bowed like it was weighed down by a fifty-pound boulder.

“Hey, Kim?”

She whirled around, her blue eyes swimming with unshed tears, and it stopped my heart. Scenarios spun through my mind like a kaleidoscope of doom. Illness, accident, death.

“What is it?” I crossed the narrow space and braced her with hands to her shoulders. Looked as if she’d crumble under the least little breeze. “Your dad okay?”

She stepped out of my grasp and rubbed her hands over her face. There were smudges under her eyes, and her hair was a nest of disarray like she’d been plowing her fingers through it over and over again.

“It’s my mama,” she finally choked out.

It took a moment to puzzle out what she’d said. “What about her?” Was she dead? Far as I knew, no one had heard a word from her since she’d taken off more than twenty years before. Didn’t expect it would hit Kim so hard to learn of her passing.

“She’s back, Jax.” Her tortured gaze caught mine. “Showed up at the shop earlier today, like she hadn’t been gone all these years.” She raised her fingers to her trembling lips. “Never thought she’d come back.” She sniffled.

“Sit, Kim.” I took her elbow and walked her to the chair in the corner. Anguish creased her face and darkened her eyes. “Tell me what she said.”

With a shake of her head, her dark blond curls swept across her shoulders and settled like a veil over her face. “Didn’t say anything except she wanted to explain why she’d left in the first place.”

“And did she? Explain, I mean.”

Slumping in the chair, she closed her eyes. “I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction. It doesn’t matter why she left; the damage is done. She can’t just waltz into our lives again like it never happened.”

Pieces of conversations I’d had with Bob over the last several years lined themselves up in my memory and told a different story than the version Kim was holding onto. But I

was guessing there wasn't room for grace in the midst of her pain. Not yet, anyway.

“You talk to your dad about it?”

She shook her head. “She says Daddy's the one who told her where I was, so I know he spoke to her. But I can't find him. Went by the house, and he wasn't there. He's not answering his cell, either.” A tear slid down her cheek, and she swallowed. “Went to a couple of his old haunts, thinking maybe he'd...” Her face crumpled and a sob broke free. “What if he goes back to drinking, Jax? I don't think I can go through that again.”

I gathered her into my arms and held on as my throat went tight. In all the years I'd known Kim, I couldn't remember her being broken this way. She muscled through every challenge, as if by sheer force of grit and determination, she could control the outcome. I'd found out the hard way that not a one of us was invincible, most especially when the Lord had work to do on us. Had me a feeling, Kim was on the cusp of facing down her fiercest foe—herself.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Kimberley*

By the time I'd gathered up the last little morsel of dignity and slunk out of Jax's office, my eyes were raw and swollen from blubbering like a two-year-old in his arms. Last time I'd cried like that was the day Mama left. It seemed rather poetic, in a warped, Tennessee Williams-sort of way, that her return would afford me the same, sad result.

Couldn't help but picture Daddy sprawled in his own boozy mess, and my eyes filled all over again. It'd been two whole years of not worrying every time I couldn't get ahold of him. Two years of affection growing between us, the likes of which I hadn't seen since I was a girl. Two years without the anger that thrummed through every nerve ending whenever I thought of what Mama's betrayal had done to us.

She was here but one day, and I was afraid we were sliding right back into the mire. I'd rushed from the vintage shop on the tail end of kicking Mama out, blathering excuses to Charlie like an irresponsible teenager, to be sure Daddy was okay. But he wasn't home, and he wasn't answering his cell. Why'd I have to go humiliating myself by running to Jax and falling apart in his office? He had enough of his own grief to last two lifetimes. He surely didn't need my pitiful self crying like a baby.

I'd gotten control over the tears by the time I landed on Daddy's front porch again as the sun was slipping behind the old oak that sat in the neighbor's yard. It was some relief when I spotted his car in the drive, and it appeared to be all in one



piece. Did that mean he hadn't gone on a drunken spree to drown his sorrows in a bottle of Jack? *Oh, Lord, let it be so.* The prayer sounded foreign even in my head. I hadn't uttered God's name in a respectable manner in more years than I could remember, so it wouldn't surprise me to find He'd all but forgotten who I was.

I hesitated at the door and swiped my fingers across the smudges of mascara below my eyes as if there was even a hint of anything left. Poor Jax was probably wearing more makeup on his shirt than I had on my face. Just the thought of it had my cheeks heating as I stepped into the small entry hall and craned my neck to see into the kitchen. No one. I stood still as death and strained to hear past the silence. Nothing.

"Daddy? You home?" The tremble in my voice gave away the deep-down fears that would take more than a few tears to obliterate.

"Be out in a minute, Kim." Daddy's words sounded steady and sure, and I pressed a hand to my heart and blew out a relieved breath. *Thank You, Lord. Seems You haven't forgotten me after all.* Maybe Charlie had misunderstood; maybe Mama hadn't come by here before showing up at the shop. But if that was so, how'd she know where I was?

With one ear bent toward the back of the house, I went into the kitchen to collect a bottle of water from the fridge to soothe my dry, scratchy throat. That's when I spotted the box of Goo Goo Clusters sitting on the counter like the omen of doom. Hadn't Mama always filled Daddy's Christmas stocking with that particular candy? There was some story that went along with them, but what was it? Something about their first date and the Bedford County Fair. The harder I thought on it, the further it slipped.

"Hey, Kim." Daddy wandered in with his hair slicked back and smelling of soap like he'd just taken a shower, and...had he shaved? On a Monday? "Sorry I didn't phone you back. Been a mite busy." He was lying. Years of weaving through the dregs of his addiction taught me how to read the lack of eye contact and guilt written in every line and crevice of his face.

It wasn't until cold water washed over my hand that it struck me, I'd squeezed the life out of the water bottle. My heart was beating so hard, it thrummed clear up to my throat. His eyes were clear, and his voice steady, but Mama still had a hold of him every bit as much as when he was a drunk.

“You get all gussied up for her?”

He slipped his wallet off the kitchen table and jammed it in his back pocket, never once glancing my way.

“She's not coming, Daddy.” The words were forced through tight lips. “I told her we don't want her here.”

He sliced me with a look. “Don't work that way, Kim. I get you're upset right now. Your mama told me what happened at your work, but you need to calm yourself and listen to what she has to say.”

Tears burned at the back of my eyes. How could there be any left after my crying jag with Jax? “There isn't a thing she can tell me that'll change the past! She's been gone twenty years, and you're gonna just let her waltz back in here like nothing's happened?”

“You need to hear her out before you go off making accusations.” His gray gaze shifted some so the steel was softened with sympathy.

A thought struck me and snatched the air clear from my lungs. “Did you know before today she was coming back?”

He shrugged as his eyes slid away from mine.

“How long, Daddy?” My voice cracked as the words caught up in my throat. I closed my eyes. *Breathe. Don't cry. Just breathe.* “How long have you and her been talking?”

“Couple weeks. Tried to get her to come for Thanksgiving, but she thought it'd be best to wait a bit.”

If he'd slapped me across the face, I couldn't have been more shocked. It turned out Mama wasn't the only one who'd betrayed me. I hurled the water bottle into the sink and watched water spurt across the window and curtains. Curtains

I'd paid for with my waitressing tips when I was barely out of high school.

“Where was she when you were passed out and lying in your own vomit?”

Daddy's mouth firmed, and he jammed his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. “You need to give us a listen. Pitching yourself a hissy fit ain't gonna do any of us a bit of good.”

“Hissy fit? Is that what you call this, Daddy?” A scream was climbing up my throat from some dark place I'd never known existed inside of me. “I was the one who spent my entire teen years working to put food on the table, because you were too drunk to hold down a job. I was the one who dragged you out of bars and cleaned you up and got you tucked into bed. Me!” My heart was pounding so hard, I couldn't draw air. Fire sparked every nerve ending and enveloped me in a deep, wrenching pain.

Daddy hung his head. I'd all but smeared his face in his shame, and he couldn't even look at me. But that was just fine by me, because I couldn't stomach the sight of him either.

I snatched my purse from the counter and stormed toward the door. When I pulled it open, Mama stood right there on the threshold as if waiting for her cue. Her trembling mouth and the shell-shocked bite to her eyes told me she'd heard everything I'd said to Daddy.

“He's all yours, Mama. The two of you deserve each other.” I pushed past her, ignoring Daddy's shout to come on back.

Tears blinded my eyes as I drove away, so I went around the corner before pulling over to the curb and shutting off the engine. It was full dark now and quiet as death. I would welcome it right now—death. It would stop the pain of betrayal. I'd spent my entire adult life taking care of Daddy until it was too late for me to live the life I'd dreamt of living. College. Marriage. Children. And for what?

I dropped my head onto the steering wheel and sobbed my heart out. Again.

---

*Jax*

The depth of loneliness struck most often once the kids were down for the night. Used to be Callie and I would spend those few hours hip-to-hip on the couch talking over our day—a funny story about a patient from me or what precocious thing Nora might've said from her. Before long, she'd have shifted around so her stockinged foot would somehow end up in my hands. Might be nothing more than a quick massage, but most often turned into a whole lot more. The loss of that intimacy was enough to make a grown man cry.

But then a switch flipped. It wasn't Callie's scent that wrapped itself around my memory that night; it was Kim's. More than that, it was her pain that nicked at my own, reminding me that I didn't have a monopoly on grief. Kim might not have been mourning a death, but the betrayal she'd felt from her mama was just as fierce. Add to that, the fear that Bob might slink back to his old ways, and the girl was in a world of hurt.

Once I got the kids down for the night, I'd settled in my home office to look over patient x-rays when my phone vibrated. I snatched it up thinking it might be Kim, but instead, it was Bob's name that appeared on the screen. He was an early-to-bed sort of guy, so if he was calling near nine, there was an emergency.

“Everything okay?”

“Is Kimberley with you?” He sounded out of breath.

My gut clenched. “Not since this afternoon. What's goin' on?” Had me a feeling I already knew, but what Kim told me in private was going to stay between us.

He groaned. “We got into it earlier this evenin', Kim and me. Thought maybe I'd give her a bit of time to calm down,

but now I can't find her. She's not answering her phone, and she ain't at her apartment." Sounded like the man was getting a taste of his own medicine.

Kim could take care of herself—had been since she was thirteen—but I'd never seen her like I had that afternoon. Might be something to worry about.

Bob's words cut through my thoughts. "I'm around the corner from you. Mind if I come on by?" There was an edge I hadn't heard in his tone since he'd stopped drinking. Could be Kim's fears weren't far off base.

"Yeah. Come on."

Wasn't a few minutes later, I caught his headlights in the front window and met him at the door. His gaze swept the living room before landing on me. Did he think I'd lie about Kim being there or was it hope that had him seeking her out, even though he knew better?

"Sorry, Jax. Don't mean to interrupt your evening."

"Don't give it a thought. Can I get you something to drink? Coffee? Tea?" The way he was scraping his hands through his hair, I figured he was wishing for something stronger. But his eyes were clear, and his gait steady.

He shook his head. "You said you saw Kim earlier today?"

I motioned he should follow me, and we moved into the kitchen. "Had an appointment this afternoon." That's all I was saying. Even that could be considered a HIPAA violation if someone wanted to get finicky about it.

"She tell you her mama came to town?" He dropped into a chair at the kitchen table.

I kept my focus on the coffee fixings. "That what caused the ruckus between the two of you?"

He planted his elbows on the table. "A full-blown meltdown would be more like it." He fisted his hands like he was praying. Might be a good idea. "She was fit to be tied, lemme tell you."

I flipped on the coffee maker and joined him while reasoning out the best approach. “Has to be a shock, don’t you think? I mean, her showing up today must’ve thrown you off, too.”

He rubbed his chin against his folded hands and closed his eyes. “The thing of it is, she didn’t just show up today.”

I shrugged. “Showed up, called, whatever. Either way, it was outta the blue, right?”

Dropping his hands with a *thud*, he flicked a glance my way. “Not exactly.”

I narrowed my eyes on him. “Then how is it? Exactly.”

Huffing out a breath, he shifted in his chair. “Couple weeks back, I got me a letter from Sue Ellen. Said she was real sorry about what she’d done, runnin’ off and all. Included her number in case I wanted to talk, and so I called.”

Two weeks ago? “So, Sue Ellen showing up today was planned?”

Rubbing the side of his nose, he grimaced. “Yes and no. Told her I wanted us all to get together and see if we could talk things out, but she got it into her head that it’d be best to see Kimberley by herself. I didn’t know she was gonna just show up like she did at Kim’s workplace.”

I pushed away from the table, my jaw clenched so tight it was a wonder I didn’t break a molar. Stalling, I got me a mug. Didn’t care one way or another about coffee, but I needed to put my focus on something other than tearing into Bob. Of all the fool—

“Where d’you think Kim took off to?”

Wherever it was, if she didn’t want to be found, she wouldn’t be. “Try her friends? Bekah and the gals she works with?”

“Don’t know how to get ahold of ’em. It’s not like when she was a kid, you know?” He jammed his hand through his hair, leaving strands of it standing on end. “I don’t have me a list of her friends’ names and numbers.”

I leaned against the counter, mug in hand, and stared at the man I'd known most of my life. Memories of him were categorized in three distinct phases—before he took to drinking, the years he was a drunk, and after his sobriety. Couldn't be more than sixty, so a third of his life was lost to him. And the years lost to him caused a whole lot of loss to Kim, as well.

“It's none of my business, Bob, but I'm gonna speak anyway.”

He nodded once.

“When Kim's mama took off like she did, she got hit from all sides. Losing Sue Ellen was hard enough, but she lost more than that. You get that, don't you?”

He snorted. “You don't gotta tell me. I know I failed her.” His eyes watered up and he swiped a hand across them. “It makes me downright sick to think about what she went through. Count my blessings every day that she's forgiven me like she has. Or thought she had, anyway. The words she was spewin' at me tonight says something different.”

“It's more than that, Bob. All those years...” I blew out a breath. He didn't need me to remind him of everything Kim went through. “Anyway, it wouldn't surprise me if she was dealing with a little PTSD.”

Bob squinted up at me. “PTSD? You mean like what happens to soldiers when they go off to war?”

I set the coffee mug on the counter and sat across from him again. “Any prolonged stress.” Did he really need me to spell out how hard it'd been on Kim? All those years of looking after him, working to put food on their table? Her pride and shame hadn't allowed her to take help from anyone, not even my parents. Bob knew that, didn't he?

His shoulders slumped. “Knew it was hard on her, but I never figured...”

“Now with Sue Ellen showing up unannounced, can you blame her for bein' upset?”

Bob shook his head. “Guess not.”

“You should’ve talked to her first.” Like I was telling him something he didn’t already know. “What did you expect to happen?”

Eyebrows hitched, he shrugged. “Guess I figured we’d work it out. Didn’t expect Sue Ellen to jump the gun like she did or Kim to be so angry.”

It’d be easy to judge Bob for his shortsightedness, but I’d blundered through my own, and it had cost me my wife. “You’re gonna have to give her some time.”

Bob pinned me with watery eyes. “Will you talk to her? I’m sure she’d listen to you.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin.” I blew out a breath. “What’s the deal with Sue Ellen coming back anyway? Y’all thinking of getting back together? Because Kimberley believes it was her mama leaving the both of you that got you drinking.”

He shook his head. “Well, that’s where she’s wrong. There’s a whole lot Kimberley doesn’t know, and that’s on me. I let her believe a lie because it was easier than facing the truth.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Kimberley*

Work had been my escape for as long as I could remember. When Mama left and it became clear right quick that I'd either have to work or starve, I put everything I had into waitressing and school. There wasn't a bit of energy left over to tend to the worries of the day. It was like living in a fog of busyness that numbed my mind to all else. Wasn't healthy by any means, but it was the only way I knew how to survive.

Since Daddy got himself sober, I'd been walking a tightrope waiting for him to relapse. Only in the last couple months every phone call didn't have my heart racing for fear it was bad news. I'd been more hopeful than ever. Even safe enough to dream a little, and I wasn't going to let anything steal it away from me.

That's the only reason I agreed to go to Friday's Shelbyville Christmas Parade with Jax, Chandler, and Nora, even though the holiday spirit had been leached out of me the moment I laid eyes on Mama. Daddy calling a dozen times a day didn't do anything to make me feel kindly toward him either. Why couldn't he understand there was nothing to talk about? If he thought I'd let go of two decades worth of grief, and welcome Mama back with open arms like her leaving us didn't amount to a hill of beans, he was plumb crazy.

After parking alongside the curb in front of Jax's house, I slipped my cell into the glove compartment as if I could tuck Daddy away for a few hours. The old adage *out of sight, out of*

*mind* didn't hold water as far as I was concerned, but it'd put a smidgeon of space between me and the guilt that wormed its way into my inner recesses every time I declined his call. Answering to him had come as natural as scratching an itch.

I climbed from my car and shivered. A cold front had come down from the north putting a brisk chill in the air. Even though the sun was just beginning to dip, most houses had Christmas lights blazing from their rooflines—except Jax's. They lent a festive mood to the quiet which was broken when Nora screeched my arrival to the entire neighborhood as I was zipping into my coat.

“Kim!” She flew down the front steps, flapping her long, skinny arms. “You're here.” The girl could pull a goofy smile from Ebenezer Scrooge.

“I am.” I braced myself for impact as she launched into me. This was just what every girl needed when feeling low. “You're gonna catch yourself a chill running around without a coat.” I rubbed her bare arms where goose bumps were popping up.

“Daddy's got it in the car. You're gonna ride with us, aren't you?” Had she been my own child, I couldn't imagine there'd be more love pouring out of her. Then again, if she'd been my own, she'd be aware of those pesky flaws that put distance between a mama and her kids.

“No sense having to find two parking spaces.” I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and marched the both of us to the house. It was looking like the predictions of an upcoming ice storm might prove true. Of course, the weather reports were wrong more than they were right, and I was praying it was so this time. I was supposed to drive up near Nashville the next morning with Charlie to look over a job, but ice and me didn't get on well together. Unfortunately, the client's expectations were such that we didn't think she'd be willing to wait until Monday.

When I stepped inside behind Nora, Jax was nabbing his coat from the entry hall closet. “Look at you bein' right on

time.” I caught a whiff of soap or aftershave as he moved in for a hug.

“It’s been known to happen,” I murmured against his shoulder. My heart did a little jig and my cheeks went hot. Couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt the flush of attraction, and it was downright inconvenient. It couldn’t be nothing more than residual emotions from crying all over him the other evening. Jax needed him a wife like Callie had been—a stay-at-home mama who loved to bake and garden and such. Not someone with more baggage than a debutante traveling through Europe.

“Think you’ll be warm enough?” Jax nodded at me. “Gonna be a cold one tonight.” He reached into the closet and pulled out a light blue down coat.

I hesitated. Wasn’t it Callie’s? “I’m fine with what I got.”

He tucked it under an arm along with his own. “I’m gonna bring it just in case. Bet you a hot chocolate, you’ll be shivering before Santa makes an appearance.” He glanced at Nora. “Go get your brother, would you? We should be going.”

By the time we’d parked on a side street near the Square, the sun had set and a breeze brought with it a wind chill that cost me the bet. It didn’t seem to bother the kids to have some other woman wearing their mama’s jacket, and I was grateful for the warmth of it as we squeezed past families lining up for a clear spot to see the parade. Wreaths hung from lampposts and shop windows while lights blazed from within the decked-out stores. Even The Coffee Break, which generally closed right after lunch, was open to customers with a line clear out the door.

I took hold of Nora’s hand so she wouldn’t get tugged into the crowd. “I can’t believe how many people are here.”

Jax had an arm around Chandler’s shoulder as we climbed the courthouse steps. “What d’you say we park it here? We’re not gonna find a better spot.”

“I can’t see anything.” Nora jumped up and down like a kid on a pogo stick.

“Come here, squirt.” He picked her up and plopped her onto his shoulders. “How’s that?”

Quick as a lick, a memory passed through my mind of my daddy doing the same for me when I was about Nora’s age. It hadn’t been a Christmas parade, but the particulars were fuzzy. I just remembered feeling as if I was on top of the world and grinning down at Mama.

“Hey, Daddy, there’s Skeeter.” Chandler tugged on Jax’s coat sleeve, and just like that, the memory was gone. “Can I go stand with him and his mom?”

“Promise you won’t leave that spot?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay then. Once the parade’s done, we’ll see about getting something to eat.”

An hour later, we were heading back to the car while Nora grumbled about being hungry and cold.

“At least you got to see the parade,” Chandler whined. “We never even saw Santa from where we were.”

“You shoulda stayed with us,” Nora said. “We saw him, didn’t we, Kim?”

I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

“You kinda had a premiere spot, squirt,” Jax reminded her. “If Chandler was eight feet tall, he could’ve seen a whole lot more, too.”

“Dr. Jax!” A female voice had us turning back toward the Square. The woman who broke free of the crowd looked like she’d stepped off the cover of a holiday magazine. Her elf costume didn’t hide her curves the least little bit. With all the skin she had showing, it was a pure miracle she didn’t freeze to death.

“Hey, Kenzi. Didn’t know you were gonna be in the parade. Your float was great.” Did Jax’s eyes light up?

As they bantered back and forth, it took a full minute for me to recognize the unfamiliar pang that soured my mood.

Last time I'd felt that green-eyed monster taking hold of me was clear back in high school.

"Can we go now?" Nora tugged on Jax's hand. "I'm hungry, Daddy."

"Mind your manners." Jax put an arm around Nora and Chandler's shoulders. "This here is Miss Kenzi. She's a patient of Daddy's. These are my kids, Chandler and Nora."

"Hey, kids. Nice to meet you." Her impossibly large, kohl-lined eyes landed on me as if checking out the competition. I wasn't the only one feeling a bit green tonight. "And who's this?"

Nora pulled away from Jax and wrapped her arms around one of mine. "This is Miss Kimberley. She's our friend, isn't she, Daddy?" Despite feeling a little snarky, I couldn't help but smile. Nora was claiming her territory right quick. It warmed me up better than a cup of hot cocoa.

Jax chuckled. "Yes, peanut, she's our friend. A good friend, actually. Miss Kimberley Saint John, meet Kenzi Reynolds." Had his focus not been on Nora, he might've seen Kenzi's eyes cool just a tad. It was clear she had more on her mind than discussing her C-5. And why wouldn't she? It's not like there were boatloads of good-looking, eligible men lining up the streets of Shelbyville. And there sure weren't many like Jax. It was just too bad competing with a ghost for his affections was near impossible.

---

### *Kimberley*

There wasn't a restaurant in Shelbyville that wouldn't have more than an hour wait for supper, so Jax suggested we pick up a couple pizzas and head back to his place. It was on the drive there Chandler said we should eat picnic-style on the family room floor while watching a Christmas movie. It was all so...homey. That was a good thing, right? So, why did it stir up something sad from deep within me?

“How ’bout *Polar Express*?” Nora piped up from the back seat.

“That’s a baby movie,” Chandler grumbled. “I wanna see *Elf*. The movie was my idea, so I should get to pick.”

“Hold up, kids.” Jax kept his eyes on the traffic ahead but raised a hand. “We’ll compromise. *Polar Express* tonight and *Elf* tomorrow. Sound fair?”

“Yay!” Nora said. “Is Kim gonna be with us tomorrow, too? Are ya, Kim?”

A body could get used being a part of this family, but where would that lead? They had their life, and I had mine. Sort of. Maybe that’s what sparked the melancholy. Knowing I’d forever be in the friend category—even if it was a good friend, like Jax had said to that Kenzi chick.

I shifted in my seat so I could see Nora’s face. “That’s sweet, kiddo, but I have to work tomorrow.”

“But it’s Saturday.”

Jax pulled up to a light. “You know, Nora, people work on Saturday, too.”

“You don’t.”

“No. But I used to.” His words seemed to come from somewhere else, and his eyes were glazed over as if he was lost in a memory. Did it have to do with Callie? Seemed the both of us were fighting demons tonight. I blamed it on the holidays. There was something hopeful and sad all at the same time.

When we got to the house, we piled out of the car, and I glanced at Jax’s stark roofline. Maybe if he hung up some lights and put a Christmas tree in the front window. Give the place life. The only other time I’d been to the house was when Callie was alive. She and Jax threw a huge Christmas party—her last hurrah—and there wasn’t a space inside or out that wasn’t decorated.

Jax stepped up beside me with the two pizza boxes in his arms while the kids ran into the house. “Whatcha lookin’ at?”

“Your house. It’s a little...stark. You need some decorations.”

He grinned. “Too bad you’re working tomorrow, ’cause it just so happens I’m planning on putting up the tree and maybe even stringing some lights. Of course, if you’re off work early enough, you could come by for supper and help us trim it.” Without waiting for an answer, he sauntered up the walk.

We made short work of the pizzas, and before the hero boy in *Polar Express* awakened on Christmas morning, Nora and Chandler, who bookended me on the couch, were sound asleep. Throughout the movie, my gaze kept moving from the television screen to the mantle where family pictures were lined up. A wedding photo of Jax and Callie, so young and vibrant. Another of them posing with the kids, and a couple that appeared to be candid shots. If a person knew nothing else of them other than these few photos, it’d appear their lives were perfect. But that wasn’t the whole story. How unfair the kids lost their mama so young, and Jax the love of his life like he did.

Jax, who was sprawled in the recliner, snatched up the remote and turned off the television, leaving the room in sudden silence. “Didn’t expect they’d make it as long as they did.”

“Good thing you’re a forward thinker.” He’d called in intermission halfway through the movie and made the kids brush their teeth and put on their p.j.s. It would appear he had this daddy gig all figured out. Amazing what a person was capable of when they had no other choice.

He lowered the footrest and climbed out of the recliner. “Let me just put them to bed.”

“I should be going.” Careful not to disturb the kids, I scooted off the couch. Last thing I wanted was for things to be awkward between us, and the way I was feeling, I was sure to make a fool of myself. What if he figured out I was beginning to have feelings for him? Just the thought of it had my face on fire.

“Don’t go.” Jax touched my arm. “I’d really like to talk to you about something.” He dropped his hand. “If it’s okay with you. I mean, if you need to get up at the crack of dawn or something...”

“No. We’re not leaving till ten.”

“Then stay, will you?”

I nodded. “You want help with the kids?”

“Nah. I got it.”

While he tended to Nora and Chandler, I collected the dishes scattered about the blanket on the floor and took them into the kitchen. Glasses were crowded in the sink, and the pizza boxes were open with a couple of pieces left in each one, so I began clearing that mess, as well. What would it be like if this was my family I was cleaning up after? Always thought I wasn’t missing anything by not having one of my own, but the way my heart was swelling told me differently. Bitterness rose up and nearly choked me.

“They’re down.” Jax’s voice at my back startled a squeak from me.

Hand to my chest, I turned. “You scared the life outta me.”

He gave me a crooked grin. “You must’ve been far away, huh?”

I reached for a dishtowel, leaned my backside against the counter, and dried my hands. “Suppose so.”

“Wanna share?” He cocked his head to the kitchen table. “I can make us a cup of coffee or tea. Whatever you’d like.”

“I’d like to be able to sleep tonight, so I’ll pass.” I crossed to the table and sat. “What’d you wanna talk about?” As if I couldn’t guess. I’d only bawled in his arms a few days back, and the both of us pretended it hadn’t happened. I was embarrassed, and if I were to hazard a guess, Jax probably thought I was short a screw or two.

He slid into the chair across from me and folded his arms on the table. “Just wanna be sure you’re doing okay.” He shrugged. “I mean, after everything that went down on



Monday.” He was tiptoeing through a pile of eggshells I’d forced on him.

“I’m sorry about that, Jax.” My face grew warm, and I stared at my clasped hands. “I should’ve never showed up at your office like I did.”

Holding up his hands like a traffic cop, he shook his head. “That’s not what I’m sayin’ at all. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

I blew out a sigh. He was being kind, and it washed over me like a soothing balm. It was a powerful thing, kindness, and he ought to be careful how he used it. A girl could get the wrong idea. “Of course, we’re friends, but—”

“No buts, Kim.” He rubbed his chin. “Don’t know if you were aware, but your dad came by that night lookin’ for you.”

Well, if that wasn’t embarrassing, I didn’t know what was. “I’m sorry he bothered you.”

“It wasn’t a bother. He was worried about you.” His gaze narrowed. “Truth is, so was I. Have the two of you worked through things?”

Shoulders stiff, I crossed my arms against my chest. “That’d require I talk to him, now wouldn’t it?”

He quirked a brow. “None of my business.”

“We kinda made it your business, Jax. Us comin’ to you like we did.” You’d’ve thought Daddy and I were a couple of school kids instead of grown adults. “What’d he tell you?”

A shrug and a frown. “Just said the two of you had words, you weren’t answering your phone, and you weren’t at your apartment.”

I twisted my mouth. “He tell you *she* was there? When I left, I mean? Standing right there at the door like he’d been expectin’ her.” A surge of tension washed through me all over again. How could I talk to Daddy when I couldn’t bear to look at him?

So lost in my private little battle, it took a beat to realize Jax hadn’t answered me. Instead, his head was bowed over his clasped hands. “Jax?”

A sigh. “Talk to him, Kim. I don’t know more than bits and pieces. It’d be like tryin’ to make sense of a jigsaw puzzle with more than half of it missing.”

A whole lot of unease washed over me. “What do you mean bits and pieces?”

A shrug. “Things he’s intimated over the years. Read-between-the-lines kinda stuff.” He rubbed his brow. “I think there’s a whole lot more goin’ on than he’s shared. We all of us have things we’re holding onto for one reason or another. If you want answers, you’re gonna have to go straight to the source.”

That was about as clear as the Missouri River and just as helpful. And what was it Jax was holding onto he hadn’t been honest about?

## CHAPTER FIVE

*Jax*

Fourteen hours after putting my size elevens in my mouth, regret was still hanging over me as I hauled the boxes of Christmas decorations into the house. Maybe the distraction would wash away the reminder of the hurt that swam in Kim's eyes when I refused to say more. Bits and pieces. What was I thinking blurting out something I couldn't explain? Hadn't I just said it wasn't any of my business? And then there I went, stepping knee-deep into Bob's mess.

"Aren't we gonna hang lights outside?" Nora had pulled a string of tangled Christmas lights from one of the boxes and held them up for my inspection, bulbs spilling over her skinny arms.

"Just leave them in the box, baby girl. It's too cold to do that today. Let's focus on getting the tree set up and decorated."

Chandler scowled at the red tree bag laying on the family room floor. "Skeeter's daddy got them a *real* tree. They cut it down all by themselves." He toed the bag. "This is a fake one, isn't it?"

First time in three years we were putting up decorations, you'd think they'd appreciate the effort. "Don't have time to go out and chop down a tree, son. This one'll do us just fine."

"Is Miss Kim comin' over today, Daddy?" Nora knelt in front of a Rubbermaid box larger than her and started emptying it right where the tree was supposed to go.

I took hold of her arm with one hand and the box with the other and scooted them both to the side. “She told you last night she’s gotta work today.” Even if she didn’t, chances were she’d be giving me the same cold-shoulder treatment she was giving Bob. Not that I could blame her. Didn’t need another person not being straight with her.

Chandler looked up from unzipping the bag. “Is she your girlfriend?”

The question shocked me silent for a beat. I reached past him and hauled the bottom portion of the tree from the bag. “Just a friend.” Got it situated in front of the window and unhinged the boughs. Chandler might’ve been right—it was a poor substitute for the real thing. At least the lights were pre-strung. Course, that didn’t mean they’d work.

“But she’s a girl, isn’t she?” Nora said. “And she’s a friend. So doesn’t that mean she’s your girlfriend?”

No way I was that quick when I was seven.

Chandler laughed. “It’s not the same thing, dweeb.”

She stamped her foot and whirled to face me. “Daddy, Chandler’s callin’ me names.”

Swallowing a sigh, I glared at him. “You know better than that.” I yanked the middle section from the bag. “Come help me line this up, will you?” We slipped it into place. One piece to go. “Come on over here, Nora. Pull the boughs down so they’re stickin’ out instead of up.”

“If Miss Kim isn’t your girlfriend, Daddy, who is?” Nora stared at me. “It’s not that Miss Kenzi, is it?” Her face twisted like she’d sucked on a lemon. “I don’t like her.”

Had to force a frown to cover for the chuckle that wanted to break free. “That’s not a nice thing to say about a person, Nora. You don’t even know her.”

“Why can’t Miss Kim be your girlfriend?” Nora’s tone was a shade whiny.

“Yeah, Daddy.” Chandler handed me the top piece of the tree. “Aren’t you ever gonna get married again?”

What was with them today? “Maybe, maybe not.” I scowled at him. “Y’all wanna put up the Christmas decorations or you wanna jabber about things that’s none of your business?” Like I was one to talk.

Chandler threw me a crooked grin. “I can do both.”

While the two of us connected the tree, Nora had dragged a stool over to the fireplace mantle and climbed up. What was she doing now? She took hold of the wedding picture that sat in the middle and fingered it.

“Mama sure was pretty, wasn’t she?” The question was matter of fact, not wrapped in emotion as I’d’ve expected.

I went to her and peered over her shoulder. “You remember her, honey?”

She shrugged. “Not really. Except...”

“What?”

“Singing.” She twisted to look at me, and I took hold of her shoulders to steady her. “She used to sing, didn’t she?”

Throat tight, I nodded. “She had a real pretty voice. Loved to sing.” I stared at the photo. It was a lifetime ago we got married. And so much of our time together, I’d spent working. Maybe if I hadn’t...well, maybe she’d still be alive.

“You wanna put that photo in your bedroom, baby girl?”

Her eyes went wide. “Can I?”

“Sure. Maybe we’ll get us a Christmas picture made to replace it.”

“Hey, Daddy?” Chandler set down a box of ornaments. “Is it okay if I put one of those in my room, too?”

I grabbed hold of Nora and lifted her off the stool. “Whichever one you want, son.” Why hadn’t I thought to offer them pictures before? “What d’you remember about Mama?”

“Mostly her bein’ sick.” He moved to the mantel, his back to me, and my throat got a tad bit tighter.

Anyone who said life was fair was either a fool or a liar.

Chandler nabbed the photo of the four of us posing in front of the Smoky Mountains sign. It was the last trip we'd taken before Callie had been too weak to travel. Nora had just turned three, which meant Chandler was about Nora's age now. The kids needed more than a picture or two to remember their mama by.

I cleared my throat. "Maybe when we're watching *Elf* tonight, I'll bring out the box of photos I got stored in the hall closet and we can go through them. Put together a collection for your walls."

Nora hugged the wedding photo to her little chest. "You got any of Miss Kim? I wanna put one of her in my bedroom, too."

Pictures of Kim? "Fraid not, sweetie. We've known each other a long time, but it's not like we hung out or anything."

Chandler laid his photo on the recliner. "Then how d'you know her so good?"

Everything back on solid ground, I started unloading boxes of ornaments from the large Rubbermaid container. Enough here to decorate three trees. Callie sure knew how to do up Christmas. "Her dad, Bob, and my dad worked together for years. They became close friends. Kim and I knew each other in school, but we didn't run around in the same circles." Kim didn't run around in any circles, if I was remembering correctly. It wasn't until we were almost out of high school that I saw the truth of it. Probably figured if she let anyone in, they'd have a front seat to her shame.

"But you do now?" Chandler stared at the photo he'd chosen.

"We do now." It all started when Callie got sick. Kim would bring food over from the restaurant where she waitressed, worried we wouldn't have anything to eat. Probably figured a workaholic husband didn't have the sense to keep his family fed. And she'd have been right, too.

Maybe it was a crazy notion, but did the kids sense something shifting between Kim and me? Was that where all

the questions were coming from?

“Daddy?” Nora tugged on my hand. “If you start thinkin’ about getting married again, could you maybe marry Kim? I’d like her to be my mama.” She twisted to get a look at her brother. “Don’t you think Miss Kim could make a good mama?”

Chandler nodded. “Yeah. She’s real nice to us. She wouldn’t be like a wicked stepmother in some of those movies we’ve seen.”

If only real life could be so easily wrapped up inside of seventy-five minutes. There were layers of hurt and betrayal Kim carried around like battle gear, and I wasn’t exactly knight-in-shining-armor material. Had me a load of my own stuff to work through before I’d be good for anyone. *But it does seem You’re working out something here, Lord. Help me to follow Your lead.*

---

### *Kimberley*

Driving up Highway 24 with ice and rain pelting the windshield had my grip on the steering wheel tight enough to choke a chicken. Bad weather was not my friend. I was hoping Charlie would drive, since she was the boss, but she had other plans. Better plans, from the sound of it. Derek was picking her up from the client’s home, and they were going to spend a romantic night at Gaylord’s Opryland Hotel before the holiday chaos kicked in. Just hearing about it made me wish I hadn’t turned down Jax’s invitation to hang out with him and the kids. Then again, it might be best to put a little distance between the two of us until I could shake free of whatever hold he had on me lately. It didn’t help that he seemed to be keeping some of Daddy’s secrets from me, either.

“I’m sorry to drag you out on a day like this, Kim.” Charlie had her laptop open and was working on some design elements from the passenger seat. “If it were anyone else, I’d

beg off, but Sylvie George...” What was there to say? The woman had a reputation.

“Don’t give it another thought.” *Please, Lord, clear up this weather before my trek back home.* I was such a faithful prayer warrior. Ready to call in favors whenever it suited me, but then forgetting all about Him when things were smooth. Was it a wonder He wasn’t filling up the empty places in my soul?

“Based on my last meeting with Sylvie, and what changes she gave me over the phone, we have us a solid plan.” Charlie grimaced. “I think.”

I nodded.

She slapped the laptop closed and shifted. “You okay, Kim?”

I dared to take my eyes from the road for a split second. “I’m fine. Just a nervous driver is all.” I tried a little laugh, but it fell flat. Figured I could blame my touchy mood on the weather, but Charlie didn’t miss much.

“Hmm. Well, you’re awfully quiet. Haven’t said hardly anything since your mama showed up at the shop on Monday.” There was a questioning lilt to her tone, but Charlie wouldn’t push if I didn’t respond. That didn’t sit well with me, though. She deserved better.

“Not much to share. I confronted Daddy that night, and when I was leaving, she showed up like she was expected.” My heart kicked up at just the thought of it, and I was plumb mad all over again.

“That must’ve been rough.”

“Yeah.” We were nearing Smyrna, and, thankfully, traffic was lighter. Most people had the sense God gave a rock and stayed home where they were safe and cozy. I dared a glance at Charlie. She had her hands folded on the closed laptop as if waiting for me to go on. “I don’t want to bother you with my drama.”

A soft sigh filled the car. “I don’t ever want you to feel like you gotta share your life with me, Kim. I don’t wanna pry, and your business is your business. That bein’ said, I also want you



to know that I'm here for you. You know Jenna's my cousin, and in the time I've known Darlene, she's become like a mother to me. We're family. And in time, I'm hopin' you'll feel the same."

Her words had tears biting at the back of my eyes. I could count on Jenna and Darlene for anything, but it always seemed Charlie was closed off. Or maybe it wasn't her that was closed off, but *me*. I kept even my closest friends at some length, for fear they'd hurt me. Like Mama did. And Daddy.

"You mean that, Charlie?" I flicked a glance her way. "I mean, truly?"

Lines appeared between her brows as she peered at me. "Of course." She leaned closer. "I'm sorry if I upset you."

I shook my head and kept my focus on the windshield wipers *thwap, thwap, thwap*-ing as my eyes blurred. "It's not you that got me upset. It's me. It's like I just got this amazing...epiphany." How appropriate for the Christmas season. "It occurred to me that I've been thinking everyone around me is closed off, when all the time, it's been me." I dared to take a hand from the steering wheel and press it to my chest. "I'm the one who's pushing people away." Had been for as long as I could remember.

"Some might say it's a protective instinct, you know? A way to keep yourself from being hurt."

I snorted. "You mean *more* hurt." A semi slowed in front of me, and I tapped the breaks.

She drew in hiss. "Ooh. Guess I hit a nerve. There I go, putting my two cents where it doesn't belong."

"No." I shook my head. "I trust you, Charlie, and I appreciate your friendship. I'm just hoppin' mad at my daddy right now, and I don't know what to do with it."

"Well, have you tried talkin' to him?"

I grunted out a laugh. Where had I heard that before? "You sound like Jax."

"Jax? Is he your boyfriend?"

*I wish.* Sigh. “Just a friend.”

She laughed. “If that didn’t sound like disappointment, I don’t know what does.”

I twisted my mouth. “Known him most of my life, and it’s just the last little bit of time, it feels like things are shifting for me.”

“Yeah? What about for him?”

I wrinkled my nose at her. “He’s still mournin’ the loss of his wife.”

“Oh? How long ago did she die?”

“Um, about three years.” I dared to pass the semi. Fearful of the storm or not, forty in a 65 was too slow even for me.

“You’ll wanna take 440 West.” She waited until I’d moved to the right lane. “Three years, huh?” There was a probing-like lilt to her tone.

“Why d’you say it like that?”

“Seems like a long time, is all.”

I eased onto 440 and merged into traffic. It was a little heavier here, and my knuckles were starting to ache from my death-grip on the steering wheel. “I don’t know. Daddy drank himself into a stupor for a lot longer than that after Mama left. Maybe if he dealt with it better, I’d be living a different life right now.” I didn’t sound at all bitter.

Charlie slipped the computer into its bag. “We sort of got off track. You didn’t say why you haven’t talked to him about this.”

Excuses flitted through my mind, and I discarded every one of them. Maybe that was my problem—I was looking for excuses that’d put me in a good light rather than just tell the God’s honest truth. “I don’t know if I can talk to him without throwing a duck fit. Thought I’d forgiven him for the drinking and such, but when I saw him last, all this anger just sort of spewed out of me.” And it scared me. “If Mama bein’ back here is gonna put me and Daddy right where we started, I don’t know if I can survive it again.” Just voicing it out loud

took some weight off my chest, and I could breathe a little easier.

“Forgiving someone for a betrayal is hard.”

I dared a glance at her. “Betrayal? I’d never thought of it like that.”

“Sure. We put our hopes and trust in other people, especially our parents, and when they disappoint us, it’s a betrayal of sorts. I’ve been through a few of my own, Kim.” She sighed. “Took a lot of prayer to work through mine. Healing can only come through surrendering it to the Lord. He’ll use it, if you let Him.”

I let that one slide and focused on the rest of the drive as Charlie directed me toward Bell Meade—a city within the city of Nashville.

The houses in historic Bell Meade were mansions on hill-top pieces of property. “Sylvie lives in this neighborhood?”

“Yep.” Charlie let out a long sigh. “And she doesn’t want anyone to forget it. Just a couple more blocks up there on the right.”

When I turned off the busy city street and onto the George estate, my mouth dropped clear to my toes. The house had to be more than eight-thousand square feet of brick, mortar, and columns.

Charlie gathered her laptop and handbag. “Just park in the portico, Kim, and get your game-face on.”

“Remind me how you got this client.”

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “It’s all by word of mouth. A former client of mine—you know Elodie—got me my first job when I went off on my own. That was how I met Clive and Karly Witt.”

I nodded. Charlie was so matter-of-fact about knowing the mega country star, I don’t think she even thought of him that way.

“One thing led to another, and here we are.” She grimaced. “I’m gonna warn you, though, if it turns out Sylvie is

impossible to work with, we're gonna just pack up our stuff and walk away, you hear?"

My mouth dropped open. She'd turn her back on a job that'd pay more than I made in five years waitressing? "Seriously, Charlie? You'd do that?"

She quirked an eyebrow. "Girl, you're gonna learn sooner or later that God doesn't intend for us to be doormats for the rich and famous. Whatever happens, He'll provide." She nodded once. "That bein' said, we're gonna be sweetness and light so she doesn't have a thing against us if it all goes south."

"Sweetness and light. You got it." That'd be a push for me on my best day, which this wasn't. But I was learning a lot from Charlie. Not just about design, but how to talk to people and consider their feelings above my own. Could be this was a lesson I should've learned before confronting Daddy earlier in the week.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Kimberley*

Watching Charlie charm the ugly right off Sylvie George was downright inspiring. Of course, there wasn't a whole lot of childhood memories and areas of contention between the two of them like there was with Daddy and me. But between her example of Christian love and the encouragement she'd shared with me on the drive up, it put some softness to my backbone and made me think I could talk to Daddy without turning into a screeching lunatic. At the very least, I had to try.

With that in mind, I called him on my drive back down to Shelbyville and wasn't the least bit surprised when he answered on the first ring. Could be his seventeen calls I'd let go to voicemail since Monday had him jumping at the chance to say his piece.

"You up for talkin', Daddy?"

"Where're you at? Sounds like you're in the car."

"Yes, sir. Driving down from a meeting in Nashville. I'll be home in about twenty minutes."

"You wanna come by the house? Got some homemade soup on the stove."

No doubt Mama had made it. Couldn't recall when Daddy ever cooked anything that didn't require three minutes and a microwave. That meant she was still hanging about. Was she here for good? Did she expect Daddy would just welcome her

back with open arms? If so, she was either delusional or he was a dang fool.

“I’d prefer we meet at my place, if it’s all the same to you.” It would give me the home-court advantage, while at the same time, not allowing me to storm off in a huff when things didn’t go my way. I was nothing if not realistic. Looking after Daddy for years leeched the magical clear from my bones. It was literally on the tip of my tongue to warn him not to bring Mama along, but if I was going to channel Charlie, I’d best let the Lord in, too. If He deemed it best Mama came along, who was I to interfere with the Creator of the World?

It was closer to thirty minutes before I pulled my car into the complex lot. Ice had started pelting around the time I neared Christiana, and I’d slowed to the speed of a slug. Christmas someplace warm and tropical would be right fine if I could afford the time and the plane ticket.

Daddy’s truck was parked in the visitor space, and I took me a deep breath before climbing the stairs to my second-story apartment. No doubt, he used his key and made himself at home, and I hesitated at the door. *Please, Father, I know I’ve been absent lately, but I could sure use a hand here. Help me to behave myself and be able to speak my mind without losing my temper. I need Jesus more now than ever.* One more deep breath, and I took the plunge.

Even as dark as the skies were, it took a moment for my eyes to adjust as I stepped inside. The whole apartment would fit into Sylvie George’s foyer, but I was proud of my quaint home. Thanks to working at Vintage Decor & More, the furniture and such outshone its surrounding. The complex was just plain old—not vintage-historic old, more like 1970’s old. It was a wonder there wasn’t gold shag covering the floors.

I’d left the window blinds open, and Daddy had turned on the lights above the dining area. Only thing separating that and the kitchen from the rest of the place was that the carpet transitioned to tile. Otherwise, it was just one big room. Charlie called it an open concept—said it sounded better. There was a white paper bag on the table, and Daddy was setting out plates. Three of them. So, where was Mama?

Daddy let out a breath. “I was about to give you a call and see if you had car trouble.”

“Just bad weather.” I glanced around the room. “Is it just you?”

“No.” He tucked his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and straightened his spine. “Your mama’s in the bathroom. I’m hoping you won’t make a fuss like you did the last time you saw her.”

Make a fuss? Is that what he was calling a hissy fit these days? “Had me a feeling you’d bring her along.” I dumped my purse onto a chair but kept my eyes on him. “Just hoping you’d have more sense than to fuel a smoldering situation.”

“I insisted.” Mama’s soft voice had me spinning around to find her standing in the hallway. My heart thrummed in my chest so hard, it was a wonder it didn’t explode. *Breathe. One. Two, Three. Four...* I could count clear to a hundred, and it wouldn’t ease the pounding any. If Charlie were here, she’d step right in, hand outstretched, and introduce herself to Mama without batting an eye. But I wasn’t Charlie.

“Mama.” I nodded at her. “I see you made yourself right at home.” It was as if the words came out all on their own without my permission. *Lord, grab hold of my tongue and find me a bit of graciousness if you don’t want this to end badly.*

Daddy cleared his throat. “Picked us up some sandwiches at The Coffee Break before they closed. Thought you might be hungry seein’ as you been working all day.” His voice was a tad shaky, and his eyes didn’t quite meet mine, but he was making an effort, and I couldn’t fault him for it.

“Thanks, Daddy.” Mama and I moved toward the table at the same time, and I stopped so she could pass me by. “There’s sweet tea in the fridge.”

The last thing I wanted to do was eat, but I sat myself down at the table with the both of them anyway. As I unwrapped my sandwich, I glanced at Mama. I remembered a time when I thought she hung the moon. Now, there was

nothing but bitterness in my heart for her. “Where you been all these years, anyway?”

She tucked her hands into her lap and stared down at her plate. “Here and there. But the last few, I’ve been working at a place in Northern California. Placerville.” She cleared her throat. “Restaurant called Bella Cucina.”

Waitressing? Wouldn’t that round things out nicely? “Up until I got this last job, I’d been working in restaurants almost since you left.” There was a bite to my words—an accusation.

Daddy jumped in like the referee after a knockout. “Kim’s an interior designer now. Doin’ real good for herself.”

I glared at him. Didn’t need him defending me to Mama, like he was afraid she might look down on me otherwise. “I’m an assistant, Daddy. That’s all.” But that wasn’t all. I was proud of my job, and Charlie had said more than once I was ready to tackle a project on my own. In fact, if Sylvie George wasn’t so difficult, she would’ve given that one over to me. I was just being contrary. Anything to put Daddy in his place. Oh, why couldn’t I just get ahold of myself and let it all go?

“Look, Kim.” Mama reached out like she was going to touch me then thought better of it. “I asked your daddy to let me come along so we could clear the air. I know you’re angry. You have every right to be, but—”

“You left us.” The shot was aimed right at her heart.

She nodded and cleared her throat. “Yes. For reasons that aren’t important right now.”

I shoved my plate aside. “Not important?” My voice caught on a sob, and I swallowed it down. “How can you say that? Do you know what happened after you took off? Do you even care?”

Head bowed, she folded her arms on the table. “I know it was hard on you, but the past belongs in the past.”

Tears sprang to my eyes, and despite my prayers earlier, God didn’t have a hold on my tongue. “How can I do that when the past directly accounts for where I am right now?” I ignored Daddy’s raised hand and plowed ahead. “I’m thirty-



five years old, Mama. The girls I went to school with all have families now, some with children who're in high school. Instead of living like a normal teenager, I was working twenty hours a week on top of school just so Daddy and I could eat."

"Look here, Kim," Daddy cut in. "You can blame me for that, but it ain't your mama's fault."

I turned on him. "You were drinking all the time because she left us. You don't think she has some blame for all this? If she hadn't left—" I covered my mouth to keep the rest of the ugly words from breaking free. Anger was roiling in my belly, and it seemed whenever I let the least little bit of it loose, it took over.

The three of us sat around my humble kitchen table with nothing but bitterness to connect us. I'd thought all was forgiven toward Daddy, but nick the scar, and it was a gaping wound all over again. It's as if I hadn't healed the least little bit.

"You want the truth of it, Kim?" Mama raised her chin a notch and stared straight at me. "I had what you might call a mental breakdown. And by the time I got the help I needed, I couldn't face your daddy or you." A tear spilled down one cheek, but she didn't even flinch.

What was I supposed to do with that? Accept it, forgive her, and pretend the last twenty years never happened? For all I knew, she was making this up to get back into my good graces.

"I can't do this." The words were mumbled through stiff lips. "I know y'all wanna make things better, but I just can't." I pushed away from the table and closed myself in the bedroom. My heart hammered as I laid my head against the closed door and listened for them to leave. *Oh, Lord, why can't I just surrender it all to You? I'm so tired.* But the only answer that came back was Mama and Daddy leaving.

It was quiet and dark, except for the colored lights twinkling in the tree. I was thankful they worked after so many years of neglect. The glow of them spotlighted the starkness of the fireplace mantle. Reminded me that life went on. Or at the very least, it should. I could only hope and pray there'd be another collection of photos to mark a new future. There were residual ashes left from my life, but I had to believe the Lord would work beauty from them. Mistakes could be redeemed if we were willing to learn from them and let go. Instead, I'd held onto guilt and brokenness as if there'd be nothing at all if I didn't have at least that.

But that was a lie from the enemy. I had Chandler and Nora. Had me a thriving practice. Parents who raised me right. And some friends. What more could I want?

Loneliest part of the day was after the kids were down, and I was left with my thoughts. It was when I took to reading the Bible, searching for significance beyond my own world. Trusting in the promises God made, reminding myself that sometimes they didn't come true this side of heaven. Healing and whole. That's what Callie had believed with all her heart. It wasn't until the last few weeks she realized it wasn't going to happen here on earth. Astounding it took facing death before she could truly cling to her faith.

Why was it we needed to learn the hard way?

It was in the midst of this thought when my phone dinged to alert me to a message.

Kim. *Can you talk?*

It would've been easy enough to call, but a nudge pushed me to do otherwise. *Want 2 come over?*

*Be there in 10.*

Something was up. Why else would she agree to go out so late? I laid the phone aside and took to cleaning the mess left over from dinner and decorating. The memory of Nora's request that I ask Kim to be my girlfriend tugged a smile from me. It wouldn't take much to wrap my head around that idea. Didn't quite know why it took so long to do so, considering

we had us a team of matchmakers working an angle. But I didn't want it to be on account of loneliness. That wouldn't be fair to anyone, least of all Kim.

Last time Mama was over, she left a box of some sweet-smelling herbal tea. Said it was caffeine-free, which to my way of thinking made it useless. But I rooted through the pantry to find it in case Kim wanted something hot to drink.

Headlights shone in the front window, and I peered through the blinds to watch as Kim climbed from the car and made her way up the walk. She wasn't wearing a coat but didn't seem to notice the cold. Shuffling feet and stooped shoulders. Not a good sign. Before she could knock or ring the bell, I opened the front door. No sense alerting the kids to her visit; I'd never get them down again.

"Hey, Kim." Should I hug her? Hadn't felt so awkward around a girl since eighth grade. If it hadn't been for Nora's pushing her nose where it didn't belong, I wouldn't have now, either. "Come on in."

"Thanks for letting me barge in like this." She placed her hand on my chest for a brief moment as she passed, but it left an imprint clear to my bones. It didn't mean anything. Just too long since anyone had touched me. It was a powerful thing, being touched. For healing. For comfort. For loving.

Best to focus on why she'd come. "Want some herbal tea?"

Her eyebrows rose. "I didn't take you for the herbal tea type."

"Mama brought it last time she was here."

"Ahh." A brief smile hovered on her lips then melted away as her eyes filled. "I'm sorry. Believe it or not, I have friends I can talk to, but..." Her voice cracked and she covered her mouth.

My gut clenched. Hated feeling powerless. "Come on. We'll get you a cup of Mama's tea." I took her arm and led her to the kitchen. While she sat, I filled the kettle and put it on the stove. Something to focus on besides Kim's tears.

“I shouldn’t have come.” She pushed a hand through her hair with a sigh. “Guess I didn’t realize how late it was until I was pulling into your driveway.”

“It’s fine. Talk to your dad?” I nabbed a mug and dropped a tea bag into it.

“Yep. And Mama, too.” Her mouth tightened. “You said something last night about feeling like there were things Daddy didn’t share. Bits and pieces, I think you called it.”

The kettle whistled and tending to it gave me the necessary minute to offer up a quick prayer. There was a reason the Lord had been bringing the two of us together, even if I couldn’t yet wrap my head around what it might be. Hoped it might be.

“Been regretting it since.” I placed a steaming mug in front of her and sat. “There’s a whole lot of hurt you’re dealing with, Kim. I don’t want to add to it.”

“I don’t think that’s possible. You’ve been nothing but kind.” She cloaked the mug with her hands. “Truth is, I’m tired clear to the bone of bein’ angry with them. I just don’t know how to change it.”

“Holding it in doesn’t help.” I grimaced. “After Callie died, I didn’t know what to feel. Anger. Grief. Guilt—”

“Guilt?” Her eyebrows hitched. “Why guilt?”

There I went again. Opening my big mouth. Kim didn’t come by to talk about my issues, and I wasn’t ready to share them if she had. “We’ll get to that another time. The point I was tryin’ to make was that I bottled up those emotions for so long, it started to take a toll. It was all I could do to put one foot in front of the other. If my folks hadn’t been here to help me out, I don’t know what I’d’ve done.”

She frowned. “But I don’t need help. I’m not raising kids or tryin’ to keep a business afloat.” It seemed as if her entire body went stiff. Knuckles whitened around the mug, back now ramrod straight, and a muscle along her smooth jawline jumped.

“We all need help sometimes, Kim. There’s no shame in admitting it.” Easier said than done. “Things didn’t turn

around for me until I started seeing a Christian counselor. Allowed me to share my feelings in a safe place, and then he helped me sort them out.”

“A counselor?” Her eyebrows drew together. “Thought I had this all worked out in my head until Mama showed up. Then all this anger came rushing back, as if I hadn’t worked through anything at all.”

“So, talking to them didn’t help?”

Her gray-blue eyes met mine—clear as the Caribbean Sea. “It just caused more confusion and doubt. Mama said she’d had a mental breakdown.” Tears filled them again. “But I don’t know if I can believe her. And even if I did, what am I supposed to do with it?” Panic tinged her words.

“You’re scared.” Hadn’t even realized I voiced the thought until her tears spilled over. I reached a hand across the table, and she clung to it like it was the only thing keeping her from being swallowed up in her fear. “Of what, Kim?”

A shrug. “That I wasted my whole life wrapped up in Daddy’s disease. Without him to focus on, I’ve got nothing.” She swiped a strand of hair off her face and sniffled. “All my friends are married with kids. I’ve never even had a boyfriend. Not really.”

It was hard to believe no one had stuck around long enough to see what was so clear to me—that beneath Kim’s stony exterior lay the heart of an exceptional woman. “Seems to me you’re living in a world of fools, then.”

She sucked in a breath and narrowed her eyes. “I’m the fool, Jax. Lived with Daddy until he got sober. I was too ashamed for anyone to see. Or maybe too proud.”

“But two years now, he’s been clean and sober. Why haven’t you given anyone a chance since you’ve been on your own?”

She slid her hand from mine and dropped her gaze. “Guess there hasn’t been anyone worth taking a chance on.” Was she blushing? “I should go. No sense in bending your ear all night

when there's nothing to be done about it." She jumped up and took hold of her still-filled mug.

I met her at the sink, eased it from her hands. The warm liquid sloshed over the edges when I set it on the counter. "Don't you think it's time you started focusing on your life instead of your dad's?" Taking her shoulders in my hands, I waited until she looked up at me. "Might be time to cut the apron strings." Her eyes were so deep, I could've gotten lost in them. Wanted to get lost in them. I don't know if she moved or I did, but our lips touched, soft as a whisper.

"I knew it!"

We jumped apart like we'd been hit with a cattle prod and swung around at Nora's squeal. She stood at the kitchen entrance, eyes as wide as her smile.

"I knew it. Miss Kim *is* your girlfriend."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Kimberley*

Every time I thought about Jax's lips touching mine, my heart did a crazy little jig. Didn't know if it was a good thing or if I was fixing to pass out. Then again, what if it was all in my head, and I was making something out of nothing? Nora might've interrupted Jax moving in to see if I had me a lash caught up in my eye. It happened quick as a lick, and more breath than substance. Maybe I moved toward him. Maybe he never meant for anything at all to happen. It wasn't like I could ask him what his intentions were.

And that's what had me tossing all night in my bed. There was enough drama happening with Mama and Daddy without me adding to it. If I mustered up enough gumption and said something to him, and I was delusional, it could make things so awkward, our friendship would suffer. And I didn't have a whole lot of those to spare. And there was something else. He said something about feeling guilty when Callie died. What was that all about? What reason would he have to feel that way?

I needed someone, other than Jax, to help sort through this thing. On that thought, I soured a tad more toward Mama because she couldn't be that person for me. When guilt nudged me for going there, it took a full ten seconds to realize it was probably from God. Or His Spirit. It's not like I could complain about it to Charlie, who lost her mama when she was just a child, or Bekah, whose mama recently died of cancer. At

least mine was alive, even if the mere thought of her riled me up like a bull ready to charge.

Or maybe the nudge of guilt was something altogether different. Didn't I feel ugly every Sunday morning when I climbed out of bed without the least little intention of going to church? You'd think after twenty years of ditching God, my heart would be too hard to care one way or the other, but you'd be wrong.

I spent the morning doing laundry and going over the design ideas Charlie and I came up with for Sylvie George. If she decided to give me the lead on the project, I wanted to be ready. But my mind kept slipping back to that maybe-kiss with Jax. *What am I supposed to do about it, God?* I grimaced at my computer screen. I had some nerve to give Him a pass then ask for advice. But when Bekah called just after noon, I wondered if maybe God wasn't tons more faithful than I was.

"Hey, Bekah. What's up?"

"You've been on my mind lately, is all. Haven't heard a peep from you in weeks. Are you free to come over for an early supper? Nothing fancy, just homemade chili and corn fritters. Daddy'll be here, and he's been asking about you."

Couldn't help but look up at the ceiling as if I'd find an angel hanging out in the corner. Once Daddy got sober, he'd started hounding me about getting right with God. Said the Lord never gave up on him, and He wouldn't give up on me, either. Figured it was one of his AA mantras and didn't give it much credence. But had to admit it was a little eerie that Bekah called out of the blue on the tail end of my half-hearted prayer. I wasn't about to ignore Him again.

---

Bekah and Mitch lived in a small, brick ranch house just outside of town. An old oak grew square in front of their place with a treehouse that sat about ten feet off the ground. With the trees bare of leaves, a body couldn't miss it. Mitch had built it for their son Caleb right after the boy had come to live with



them. They'd adopted him when his own parents were killed in a car accident. There seemed no end of tragic stories, which made mine seem trite in comparison.

I parked alongside Bekah's daddy's truck and climbed out. Before I reached the porch, Bekah had the door open.

"I'm so glad you could make it." She gave me a quick hug and ushered me inside.

Mitch came from the kitchen carrying a platter of Fritos and what looked to be pimento cheese. "Hey, Kim. Hope you came hungry, 'cause we got a mess of food."

I wasn't the least bit hungry—hadn't been for days—but rather than say so, I smiled at him. "It smells heavenly in here." Chili pepper, corn fritters, and cinnamon-scented candles. A lit Christmas tree, already loaded with wrapped gifts, dwarfed the small family room. John Miller, Bekah's daddy, and Caleb were in serious conversation—or as serious as an eight-year-old could be—in front of the crackling fire.

"Hey, Kimberley." Mr. John threw me a huge smile as I crossed to give him a hug. "We haven't seen you in a coon's age, girl. Where you been hiding?"

"Working, mostly." I ruffled Caleb's hair. "You doing okay?"

Caleb's eyes lit up as he tugged on my hand. "I already got six presents under the tree, and Santa hasn't even come yet."

I widened my eyes. "Six presents. My, but that's a whole lot. Bet you can't wait until Christmas morning." Just like when I was around Nora and Chandler, talking with Caleb had me wishing I'd done things different in the past. If I'd've cut the apron strings (as Jax called them) earlier with Daddy, maybe I'd have me a family today.

I said as much when Bekah and I were doing the dishes after supper. It was the first chance I'd had to talk to her alone, and I was itching to hear her advice about Jax.

"That might be true, Kim, but regret's not gonna get you very far." She rinsed a muffin tin and handed it to me to dry.

“Mama’s back.” I almost laughed when her mouth dropped open, and her eyes went wide as supper plates.

“You talk to her?”

I shrugged. “Ranted is more like it. Been a lot of that going on lately, and I’m fixin’ to have myself a meltdown.” I set the muffin tin aside. “Can’t seem to shake loose of the anger and bitterness toward Mama, and now that she’s back, it’s like it’s sparked all over again for Daddy, too.”

She rested her dripping hands on the edge of the sink and tilted her head to look at me. “You remember a couple years back I asked you about Mama and Daddy offering to let you come live with us after your own mama left?”

Seemed like a lifetime ago, when Bekah and I were just starting to be friendly toward each other. I was too busy back then resenting her for having the perfect family, perfect husband, perfect life. Blinded to the truth of things. “What about it?”

“When we talked that day, it turned things around for me. I was holding Mitch responsible for everything that happened to us. When you said you couldn’t add to your daddy’s shame by leaving him like your mama did, it made me think you were a much more forgiving person than I could be. It shamed me.”

Her words had my face burning. “Turns out I wasn’t as forgiving as I thought.” Proudful had been more like it. “I think maybe I saw myself as some martyr, sacrificing myself for Daddy.”

She took to tackling the dirty dishes again. “You ever wonder how things might’ve been different if you took my parents’ offer of help?”

How often I’d envied Bekah’s life when I was a kid, and I didn’t even know her back then. “More than you can imagine.” Instead, I suffered like I was some sort of Southern Joan of Arc. “I was afraid of what would become of Daddy if I did, though. Now that Mama’s back, he’s vulnerable all over again. Jax says I need to worry about myself for a time and not let this get to me.”

Bekah gave me a sideways glance as she scrubbed a platter. “Spending much time with Jax?”

My shoulders relaxed and a smile tugged at my mouth. “Some.” I took the platter from her. “I think he kissed me last night.” I said it like we were discussing a pie recipe.

“What?” She shook the soap suds from her hands before snatching the dish towel from me. “Way to bury the lead there, girl.”

“Only thing is, I’m not sure.” Could I sound more like a junior high school girl talking up her first crush? “Could be I imagined the whole thing, it happened so fast.”

She dried her hands. “Guess the question is did you *want* him to kiss you?”

I pressed a hand to my chest. “Scares the life outta me, if you want the truth.” Hadn’t even known it until the words blurted from me.

“Why? Seems to me every time you talk about him, your eyes go kind of mushy-like.”

I shrugged. “He’s become a good friend, and I don’t have a whole lot of those. You know how I can be.”

She grabbed hold of my wrist and tugged. “For someone who could pull off a modeling gig, you sure don’t have much confidence.” Wasn’t so sure about the modeling gig, but she was spot on about my lack of confidence. “You need to start letting people in, Kimberley. I tell you this because I’m your friend and I love you. You push people away like you gotta reject them before they can reject you.”

My throat closed up as tears burned at the back of my eyes. She wasn’t calling me on anything I hadn’t figured out for myself. Too little too late, maybe. Another gift from Mama. Abandonment issues. Isn’t that what Charlie called it the one time we talked about it?

“Want my advice?” Bekah’s question was soft enough to disregard if I chose.

I tilted my chin back and looked her square in the eyes. “It’s why I’m here.”

“Tell Jax how you feel.” She squeezed my hand. “And find it in your heart to forgive your mama and daddy, ’cause I guarantee you that it’ll hurt you more than them in the end.”

I twisted my mouth. “And how do you suggest I do that? There isn’t a magic pill for it, is there?”

She gave me a lopsided smile. “You know what you need, Kim. And it’s not a magic pill. Surrender it all and let the Lord heal you.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

She shook her head. “Not easy, girl. But you gotta start somewhere. And if I were you, I’d do it right away. You keep mooning over this, you’re gonna make yourself sick.”

---

*Jax*

Never knew a seven-year-old could have the ability to nag a body to death, but that’s what Nora was bent on doing. She latched onto that brief kiss I shared with Kimberley last night and ran away with it. Had us good and married by the time we got home from church and didn’t let up the rest of the day. By the time I was putting supper together, she was on my last nerve.

“You gotta let it alone, Nora. What happens or doesn’t happen between Kim and me is our business. How many times do I need to tell you that?” The crux of it was, I had no idea if that lamebrain move last night put an end to our friendship or opened the door for something else. I hadn’t worked up the nerve to call Kim—or even text her. I pulled the dish of baked chicken from the oven as the heat from it nearly singed my eyebrows. “Go tell Chandler supper’s ready, will you?”

“But Daddy.” Blue eyes narrowed like she wanted to give me what for, but she instead blew out a breath and stomped her foot.

“No buts. Go.”

She whirled around and huffed her way through the house. If she was this tenacious now, I’d never survive her teenage years. Wouldn’t be the worst thing to get myself married to someone who could soften some of my rough edges. The kids loved Kim, and she had an affection for them. But that wasn’t enough to base a marriage on. And what would Kim get out of the deal except a ready-made family?

“What’s for supper?” Chandler slipped into his chair at the kitchen table. “Can we watch a movie after?”

“Chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans. And no, you can’t watch a movie after. Gotta get you ready for the school week.” Learned the hard way it was best to have the kids get themselves organized before Monday morning hit. Laundry put away, backpacks gone through, and clothes picked out. Weeknights were like an Olympic event—fast and furious.

Nora slid into the chair next to Chandler and plopped her elbows on the table. “I gotta field trip on Thursday, Daddy. You need sign the letter my teacher sent home.” Appeared she was calling a truce. Or maybe it was just a short break. Knowing Nora, she wouldn’t let it go without a fuss.

“I will, baby girl. Soon as we’re done with supper.” I slid their plates in front of them before sitting down with my own. “Chandler, you wanna say the blessing?”

He nodded, folded his hands beneath his chin, and closed his eyes. “Thank You, Jesus, for the food we’re gonna eat. Please help it make our bodies strong. Amen.” Short and sweet. Couldn’t ask more of a ten-year-old boy.

We got through supper without any major mishaps, except maybe Nora turning her nose up at her green beans. I was finishing up the dishes when my phone buzzed. Kim. I snatched it and glanced out the kitchen entry to be sure the kids were out of earshot. Didn’t need Nora to start up all over again.

“Hey, Kim.”

There was a beat or two of silence. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Sounds like you’re whispering. Are the kids in bed already?”

I slipped into the garage where we’d have some privacy. “No, of course not. Just didn’t want Nora to hear us talking. She’s gotten it into her head that we’re a couple. Has us married already.”

Silence.

“You there, Kim?”

“Uh, yeah. About last night. That’s kind of why I’m calling.”

Didn’t figure we could pretend it never happened. Was just hoping for a little more time to puzzle out what I was feeling. “If you don’t mind waiting until the kids are down, you could come over here.” Not that it worked out so well the night before.

“She must’ve really rattled you.”

I huffed out a laugh. “The girl’s like a dog with a bone. Give me a half hour, okay?”

Spent the next thirty minutes tending to the kids while my brain kept flitting back to Kim. And the kiss. It was downright ridiculous for a man my age to get all twisted up over a modest peck like that, but I knew things could go sideways right quick.

By the time Kim showed up, I was a tangle of nerves. Played a dozen scenarios in my head and wasn’t any closer to knowing what to say than when I started. Had the door open and was hustling her through the kitchen and out into the garage before she could open her mouth.

Once we stood out on the stoop, she pulled her arm from my grasp and looked at me like she was questioning my sanity. Easy for her to judge; she didn’t have to deal with Nora.

“Way to make me feel welcome, Jax.” She leaned against the stair rail and folded her arms. The blue of her sweater reflected in her eyes making more obvious the twinkle of

humor. “You can’t tell me one itty-bitty girl has you so ruffled.”

“Sorry.” My neck went a little hot as the truth of her words hit me. “But she’s seriously not gonna let this go. She sees you here again, no telling what she’ll get into her head.”

Her gaze darted away from me, and she swallowed. “You sayin’ you want me to stay clear?”

I leaned against the wall and blew out a breath. “Course not. Just don’t know what to make of that kiss last night is all.”

She snorted. “You and me both. That’s why I wanted to talk to you.” Hugging her arms tighter around her, she glanced at me. “It’s confusing, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “The thing is, you got a lot going on in your life, what with your parents. I have the kids to consider. Although, they like you a whole lot.”

Her lips twitched into a ghost of a smile. “*They* like me. What about you? Did I just imagine you kissing me?”

Rubbing my neck, I huffed out a laugh. “No. Wasn’t much of one, though, was it?”

“If Nora hadn’t come in, would it’ve been different?” Cheeks pink, she looked me straight in the eye.

“I don’t know. Aside from her now hounding me, I’m glad she did.” The words escaped before I could gather up the sense to keep them to myself. “That came out wrong.”

She quirked a brow at me but kept silent.

“Look, Kim.” I held out a hand, and she took it. “I care about you.” More than I thought possible after losing Callie. “But your whole world’s all cattywampus. It’d be easy enough to kiss you right here, but I don’t want you to regret anything when the haze clears up some.”

She squeezed my hand then let go. “You’re right. I’ve been thinking on what you said about me holding tight to the stuff with Daddy when I should’ve let it go a long time ago. Things might be a whole lot different today if I had. I blamed him for everything when it was my choice to stand by him. I’ve been

pushing people away out of fear they'd hurt me, like Mama did." She dipped her head. "Or maybe it was shame or pride or who knows?"

The more she talked, the more I wanted to kiss her again. Her eyes had a soulful pain behind them, and there was an urge somewhere deep inside me to replace it with hope. "You haven't had an easy time of it."

She shifted her stance. "And you have?" Point taken. With a frown marring her brow, she glanced at me. "You said something last night about feeling guilty over Callie's death. I don't get it. What possible reason could you be guilty of anything? I mean, she got sick."

Couldn't quite meet her eyes, so I focused on the windshield of my car parked in the middle of the garage. The cross I had hung from the rear-view mirror right after Callie's diagnosis came in. Reminded me every time I climbed into the car to pray, not that it did Callie any good.

"I'm sorry, Jax. It's none of my business." She pushed off the railing like she was fixing to leave. Wasn't fair that she'd shared every bit of her trouble with me, but I was too ashamed to do the same.

I took hold of her arm as she started to pass by me. "It is your business. At least, I want it to be your business." Even if I didn't understand the Lord's timing, I knew it was perfect. Kimberley was right here for a reason, and I didn't want to miss out on His blessing because I couldn't swallow my pride long enough to open up to her.

"Suppose that's a start." She rubbed her hands up and down her arms. "You think we could take a chance and go inside and finish this conversation? It's cold out here."

It wasn't until that exact moment I realized the truth of what she said. "Of course." If Mama was here, she'd give me a look that'd churn butter for making Kim stand outside like I was ashamed of her being there. Why I was letting my little girl control my actions was beyond ridiculous.



The under-counter lights were all I'd left on in the kitchen, shrouding it in shadows of intimacy. "Can I get you something to drink?" Too bad it took a minute to find my manners.

"I'm good, thanks." She slipped into Nora's chair, and I sat across from her.

It'd be a whole lot easier to bare my soul if I had something else to do so I didn't have to see the condemnation in her eyes. *Man up*. I cleared my throat and folded my hands on the table. "You wouldn't know this, 'cause we didn't really reconnect until after Callie got sick, but I wasn't around much before then."

I kept my head down but could still see Kim shift in her chair. "Where were you?" Hesitancy swirled around her words like she wasn't sure she wanted the answer.

"Working." I flicked a glance at her. "Spent twelve hours a day at the office, including Saturdays."

A line formed between her brows, and she frowned. "Okay." She drew out the word. "But isn't that what it takes to build a practice?"

Rubbing my temple, I glanced at her. "Yes and no. I mean, there was no call to be gone as much as I was. And it wasn't fair to Callie. Wasn't fair to the kids, either."

"That's why you feel guilty? Because you worked too much?" Sounded like she thought I was being ridiculous. "I had me a daddy who couldn't hardly keep a job."

"The thing is, even when I was around, Callie got the short end of the stick." Shook my head of an image of Callie coming to me with symptoms I waved off like she was being a nuisance. A bid to get my attention because I never seemed to have enough time for her.

Kim reached a hand across the table and covered one of mine. "You don't think you're bein' a little hard on yourself?"

It would be easy enough to agree and let it go, but I'd been doing that for too long. "You don't understand, Kim. When Callie started having symptoms, I blew them off. Made her feel like she was some sort of hypochondriac or a whiner. By

the time I paid attention long enough to see there was something to be concerned about, she was too far along. I was so focused on my success, I dismissed her.” Emotion lodged in my throat, and I swallowed it down. How many hours had I spent crying out to the Lord to forgive me for my selfishness? How many times did I ask Him to let Callie live and take me instead?

“You can’t blame yourself for Callie getting sick any more than I can blame myself for my mama having a mental breakdown. I may not be spending much time talking with God as I should, but if I’m gonna believe anything my daddy’s told me, God didn’t take Callie from you because you worked too much. He had that planned out a long time ago. Before the two of you ever met.”

A weight shifted from my shoulders. Wasn’t gone entirely, but it lessened some. A good part of that was knowing Kim knew the truth of things, and it didn’t sour her toward me. I turned my hand over, so our palms touched. “You gotta work things out with your parents, Kim. You don’t wanna live with that shadow hanging over you anymore, do you?”

A quick shake of her head, and she gave me a watery smile. “I’m real tired of bein’ angry. Maybe you could say a prayer for me tonight?”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Kimberley*

**M**y belly was a tangled knot of worms going into the workweek. Couldn't hardly sleep for thinking about Jax and the possibilities. I was probably the only living 35-year-old woman who'd never even had a boyfriend, and just the idea of making a mess of things before we'd even gotten out the gate paralyzed my brain. On top of which, I needed to patch things up with Mama and Daddy, but I didn't have the first notion how to go about it. Pretending all was good between us wouldn't make it so. The walls around my heart needed to come down.

With that in mind, it was a blessing that work kept me out from sunup to sundown over the next several days. In hindsight, I saw it was God's timing. Sylvie George wanted her place finished before her annual Christmas party, and that alone would take a miracle. It'd help some if she'd stopped changing her mind. When I'd grumbled about it, Charlie just laughed and told me she'd dealt with worse. If I wanted to succeed in this business, I'd need to roll with the punches. Never had been my forte, but it was proof right there I needed to start depending more on God's grace than my abilities, such as they were.

Busy as I was, I could've called Daddy, but the next conversation was too important to do over the phone. We'd need to be face-to-face. And if Mama was there, all the better. But before I could even take that step, I needed the Lord to

prepare me. Soften my heart, because it was far too ugly for me to pretty it up on my own.

After a night of tossing and turning, I climbed from my bed still drunk with sleepiness. Since Charlie was waiting on a delivery, I didn't need to be into work until noon and was hoping to sleep in. Maybe it was God tugging on me to surrender. Couldn't remember the last time I'd been on my knees in prayer but figured if the good Lord was going to meet with me, I'd need to humble myself some. Beg forgiveness for the years I'd pushed him aside because I'd been bitter and ungrateful.

Hands folded, I knelt at the side of my bed like I did when I was little and closed my eyes. The first prayer Mama taught me flitted through my mind: *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; please angels watch me through the night and keep me safe till morning light.*

That was just fine for a child, but I was a grown woman with a whole lot of wrongs that needed to be made right. Took me a deep breath and plunged ahead. "Oh, Father, I sure hope You're a sight more faithful to me than I've been to You." The whispered words took hold of my heart, and a fist of emotion took hold of my throat. "I've been blaming you for every wrong thing that's happened to me, Lord. Even when some of them were of my own making. I don't wanna live this way anymore. Oh, Father, please, *please* take away the bitterness I've been clinging to. Help me forgive Mama and Daddy. Wash me clean of my sins. I need the light of Jesus to shine in my heart, Lord. Please." The last ended on a sob as tears poured down my face.

I dropped to the floor and leaned back against my bed, eyes closed. Kept wiping the tears away, but they just kept coming as if the Lord was purging the brokenness from inside of me as I continued to pray. Sniffing, I pushed off the ground, snatched a tissue from the box on my bedside table, and blew my nose. It might've been a weak start, but it was better than none at all. I'd cling to the scripture that talked about even faith the size of a mustard seed holding a whole lot of power.

After taking myself a hot shower and slipping into jeans and a sweater, I glanced at the clock. It was nearly six. Daddy had always been an early riser—when he wasn't drinking. With my heart thumping hard as a bass drum, I picked up my phone and opened up my message app. He'd stopped calling after he and Mama were at the apartment—not that I could blame him. Couldn't reason with a crazy person, and I'd been downright certifiable since Mama showed up.

Me: *Can we meet at Coffee Break?*

It took all of ten seconds for Daddy's response: *When*

A few more back and forth texts, and it was settled. I swiped on a little mascara and lip gloss and headed out the door. Hadn't asked if Mama would be there, but I was determined to behave myself no matter what. *Could use a little help with that, Lord, even though I went off on my own last time.* I prayed myself up all the way to the town square and parked in front of the coffee shop. Daddy's truck was two spots down and empty.

The Christmas decorations trimming shop windows, streetlamps, and maple trees surrounding the courthouse gave the bitter cold an excuse to hang about. What would the holiday season be without it? Couldn't imagine living someplace like Hawaii or Florida this time of year, although from what Jax said his parents weren't complaining.

I hesitated at The Coffee Break door, said one last little prayer, and took a deep breath. A man stepped out, to-go cup in hand, and held the door open for me.

“Thank you.” I slipped inside where “A Holly Jolly Christmas” piped through the speakers and glanced around until I spotted Daddy sitting at the small table in front of the window. Alone. I checked the line of patrons, but Mama wasn't there, either. It was probably for the best. Facing the two of them at the same time might've been more than my puny faith could carry. Since I'd rushed out of my apartment before I could brew a cup of coffee, I was in desperate need of caffeine. I caught Daddy's eye and motioned that I was going

order, but he waved me over. It was then I noticed he had food and drinks on the table.

As I made my way towards him, he pulled out a chair and held it for me. “Went ahead and got you a pecan sticky bun and coffee.” His smile was tentative. Probably preparing himself for me to throw the offering in his face. Poor guy.

“Thanks, Daddy. I could sure use the coffee, but you know I don’t eat breakfast.” I slid into the chair and dropped my bag onto the empty one beside me. The pastry did look delicious, and my tummy grumbled in response. Would be downright unappreciative to not eat it.

“Fresh made.” He patted me on the shoulder before sitting down. “Besides which, I’m hoping it’s a peace offering.” His eyes had shadows under them like he’d aged a few years since we last spoke, and it struck me that I’d done that to him.

“You don’t need a peace offering, Daddy, and I’m sorry I’ve been so ugly.” I picked up the coffee and took a tentative sip. Lukewarm but strong.

“Don’t know how things went sideways so fast.” He frowned. “Guess I should’ve never kept you in the dark about your mama. Wasn’t fair to you.”

“I probably would’ve thrown myself a hissy fit even if I knew her plans ahead of time. That’s on me.” Look at me being all apologetic and gracious. *Thank You, Jesus.*

Shaking his head, he leaned his elbows on the table. “Not talking about recently. I mean from when she left all those years ago.”

I wrapped my hands around the cup. “Don’t know if I’d’ve understood back then what Mama was goin’ through. You did the best you could, Daddy. I mean, the drinking and such... that was real hard, but you’re better now. Right?” *Please, Lord, let him be stronger now than he was when Mama left.*

His eyes reddened some, and there were tears hovering in them. “It was my fault your Mama took off like she did in the first place, Kim.” He pressed a thumb and finger against his eyes and took a deep breath. “You been blaming her all this

time, and instead of telling you the truth, I drank myself into a stupor over the guilt of it. Not only did I fail you, but I failed her, too.”

Reaching across the table, I took hold of his arm. “What’re you talkin’ about? Mama said she had a breakdown and that’s why she left.”

He nodded real slow. “But that’s not the whole of it.” He worked his mouth as if trying to make it form words too difficult to speak. “She...your mama...well, one of the guys I worked with back then, he assaulted her.” He stared at me. “You know what I mean?”

“Assaulted?” A fist squeezed my heart. Keeping my voice low, I shook his arm. “Are you sayin’ Mama was raped?”

He nodded. “And I made it worse when I didn’t believe her. Accused her of cheatin’ on me.” He snatched up his napkin and wiped his eyes. “Didn’t learn the truth of it until she left, and then I couldn’t find her. Didn’t have any idea if she was dead or alive until she called a few weeks back.”

And I added to her pain with accusations and rejection. “Oh, Daddy. What’ve we done?” I was gonna be sick. But Mama came back, so I had to believe she’d be willing to at least hear my apology. “I gotta talk to her. I thought maybe she’d be here with you, but—”

“She’s gone.”

“Gone? Gone where?”

“Back to California. Said she couldn’t add to your heartache, and it’d be best if she just went home.”

Bitterness had turned me into a cold, heartless woman. I was every bit as awful as I’d accused Mama of being. Was it a wonder no one had dared to look beyond the wall I’d built around my heart? Until Jax. He saw something in me I thought had died when Mama left. If I ever had any hope of a future with him, I had to fix things with Mama.

---

*Jax*

Last time I saw Kimberley, we'd agreed the both of us had some work to do in order to let go of the past. She asked if I would pray for her, and I did just that whenever she came to mind—which happened every time I wasn't tending to the kids or patients. Wanted to call her at least a dozen times—had the perfect excuse what with her fixing to work things out with Bob and her mama. Thought maybe she'd've called as soon as she spoke with them but hadn't heard a thing. Could be a little distance would give us perspective.

By Thursday, I was done with distance. I'd promised the kids we'd go to the Dicken's Christmas in Franklin on Saturday, and I was going to ask Kim to join us, no matter what Nora might make of it. Could easily wrap my head around the idea of Kim being a big part of our life. The thought of it, along with the Christmas music piping through the speakers at the office, put a spring to my step.

Was doing a side-posture adjustment on Myra Johnson near the end of the day when Chelsea brought another patient into the room. She got him set up on the other table with a heating pad to his back then caught my attention. Made a point of holding up a Post-It note then stuck it on the counter next to my tablet. Message received.

“Okay, Miss Myra.” I reached down to help her get upright. “You be sure to stretch at least a couple times a day, drink plenty of water, and you should feel relief in the next day or so.”

“Oh, I drink all kinds of fluid.” She fluffed her gray hair into place before standing.

I had to bite back a grin. “We're not talking sweet tea and coffee. Those'll dehydrate you. I mean plain water.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I don't like the taste of water.”

I walked her to the exit, picked up her purse from the counter, and handed it to her. “If your water has a taste to it, you might consider getting a filter or buying bottled.”



She rolled her eyes before taking her purse from me and shuffling out.

I glanced at the note Chelsea left. *Kim Saint John is here. Waiting until you're done for the day.* Guess I wouldn't have to call after all. Last time she showed up at the office, she was a mess of emotions over her mama appearing. A fist of uneasiness gripped my gut. Was it going to be more of the same?

Finished up the last couple patients for the day and headed for the waiting room. Chelsea and the other gals had done a fine job decorating, including an eight-foot-tall tree set in the corner bursting with lights and ornaments. Kim was sitting in the corner chewing on a fingernail, eyes glued to her phone. Her long blonde hair was pulled up in a messy knot that exposed her features. Didn't appear to be joy in her eyes. Fact was, she looked about to jump out of her skin.

It wasn't until I slipped into the chair beside her that she saw me. Jerked a little and dropped her hand to her chest. "You shouldn't sneak up on a person like that."

"Afraid you were in your own little world." I took hold of her hand and stared at the chewed nail. "Nervous?"

She gave me a sad smile. "Agitated, I suppose." She curled her fingers around mine. Fit like it was meant to be. "Promise I won't make a habit of this, but do you have a few minutes to talk?" Worry clouded her eyes, but it was subdued. No underlying emotions.

Wouldn't bother me in the least if she made a habit of showing up here, although it would set the staff to gossiping. "Sure. Come on back to my office." As we walked past the reception desk, I made a point of ignoring Chelsea's grin and wriggling eyebrow. She was as bad as Nora.

There were two office chairs facing my desk. I adjusted them so we could be face-to-face then waved Kim to one while I took the other. The windowsill behind the desk had pictures of Nora and Chandler along with a formal one of Callie and me made at a church Valentine's Day dinner. Kim's gaze seemed stuck on that photo. We'd had history, Callie and

me. The birth of two babies, nights walking them when they were sick, pouring our love over them, plenty of fights and plenty of making up, too. Would Kim be willing to step into a ready-made family or would the ghost of the past hang heavy over her?

“She sure was pretty.” Kim’s gaze slid from Callie to me.

“Yeah.” No denying it. “Not any prettier than you, though.” No denying that, either. “You think it’d be possible to be with someone who had kids with another woman?” I kept my focus on Kim’s face to see if I might catch a clue to her answer before she shared it.

She swept a loose strand of hair behind her ear with a sad smile. “Oh, Jax. You could do a whole lot better than me.”

I leaned over and took hold of her hand in both mine. It was soft and warm to the touch. “Why’d you say that?”

“I messed up something awful.” She sat back, her hand sliding from mine. “I was all the time blaming Mama for bein’ the cause of Daddy’s drinking when it wasn’t at all true.”

Didn’t surprise me in the least. A puzzle appeared a whole lot different when all the bits and pieces were put to rights. “You told me the other night that your mama indicated she’d had a breakdown.”

Kim scrubbed her hands over her face then blew out a breath. “Someone Daddy knew from work attacked her, but when she tried to tell him about it, he accused her of cheating on him instead. Seems she was already struggling with some emotional issues, and Daddy says that his turning on her broke her.” She swallowed as tears swam in her eyes. “All this time, I’ve been cursing her for what she did.”

“You talk to her about it?”

She shook her head.

“Well, why not? You gotta know she’d forgive you, and —”

“She left a couple days ago. Flew back to California where she’s been living.” Kim swiped at the tears. “Didn’t wanna

upset me anymore.”

It seemed to me she could’ve given Kim a little more time, but I thought better of saying so.

“Daddy’s got the address of where she works. Or worked. I’m gonna fly out there and tell her how sorry I am in person. I just gotta finish up with my part of this client Charlie and I have been working with. Another week, I think.”

The thought of Kim going out to California on her own was a pitiful picture. “You don’t think a phone call would do the trick?”

Tears welled again. “Can’t do that, Jax. It seems fitting that I make a supreme effort after bein’ so horrible to her. I’m gonna try and convince her to come back here. For good. If she’s needing a job, I’m sure Charlie would hire her to work at the shop. She’s always looking for reliable help.”

And what if Kim couldn’t convince her? If there was anything more pitiful than the thought of her going alone to see her mama, it was coming back home defeated. At Christmas time. If she wasn’t leaving for another week... “You want some company?”

Her eyes went wide. “Meaning what?”

“Meaning I’ll come with you. We can fly out together. Always wanted to see a little of California.”

Her mouth opened and shut like a fish drowning on the shore. “What about Nora and Chandler? And your practice? And Christmas?” With each question, her voice rose. “You can’t just walk out on all that for me.”

“Don’t you worry about that. I got me a plan.” I took hold of her hands. “But only if you want me to come along. I don’t wanna push myself on you.”

A smile flirted around the edges of her mouth. “I don’t think that’s even possible.” The smile melted away. “But why would you do all that for me?”

“It’s what friends do.” I waited until her gaze tangled with mine. “And like told you, I always did want to see California.”

Her smile bloomed. Wouldn't mind a bit if I could see it every day for the rest of our lives. Now that I'd made the grand gesture, it'd take a miracle or two to actually pull it off. But if this wasn't the season for miracles, I didn't know what was.

## CHAPTER NINE

*Kimberley*

It didn't take but a day or so after deciding to fly out to California to beg Mama's forgiveness that I came to realize the idea wasn't of my making. If I lived to be a hundred, I'd not forget how the Lord orchestrated the pieces that made it all possible.

How else could I explain that everything needed to complete Sylvie George's project came in ahead of schedule? Or the fact that Jax had like a gazillion air miles to more than cover the cost of the crazy-expensive last-minute plane tickets? And maybe his mama and daddy would've craved another Tennessee Christmas over one in Florida without the Lord's intervention, but I was trusting in sovereignty over happenstance. Jax said they jumped at the chance to drive out a week before Christmas and stay with Nora and Chandler.

You'd think seeing the hand of the Lord in my situation, I'd be able to surrender my fear of flying to Him as well. But as Jax and I boarded the plane, nerves jittered in my belly like I was climbing aboard the scariest roller coaster ever known to man. It didn't help that the aisle was too narrow for one body to pass by another, and the seats were close enough whoever sat alongside Jax and me were going to be intimate acquaintances real quick.

"Let me get that for you." Jax took hold of my carry-on and stowed it in the overhead carrier as I slipped into my very cozy seat. He plopped down beside me and wrestled with his seatbelt. "We were lucky to get a window seat."

While other passengers shuffled down the aisle past us, I peered out the minuscule window to see men tossing suitcases onto a conveyor belt like they were hefting bales of hay. “I’m glad I didn’t check a bag.”

Jax patted my hand. “You okay? Haven’t said much since we got to the airport.”

“Just nervous, I guess.” I forced a smile.

“About seein’ your mama?”

“I can only be worked up about one thing at a time, and right now I’m focused on flying.” As I fumbled for the ends of my seatbelt, a big man plopped down in the seat next to Jax.

“Didn’t know you were afraid to fly.” Jax shifted to give the man a little more elbow room.

“Never have before, so I’m not sure yet if I am.”

“Really?” He looked at me like I’d just told him the world was flat.

I scowled. “Apparently you’re not sufferin’ the same fate.”

He chuckled. “Nothing to be ashamed of. It just surprised me is all. And there isn’t a thing to worry about. These planes are built like tanks. You’re more likely to be killed in a car accident than in an airplane crash.”

Thought I was fixing to lose my breakfast when the plane took off, and I couldn’t help but cling to Jax’s hand. People around us were chatting and laughing like they were hanging out in a coffee shop, and after a few minutes I relaxed. One nerve-wracking experience down, and two to go. First, find Mama then convince her I’m not the horrid monster I’d acted like when she tried to talk reason with me.

A quick layover in Denver, and we landed in Sacramento ten minutes earlier than scheduled. This airport, just like the one in Nashville, was teeming with all kinds of people, and I had to skip-run to keep up with Jax’s long legs as I rolled my carry-on behind me. He didn’t appear the least bit lost or confused with all the mayhem going on around us. I’d prided myself on being independent, but I’d never navigated an

airport or rented a car or been in a state I didn't drive myself to. How would I have managed on my own?

I couldn't remember a time someone had taken care of me—at least not since I was a little girl—and a warmth of gratitude brought with it a bubble of joy. The outpouring of it had me reaching for Jax's hand. His fingers wrapped around mine and squeezed as he offered up a sweet smile. Right then and there, the wall around my heart crumbled a little, and it scared me senseless.

Jax put his hand to my back and guided me to the escalator. "We just gotta pick up the rental car, and we'll be outta this crowd. Looks like we'll have to go out the doors of baggage claim to get to the shuttle."

"Are all airports this complicated?" Seemed there were escalators going every which way, and the baggage claim area at the bottom was as big as Costco.

"This is nothing. You wanna see an airport nightmare, try navigating Denver or Dulles in Washington, D.C. This here's a piece of cake."

There was a definite bite to the air when we stepped outside, and I clutched the edges of my sweater together. "I thought California was supposed to be warm and balmy." A gust of wind had a shiver running down my spine.

"You're thinking of Southern California. There's the shuttle." Jax took hold of my hand and hurried us across two lanes of airport traffic.

A half hour later, I slipped into the passenger seat of the nondescript rental car while Jax held the door for me. Couldn't recall any man doing such a thing—not even Daddy. Of course, my experience with men was limited to a few dates that fizzled before they began. Used to be I blamed it on the quality of men in my sphere, but it could be I had a sign as big as life that said *Don't mess with me!* stamped across my heart.

I tucked that away for further reflection as Jax merged onto the highway. There was vast nothingness across the landscape

on either side. No trees. No vegetation. No buildings. Just a whole lot of flat. Why would Mama choose to live here?

“How far is it to Placerville?”

“Little over an hour, I think. When we get through Sacramento, I’ll have you plug the address to our hotel in the map app.”

“You promised to give me the bill for the rooms.” I had me a feeling he was going to be stubborn as a mule on the subject.

“Yes, ma’am.” He flicked a glance at me. “I know you’re hesitant to call your mama, but what if she’s out of town?”

I could hardly blame him for questioning me. What kind of sense would it make to go to all the expense of time and money just to discover Mama wasn’t around to talk to? “Had Daddy call her a couple days ago. He didn’t tell her I was coming, but he did ask what her plans were. Said she was going back to work at the restaurant, so I’m pretty confident that’s where she’ll be tomorrow.” And if her plans had changed? It wasn’t just my time and money at risk. “But I see your point, Jax. I’ll give her a call when we get into town and let her know I’m here and wanna talk.”

He blew out a breath and nodded. “I think that’s wise.”

Traffic through Sacramento wasn’t a whole lot different than Nashville during commute time, but my shoulders tensed up just the same. I’d set up the directions like Jax asked, and he maneuvered through the mess of cars like it didn’t faze him even a little bit. Was this what Placerville would be like—tall buildings and freeways that went every which way?

But once we passed through Sacramento and Folsom, the scenery changed up quite a bit. Rolling hills, not unlike in Tennessee, and lots of oak trees. The town of Placerville was a picture with its Main Street decorated up for Christmas. A tall tower sat smack in the middle of the street with a huge wreath planted up top. More wreaths were hung from old-fashioned lamp posts and every shop along the street had painted windows with snowmen, Santas, or Christmas trees.



“Isn’t this pretty?” I nearly had my nose glued to the window. I could see why Mama liked it here.

“Sure is. Maybe after we check in, we can bundle up and window shop. Find us some supper. What d’you say?”

“Sounds good.”

Jax had booked us each a room at the Historic Carey House Hotel. I figured “Historic” meant expensive. There were antiques in the huge lobby, along with a vintage Christmas tree, and my room appeared to be something Charlie had put together for one of her clients. Didn’t matter if the pieces in here were mass-produced replicas, it was quaint all the same. Yep, this was going to cost me a pretty penny. After all, it was California, and I’d heard a lot of talk about how pricey it was here.

After I freshened up, I checked my watch. Fifteen minutes before Jax would come calling for me. I dug through my purse to find Mama’s number Daddy had jotted down on a piece of scratch paper. The smart thing would’ve been to put it in my contacts, but if she rejected my apology, it would hurt that much more to delete it later.

I perched on the stool at the end of my bed and thumbed in the number. Each ring had my hand tightening a tad more on the phone.

“Hello?” Her voice was a blend of suspicion and hope.

I cleared my throat. “Mama? It’s me. Kimberley.”

There was a beat of silence. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m fine. I was just calling to see if we could meet.” My heart pounded as I waited for her to reject me, like she had every right to do.

“Oh, Kim. Didn’t your daddy tell you? I’m back in California. Left last week. But we can talk now, can’t we?”

“Are you in Placerville? Because that’s where I am. Sitting in a hotel room on Main Street.”

“You’re not!” Her voice broke. “You came all this way to see me?”

A fist of emotion anchored in my throat. How could she be anything but angry at me after the way I treated her? “I did. I was hoping you’d have time to meet tomorrow. I’d rather we could talk in person, if it’s all the same to you.”

A sob broke out on the other end. “It’d be an answer to prayer. But why wait until tomorrow? I’m not working tonight, but you could come in for supper. My treat.”

---

*Kimberley*

The sun had long dipped behind the buildings on Main Street when Jax and I stepped out of the hotel. Without the warmth to take the sting from the cold, I was shivering before we hit the sidewalk. Why hadn’t I thought to bring a coat?

“You look about to freeze to death, Kim.” Jax wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. Anyone else, I would’ve thought it was a sneaky move toward a pass, but I knew better. Jax wasn’t like that. Darn it. He could’ve given Ashley Wilkes of *Gone With the Wind* lessons on chivalry.

“I took it to heart when you said pack light.” Tucked beneath his arm like I was, warmth radiated clear to my bones. Wasn’t sure if it was body heat or being so close to him, I could’ve tilted my head and kissed his jaw. The thought of it had heat climbing up my neck. If I dared to be so forward, what would he do? Step away in horror? Give me a sympathetic smile? Kiss me back? That had my cheeks burning even more.

“Warm enough?” Jax tightened his hold.

“Perfect.” And it was. We meandered down the street toward Bella Cucina’s as Christmas music piped through speakers that must’ve been connected to every building. The thrum of nerves had my stomach jittery, but I didn’t know if it was being snuggled up to Jax or the upcoming talk with Mama. Felt as if I was teetering on a precipice, and things could go either way.

We stepped out into the street and waited for a car to pass before crossing. The awning over Bella Cucina's doors was deep burgundy with the cursive name in white. Could see patrons sitting at candlelit tables through the windows.

As we approached the door, Jax dropped his arm and stepped back. "You go ahead and meet with your mama, Kim. I'm gonna wander around for a bit. Maybe do a little Christmas shopping for the kids."

"What?" How could he leave me like this? "Mama's expecting me to bring a friend."

He held up his hands. "This is something you and your mama gotta work through on your own. I'll only be in the way."

It would be clingy to beg, and Jax was right. This was between Mama and me. "But what about supper? You need to eat."

"How 'bout you text me when you're through hashing things out, and I'll come by then. Worst case, I'll order something to go and take it back to the hotel." He backed up more with every word he spoke till he was nearly in the street. Had to give in for no other reason than to save him from being swiped by a car.

"If that's what you want."

He nodded once. "Good luck, Kim. I'll be praying for you."

Well, heck. Why hadn't I thought of that?

The restaurant had greenery and white lights strung about with a skinny decorated tree in one corner of the waiting area, nearly hidden by all the people standing about.

"May I help you, young lady?" An elderly man with a charming grin stood at the hostess podium. Or, rather, the *host* podium.

"I'm supposed to be meeting someone, but I'm not sure if she's here already." I peered into the dining room, but if Mama was there, it was too dim to recognize her.

“What’s her name?”

“Sue Ellen Saint John.” Maybe. What if Mama had changed her last name? She didn’t have any reason to keep it.

“Oh, yes!” His jovial tone drew my attention. “You must be her daughter Kimberley. Are we waiting on another guest? Your mother said you had a friend accompanying you.”

“He may come later, if that’s okay. He wanted us to have a little time to ourselves.”

“Well, we’ll be sure and save him some food. Come right this way.” He offered an arm, and I hooked mine into it. “I’m a friend of your mother’s and owner of this establishment.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr...er—”

“Sean O’Shay. We’ve been blessed for the last five years to have Sue Ellen work for us.” He guided me through the crowded dining room, patting patrons on the back and asking about their meal as we went. There was upbeat chatter and the clink of silverware set to the backdrop of “O Holy Night.”

“This is the best eggplant parmigiana I’ve ever tasted,” one woman told him.

“I’ll be sure and let Katie know. She added something unique to her mother’s recipe.”

I spotted Mama sitting at a corner table, a tentative smile of greeting wavering on her lips as we approached.

Sean pulled out a chair and held it for me. “Sue Ellen, your daughter is the spitting image of you. I hope you both enjoy your meal.”

Mama fiddled with her silverware and cleared her throat. “Is your friend coming?”

“Maybe later. He doesn’t wanna intrude on our... discussion.” My stomach was so tied up in knots, I couldn’t imagine getting a bite down. Although it did smell heavenly. Couldn’t remember the last time I had Italian food.

“That was thoughtful of him.” She offered a smile. “Are you and him serious?”

Serious? It took a couple of beats before I caught onto the question. “Oh, no. We’re not...I mean...he’s just a friend.” That line was getting a little stale. “But he was kind enough to come all the way out here with me.”

Mama’s brows went up. “That’s some friend.”

I drew in a deep breath and blew it out. We could dance around the reason I was there all night and never get anywhere. Best start with an apology. “I feel just awful about the way I treated you, Mama.”

She pressed a hand to her chest. “You came all this way to tell me that? Could’ve called and saved yourself the expense.”

“No.” I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “The least I could do was say it directly. After all, I didn’t have any trouble being ugly to your face.” Mama’s eyes filled, and tears bit at the back of mine in reaction.

“You didn’t know, Kimberley.” She sighed. “Your daddy told me he kept the truth from you out of shame.”

The mere thought of Mama being cast aside like she was nothing but trash when she’d done nothing wrong made me spitting mad. Worse than that, she’d been assaulted. “I can’t imagine how horrible it must’ve been for you, Mama.” I snatched my napkin from the table and dabbed at the tears in my eyes. “Being abused and left alone like that.”

“I’ve come to believe everything happens for a reason.” She reached out a tentative hand, and I grabbed it like it was a lifeline. I never wanted Mama to feel rejected by me again. “I was a hot mess, let me tell you.” She huffed out a little laugh. “But I had a friend from years ago who’d moved this way right outta high school. We’d stayed in contact, and I called her.”

“Daddy said he didn’t have any idea where you went off to.”

She squeezed my hand. “That was kind of the point. Stella got me some help, and the two of us worked together until she passed some five years back. She was friends with Sean and his family, so they offered me a job here. Simple as that.”

I doubted it was simple at all. But it appeared Mama had been doing good for some time. And although I didn't want to burden her with my doubts, it was keeping secrets that got us here in the first place.

"Something on your mind, Kimberley?" She tilted her head. "You appear troubled."

Now it was my turn to fiddle with the silverware. How could I word it so it didn't come out sounding like another accusation? "You've had a world of hurt, Mama. I truly can't imagine how hard it was, especially when you said it caused you some sort of breakdown."

Mama frowned. "But?"

"But you've been better for a few years now, haven't you?"

"You're wondering why I waited so long to come searching for you?"

I shrugged.

"To tell you the truth, Kim, it was pure fear." She twisted her mouth. "What happened to me? It was no excuse to leave you like I did. Your daddy? Yes. He didn't deserve my loyalty after that. But leaving you in that situation?" She clamped her mouth tight. "There was no call to do that to you. I didn't have any idea your daddy would turn to drinking like he did, but that's no excuse. I deserved your anger. Even your hatred for walking out on you. It took me nearly ten years to work up the nerve to face you."

"And then I was ugly as sin to you." Shame made it hard to look her in the eye.

"You were hurt. Had yourself twenty years to work up a good mad, and I don't blame you a bit for lashing out like you did. Your daddy and I both failed you." Tears trickled down her cheeks, but she managed a smile. "But look at you. You're successful and beautiful and strong. Despite how poorly we messed up. It's by God's grace we can even sit here today and talk like we're doing."

“What about Daddy? How can you even look at him with anything but anger for what he did?”

She shook her head and sighed. “Sweet girl, if I were to hold onto bitterness, it’d do no one any good, least of all me.”

Wasn’t that a lesson I’d been tripping over the last few weeks? But it was a whole lot easier said than done. Might could learn a thing or two from Mama.

“Will you consider coming back?” I squeezed her hand. “We could start over, you and me.”

“On one condition.”

“What’s that?” I’d do just about anything to fix the mess I’d made.

“Introduce me to this special friend of yours. I have me a feeling there’s more to this story than you’ve let on.”

## CHAPTER TEN

*Jax*

I've never been accused of tap-dancing around a subject, but it's what I'd been doing since Kimberley and I got back from California. Not that we'd had a chance to talk, what with her helping her mama get settled, both of us working, and my parents staying at the house until after Christmas. Couldn't hardly tell her over the phone or with a text that I was falling hard for her. Needed to see the expression on her face, read her body language to know the best approach. Unless, of course, she didn't want any part of it. Of me.

Only one way to find out.

I was encouraged when Kim immediately agreed to a night out. Didn't call it a date, exactly. Maybe if she'd known what I was planning, it would've been a different story. Just told her there was something I needed to talk to her about and could use a break from my crowded home. Had to call in a favor to reserve a quiet corner table at Sperry's Restaurant in Nashville—especially this close to Christmas—but it could be my only chance to impress her.

I was fumbling with my tie in front of the dresser mirror when Nora wandered into my bedroom.

“Are you fixin' to go somewhere, Daddy?” She had a gooey candy cane in her hand and the tell-tale red stains around her lips.



“Told you I was goin’ out to supper. Remember?” I scowled at the botched attempt to tie the dang thing and tugged it lose. Never could get it down.

“Nora Jane Jensen.” Mama marched into the room. “What’d I tell you about botherin’ your daddy? You come on out here right now and eat your supper.” She clucked her tongue. “And where in the world did you get that candy cane?”

“Gampaw gave it to me. Said it was for doin’ my homework.” She tugged on my shirt. “Are you goin’ out with Miss Kimberley? Chandler says you are. Does that mean she’s finally your girlfriend?” From her lips to God’s ears.

“How about I answer that question tomorrow? Now you listen to your gammaw and go eat your supper. Let me finish up here.”

“Yes, sir.” There was a definite bounce in her step as she left. Probably figured there was a new Mama on the horizon.

Mine tapped me on the shoulder. “Let me help you with that, Jax.”

I swiveled around to face her and held my chin high to give her room to work. “Don’t know why I’m makin’ such a fuss anyway. She’s not gonna care if I’m wearing a tie or a t-shirt.”

“Sure she will.” Mama straightened my collar before working her magic. Been knotting Dad’s ties for church since I could remember. “You wanna make a good impression on a lady, you give her your best.” She arched her penciled brows at me.

“Yes, ma’am.” Couldn’t argue with her there.

“You’ve known Kimberley most of your life.” Mama finished, and I glanced down at her. “What’s changed? Why now, after all these years?”

“Timing, I suppose.” Turning to the mirror, I checked her work. Perfect, as always. “Wasn’t near her much in high school. Didn’t wanna be. She’d built up a wall thick as Fort Knox around her. No one was gettin’ in. Then when Callie got

sick, she showed up one day with a pot of soup and some kind words. Opened up the door for a friendship. Got to know her differently.”

“Friends is one thing, Jax. You got feelings for the girl?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Our eyes met in the mirror. “Something just shifted over the last several weeks. Maybe my grief blinded me for a time, but now...” I shrugged. “Rather go it alone than without her.” And that was the truth of it. Wasn’t afraid to be alone, and I didn’t need a woman to raise my kids. Life would just be sweeter with her in it.

Kissed Mama on the cheek. “Gotta go. Told Kim I’d be at her place by six, and it’s nearly that time now.”

It took a few more minutes to get out of the house what with Nora hounding me with questions, but I landed at Kim’s door right on time.

When she opened it, her mouth dropped, and her eyes went wide. “Wow. You look amazing.” She plucked at her red blouse. “And I need to change. You should’ve told me we were going formal.” She could’ve been wearing a gunny sack and she’d still be beautiful. Blonde curls framed her heart-shaped face, and it would’ve been easy enough to get lost in those deep gray eyes. What did I care what she was wearing?

“You look great just as you are.”

She laughed. “Yeah, right.” Tugging me inside, she closed the door. “Give me two shakes, and I’ll be ready. Have just the thing.” She escaped into her bedroom before I could protest.

I’d never actually been inside her apartment before—always stopped at the door or she met me in the parking lot. It was small, but it suited her. Throw pillows in vibrant shades added a splash of color to the two white sofas she’d arranged in an L-shape. In front of them was a coffee table with some kind of pinecone and greenery centerpiece, where a trio of battery-operated candles glowed. A small Christmas tree sat in front of the one large window. Unlike our tree, hers was missing the gobs of tinsel Nora had insisted was the finishing touch.

“I’m ready.”

Her breathless voice had me spinning around, and now it was my turn to gawk. Definitely wasn’t wearing a gunny sack. A mid-length, jade green dress hugged every curve while modestly covering her body. It was far sexier than if she’d been showing cleavage and skin, and it took a full ten seconds to loosen my tongue enough to speak.

“That’s a dress.” Brilliant repartee.

With a laugh, she walked across the room to the coat closet by the front door, teetering on heels that, as a chiropractor, I’d advise against. But as a boyfriend—maybe someday a husband—could definitely get behind. She plucked a gray coat from its hanger and handed it to me. “Do you mind?”

“Absolutely not.” I held it open while she slipped into it then scooped her hair from beneath its collar. “You look stunning, Kim.”

“So do you, Jax.”

As she passed by, I caught a whiff of her floral scent. The girl went to the trouble to dress to impress *and* spritzed on some perfume. Didn’t want to be overconfident, but it appeared this evening might turn out the way I’d hoped.

“Where are we going for dinner?” Kimberley trailed one hand on the wrought-iron railing as I walked her down the stairs.

“You ever been to Sperry’s?”

“I’ve heard of it. It’s in Franklin, right?” Her heels clicked on the parking lot pavement as we crossed to my car.

“There is one in Franklin, but the original is in Nashville, or more accurately, Bell Meade.” I opened the passenger door for her. “I got us reservations for 6:30.”

She hesitated before climbing in and wriggled her eyebrows at me with a grin. “Why, Dr. Jensen. Are you trying to ply me with a romantic atmosphere, great steak, and a salad bar?” Was she teasing or being serious?

“I’m gonna try real hard, Miss Saint John.”

The grin melted away, and she fingered my tie. “Look, Jax. You’ve been such a good friend, and I don’t wanna presume anything, so I gotta ask.”

Had me a feeling this was the make it or break it moment. “Anything.”

“Is there something more between us? I mean, is there at least a *possibility* of something more between us?”

I thumbed a strand of hair from her cheek, turning red from the chill in the air. “Do you want there to be?”

She swallowed, her gaze tangling with mine. “Do you want me to want there to be?”

We could play this game all night. Instead, I lowered my mouth toward hers real slow, so she’d have time to pull away. As my lips grazed hers, heat shot through me and landed somewhere in my belly. Her mouth was soft and pliable beneath mine as I cupped her cheek and deepened the kiss. When I finally eased back, it was everything I could do to breathe.

She blinked her eyes open and touched her lips with trembling fingers. “I suppose that clears things up some, doesn’t it?”

---

*Kimberley*

Never before had I realized the front seat of a car could feel so intimate. The darkness enveloped us with only the dash lights glowing as we drove down the highway. My heart was still tripping over Jax’s kiss, and it was all I could do not to run off with the possibilities. It was just a kiss, after all, and as inexperienced as I was, could be I was making too much of it.

“You okay over there?” Jax’s deep voice sent a shiver up my back. How could one little ol’ kiss turn me into a blob of mush? “Are you warm enough? We can turn up the heat.”

“No. I’m fine.” Any warmer, and I’d melt into a puddle on his fine leather seat.

“Is your mama all settled in?”

Now this was a topic I could handle. “She’s gettin’ there.”

“I was surprised she agreed to move into the spare room at your dad’s place.” The words were a shade tentative, like he was feeling me out about the situation. A month ago, the idea of Mama moving in with Daddy would’ve sent me into a duck fit, so I couldn’t hardly blame him.

“You wanna know something even more surprising?” I shifted to get a look at his profile. Strong chin, straight nose, high cheekbones.

“What’s that?”

“They’re still married.” I barked out a laugh. “Can you believe it?”

“Makes sense, I suppose. No contact for twenty years, and your dad didn’t know where she was, so it’s not like he could divorce her.” He reached over and took hold of my hand.

The warmth of it had heat shooting through me all over again. If this is what falling in love felt like, I wasn’t sure I liked it. How was I supposed to make intelligent decisions if the thought of Jax holding my hand snatched away every one of my brain cells?

“So, do you?” He squeezed my hand.

“Do I what?”

He chuckled. “Where’d you go off to? I asked if you thought your parents might get back together again.”

I eased my hand from his. It appeared I was incapable of even the simplest conversation while he was touching me. “Crazier things have happened, I suppose.” Like me falling for Jax after all these years. “Mama doesn’t seem to be holding a grudge against him, but it’d be awful hard to trust after what he did to her.”

Of course, Mama didn't appear to hold onto a hurt like a miser clinging to a gold piece—like I'd been doing all these years. But the Lord was working on me. I'd hardly traveled down that dark and slippery path of anger since Jax and I had gone to California. The few times it snuck up on me, I was reminded of my own failures and that put a halt to it. *Thank You, Jesus. I feel Your presence more every day.*

As we neared the restaurant, I pointed out Sylvie George's house. "It's at the top of that driveway. All you can see from here are the Christmas lights." Appeared to be a gazillion of them outlining the mansion and the landscaping.

"Must've been quite the project. A little different from us peasants, huh?"

I laughed. "My apartment could fit into her foyer." And it was enough for me. It was pretty clear that being rich hadn't brought Sylvie George any joy.

Sperry's didn't appear to be much of anything from the outside. If it hadn't been for the Christmas lights and a crowded parking lot, I might've missed it.

"Wait here while I come around and get your door for you."

Jax reached in and offered a hand. It felt natural as a worn pair of denim jeans as he walked me across the uneven parking lot—unlike the crazy-high heels I was teetering on. I'd bought them—and the dress—on a whim the year before, hoping to be asked out for New Year's Eve. Instead, I'd spent the night at Daddy's playing scrabble and gin rummy. Not even my most pathetic New Year's Eve.

When we stepped inside Sperry's, it was a different world. Low lights, dark wood, and miniature lamps at each table. It was intimate and rustic and romantic with garland and twinkle lights above the bar and a red-on-green wreath above a stone fireplace set in the center of the dining area. The tables were close enough together, it would take seasoned waiters to maneuver.

“It’s beautiful.” And undoubtedly expensive. Bet the staff made more in tips than my entire paycheck working the Grill before landing the job at Charlie’s.

“Good evening.” The hostess at the podium greeted us. “Do you have a reservation?” As if we’d get in otherwise. There didn’t seem to be an empty table.

“Yes. Jax Jensen is the name.” As he spoke, Jax’s hand settled at the small of my back creating a tingle of awareness. He kept it there as we followed the hostess to a cozy corner table. Or as cozy as it could be in wall-to-wall people. It would seem half of Nashville was celebrating the Christmas season.

As we sat, the hostess handed each of us a menu. “Peter will be with you momentarily.”

Jax set his menu aside. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

I wrinkled my nose. “No, thank you. With Daddy drinking most of my life, it put me off of alcohol. But if you want a glass—”

“Nope. Never was big on the stuff. Besides, looking across the table at you is intoxicating enough.” He wriggled his eyebrows and grinned.

I laughed. “Where in the world did you pick up that line?”

“Came up with it all on my own.” His smile faded. “Seriously, Kim, I wanted to talk to you about—”

“Good evening.” A young man stood over us. “My name is Peter, and I’ll be your server. Are we celebrating a special occasion?”

Jax’s eyes met mine and held for a breathless moment. “Only time will tell.”

Peter frowned. Probably uncertain how to respond to Jax’s cryptic answer—one that reminded me that this could be a pivotal evening for us. “Can I start you out with something to drink and maybe an appetizer?”

I smiled at Peter. “I’d love a glass of water with lemon.”

“I’ll have the same.” Jax peered at the menu. “What about an appetizer, Kim?”

A quick glance at the portions sitting in front of the diners around us told me it’d be everything I could do to eat half a meal. “I’m fine without it. Whatever you want.”

“We’re good.”

“Let me tell you about the specials.” He rattled off a few meals with prices that’d cost me a day’s salary. “All our dinners include a breadboard and either a wedge salad, Caesar’s salad or a trip to our salad bar. I’ll go get your waters and give you a chance to look over the menu.”

I flipped mine open the minute he turned away and nearly choked at the prices. “You see what they’re charging for a bacon cheeseburger?” I whispered across the table.

He leaned forward with a grin. “It’s Kobe beef, and most people aren’t comin’ here for a burger. Don’t you worry about the prices, Kim. I think I can afford a meal here now and again. This is a special night.”

“Is it?” He’d started to say something when the waiter had arrived, and I wanted him to finish it. Needed him to finish it, if I had any hope of getting even a bite down.

“I hope so.” He cleared his throat. “Nora keeps asking me if you’re my girlfriend. The kid’s obsessed with it.”

A smile twitched and it was everything I could do to hold it back. “You did tell me a while ago that she’s like a dog with a bone.” Warmth settled in my soul to know Nora was on my team—if there were such a thing.

“Told her I’d give her an answer tomorrow.” His gaze tangled with mine. “What d’you think I should tell her?”

My breath caught while my heart thumped like a jack hammer. “What d’you wanna tell her?”

A grin cut loose. “What d’you want me to want to tell her?” Then he sobered. “All kidding aside, Kim. Ever since Thanksgiving, I’ve had this sense that you’re the one God put



on my heart. I didn't want to say anything until I was sure I could put the past where it belongs. And now I am."

I pressed a hand to my chest. Was this real? "I feel the same way." His past wasn't the only one tripping things up some. "It's crazy when I think about how long we've known each other. Years, actually."

He nodded. "Everything in God's time. But you've been goin' through a lot these past few weeks, and the last thing I want to do is add to the turmoil." He reached his hand across the table, and I slipped mine into it. "And then there's the kids."

What about the kids? "I thought you said they like me."

"They do. They love you. But you've seen the best of them, and believe me, they aren't all kittens and sunshine. Still, they come with the package, so you might wanna think about that before we get Nora's hopes up. I just don't want to see them get hurt again, not after losing their mama like they did."

Of all the things Jax could've said, nothing would've hit my heart more. It was proof that he was a man who loved deeply, walked wisely, and listened to the Lord. What more could a girl want?

"Then I suppose we outta let our waiter know that this is a special occasion after all. It's not every night I'm on a first date with the man of my dreams."

# EPILOGUE

One Year Later

*Kimberley*

A high-pitched screech broke into my dreams, and I snuggled so close to the warm body lying next to me, there wasn't space between us for a thought. I would've drifted back to sleep, too, if it wasn't for the hand trailing down my back and the warm lips at my neck sending shivers of pure desire shooting throughout my body. Four days we'd been married, and it was pure bliss.

"Merry Christmas, babe." Jax nibbled my ear which set me afire all over again.

"Merry—" *Oh my gosh!* "What time is it?" I twisted around to peer at the clock on my nightstand.

"Almost eight. We got plenty of time." He tugged me back down. "Mama and Dad will take care of the kids, and—"

The bedroom door flew open. "Are y'all gonna sleep *forever*? Gammaw says we can't open our presents until you get outta bed."

"Nora!" Jax pushed up on one elbow and glared at her. "What's the rule about privacy?"

"But Daddy, it's Christmas."

He thrust an arm out and pointed to the door. "Unless someone's dead or you're bleeding profusely, you're not to come barging in here." Once she was gone, he flopped onto his back. "Forgot to lock it."

I giggled. “She’s got a point, Jax. It *is* Christmas. You remember when you were little? You ever let your mama and daddy sleep this late?”

“No, but we never went to midnight service when I was little, either. Haven’t even been in bed for six hours.”

“It’s your own fault.” I combed my fingers through the hair on his muscular chest. “That’s what happens when you procrastinate. Shouldn’t wait until the last minute to get the kids’ Christmas presents assembled.”

He looped a strand of hair behind my ear. “Had me more important things to do these last few nights. Like making sure my new wife was properly loved.”

I kissed him long and slow. “She’s loved. Now it’s the kids’ turn.” I climbed from the bed and snatched up my robe from the foot of it. “Besides which, Mama and Daddy said they’d be here by ten for brunch, and I’m sure your mama can use my help.”

Jax let out a big sigh. “Fine. I got something to show you anyway, and it’d be good to do it first thing.”

I tied the sash on my robe. “What’re you talkin’ about?”

“Your Christmas present.” He wriggled his eyebrows. “Gotta take you to it, though. I couldn’t fit it in the car.”

Holding up a hand, I glared at him. “Now hold on, Jax. We agreed, no presents for each other. Not when we’ve got our honeymoon cruise to pay for.”

He tilted his head like he was giving it serious thought. “I’ll make you a deal. If you don’t want your present, then I’ll take it back. Deal?”

Was there a catch? “Promise?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m not fixing to cause problems between us before we’ve been married a week.”

Within an hour, Jax was driving the kids and me to a secret, undisclosed location. What in the world was he up to? I had me a feeling his parents knew because there were

suspicious nods between them and Jax before we left, and when I asked if they wanted to join us, they refused.

I twisted around to peer in the back seat. “Y’all know what your daddy’s up to?”

Chandler shook his head. “But it’s gotta be big, ’cause he promised Nora and me a half hour extra screen time every day we’re on Christmas break if we waited on opening our presents.”

“Aha!” I nudged Jax with an elbow. “Bribery, huh? Is that what you call good parenting?”

He grinned. “Special circumstances.” He glanced in the rearview mirror. “Right, kids?”

For the life of me, I couldn’t figure out what Jax was up to, and it got even more confounding when he turned off Wartrace Pike and had us heading out into the country.

“You’re not even gonna give me a hint?” I tugged on his sleeve like Nora did when she wanted his undivided attention.

“We’re almost there.”

Wasn’t five minutes later, he pulled into a long gravel driveway and parked in front of a beautiful, two-story brick and vinyl house. It was so new, the stickers were still on the arched windows and there wasn’t a lick of proper landscaping. Just maple and hackberry trees growing wild.

“I don’t get it.”

“Hey, Dad. Don’t you have the picture of this place in your notebook?” When I turned to look at Chandler, he had his nose pressed against the window, fogging up a circle with his warm breath.

Jax patted my knee. “Let’s have us a look.”

“What d’you mean?”

He held up a set of keys. “If you don’t like it, we don’t have to buy it.”

My eyes went from the keys dangling from his finger to the house. “This is the Christmas present?”

Nora squealed. “I always wanted to have a two-story house. Is my bedroom upstairs?” She was out the door before Jax could answer.

“You bought this, Dad?” Chandler threw open the car door. “No way.”

Jax started to climb out, and I grabbed his arm. “What’s wrong with the house you already have?”

He cupped my cheek. “You just said it. Not ‘what’s wrong with the house *we* already have?’ You deserve your own home, Kim. A place you can fix up the way you like. Pour some of your creativity into it. It’s a fresh start for both of us.”

“But what about the kids? How are they gonna feel if you take them out of the only home they’ve ever known?”

He chuckled and waved a hand toward them. “Do they look upset?” He had a point. They were running around peering through windows, grins on their red-cheeked faces. “And if you don’t like this one, we can keep searching. I just thought it’d be nice for the kids to have a few acres to run around on, maybe raise some animals.” He squeezed my hand. “What d’you say, Mrs. Jensen? You want to take a gander?”

I pointed to the keys in his other hand. “Where’d you get those?”

“Well, it just so happens one of my patients is the contractor. When I told him I was looking to buy a place for my future wife, he recommended this one. It was a spec home, so he hasn’t even put it on the market yet. But again, if you don’t like it—”

I shut him up with a kiss. When we finally parted, both a little breathless, I rested my forehead against his. “I’m sure I’ll love it. Let’s go check it out.”

We climbed the few brick steps to the wrap-around porch, and Jax unlocked the door. The kids pushed through ahead of us, and as I started to follow, Jax caught hold of my arm.

“Just in case this is the one, we’re gonna do it up proper.” He picked me up into his strong arms, making my head spin, and carried me across the threshold. “Merry Christmas, babe.”

And it was.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jennifer Sienes holds a bachelor's in psychology and a master's in education but discovered life-experience is the best teacher. She loves Jesus, romance and writing—and puts it altogether in inspirational contemporary fiction. Her daughter's TBI and brother's suicide inspired two of her three novels. Although fiction writing is her real love, she's had several non-fiction pieces published in anthologies including two in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. She has two grown children and one very spoiled Maltese. California born and raised, she recently took a step of faith with her real-life hero and relocated to Tennessee.

Visit her at <https://www.jennifersienes.com/>



# ALSO BY JENNIFER SIENES

## APPLE HILL SERIES

[Surrendered](#) (Book One)  
[Illusions](#) (Book Two)  
[All That Glitters](#) (Novella)  
[Providence](#) (Book Three)  
[Saving Faith](#) (Novella)  
[Wish Upon a Star](#) (Novella)

## BEDFORD COUNTY SERIES

[Night Songs](#) (Book One)  
[A Sojourner's Solace](#) (Novella)  
[These Simple Gifts](#) (Christmas Novella)  
[Shadow Dancing](#) (Book Two)  
[Itty Bitty Faith](#) (Novella)  
[Tangles and Tinsel](#) (Christmas Novella)

## COLLECTIONS

[Keeping Christmas: Volume Two](#)