



THE  
*Billionaire's*  
**CHRISTMAS**  
*Wedding*



**LAURA HALEY-MCNEIL**

# THE BILLIONAIRE'S CHRISTMAS WEDDING

A SWEET FRIENDS TO LOVERS ROMANCE

CHRISTMAS BILLIONAIRES

BOOK NINE



LAURA HALEY-MCNEIL

HUERFANO PRESS, LLC

The Billionaire's Christmas Wedding

Book 9 of the Christmas Billionaires Series

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Published by Huerfano Press, LLC

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# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Thank You!

About the Author

*For Colleen*



# CHAPTER 1



On a chilly November morning, Claudia Temples rang the doorbell next to the imposing front doors of Brock Amwell's Aspen mansion and stepped back. A sick dread swept over her. She was about to start her job as a personal assistant to one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen. How she got this job puzzled her. She looked nothing like the svelte models he'd been photographed with before his accident, but she wasn't there to date him. He needed help, and she'd work hard to make his life more comfortable.

That he couldn't see her was a relief. Would he have hired her if he knew what she looked like—if he knew she wasn't model beautiful?

Maybe not. His manager, Uma Kamil, had been present during each interview that Claudia had with Brock. Someone as good-looking as Brock probably would've asked his manager what she looked like. What had he said when his manager had told him she wasn't thin, and that she wore a wig?

Why did she care? She had a job despite it being temporary. She'd make sure Brock lived as close to a normal life as possible until he underwent the experimental surgery that would restore his sight.

The door opened. Claudia's heart pounded harder. Brock's manager, Uma, looked Claudia up and down before pasting a wide smile into place. Her eyes showed her displeasure at the decision Brock had made—that he'd decided to hire Claudia.

“Claudia, darling, how good to see you,” Uma’s greeting sounded as if they were lifelong friends, which made Claudia frown.

“Fine.” Claudia smiled at the woman. “I hope you are.”

“Can’t complain.” Uma looked as if she were trying to think of a reason *to* complain. She lifted her shoulder.

When Claudia had interviewed with Brock, Uma treated her as if she were an actress who was wrong for a part. She was certain Uma told Brock not to hire her. Apparently, Brock hadn’t listened to her. When the agency told her Brock wanted her to be his assistant, she had to sit down. She never expected to get the job. There had to be several candidates who vied for the position. Who wouldn’t want to work for this handsome man? She’d even asked the employment agent why she’d been selected.

“He was looking for someone who would put his interests first.” The agent gave a dry laugh. “He’d been surprised that you didn’t know who he was, which may have had something to do with his decision. Maybe because of that he believed that you wouldn’t use the position to promote your own interests.”

“I’m not an extreme sports enthusiast.” Claudia was still surprised Brock thought she was the right person for the job. “If that doesn’t matter to him, then I’ll accept the position.”

She’d spent the next day sitting in the employment agency’s office with Uma and signing documents promising she wouldn’t reveal any of Brock’s personal information. Uma’s voice was pleasant, but her eyes glittered as she explained that Claudia was never to talk to any reporter about Brock. She would never do that, but Uma’s warning still made her nervous.

What reporter would want to talk to her? Maybe that was why Brock had hired her. She wasn’t cute and bubbly—not the sort of person one would expect to be seen with handsome and charismatic Brock Amwell.

“Come in. Come in.” Uma stepped to the side. With a sweep of her arm, she gestured Claudia into the entryway.

Claudia picked up her luggage and moved inside. She looked past the welcoming arms staircases to the great room with its vaulted ceiling and view of Buttermilk Mountain. She had been to Brock's house several times for interviews, but the magnificent mansion never ceased to amaze her.

"Brock will be along shortly." Uma's smile was brief before she turned away and strode across the terra cotta flooring to Brock's home office that was situated behind one of the staircases. "That will give us time to chat."

"About what?" Claudia didn't move. She'd signed all the necessary paperwork. She knew what was expected of her.

Uma jerked to a stop and turned to Claudia. The flash in her eyes disappeared. "Claudia, darling, I want to make sure you're comfortable. This little alone time will be divine to get to know each other better. After all, we will be working closely together."

"That's the first I've heard of that. I appreciate your concern, but I'm comfortable." Claudia's distrust kicked in.

Powerful people always picked her as an easy mark to comply with their requests. At one time that was true, but not anymore. Her compliant attitude ended outside the private office of the longest-serving United States senator. Other things ended that day as well.

Claudia smiled at the woman who seemed to be as cunning as she was striking. "I can stand here until Brock is ready to see me."

"Let's not start things on the wrong foot." Uma's eyes dilated making Claudia wonder if anyone had ever refused one of her requests.

"That's the last thing I want. I'll wait here." She spoke more calmly than she felt. "What did you want to say to me?"

Uma frowned before regaining her cool. "I want to make sure—"

A tap sounded from the hallway behind the staircase. Brock, tall and powerfully built, appeared in the opening, his white cane moving back and forth. Claudia swallowed at his

presence that was commanding even in this spacious foyer. Everything about him exuded overpowering masculinity.

The tip of the cane touched the leg of the pedestal table. Claudia set her suitcase on the floor and stepped toward Brock.

Uma reached for her. To stop her? Claudia moved out of her reach. She moved to Brock's side. She didn't miss the quiver of his nostrils. She swallowed hard. Had he caught her scent?

"Claudia." His chiseled features broke into a smile that pressed thumbprint dimples into his clean-shaven jaw. He turned to her. "I heard you and Uma talking. I trust you had a nice chat."

"I'm sure we would have but as it turned out, it wasn't necessary." Claudia softened her tone. She felt Uma bristle.

"Good. I hadn't meant to keep you waiting, but being blind sometimes slows me down." He laughed as if he'd cracked a joke.

Claudia felt sad. Did anyone get used to being blind? Or any handicap? What about her handicap? Did people look at her and wonder why she couldn't control her weight? At least they thought she had beautiful hair. If they only knew.

"I've lived here seven years so you'd think I could find my way around my own home even in the dark." His voice was light, but that still didn't prevent Claudia from pressing her lips together.

She was sorry he was blind. There was so much to see. She forced a smile, then wondered why. He couldn't see her. Would Uma tell him she hadn't smiled at his jokes? As much as she wanted to look at Uma, she kept her gaze on Brock. She felt Uma watch her.

"Not even a snicker," Brock said on a rough exhale. "I guess I need new material."

"I'm sorry." Claudia's heart sank. She was starting on the wrong foot with Brock and Uma, his trusted confidant.

“There’s no need to apologize.” He waved dismissively. “I don’t expect you to laugh at something you don’t consider funny.”

Claudia was at a complete loss for words. Brock was an extreme sports athlete. She hadn’t expected him to have a sense of humor, but why wouldn’t he? He was human. He would want to laugh and joke. Because of his accident, did he want to make people laugh to lighten the situation? Did making people laugh prevent them from feeling sorry for him?

“Brock.” Uma took a step toward him. “I can set Claudia up in your office to work on those projects we discussed while you and I review your publicity schedule.”

“Let’s not talk about that now,” Brock said, and Claudia noticed he didn’t face Uma. Rather he turned his ear toward her. “Because Claudia just arrived, it’s a good time for her and me to get to know each other better.”

Claudia tried to calm the tension that stiffened her back. He was relaxed and charming. She would work closely with him, so naturally, he’d want to get to know her better. She shouldn’t be concerned.

“Good idea.” Uma jerked her gaze to Claudia. Her tone was compliant, but lines pressed into the corners of her eyes.

Brock couldn’t see that, but the tip of his head signaled he’d noticed a change in his manager’s tone. Claudia didn’t know much about the blind but had looked up information on the internet. Because the blind functioned without the sense of sight, they developed their other senses to replace that loss. Brock was using his hearing to sense other people’s reactions. He seemed to do well in that area.

“Let’s start with getting Claudia settled in her room.” Brock pulled his phone from his pocket. His hands slid over the screen which showed icons but also had a screen protector with patterns of raised dots—braille.

He touched the screen. A tall man whom Claudia had met during her last interview stepped into the room.

“You’re back.” The man smiled when he saw her. “I guess we didn’t scare you away.”

“Hello, Russell.” Claudia laughed more from relief. He had a face that defied age, though Claudia thought he was close to her age—mid-to-late twenties. His warm greeting took the edge off her contentious conversation with Uma. “And no, you didn’t scare me away.” She hoped she didn’t scare easily.

“Russell, can you take care of Claudia’s luggage?” Brock asked.

“Sure thing, Boss.” Russell picked up the suitcases that she’d set near the front door.

“After you’re settled, I’ll see you in my office.” Brock turned his head to her as if he could see her.

Looking into those gray eyes, Claudia was glad he couldn’t see, but he had to know what she looked like. Uma would’ve told him. The way the manager looked her up and down was clear that she didn’t approve of Claudia’s appearance. She was amazed Uma’s opinion hadn’t influenced Brock’s decision to hire her. That didn’t mean Uma wouldn’t quit trying. Just because Claudia had been hired didn’t mean Brock wouldn’t change his mind. She liked Brock. She hoped she’d continue working for him until his surgery.

Once his sight was restored, there was no reason for her to stay. Uma had made that clear during her last interview. With any luck, her next job would be confirmed by the time she left Brock’s employ.

“I’ll hurry,” Claudia said as she fell into step behind Russell.

“No, take your time.” Brock’s head turned as she walked past him.

When she hesitated, he smiled. He had sensed her hesitation. She had to remember to conceal her emotions. Brock was picking up everyone’s reaction to him.

“I want to make sure you’re settled before I put you to work.” He grinned.

Claudia smiled, which he seemed to sense.

“Thank you,” she murmured. She rushed to the staircase that Russell climbed and followed him.

Even before she reached the top step, she heard Uma step to Brock and speak to him in low tones.

“She’ll do fine,” Brock said. There was a tap as if he’d walked away from Uma.

Claudia didn’t dare turn around. She knew Uma was scowling and watching her climb the stairs.

Russell moved down the gallery to a hall lined with museum-quality art. He stopped in front of the door that led to the suite of rooms where Claudia would stay while she worked for Brock.

How long would that be? Would Uma convince Brock to fire her or would her performance convince Brock he’d made a mistake when he hired her?

*Oh, Lord, please help me to be the best assistant Brock’s ever had.*

The prayer was a sharp jolt. When was the last time she’d thought to include God in anything in her life?

That answer brought tears to her eyes. It was the day she’d gone on that wild errand for Senator Silas Blocksdale. Too late she’d learned he didn’t want her to deliver any bill to the Oval Office.

When she worked for the senator, she’d been svelte and had waist-length blonde hair. She hadn’t looked like that in seven years.

## CHAPTER 2



Brock knew he didn't look at Uma when she stepped to him to voice her displeasure with his latest hire. His doctor had told him that without his sight, he would depend more on his hearing. When Uma spoke to him, he turned his ear to her.

"I don't know why you hired her." Uma's tone was low but conversational as if they were discussing his latest endorsement.

"Didn't we have this conversation already? Like numerous times?" Brock felt Uma tense.

"And you ignored me each time," Uma said, her voice calm.

Brock didn't want to rile Uma, but she was an easy mark. She ran a successful company where she and her team managed celebrities. She was hired because she knew which people should surround her clients. That Claudia didn't have the attributes Uma preferred—beauty and charm—disqualified her.

He had hired Uma's recommendations before and that had proved disastrous. The women were beautiful, at least he sensed they were, but that was where the qualifications ended. He wasn't looking for a wife. He needed someone to assist him in his daily needs. He'd learned to walk through his house, but he didn't plan to live the rest of his life confined in this mausoleum.



His surgery was scheduled for later that month. He couldn't wait to regain his sight. It would mean he wouldn't need Claudia anymore, but that had been explained to her. She had said she understood. Once he could see, he wouldn't need an assistant. He liked his independence and preferred taking care of his own needs.

"We did it your way, and it didn't work out." Brock felt Uma jerk. He'd learned long ago that blunt talk was the only way to get Uma's attention.

"Once it didn't work out." Uma's voice was tight.

"Three times." Brock reined in his patience. "Those women broke their contracts by leaking to the press that I had more than a working relationship with them. I didn't want to take them to court, but I felt it was the only way for them to learn contracts serve a purpose."

"They know it now," Uma said airily. "That still isn't a good reason to reject the perfect candidate I found for you."

"Perfect because she was beautiful?" Brock arched a brow and wished he could see Uma's face, but he knew her well enough to imagine it. She'd managed his career since he'd burst onto the scene as a high school dropout who snowboarded the back bowls near Telluride, Colorado.

His parents, both medical doctors, had been furious when he'd announced he didn't need to graduate high school. He hated school, and he loved to snowboard. He'd seen what education had done to his parents. They'd built a practice that catered to the wealthy who populated Colorado's ski towns. They had enough money to make sure Brock and his younger sister and brother had everything they needed except what they wanted—time with their parents.

It was during one of his parents' parties that Brock met Uma. When she learned he was an extreme sports athlete who jumped from helicopters to snowboard down mountains, she convinced him to let her represent him. She drafted the contract.

Despite Brock's parents' reservations, he let Uma schedule his sporting events, sponsorships and what parties he should attend. Even though he owned this Aspen mansion, he'd spent his life on the road. His carefree life ended when he made a decision that changed his life forever. The next day he was caught in an avalanche that cost him his sight. How he survived the accident had been God's grace. The doctors were amazed.

"Of course, Tiffany was beautiful," Uma snapped. "And she was qualified. More than this person."

"She has a name. It's Claudia," Brock said. "And as I recall, Tiffany's qualifications were lacking in several areas, starting with getting up before noon, and she didn't know how to snowboard. Claudia does."

"Fine." Uma backed off—for now. "Did you have a chance to review the schedule I sent you?"

"Yes, my computer's audio read it to me," Brock said. "It isn't what I wanted."

"I'm working on those other venues, but in the meantime, you need to stay in the limelight. Because of you, the snowboard industry has burgeoned. Every kid wants to be Brock Amwell. With these sponsorships, you'll make millions."

"Which means you'll make millions." Brock moved down the hallway that led to his office. He swished the cane back and forth, though he sensed how much distance to keep between himself and the walls.

"Of course I will. That's my job. You signed the contract," Uma said. "Where are you going?"

"To my office. I don't want to have this conversation in the foyer," Brock said. He heard Uma's heels rush to keep up with him.

"So say, 'Uma, let's go to my office and talk,'" she said.

He exhaled roughly. Sometimes talking to Uma was like talking to his parents, who still tried to convince him to return to school. He was making millions from sponsorships and

competitions, and they still wanted him to at least get his high school diploma.

“Uma—”

“Yeah, I know.” She sounded exasperated.

He stifled a laugh. She had been a good friend, even if they didn’t always agree on the direction she wanted to take his career. Lately, their differences had been considerable. Not just with the assistants she’d hired, but with his publicity engagements.

When they entered his office, he felt his way around the desk and sat in his padded chair. Behind him, the glass wall faced Buttermilk Mountain. His chest tightened remembering the view with skiers and snowboarders zipping down the slope. Sometimes, he wished he could be with them. Since the decision he’d made, he knew his life was heading in a different direction.

“I had asked you to contact the Christian athlete ministries to see if I could speak at their youth groups. None of them is on the list you sent me.” Brock listened to Uma shift in her seat.

“Brock.” She drew out his name. “We’ll get to those. Right now, the sponsorships are important.”

“Why? Because they pay?” Brock tried to control his temper. It was something he was still learning since he’d committed his life to Christ.

“Of course, they pay.” Uma sounded confused.

“I don’t need the money.” Brock softened his tone. “Thanks to you, I’ve done well, and I’ve made great investments. I’m set, and I’m grateful to you for that. Now that I know there’s more to life than snowboarding the back bowls, I want to spread that message.”

Uma exhaled. She really believed this was a phase for him. But he’d never had a phase. Snowboarding had been his life. He’d never strayed from that. Not even women distracted him from his need to find the most dangerous mountain to snowboard and compete against other risk-takers. He’d

climbed the ranks quickly and became the person to beat. Another snowboarder had yet to match his skill.

“You say that now, but things could change,” Uma said gently.

Brock tightened his mouth. It was the tone she used when she knew she had the argument that would convince him to her way of thinking.

“When they change, I’ll deal with it.” He wouldn’t deal with it alone. He had always thought he was alone, but now he realized God was at his side. “I have a message that will resonate with the kids. I need that chance to share it. If you won’t help me, then—”

“I’ll help you,” she said. She wouldn’t want to lose him as a client. She would think he’d grow tired of his commitment to Christ. He’d never convince her he was in this relationship to stay. The only way she’d realize that was by his actions. She’d been in this business too long. She was hard and jaded, though Brock was certain she’d never been warm and fuzzy.

He never thought he’d accept Jesus as his Savior, but he’d heard the right message at the right time. God’s timing was everything.

## CHAPTER 3



Claudia thanked Russell for showing her to her suite.

“No problem.” His smile was blindingly white. “If you need anything, let me know. Brock did tell you about the app we use to communicate with each other.”

“Yes, thank you. I downloaded it.”

“If you need anything else ...” Russell arched a brow.

“I’ll let you know.” Claudia smiled. She was glad Russell was easy to talk to.

He nodded.

A middle-aged woman moved into Claudia’s suite. Her smile warm, she greeted Russell. Stepping to Claudia, she extended her hand. “I’m Glenda. I’ll help you get situated.”

She picked up Claudia’s suitcases and carried them to the double doors on the far side of the room. Claudia was surprised to see it was a closet—more than a closet. It looked like a store with racks and shelves filled with clothes, shoes and accessories.

“Are those for me?” Claudia stammered.

“What?” Glenda looked over her shoulder at Claudia and frowned, then she laughed. “Yes, but just to get you started. I guessed at the sizes so if they’re wrong, let me know, and I’ll order what you need.”

Claudia should’ve been grateful. Instead, she felt embarrassed. She never shopped unless she was in dire need.

In college, she shopped all the time. She'd been a size four. The perfect size for the latest fashions. Everything looked great on her. Her mother loved showering her with clothes and shoes and bikinis. Claudia had a great figure. When she went to the beach, she was the girl the guys watched. Thankfully, her friends weren't jealous. They liked her for who she was—a smart woman who knew what she wanted out of life.

"I'll let you ladies get settled." Russell gave an exaggerated bow and smiled.

"Thanks for showing me to my room—er, suite," Claudia said.

"Anytime." Russell winked, then strode from the room.

Claudia stepped cautiously to the closet. She couldn't see Glenda but heard her moving in the back. Claudia took a breath, then stepped into the closet. She stifled a gasp. It was bigger than the Denver apartment she'd rented after she left Washington, D.C. Without thinking, she fingered a silk blouse with appliqued cuffs. It was like a blouse she'd bought when she was working as an intern on Capitol Hill.

She shut her eyes and pulled her hand from the blouse. Those should have been days that she remembered with fondness. Instead, they were her nightmare.

"You don't like that one?" Glenda's voice brought Claudia back to the present and away from the grunting and the grabbing that still haunted her memory.

"What?" Claudia looked from Glenda to the blouse. "Oh, no, I like it fine. It's beautiful. It reminds me ..." Tears choked her voice, and she dropped her gaze. "It's nice." She could barely speak.

"Oh, hon." Glenda wrapped an arm around Claudia's shoulders. "Is Uma being tough on you?"

Claudia's face came up.

"Don't mind her. She treats everyone that way." Glenda snorted a laugh. "She thinks she's the smartest person in the room, and judging by her track record, I think she's right, but

Brock stands up to her. She doesn't like that, but he's convinced you're the right person for this job."

"What?" Claudia dragged out the word. She hadn't realized Brock and Uma were at odds because of her. "How do you know that?"

"I hear things. You hear a lot when you work for the people in this town." Glenda tipped the corner of her mouth. She stepped to Claudia's suitcase and pulled out the pants and tops Claudia had purchased at a discount store.

Claudia nodded. She'd never worked for anyone rich except for the senator, but she'd worked in his office, not his home. Would that have made a difference?

"I should put my clothes away." Claudia felt embarrassed when Glenda slipped one of her blouses onto a wooden hanger that had to have cost more than the blouse. Glenda treated Claudia's clothes as if they were haute couture. Claudia didn't know if she should laugh or cry.

"This is my job." Glenda grinned. "Go downstairs and talk to Brock. I'm sure he has a lot to discuss with you."

"I'm sure you're right." Claudia still felt guilty that Glenda was putting her cheap clothes away. "Thanks for unpacking my suitcases."

"Like I said, it's my job." Glenda slipped another blouse over a hanger.

Claudia stepped into the private bathroom and stared at her reflection. Her face was puffy. From the drive she had taken from Denver, or because she felt like a fraud working in this beautiful mansion and for a handsome man who didn't know what she looked like? Did it matter?

She splashed water on her face, then blotted it with a fluffy white towel that felt like velvet. She had thought to change her clothes, but it was almost dinnertime. What would that be like? Would she eat with Brock? Would Uma be there?

Turning from the mirror, she moved out of the room and down the stairs to Brock's office. She should be able to find it.

Every time she came to the house, she talked to him in that room.

Downstairs, she crossed the foyer to the hallway behind the staircases. Voices coming from the open door at the end of the hall raised then lowered. She slowed her pace. It sounded like an argument. Brock's voice was level, but Uma sounded contentious.

"It's okay, Claudia," Brock called out to her, making her wonder how he had heard her. He had a very acute sense of hearing. "You can come in."

Uma appeared in the doorway. At first, she just stared at Claudia, then she smiled.

The tension in Claudia's chest eased. Uma may be a bully, but apparently, she had a modicum of compassion. She returned the smile. When she reached the door, Uma stepped aside.

"I have a dinner meeting, so I'll see you tomorrow," Uma said.

Claudia didn't know if Uma was talking to her or Brock. Maybe to her. Brock had to know her schedule.

"All right." Claudia turned to her, but she'd already left.

Would she and Uma ever be friends? Did Uma make friends? She seemed more interested in her career than people, except for Brock, but he was the one who made her money.

"Have a seat." Brock gestured to a chair as if he could see it. "I didn't get a chance to ask you about your drive." He directed his sightless gaze at her and steepled his fingers.

"It was nice."

"Good." Brock leaned back. "I wanted to discuss the events we'll attend. Uma's scheduled me to speak at some sponsorship events. Because the ski season is gearing up, some of the companies that have sponsored me have scheduled me and other extreme sports athletes to talk and greet fans at these events."



Claudia nodded, then remembered he couldn't see her. "Yes, you had mentioned that the last time we met."

"I knew you'd remember." His smile was perfect, with white teeth flashing in his tan face. He looked like he'd just stepped off the slopes. But he'd been injured when he was competing in an event in New Zealand last spring. "We'll leave the day after tomorrow. We'll head to Tahoe. They're hosting the World Cup this year."

Claudia made a mental note to research extreme sports events for the season. She didn't know how long she'd work for Brock, but she wanted to appear knowledgeable.

"I trust you've checked out the closet in your suite," he said.

Was that why he'd had someone deliver all those clothes for her? Had he thought her discount store wardrobe not good enough for the events they'd attend? But he couldn't see what she wore.

Uma could.

"The clothes look fine ... great. I'm sure what's available will be fine for me," she said, then thought she should add, "I'll try on what I plan to pack."

"Glenda will take care of the packing," he said.

He had someone on his staff to do everything.

"I'm planning different events this year." The tone of his voice changed, making her wonder what he was about to tell her. "You may have heard Uma and me discussing them."

"I'm sorry, but I didn't—"

"That's probably for the better." He waved away her explanation. "I want to get involved with the Christian athlete groups. Uma will be contacting some groups to find out about their schedules and if they want me to talk to their members."

Claudia almost choked. Brock was a Christian? She hadn't read that anywhere on the internet. Did anyone know?

“I wanted you to be aware that we’d be attending some of those events,” he said. “Uma and I have a difference of opinion on my involvement.”

Did that mean she wanted him to speak, and he didn’t? Somehow she believed it was the other way around.

“That’s fine,” she said. “I attended those groups in high school and college.”

“Uma told me you had postings to that effect on your social media sites. What sport did you play?”

“I swam.” She hadn’t thought about that in years. “I competed in freestyle, but that was a lifetime ago.”

“Now I remember. Uma did tell me that.” His smile was broad. He looked impressed. “You don’t swim anymore?”

“No,” she said without enthusiasm. Because she didn’t swim anymore, she didn’t talk about it. When she competed, she’d had a long, lean body and a kick that shot her halfway across the pool with one movement.

Brock pressed his lips together and nodded. Claudia stifled a laugh. Had she impressed Brock Amwell?

“And, yes, I am impressed,” he said as if he’d read her mind.

Her face went hot. “Oh, thanks,” she rasped. There couldn’t be much that impressed one of the most famous athletes on the planet.

“If you want to work out, you’re welcome to use the fitness center. It’s on the upper level behind the backstairs. Dirk is my trainer, and he helps me,” he said.

She thanked him again. She wasn’t a fan of exercising but her doctor had told her to keep active.

“Now, about tomorrow,” he said. “You and I will talk to my pilot in the morning and make sure everything’s ready for the trip. The next day, we’ll fly to Tahoe for the sponsorship, but there’s also a Christian athlete event I want to attend. I may not speak since they aren’t expecting me, but it will be good to see some old friends and make new ones.”

Claudia liked the light in his eyes. She would have thought that because he was rich and famous, he wouldn't be interested in the salvation message. Instead, he seemed excited to see his friends.

"I'll make sure I'm ready for whatever comes," she said.

"Good. I don't like to sit still," he said.

A notification sounded on Claudia's phone. She glanced at the screen. "It appears dinner is ready."

"Perfect timing." Brock rose and picked up his cane. "We can finish our conversation while we eat."

Claudia smiled and rose. She waited until he moved around his desk and walked toward the door, then followed. She had known this job would be different. Her heart beat a little faster. What she hadn't expected was for it to be exciting.

When she went to Washington, D.C., she had thought that would be the most exciting time of her life. It had turned into a nightmare that still haunted her when she tried to sleep.

She prayed that God would keep His hand on her—another shock because it had been a long time since she'd prayed.

And she prayed that her time with Brock wouldn't be a nightmare.

## CHAPTER 4



*B*rock couldn't sleep. Whether he closed his eyes or left them open, he saw nothing. The pictures playing in his mind were memories, something he grasped when darkness pressed in on him. He missed the sunshine and the laughter and snowboarding at top speed down a mountainside. Those were the days when he won at everything.

When he was caught in the avalanche, when he lost his sight, the foreign feeling was a shock to his system. He had dedicated his life to Christ. That was the day before the accident. Why had God let this happen?

Slowly, he was beginning to understand. Could he serve God better with his eyesight or without it?

He also missed seeing beauty. Snowboarding down a mountainside, seeing gently falling snow, jumping off a cliff, and seeing the world rotate around him. He'd never appreciated that beauty until he couldn't see it.

The women had been beautiful, too. He had never had a shortage of women fawning over him. He loved looking into their beautiful eyes, feeling their soft skin, catching the scent of their natural fragrance. Being with them had never been fulfilling. That was when he'd been searching for something to fill the hole in his heart. When he realized only God fit into that hole, he felt peace. Then everything changed.

He still liked being around women, hearing their sweet voices.

Claudia had a musical voice. It was cultured and sweet, not like the rich girls who hooked up with the athletes. There was intelligence in Claudia's voice. Brock had noticed it the first time he spoke with her over the phone. A woman with that dulcet voice should have been beautiful. He was surprised when Uma told him Claudia was far from beautiful, though she didn't elaborate.

Claudia's lack of beauty annoyed Uma. Beautiful women attracted the right press coverage.

There was something beautiful about Claudia, but Brock couldn't define what it was. Still, he sensed it when she entered a room.

He climbed out of bed but didn't reach for his cane. Moving to the glass wall that overlooked the ski slope, he stopped just before reaching the window. He loved feeling the chill emanating from the glass. It made him feel as if he were outside.

How long had it been since he'd been outside enjoying the snow and smelling the pine trees? It didn't matter that he couldn't see them. He had to be outside.

Uma didn't want him outside. She was afraid he'd hurt himself. He'd already done that, but she said he needed to protect himself so that when his sight was restored, he could hop on his snowboard and speed down a mountain. She'd already set up a camera crew for those shots. She'd planned a big campaign.

He was looking forward to snowboarding again, too, but that didn't mean he had to stay indoors. Tomorrow, he'd go outside, and he'd take Claudia with him. He had a feeling she'd enjoy the snow and the fresh air. She had sounded as if she didn't like sports, but he knew she snowboarded. He'd make sure she enjoyed their time outdoors tomorrow. He was ready to resume his life. He planned to take her with him.



CLAUDIA WOKE. Looking through the glass wall that overlooked the ski slope, the first thing she saw were golden rays peeking over the top of the mountain. She hadn't expected to sleep well, but last night was the first time she'd felt peace since leaving Washington, D. C.—seven years ago.

“Thank You, Lord,” she murmured.

Closing her eyes, she sank into a pillow that seemed to hold her the way her mother used to. How she missed her mother and her father. They had always been there for her—even when she'd tearfully called them to tell them she'd quit the internship program. It broke her heart and theirs.

Suddenly, she remembered where she was. She sat upright. She had a job. Last night at dinner, Brock had told her she was welcome to use his fitness center. She was about to tell him she wasn't interested, but then she remembered her last doctor's visit. He had told her she was borderline diabetic—she needed to change her diet and exercise more.

She had changed her diet and tried to start an exercise program, but driving to the health club and working out with svelte women in shorts and sports bras didn't incentivize her. It discouraged her. If she worked out in Brock's fitness center, no one would see her. Brock might be there, but he was blind. He wouldn't know she wore a kerchief to hide her bald head. If Uma showed up, Claudia would leave.

She threw back the covers and climbed out of bed. Stepping to her closet, she looked through the drawers holding workout outfits. She shut the drawers. She wasn't wearing those skimpy clothes, even if no one could see her.

After rummaging through the other drawers, she found her clothes neatly arranged in a cupboard at the back of the closet. Slipping out of her nightgown, she pulled out a pair of shorts and a T-shirt and dragged on those. In another drawer, she found a pair of thick running socks. From a shelf, she lifted tennis shoes that molded to her feet. She closed her eyes and relished the feeling. The rich knew how to buy shoes.

Stepping to the bathroom, she splashed water on her face, then slowly lifted her gaze to the mirror, to her head that had

sprouted small tufts of blonde hair between the raw scabs. She closed her eyes. Her hair was growing back. Could she leave it alone this time? Could she stifle the urge to pull it out?

*Help me, Lord. Please give me the strength to leave my hair alone.*

She was praying again. Her throat closed. Why after all these years did she think God would listen to her now?

Turning away, she strode through her bedroom to the sitting room where she'd left her purse and the briefcase that held her laptop, tablet and notebook that contained the comments of every conversation she'd had with Brock. Digging through her purse, she pulled out a red and white kerchief.

She didn't wear a wig when she worked out. She was always afraid it would fall off her head and reveal to the world the pathetic strands that covered her scalp. She didn't want to frighten anyone. More so, she didn't want anyone to laugh at her. That brought back the nightmare when she realized that being pretty came with a punishing price.

After wrapping the kerchief around her head, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. The woman staring back at her was tall and big and showed no sign of ever having been slim.

She shouldn't care that she was heavy. Brock had hired her. Uma didn't want her working with Brock, but apparently, he didn't do what she wanted. He had a mind of his own. Feeling more relaxed than she had in seven years, she stepped out of her bedroom to the hallway behind the back stairs.

The fitness center's double doors were closed. Claudia hesitated and scraped her teeth over her lower lip. Would they be locked? If Brock were in there, would he want to be left alone?

Stepping to the door, she heard voices. She recognized Brock's voice. The other man's voice she'd never heard before. She tried the doorknob. When it opened, she took a breath. Inside the fitness center, the conversation quieted.

“Claudia, you came.” Brock set the pair of dumbbells he’d been lifting on the floor and turned to her. She wondered how he knew it was her. Maybe because no one else in the house used the fitness center.

The other man, a blond with stubby hair and wearing a muscle shirt, looked from Brock to Claudia. His gaze flicked to the kerchief covering Claudia’s head. He had to be Brock’s trainer.

“I hope I’m not interrupting.” Claudia stood in the doorway.

“No, come on in.” Brock beckoned her again. “Close the door. We have the temperature just the way we like it.”

“Sorry.” Claudia blushed and closed the door. She should’ve known Brock would want to keep this room cool for his workouts.

“Don’t worry,” Brock said with a laugh. “This is Dirk.” He gestured to the blond man.

“Hi, I’m Claudia.” She stepped to the trainer and extended her hand.

He seemed surprised but took it anyway. He looked into her eyes, but Claudia knew he had to wonder why Brock had hired her and not some cute, skinny girl.

She shouldn’t question Brock. She should be grateful.

“If you want him to set up a routine for you, let me know.” Brock picked up the dumbbells and continued his workout.

“That’s okay.” Claudia waved dismissively. She glanced around the room at the state-of-the-art treadmills, exercise bikes and ellipticals. “I prefer cardio to lifting.”

She stepped to the elliptical. She’d used other ones before, but this one had so many buttons and levers that she didn’t know which control did what. Embarrassed, she moved away.

“Let me show you how to get started.” Dirk appeared at her side. “Press this to start. This button controls the intensity, and this one controls speed. If you want to follow along with a digital trainer, you tap this screen here, then scroll through the



programs.” He looked at her as if to make sure she understood his instructions.

“Thanks.” She gave him a wan smile but appreciated the concerned look in his eyes.

She still didn’t think she’d figure out how to use the elliptical, but surprisingly when she pressed the controls, it worked. For now, she’d use the elliptical. She may not work for Brock long enough to worry about operating the treadmill or bicycle.

“When you’re finished in here, I’ll see you at breakfast.” Brock felt his way past a weight machine to stand near her.

“I’m finished now.” She fumbled with the power button to stop the machine.

“No.” He held up his hand. “Keep working out. I have a couple of things to take care of. Nellie knows to serve breakfast at eight o’clock.”

Of course, she did. Whoever thought Brock was some laid-back guy whose life was snowboarding would be surprised. He was in control of his life.

“All right.” She grabbed the elliptical’s handles and continued her workout.

“I’ll see you in an hour.” Brock’s smile wasn’t just dazzling. It was compassionate.

What else would she learn about this man? That shocked her. His long brown hair that had grown past his ears hid who this man was.

He turned away and walked to a corner, where he picked up his cane. Had he counted the steps he needed to take to find his cane? If she worked for him for very long, she’d have to ask. He and Dirk stepped out of the room.

Claudia gripped the elliptical’s handles harder and increased her intensity. A bead of perspiration rose on her brow. Maybe she would enjoy working out after all. She already knew she’d like working for Brock.

## CHAPTER 5



After showering and donning the clothes that Glenda had set out for him, Brock stepped to his office and made a few calls. Glenda stopped by to make sure he'd dressed correctly.

"There's nothing for me to fix," she said with a laugh. He could sense her gaze moving over him.

"So I didn't put on my shirt wrong side out or twist my socks?" He raised a brow.

"Nope. You got everything right," she said. "You keep that up, I'll be out of a job."

"You'll always have a job with me, even after my surgery, but it's nice to know I'm getting better at dressing myself." He gave a rough exhale. "Who knew I'd have to learn how to dress myself again?"

"Life is full of challenges, but I'd say you conquered this one."

"Good." He rose and grabbed his cane. "Now I'm ready for the next challenge—walking to the dining room."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Glenda sounded concerned.

"Thanks, but that's another endeavor I seem to have mastered."

He moved down the hallway to the small dining room where he took his meals when he was alone. His stomach rumbled as he caught the fragrance of bacon, eggs and

buttered Texas toast. He also caught Claudia's scent. It was intoxicating.

"I'm assuming you survived your workout," he said and moved to his chair. He heard her breath catch softly.

"I did." She started to rise, but he waved her back into her chair. "It's been a while. I'll probably be sore tomorrow."

"Then I'll have Dirk design a workout that won't strain your muscles."

"All right." She sounded surprised. "Thanks."

He didn't hear her take her seat.

"You don't need to watch me." He reached his chair and sat. "It took me a while, but I've learned how to find things—like my chair."

"You found your cane in the fitness center this morning." She sounded nervous.

"You noticed." He snorted. "So now you know I'm capable."

"I never meant—"

"I know you didn't." He gave a slight wave of his hand. "When I lost my sight, it made me determined to move about as freely as I had before the accident."

"I'd say you accomplished that." She exhaled a soft laugh.

"I agree." He touched the table to the place where he knew he'd find his napkin. With a flick of his wrist, he unfolded it and set it on his lap.

Nellie stepped into the room with a full plate that she set in front of him. Claudia had requested fruit and yogurt, and Nellie set those servings in front of her.

"How are you this fine morning?" she asked, her accent heavy.

"Doing well, Nellie. I hope you are." Brock picked up his fork.

“Mighty fine.” She stood near his chair. “Here’s bacon and eggs.”

“I know. I can smell them, and they smell wonderful. Thank you.”

“Just let me know if you need anything else,” she said and left.

Brock said a blessing. He shook salt and pepper over his eggs. As he started to eat, he felt Claudia still.

“And yes, I know how much salt and pepper to sprinkle on my eggs,” he said, again feeling Claudia’s surprise. “Now that I have my calls out of the way, I’ll tell you what I want to do with the rest of my morning, and that’s to go sledding.”

He heard her quick intake of breath.

“Does that surprise you?” He lifted a forkful of eggs to his mouth.

“Yes.” Her voice was strained. He heard her lift a glass, take a deep swallow, then set it on the table. “Not to be rude or obtuse, but how do you sled?”

“I sit on the sled and slide down the hill,” he said flatly.

“That part I understand, but part of enjoying the sport is the ability to see where you’re going,” she said, and he felt her confused stare.

“I’m aware.” Slowly he reached in front of himself until his fingers brushed his juice glass. He picked it up and sipped. “Because you’re going with me, you’ll be my eyes.”

“I don’t sled.” Her voice was soft—almost an apology.

“Have you ever?” He set his glass carefully in front of himself, then felt the table to make sure he didn’t catch the base of the glass on the edge of his plate.

“A long time ago.” Her laugh held a sense of sadness that made his throat tighten.

“How long ago?” he asked. He set his fork on his plate. He didn’t hear it clatter to the table and felt relief, but he was more interested in what Claudia would say to him.

“High school. Maybe I went a time or two when I was in college.” She lifted her glass. Was she drinking to hide the tears in her voice?

“That’s not so long ago.” He forced a lightness into his voice. “I don’t know how old you are, but I’m assuming we’re close to the same age.”

“We’re the same age. I’m twenty-seven.” There was a soft sound as if her smile had turned into a laugh. “You’re exactly one month older than I am. I saw your birthday on the internet.”

“Now that we have the internet, there are no secrets.” He laughed dryly, then calculated her birthday. He tipped his head to hers. “Because my birthday is November twenty-fifth, which means your birthday is Christmas Day.”

“It is.” Her laugh held no humor. “I’m a Christmas baby.”

“That must have been very special for your parents.” Even as he spoke, he felt her hurt.

“It was,” she said roughly.

“Was?” He couldn’t hide his surprise at what he sensed.

“They’re gone.” Again, she sipped from her glass.

“I’m sorry.” He noticed she wasn’t forthcoming with sharing information about her parents. He wouldn’t press her. If she ever felt the need to tell him what happened, he was willing to listen. He was grateful to still have his parents, though his and their schedules kept them from getting together.

“We were discussing sledding,” she reminded him.

“So we were.” He leaned back from the table. “I have a call with Uma at nine-thirty. She’s never fully awake until then. After that, you’ll drive us to the hill.”

“I will?” Her voice came forward as if she’d straightened.

“Yes, you.” Finished with his breakfast, he rose and reached for his cane. He moved to the door, his cane sweeping from side to side. “You’ll find sledding clothes in your closet.”

“Brock, did you get approval from your doctor or whoever oversees your healthcare to do such a thing?” Her steps hurried after him.

“No.” He laughed at the urgency in her voice. She was like everyone else—anxious to keep him confined to the house. She’d learn.

“Then I think you should.” There was a rustling sound as if she’d reached into her pocket. “What’s his number? I’ll call him now.”

“He told me to live my life as normally as possible. Sledding is normal.” Brock turned to her. She stopped abruptly. To keep from running into him? “I hired you to help me with my activities. You’re not involved in my healthcare.”

“When it jeopardizes you, everyone should be involved.” Her voice was firm.

“I appreciate your concern.” He turned away. “I have a call to make. You have clothes to change into, then have Russell review the SUV with you. As I recall, it isn’t difficult to drive, but instructions wouldn’t hurt. I’ll be ready to leave in half an hour.”

He stepped out the door and down the hall. As he moved away, he heard her soft breathing. Convincing her that she would go sledding with him hadn’t been as difficult as he thought. Or was she devising another strategy to convince him he shouldn’t go?

It didn’t matter. He was going, and she was going with him. All his life he’d thrived on adrenaline rushes. He hadn’t had one in months. He was ready to step back into his previous lifestyle. He didn’t care if he couldn’t see. He was going to live his normal Brock lifestyle until he regained his sight, and she was going to help him every step of the way.



CLAUDIA STOOD in her room and stared into the closet. She had been employed by a madman. When she’d interviewed with

him, he seemed normal. Now she knew he was anything but. She looked at the clothes hanging on racks and folded neatly on the shelves. Where was she going to find clothes for sledding? She opened a set of drawers and found swimsuits and shorts. She slammed the drawers shut. Her days of wearing swimsuits and shorts were gone.

Turning to the opposite wall, she opened another set of drawers filled with long underwear, thermal socks, turtlenecks and insulated pants. On another rack hung snow jackets. In another drawer, she found hats and gloves. Glenda knew what to buy.

She pulled on the long underwear, pants and sweater and stared at the mirror lining one wall of her bedroom. It was impossible to move through the room and not see herself. She was grateful the clothes fit her curves without accentuating them. She almost looked normal.

Except for the wig. How was she going to sled and keep that on her head? Should she just wear the hat and forget the wig? If they tumbled off the sled and her wig flew off her head, what then?

It had happened before. Some people felt sorry for her and helped her put it back on.

Some people were shocked, their faces tight with revulsion. Others laughed at her. She'd never forget the first time that had happened. She's been mortified and wanted to die. Now she just pretended that losing her wig wasn't weird. If people laughed or were repulsed, that was something they had to deal with. She couldn't help them.

She removed the wig and stared at the tufts sticking straight up from her scalp. The urge to grab them and pull them out overwhelmed her. She squeezed her eyes tight.

*Please, God.*

Heat rose in her throat. Normally, she didn't even think about what she was doing. She just pulled out her hair. She couldn't change what had happened. She had been assaulted—

all because she was beautiful, the senator had said. It was her fault.

She wasn't beautiful anymore. She was now heavy, and she was bald.

That was when she'd worked for a predator.

Now she worked for a crazy man.

Could she stay with Brock? He'd have his surgery just before Thanksgiving. After he regained his eyesight, he wouldn't need her. That was several weeks away. Could she last that long?

She and Brock were just going sledding. She used to love to sled. She and her friends would slide down the hill a few times, then they'd return to her parents' home. Sometimes they'd go to the ski lodge for a cup of cocoa. Sledding would probably bore Brock. She'd seen the videos of him snowboarding over a cliff, then twisting in the air before he landed in a pile of powder snow and rushed down the mountain. Sledding down a hill would be tame compared to the excitement he needed.

What if he tried to make it exciting? Was he testing her? She'd been concerned about his safety, but if he needed an adrenaline rush, she'd make sure he got it.

She placed the wig in a satin bag and pulled on a knit cap. She stared at her reflection. As long as her hat stayed in place, no one would know she was bald.

*Brock Amwell, I'm ready for you.*



## CHAPTER 6



Claudia drove Brock's SUV into the parking lot at the sledding hill. The vehicle was plush like the one she had ridden in when she'd worked for the senator.

The first time she'd ridden in the senator's SUV, she had been surprised that politicians used luxurious transportation, but everything for the senator had been affluent. The office furniture, the fine dining, the abundant staff. Everything was carefully crafted to cater to his every need.

As an intern, Claudia barely earned minimum wage, which didn't surprise her. She had volunteered for the position and hadn't expected compensation. Her parents still supported her and were delighted that she was working for the popular senator.

Senator Blocksdale had recommended that her parents buy her a condo near the National Mall. It was so close to the senatorial building that Claudia could've walked to work, but the chief of staff arranged for her transportation to and from the senator's office, which was convenient when she worked late.

At the sledding hill, Claudia followed a stream of cars entering the parking lot, then saw a parking attendant wave her to another area. He must have seen the handicap logo on the SUV's license plate. She followed the direction of another parking attendant, who directed her to a handicapped space near the tow rope. She was glad she and Brock wouldn't have far to walk. He hadn't brought his cane.

“You’ll be my eyes for this adventure,” he had said when she asked him about it.

“I hope you know what you’re getting into.” She narrowed her eyes at him. She knew he couldn’t see that, but sometimes she wondered. He was good at sensing her reactions.

“If I knew that, it wouldn’t be any fun,” he said lightly, though his eyes brightened with excitement.

When she parked the car, Brock opened the door and climbed out. She rushed around the SUV to him. He didn’t know where he was or how to get to the slope, even though he was looking right at it. Maybe he heard it.

He inhaled deeply, then turned his head as if to hear the excitement of people grabbing the rope that would drag them up the hill. He shifted his head. Did he hear the sleds and tubes sliding down the slope? People shouted and laughed and screamed as they rushed down the mountain.

Several people around them recognized Brock and nudged each other while nodding toward him. Some people called out his name and rushed to him.

“How’re you guys doing?” Brock nodded to each person as if he could see them.

Some people handed him paper and pen and asked for his autograph.

Claudia wasn’t sure how he signed anything, but his signature was legible.

He laughed and joked and asked the fans their names while he scribbled his name.

“How’s the snow?” he asked them.

“Great. Super,” came the shouts.

“Good. I’m ready to get on the slope.” He turned to Claudia and gave her an expectant look.

She snorted softly. How did he know where she was?

“Let’s go.” She moved next to him. She caught her breath when he wrapped his hand around hers.

“Lead the way.” He turned to the slope. “Someone will meet us at the tow rope with our toboggan.”

“There’s a step here,” she said and tightened her hand around his as they stepped from the parking lot to a snow-covered walkway. The strength in his grip scooped air from her lungs. Everything about this man was alluring. She pushed that thought from her mind. He was alluring—she wasn’t. He had hired her to help him until he didn’t need her anymore.

“Mr. Amwell.” A young man rushed to them. “I have your sled over here.”

“What’s your name?” Brock grinned at the man and held out his hand.

“John, sir.” The man seemed surprised that Brock would want to know. He took Brock’s hand.

“Nice to meet you, John. This is Claudia. Did you bring me the fastest sled you have?” Brock smiled, but he looked serious.

Claudia took a breath. He couldn’t see, and he wanted to go fast. She whispered a prayer of gratitude that she was in charge of guiding the sled.

“I tried, sir,” John said with a laugh.

He led them to a snowcat. A toboggan was strapped to the back of the vehicle.

“I’ll take you to the top of the hill in this. When we get there, I’ll show you how to guide the sled with your feet. It’s fairly simple,” John said to Claudia. “I’m assuming you’ll sit in front.”

She was about to say yes, when Brock said, “Maybe at first.”

“Not just at first. All the time,” Claudia said firmly.

The man laughed nervously. His gaze shifted from Claudia to Brock. Obviously, he didn’t want to get in the middle of this discussion.

“Climb inside.” John opened the door to the snowcat. At least it was warm inside.

He helped Claudia and Brock climb in and get situated, then moved to the driver’s side and sat behind the wheel. “You picked a great day to sled.” He shifted the gearstick, then guided the vehicle away from the crowd and up the hill.

“Days are all the same to me.” Brock’s smile was slight.

Claudia felt sad. Today was beautiful with the sun shining and the fresh snow covering the hillside. She wished he could see it.

He turned to the window. He refused to consider himself handicapped. He had the fortitude that she admired as well as frightened her. Didn’t he realize his denial of his blindness could hurt him or worse? Did he care?

He had to care. He was determined to live his life as he had before. He wouldn’t let anyone stand in his way. Was that why he hired her? Because he knew he could convince her to let him have his way? He was in for a surprise. She took her mission to help him seriously.

John guided the snowcat to an area away from the sledders who had ridden up the hill with the tow rope. He jumped out of the vehicle, then helped Claudia and Brock from the cab. He unfastened the sled from the back of the snowcat and dragged it to the top of the hill. Claudia placed Brock’s hand on her arm and followed John. He helped her, then Brock, sit on the sled.

Brock scooted close to Claudia, the warmth and strength of his legs pressed against her body. She dragged the cold, crisp air into her lungs and tried to move away, but he wrapped his arms around her.

“Stay close.” His voice was soft against her ear. “We want to distribute our weight evenly.”

She released her breath. At least the ride down the hill would be quick.

John showed her how to steer the sled with her feet pressed against the steel runner.

“You can also lean into the turns,” John said. “That will help you guide it down the hill. Turning will help you decelerate.”

“We don’t want that.” Brock sounded worried.

Claudia pressed her lips together. Brock was used to being in charge, but she would control the speed.

“Do you want me to give you a little shove to get you started?” John stepped back.

“We want a big shove,” Brock said.

“Let’s start with a little shove,” Claudia said. “I’d like to make it down this hill.”

“Here you go,” John said.

Claudia gave a little yelp as the sled jerked forward. She looked around to make sure no one was near them. She didn’t want to crash into anyone. As they moved down the hill, she gained confidence and guided the sled to move straight down. The sled moved faster.

Vaguely she was aware of John driving the snowcat along the edge of the slope. He stuck his arm out the window and gave her a thumbs up.

She laughed. This was the first time in ages she was having fun.

When she reached the bottom of the hill, she turned the sled to slow down and to avoid hitting the other sledders.

Feeling exhilarated, she jumped up from the sled. She extended her hand to Brock and helped him stand.

“You did great,” John shouted out the snowcat’s window. He parked it near a grove of trees, then sprinted through the snow toward them. “How’d that feel?” His eyes twinkled as he looked from Brock to Claudia.

“Great!” Claudia said, then was disappointed the word didn’t express what she felt. “Fabulous!”

“It wasn’t bad.” Brock’s droll comment made her look at him.

“What do you mean?” She was breathless from the excitement. She frowned at him.

“I mean, we could’ve gone faster.”

“We passed everyone on the hill.” Claudia gave him a hard stare even though he’d never know how she looked at him.

“That doesn’t mean we went fast,” he said.

“You’re incorrigible.” She tried to sound angry, but she laughed.

“Ready for another run?” John asked.

“Yes,” Brock said before Claudia could answer.

She looked at him and saw he wasn’t smiling as broadly as before.

“Brock, what’s the matter?” she asked him.

“We need to go faster.” He turned to her. “Let me guide the sled.”

“No way.” Giving a disbelieving laugh, she shook her head. “I’m driving.”

“Then let me give you some pointers.” His sightless gaze implored her.

She felt John grow quiet. He could see the way Brock looked at her.

Should she let Brock guide the sled?

No. He was insane if he thought she would. They’d end up in the forest lining the slope and probably get stuck in a snowdrift.

“You can give me pointers, but I’m driving the sled,” she responded firmly, then took a breath. She couldn’t believe she was cautioning this hotshot athlete.

“I love it when you scold me.” He leaned close to her.

Catching the warmth of his skin next to hers made her drag air into her lungs. “You do not.” Her voice was barely a whisper. She shifted her gaze to John, who had grown quiet.

“John’s waiting for us.” She touched Brock’s elbow and turned him to the snowcat. “Let’s go, and remember, I’m driving.”

“With my help.” He walked next to her as they trudged across the snow to the snowcat.

When John drove them to the top of the slope, he jumped out and unlatched the sled from the rear of the snowcat. He set it at the top of the hill. He rushed to the passenger side of the snowcat to help Brock climb out, but Brock had already stepped from the cab and was offering his hand to Claudia.

What a dichotomy he was. As an athlete, he had to be tough, but somewhere along the way, he’d learned manners.

“Remember, I’m driving.” Claudia kept her voice low as she placed his hand on her arm.

Brock’s face was unreadable. Had he devised a plan that put him in charge of guiding the sled? He was too determined to acquiesce. She narrowed her eyes at him. She didn’t trust him.

“I’m sitting down first, then you can sit behind me.” Claudia studied his chiseled features and the knit between his brows.

“Sure. Go ahead.” His voice was light.

She sat down, then turned to help him sit behind her. John took Brock’s elbow and helped him lower himself.

Before beginning their descent, Claudia looked around to make sure no one was close. Brock was uncharacteristically quiet. Her heart picked up speed. What was he plotting? She was learning a lot about this man.

“Ready?” Claudia asked Brock. She placed her feet on the runner.

“More than ready.” There was an energy in Brock’s voice that made Claudia’s eyes widen.

“I’ll get you started.” John gave them a little push.

They gained speed, making Claudia’s heart beat wildly. She leaned left to slow the sled.

“Sit straight.” Brock wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her into his chest.

She felt his muscles grip and caught his subtle scent.

“Relax.” His breath was close to her ear. “You’re doing great.”

Claudia could barely draw a breath. Not because she was frightened. She was exhilarated. She loved the speed. When they reached the bottom of the hill, she turned the runner and skidded to a stop. She jumped to her feet.

“That was so fun.” She clapped her hands and bounced on her toes. She couldn’t remember being this excited.

She was hardly a svelte girl who looked pretty when she jumped up and down, but she felt like it. She turned to see John pull into a space near the forest. Had she and Brock ridden faster than the snowcat?

“Claudia.” There was concern in Brock’s voice.

“What?” She stilled and turned to him.

He reached for her.

“Look out below,” someone shouted.

Her movements slow, Claudia turned to the slope—to a tube that was spinning and speeding down the hillside.

“Quick, Brock.” Claudia’s heart hammered. She grabbed his hand to pull him out of the way.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into his chest. He turned his back to the hill—to the out-of-control tuber. His chest bowed around her body, and he stiffened.

“No,” Claudia gasped. She tried to break free. She had to protect Brock.

The slam into Brock vibrated through Claudia. They flew through the air. Brock held her tight. He twisted his body beneath hers. They crashed to the ground, bounced into the air, then crashed again. The impact shuddered through Claudia. Her teeth rattling made her squeeze her eyes tight. A shower



of snow covered her scalp. She shivered against the cold. Then went rigid.

The impact had knocked her hat from her head.

## CHAPTER 7



*B*rock locked Claudia against himself and waited for the vibration to stop wracking his body.

“Oh, no.” Claudia’s soft cry and her struggle in his arms made him groan. He didn’t want to release her until he knew she was all right.

“What is it?” he rasped. “Are you hurt?”

“No. Yes. I need my hat.” She broke free from his grasp.

“Your hat?” He frowned in confusion. “If you lost it, we’ll get you another one.”

“You don’t understand.” The tears in her voice made his throat tighten. “I have to find it.”

If only he could see. He didn’t understand why losing her hat was devastating, but the heart-breaking tone in her voice made him want to heal the hurt.

“Maybe someone will find it and take it to the lodge,” he said. “We’ll stop by there on our way back to the house.”

“It won’t be there. Someone else just found it. They took it. I saw them running away. Forget the hat. It doesn’t matter anymore.” The defeat in her voice made him want to pull her close. He reached out but didn’t touch her. She was too far away.

“Let’s take another ride.” He wanted to distract her.

“Please don’t make me do that.” Her tone was painful.

“Do you want to go back to the house?” He asked the question knowing what the answer would be. He thought she was enjoying herself. What changed?

Around him, he heard soft laughs. He turned his head left, then right. The snickers increased. The ache in his chest spread through his torso. They were laughing at Claudia, but why?

“Let’s go,” he said. He heard Claudia’s soft exhalation.

“You guys okay?” There was a running sound. John’s voice vibrated and came closer to him and Claudia.

“We’re leaving.” Brock wrapped his fingers around Claudia’s arm. He heard her quiet weeping. What had upset her? “Thanks for taking us up the hill here. When we’re ready to do this again, we’ll let you know.”

“Anytime,” John said slowly.

Brock didn’t have to worry about paying John. His accountant would take care of the fee and the tip.

“Thanks,” Claudia murmured to John.

She turned and guided Brock past the voices of excited sledders who dragged their equipment over packed snow. Conversations stalled as Claudia and Brock made their way toward the parking lot and his SUV.

Brock said nothing but wondered at the pain emanating from Claudia. Though she wasn’t hurt, something had happened to her. He didn’t like it when anyone suffered. He didn’t know Claudia well, but knowing something made her suffer was like a rough edge catching on the corner of pain. No one should hurt like this.

They reached the SUV. Claudia opened his door and helped him inside.

“Are you set?” The lightness in Claudia’s voice sounded forced.

“Yes.” He faced her. If only he could see her. He had a feeling seeing her would help him understand why she hurt. He’d never sensed such pain. He wanted to take it away.

Claudia closed the door. He heard the back door open, then she rummaged through something.

“What are you getting?” he asked.

She stilled. She released a slow breath. “A scarf ... for my head.”

That puzzled him. What was she hiding? She hurt so much he didn’t want his quizzing to hurt her more. He could tell that if he said anything, she would break.

She started the engine, then drove over the bumpy parking lot that had to be snow-packed. In silence, they drove back to the house. He didn’t turn on the media player. He wanted to understand why she hurt. Music would interfere with the sounds that would help him know what had happened. He still couldn’t understand.

At least, she wasn’t crying anymore, but with her every breath, he felt her deep wounds.

The SUV slowed, then turned. He knew the gate leading to his home was opening. The SUV drove forward, then curved with the driveway leading to his house.

“Park in front,” Brock said. “Russell can take the SUV to the garage later.”

“All our things are in the back.” She sounded surprised.

“I’ll let Glenda know.”

She guided the SUV through a couple more turns before it slowed to a stop.

“Wait, and I’ll help you.” She opened her door.

“I’ll wait, but I can find my way to the front door.” He climbed out of the SUV and closed the door. He heard her quick footsteps as she hurried toward him.

The front door opened, and he lifted his gaze. He listened to the sounds that would tell him who was waiting for him.

“I’ve been calling you all morning. I have to talk to you about the Tahoe event.” Uma’s high-heeled boots sounded on the front steps. “Did you turn off your phone?”

“I must have. Sorry. What did you need?” He felt Claudia move close to him, then walk with him toward the front steps.

There was a hesitation in Uma’s steps. “Why are you wearing that scarf?” Shock filled her voice.

Claudia stiffened at Brock’s side. “I wanted to.” She spoke softly.

Brock’s jaw tightened. He didn’t know what had happened today, but it had traumatized Claudia. Uma didn’t need to quiz her.

“If you want to go to your room and rest, Glenda can let you know when lunch is ready.” Brock turned to Claudia.

“Thanks,” she murmured.

She moved away, which disappointed him. He liked having her near. Her footsteps disappeared into the house.

“Let’s go to my office and talk.” Brock moved past Uma and stepped into the house.

“Where’s your cane?” Uma followed him.

“I’ll have Glenda bring it to me.” He moved down the hallway to his office. Inside, he felt his way to his desk and sat down.

“If you want to change before we talk, I can wait,” Uma said.

“I’m here, so let’s talk.”

“You went sledding today.” Uma’s voice took an edge. “You didn’t tell me.”

“It wasn’t necessary.” He stilled, sensing Uma had more to say.

“Maybe not, but as your manager, it’s wise to tell me your plans so I can mitigate any disasters.”

“There was no disaster.” His tone flat, he looked straight at her. He could imagine her disapproval. He’d seen that expression so many times it was etched in his mind.

“Not according to the posts covering your social media sites.” Uma’s voice rose. “There are dozens of pictures of you with Claudia. Brock, when that kid rammed into you, he knocked you off the sled. You could’ve been injured.”

“But I wasn’t, so let’s talk about—”

“That isn’t all,” Uma said, and he could tell she was leaning forward. “The fall knocked Claudia’s hat from her head. That woman is bald.”

“She’s still a human being.” Brock’s comeback was quicker than he expected. Uma’s comment knocked air from his lungs. How could Claudia be bald? He had felt her hair when she had helped him last night after dinner. It was soft and silky to the touch. If that wasn’t her hair, what had he felt?

“So, if she didn’t tell you, she’s keeping something from you. Is she ill? And what other secrets is she keeping?” Uma demanded.

“Because Claudia is my employee, let me worry about what she is and isn’t telling me,” he said, feeling Uma’s surprise.

“She may be your employee, but I manage your career, so I need to know who’s working for you.” Uma shifted.

Brock tightened his mouth. Had he made Uma uncomfortable? He hadn’t meant to, but he was in control of his career. Uma worked for him.

So did Claudia.

“Your integrity is at stake,” Uma said.

“Meaning that now that I’ve professed my faith to the world, the standards for my behavior have been raised?” Brock said before she could.

“You know the media and everyone else hold Christians to a different standard,” Uma said.

“I know, which is why you didn’t want me to make my faith public, but that’s contrary to what Jesus said in Matthew about hiding our light under a bushel.”

“Who would do that?” Uma sounded sincerely confused.

“Those who believe but don’t share their faith with others.” He had more to say, but he’d wait. Uma had made it clear she wasn’t interested in his message of faith. His concern for Uma wouldn’t let him stop, but he’d wait for God’s timing. “You came here because you had information to share about the Tahoe event.”

“There’ve been some changes.” Uma seemed relieved they wouldn’t discuss his faith and settled into a chair in front of his desk. “They want to move your speech to the banquet hall. The response has been overwhelming. They’ll introduce you after dinner so you can give your speech. After your speech, you’ll go to the conference room where you can autograph your book and meet fans.”

“Claudia can take me,” Brock said.

“Is she still working for you?”

“Why wouldn’t she?” Brock jerked his head to Uma—to her voice.

“Because of the way she looked when you two returned?” Uma shifted in the chair. There was a swishing sound as if she swung one of her legs. “She’d been crying.”

“Leave Claudia to me,” he said. “What about the Christian athlete event in Tahoe? Did you hear back from anyone with that group?”

“I heard from them. Are you sure you still want to meet with them?”

“I’m positive,” he said eagerly. “What did they say?”

“They want you to be the main speaker, but they want you to talk Friday night. I told them you were already scheduled \_\_\_\_”

“Cancel the sporting event.”

“Brock,” Uma spoke more patiently than usual. “You can do both. I told them you were already scheduled to speak Friday night so they graciously agreed to change your talk to Saturday.”

“Perfect.” Brock relaxed in his chair. Everything was working out the way he planned. He knew he could talk about what it was like to be a Christian and still be an athlete. There had to be those who doubted they could fit into both worlds, but this was God’s world. He sent His followers everywhere, and that included the world of sports.

“That’s not all.” Uma sounded excited. “I received several requests from other venues that want to book you.”

“From Christian groups?”

“Some are, but the sponsorships are eager to have you sign on with them.”

“Let me know which companies,” Brock said. “I’ll decide which ones I want to promote. Tell me about the Christian groups.”

“All right.” Uma took a deep breath. “Most of these are in the southeast, but there are a couple in California.”

After Brock and Uma discussed which sponsorships Brock would accept, with Brock rejecting two that Uma said he should reconsider. Their discussion finished, Uma stood and moved across his office, where he heard her pull keys from her purse.

“Call me if you hear back from any other groups that are interested in booking me.” Brock rose.

“I will.” She stepped from his office.

Someone else stepped into the room. His heart picked up speed when he caught Claudia’s sweet fragrance.

“I thought you might need this.” She stood next to him. Taking his hand, she pressed his cane into his palm. Her touch was tender and said more than words.

“Thanks.” His voice was rough. “How’re you feeling?”

“Fine. Better.” She took a breath. “I wanted to apologize for being so upset today.”

“No apology needed, though I’d like to know what happened.”



“I suppose I owe you an explanation, though it’s so ...”  
Tears filled her voice.

“Hey, it’s all right.” He reached out and was relieved when he touched her shoulder. That relief was short-lived when he felt her tremble.

“I’m surprised no one’s told you.” The tremor in her voice made his lungs burn.

“Uma mentioned something,” he said flatly.

There was a catch in Claudia’s throat. “That I’m bald?”

The pain in her voice was like a punch below the belt. What else didn’t he know about this woman who was a tonic to his soul?

## CHAPTER 8



Claudia swallowed her shame. She took a shuddering breath and released it. Just when she thought she was healing, something would take her back to the nightmare that had changed her life forever.

She had hoped she wouldn't have to explain to Brock the debilitating habit that made her unattractive. She would only work for him until he underwent the surgery that would restore his eyesight. Once he could see, would he be repulsed when he saw her?

What he thought wouldn't matter. After his sight was restored, he wouldn't need her anymore.

After that, she'd return to Denver and hide under a hat and heavy coat even when it was ninety degrees outside.

"What did Uma tell you?" she asked. Her chest gripped, knowing the secret she had wanted to hide had been revealed.

Uma didn't hide her disdain for Claudia. Never more than now did she regret that she wasn't beautiful—that she didn't look like she had before that fateful summer when she'd been accepted as an intern in the office of the most powerful senator in the country. All her life, her beauty had opened doors for her. That summer, her beauty had been her curse. She swallowed the pain that rose like bile in her throat. When she sniffed, Brock started to raise his hand, then curled his fingers into his palm and dropped his arm to his side.

"That you were wearing a scarf around your head." Concern filled his voice. "It's all right. A lot of people do that."

I was curious as to why you did. When we received your paperwork, there was no mention of your having any illness.”

“I’m not ill.” She inhaled sharply to quell the threatening tremor that wanted to consume her. “Not in the way that you think.”

“Then in what way?” There was genuine care in those sightless eyes.

“Is it really necessary that I tell you?” She released a slow breath. “I’ll only work for you until you regain your eyesight, and I promise my ... issue won’t interfere with my performance. I understand my duties and will perform them to the best of my ability.”

“That I don’t doubt.” His voice was husky, making her wonder if he did doubt her capability.

“My letters of recommendation confirmed that I performed well,” she said.

“True.” He snorted softly. “They confirmed that you exceeded the expectations of your previous employers. The letters from the senator’s office were glowing.”

“I never told you I worked for a senator,” she said weakly. She felt the blood drain from her face, then rush back with hot shame. After the assault, she had remembered receiving a call from the senator’s home phone. She could barely breathe when she saw the number she wished she could forget. She hadn’t answered the call. No one in the family would want to talk to her. They had gone through turmoil during the trial. Whoever called didn’t leave a message. “How did you find out?”

“It was included with the employment package the agency sent us.” Something flickered in his eyes. “Why didn’t you want us to know you worked for the senator? A Washington, D. C., job is prestigious.”

“Except it wasn’t a real job.” She shook her head. “I worked as an intern. The pay was nominal. Besides, the senator is dead. It’s not like he can give you a personal recommendation. All congressional members and senators

employ several interns every summer. The position only lasts a couple of months. We got class credit.”

“All right, we’ll forget that you worked—interned,” he said quickly when she opened her mouth to correct him. “For a senator.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

He couldn’t see, yet he was so in tune with what went on around him. She could see in his eyes he sensed her discomfort when she spoke about the senator.

Why did that time in her life have to be unearthed to haunt her all over again?

But it had never stopped haunting her. She was still gorging herself, even when she hadn’t thought about that fateful day when the senator accosted her in the hallway of the senate building. And she still pulled out her hair. Even now the urge to yank out the pitiful tufts that sprouted over her head was overpowering.

*Oh, God, please help me. Brock is wonderful. He hired me to help him, not think of myself. What happened when I was an intern needs to be part of my past. Please give me peace.*

“Let’s talk about my schedule,” Brock said as if they hadn’t discussed anything that had disturbed her. “As I said, tomorrow we leave for Tahoe.”

They would attend an event where he would be surrounded by fans. Today was a taste of what that would be like. People recognized him, and he signed autographs and posed for selfies, but today hadn’t been an event where fans had come to meet their idol. He just happened to be there. In Tahoe, he’d be the featured speaker.

When Claudia swam competitively, little girls had been excited to meet her. She remembered those days. At first, it had surprised her. When she saw how nervous the little girls had been when they saw her, her heart had squeezed tight. They were thrilled that she took the time to talk to them. Of course, she would talk to them. She was glad they were interested in swimming.

The summer of her internship was between her junior and senior year—the year she'd been accepted to law school. She planned to graduate law school and be admitted to the bar. While she pursued her political career, she planned to coach girls' swim teams.

Her life had been planned.

One summer changed everything.

She quit her internship and returned to school broken. She finished the fall semester but quit the swim team. At the end of fall semester, she dropped out of college. Her parents had been devastated and tried to understand why she had quit everything—the internship, swimming and school. She couldn't tell them what had happened. The senator had been their friend. They'd donated thousands to his campaign.

To hide the pain, she moved away from home and volunteered to work for other political campaigns while she tried to find permanent employment. When she finally confessed to her parents what had happened, they'd been livid and hired an attorney to sue the senator.

The lawsuit brought Claudia no satisfaction. It increased the pain. Someone on the senator's legal team called her almost daily, demanding she drop her lawsuit.

Six months later, her parents were killed by a drunk driver. The loss of her parents made her hate the senator more. It also made her more determined to pursue the lawsuit but having the past exposed—having to relive the experience—was as debilitating as the actual experience. She became physically ill every time the senator's legal team deposed her. Still, she refused to drop the case.

The horror of going through a trial and revealing to the world what had happened sickened her. When the Office of Congressional Workplace Rights offered a settlement, she fought hard to increase the payout. She had been shocked when her attorneys told her the committee's board agreed to her payment request.

She should have been relieved. She'd get the money she wanted and wouldn't have to go to trial. Instead, she insisted the case go to trial, even after the lawyers warned her she could lose against a very popular senator.

The senator's legal team would humiliate her, but because her parents were gone, she could withstand the shame and let the world know the senator who fought for women's rights had violated her and possibly others.

The case never went to trial.

"I'm looking forward to returning to Tahoe, even if I can't see the place." Brock looked into her eyes as if he could see into her mind—as if he knew her thoughts.

The ache in Claudia's chest reminded her of why she'd agreed to work for Brock. She drew a breath. She was there to help him, not think about her problems. She had hoped that helping others would be the incentive she needed to heal.

"When I had my accident, I hadn't thought ..." A strange look came over his face. "That's in the past. In the morning, Glenda can help you pack. Some of the events will be held outside. I'll give my speech after Friday night's banquet. After that, I'll meet the fans and autograph my book."

"You signed autographs this afternoon. Not to be rude, but how do you do that?" she asked. Did this man's determination know no bounds?

She felt guilty knowing that she'd let her assault steal her dream of a political career. Was an assault the same as an injury? Brock lost his sight, but he refused to accept the handicap. He believed the surgery would restore his sight.

What if it didn't?

She sensed Brock would keep trying until he could see or live his life as if he could see.

"I've signed enough autographs I can do it with my eyes closed." He grinned.

Claudia couldn't hold back her laughter.

“Your laugh is beautiful.” He still smiled, but she didn’t miss the serious look in his eyes.

“What?” she stammered. The warmth in his voice felt as if he’d smoothed his hand across her cheek. It was a touch she longed for yet knew she’d never know.

“Your voice is already wonderful. It’s musical. When you laugh, I can feel the joy right here.” He touched his fingers to his sternum. Did he feel something in his heart? She felt something in hers—something she’d never felt before. Something she wished would never leave her.

That Brock’s sightless eyes would gauge her as if he could see was a stunning experience. In everything, this man refused to accept defeat.

She’d spent two days with him and learned more about joy and dreams than in her entire life. The fullness in her heart made her swallow. Brock would teach her more about life than she ever thought she’d know.

Was she ready?

## CHAPTER 9



Claudia took notes as Brock explained to her what the weekend would be like and that he wanted to mingle with his fans.

“Because of God’s favor, the fans have made me the success I am,” he said. “I want to spend as much time with them as possible.”

“You don’t want to exert yourself,” Claudia said cautiously.

“That’s what home is for, or a hotel suite if I don’t have time to return home.” He laughed off her concern. “I’ll have time to rest before the next event.”

“The next one?” she asked. “You didn’t tell me about that.”

“The Christian athletes have an event that weekend, too,” he said. “They’ve invited me to attend, and I told them I would.”

“Maybe you should give it a day or two,” she said slowly.

“Everything will be fine,” he said absently, though in his eyes, she saw he was deep in thought. Was he trying to figure out how to cram two events into one weekend?

“Brock, you’re not the same person you were before your accident,” she said. His pushing himself could have caused his accident. He wasn’t Superman. He needed to rest.

“You sound like Uma,” he said quietly.



“I sound like myself.” She shook her head. She and Uma were nothing alike. The aggressive woman seemed only concerned with getting Brock in front of people. That Uma didn’t want him pushing himself surprised Claudia. At least the manager had Brock’s welfare in mind.

“We’ll play it your way,” he said after he hesitated a moment.

“This isn’t a game.” Claudia tried to sound firm, but it was hard when she spoke to a man determined to enjoy every aspect of life.

“I’ll bear that in mind.” He pressed a button on his watch that recited the time. “It’s late. Let’s go to bed. You want to be rested for the weekend.”

“Is there more you haven’t told me?” She blinked. “You haven’t planned to snowboard off any cliffs, have you?”

“No, but that’s something to think about.” He looked as if he were figuring out a way to snowboard.

Claudia groaned inwardly. Why had she mentioned snowboarding ... or cliffs? Did it matter? Brock seemed to live from one adrenaline rush to the next.

“Before I give you any more ideas, I’ll say goodnight.” She rose.

Something flickered across his face. She wanted to spend more time with him. Did he feel the same way? He liked her laugh, but what about the rest of her? No doubt, Uma had told him what she looked like. That she wasn’t svelte. Now he knew that she had no hair.

But it was starting to grow back. She had to give it that chance.

“Then we’ll say good night.” His voice was softer.

“Good night, Brock.” She stared into his eyes—kind and full of joy. She turned and walked from the room.

Upstairs, she stepped into her suite as Glenda moved out of her closet.

“I didn’t think you’d still be up.” Claudia looked from the housekeeper to the open suitcase on the luggage rack.

“Brock gave me a list of activities you’ll participate in this weekend.” Glenda stood next to the suitcase and laid sweaters and thermal pants into the baggage.

Claudia glanced at the luggage. Her breath caught when she saw the bathing suit.

“I’ll take this out.” She reached for the swimsuit. “I won’t be swimming.”

“You should take it.” Glenda gave her an understanding smile. “Plans change quickly at these events. You never know what you’ll do when. I’ll pack it. It doesn’t take much room. You can always sit in the hot tub for a midnight soak.”

“I won’t do that.” Claudia tried to keep her voice steady. She fought down the pain that knotted her stomach.

Glenda was just being helpful. She couldn’t know how much her comment hurt Claudia. Glenda had to be at least twenty years older than Claudia. She had mentioned she had a daughter in college. No matter what her age, she was slim. She probably still looked good in a bathing suit. Claudia tried not to think of the days when she loved going to the beach. She turned away.

It didn’t matter that Glenda had packed a swimsuit for her. She wouldn’t wear it. She’d hide it at the bottom of her suitcase.

She didn’t want a reminder that she’d once looked good in a bikini—at least that was what some of her guy friends had told her. At the time, she’d considered it a compliment. Now she thought it was a curse.

She looked at the swimsuit. Maybe she’d wear it—at midnight when no one was around.

Why was she thinking about a swimsuit? That was trivial in the grand scheme of things. She was there to help Brock. What she felt didn’t matter. She needed to focus on her boss.



CLAUDIA STARED through the tinted windows of the SUV limo and gave a soft gasp at the crowd pushing against the security team lined up in front of the hotel that looked more like a palace. When she'd traveled with the senator, she'd stayed in many beautiful hotels but never had seen one this intricately detailed.

The crowd chanted Brock's name.

"Sounds like we've reached the hotel." He faced the window.

"Mr. Amwell, glad to have you back." A grinning valet opened the vehicle's door. He took Brock's cane and held it for him as he helped Brock from the back seat.

"Hello, Kirk, it's good to be back." Brock smiled broadly.

Claudia jerked her gaze to Brock. How was his hearing so in tune that he recognized someone's voice—especially someone he hadn't seen in a while?

Another valet opened Claudia's door and helped her from the vehicle. She noticed fans and paparazzi watched the car door, anxious to see who had ridden with Brock. When she appeared, they lost interest and called out Brock's name.

The chauffeur popped the trunk and a team of porters rushed to the limo, stacked luggage onto a cart and pushed it into the hotel.

"How's everyone doing?" Brock gripped his cane. Turning to the crowd, he waved.

The crowd cheered and waved and asked him how he was doing.

"Doing great," he said.

Claudia's heart pounded heavily. What if the crowd rushed him? Should she have hired a security team? If so, why hadn't Uma told her? She knew Brock was well-known, but she

hadn't expected rock-star status. When they reached their hotel suite, she'd discuss the measure with Brock.

A concierge, whose name tag read Gregoire, moved to Claudia's side. "If you'll follow me, miss, I'll take you to your suite."

Claudia felt relief and nodded. At least someone knew how to control this situation. She moved to Brock's side. As if sensing her, he looked her way and smiled.

"The concierge will take us to our suite." Claudia kept her voice low. Her gaze shifted as she noticed some in the crowd watching her.

"Gregoire is here?" Brock looked satisfied. "He's the best."

Claudia laughed softly. Who didn't Brock know?

"We'll catch you guys later." Brock turned to the crowd and waved.

The crowd cheered, with some shouting they couldn't wait to see him later. Paparazzi circled them and snapped pictures. Claudia hadn't realized Brock's notoriety had been so extreme.

When she worked for the senator, people wanted to meet him but approached him politely. The senator's chief of staff had trained her and the other interns to walk strategically between the senator and the public and graciously tell those who wanted to talk to him that the senator would expect their call.

Claudia offered Brock her elbow. Together they walked through the crowd that parted to let them pass.

Someone started a Brock chant that reached a fever pitch by the time Claudia and Brock followed the concierge into the hotel. The doors closed, muting the chant. Claudia took a breath. She hadn't known people would get so excited about meeting a snowboarder. An extreme sports athlete had a bigger following than she realized. It didn't hurt that Brock was handsome and charismatic.

Claudia guided Brock after the concierge, who stepped into a gold elevator. The smiling attendant greeted Brock by name.

“Hello, Tina.” He smiled. “How’ve you been?”

“Can’t complain.” She seemed pleased that Brock recognized her voice.

Claudia was stunned and felt embarrassed. How many times had she struggled to remember someone’s name? Brock’s determination to remember the name of everyone he met made her commit to remembering others. If Brock could recognize voices, she, a person with sight, could remember faces. She should do better. She could see.

The elevator opened into an entryway decorated in mauve that led to a sunken living room with furniture arranged for entertaining. A glass wall overlooked the ski area. A grand piano sat in one corner. The wide balcony had been scraped clean of the snow with furniture ready for guests. Steam from a hot tub curled over the railing.

Someone had decorated a Christmas tree and hung stockings from the fireplace mantel. Claudia’s throat dried. She turned away. She hadn’t decorated a Christmas tree since her internship.

To one side sat the dining room that could seat twenty people. An archway led to a kitchen with gleaming appliances. On the other side was a hallway that Claudia assumed led to the bedrooms.

“Home, sweet, home,” Brock said with a relaxing exhale.

“As you know, your room is at the end of the hallway,” Gregoire said.

“Thanks.” Brock nodded.

“Shall I show you to your room, Miss Temples?” Gregoire turned to Claudia.

“Sure,” she said in surprise. She expected to fade into the woodwork as she had when she worked for the senator.

“I’ll wait for you here.” Brock moved toward the living room, toward the two steps that led to the room. His cane swished back and forth.

“Brock,” Claudia said anxiously. Her pulse pounded, and she followed him.

“Don’t worry. I know there are steps here,” he said amused.

Claudia wasn’t convinced and hurried to his side. By the time she reached him, he had reached the bottom of the steps.

“See? I can walk down steps.” He turned to her and grinned.

“So you can.” She released a ragged breath. What Brock could do relieved and amazed her.

“Go check out your room.” He crossed to a chair near the sliding doors. “I have some calls to make.”

Claudia pressed her lips together, then turned to Gregoire, who waited patiently at the hallway entrance. He knew better than she Brock’s capabilities. Brock moving down the steps hadn’t alarmed him.

“Sorry,” she murmured and offered him an apologetic smile. She hadn’t meant to keep him waiting.

“Quite all right.” Gregoire gave her a reassuring look. “Your room is this way.”

He led her past a fitness center to double doors that opened to a bedroom decorated in rosy off-white. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. To the side was a sitting room with a Queen Anne desk. On the other side, a door opened to a bathroom with a sunken tub.

She swallowed. What did Brock’s bedroom look like? She lifted her gaze to Gregoire and saw he watched her.

“This is very nice.” She winced. How could she describe this beautiful suite with such a mundane word? The rooms were almost as luxurious as her suite at Brock’s house.

“You’ll find your luggage through there.” He nodded toward a glass door that led to a dressing room and closet. “I understand you’ll be attending banquets, but room service is available should you need it, and the bar is fully stocked.”

That took Claudia by surprise. She hadn’t seen Brock drink. She didn’t drink.

“Is there anything else you need?” Gregoire asked.

“I think you covered everything.”

“Then I’ll leave you to your leisure.” He gave a slight nod and stepped out of the room.

Claudia turned and took in the room. She moved to the closet and saw her suitcase stacked in the back. Her clothes, including the dress she’d planned to wear to tonight’s banquet, were hanging on the rack. She opened the drawers. Her clothes had been neatly stacked in each one. In the next drawer was her folded swimsuit.

She flattened her mouth and closed the drawer. She was glad Glenda had insisted she take the swimsuit. Because they had a private suite with a hot tub, she wouldn’t feel so self-conscious using it.

But sitting in the hot tub wasn’t her reason for being here. She was helping Brock.

She rushed from her room to the living room, where Brock had put a call on speaker phone and paced the room. He was talking to Uma.

He didn’t use his cane, but he still dodged furniture. His ability to maneuver through a room amazed her. As she walked down the steps, he turned to her and smiled.

She returned the smile. It didn’t matter that he couldn’t see her. He had an infectious smile that warmed her insides. She felt good when she was near him. Too bad this was a short-term job. She would’ve liked to have helped Brock for a very long time. For his sake, she was glad he only needed help until his sight was restored. For her sake, she’d miss him when she left.

## CHAPTER 10



*B*rock showered before getting ready for the banquet. He managed to don the dress shirt and the trousers Claudia had set out for him, though he called her to help with his tie.

His hair was still damp from the shower, but he let it go. His wearing a suit would shock most of his followers. He wouldn't ruin the look by combing his hair. He'd never combed it before.

"You're fidgeting." Claudia's musical laugh broke through his thoughts.

"Not too tight." He tugged at his collar.

His hand brushed a silky fabric. Her dress? What was she wearing? How did she look? Never more than now did he want his sight back.

Her gentle fingers slipped the tie beneath his collar, then knotted the larger end around the tail. He loved the feel of her and her subtle fragrance. The urge to hold her close shocked him. His life had been a desperate search for the next adrenaline rush. Women brushed against him and pretended the move had been an accident, but he knew better. He hadn't been interested.

Something about Claudia made him interested.

"I had to be out of my mind to want to wear a suit and tie." He grimaced. "I thought I'd set an example. Now I feel ridiculous."



“You don’t look ridiculous,” Claudia said, the sincerity in her voice making his heart beat hard. “You look ... handsome.”

“Yeah?” He was half joking but he liked that she thought he looked all right.

“Yeah,” she repeated, amusement in her voice. “I’ll take a picture.”

“Only if you get in the picture with me.” He leveled his sightless eyes on her.

He didn’t miss the catch in her throat.

“I’ll take some of you, and if we have time—” Her tone tightened.

“We’ll have time,” he said firmly.

She didn’t comment, but he could tell she wasn’t going to be in any picture.

“How’s this?” He schooled his face into a serious look, lifted his head, and slipped his fingers between the buttons of his suit jacket.

“Fine, if your name is Napoleon.” She laughed that musical tone. “Now relax.”

He did. He heard the clicks move around him. His gaze followed her.

“Now stand next to me.” He reached out and caught her hand. He expected her skin to be soft, but the silkiness caught him off guard. The more he got to know this woman, the more he realized how beautiful she was.

She took a quick intake of breath.

“Come on now.” He regained his composure. “I don’t bite.”

“I know.” She sounded unsure.

He didn’t want her to hide from the camera or anything else. There was so much beauty about her—the musical tone of her voice, the softness of her skin, the gentleness of her

spirit. Deep inside there was beauty. Did her outer appearance not match what glowed on the inside? He found that hard to believe. He wanted to be near her. He wanted to be closer than they were now.

She moved next to him, and he relished her warmth. He wrapped an arm around her waist and rested his hand on the graceful curve. That she leaned against him made him relax. Maybe she wasn't afraid of getting close to him after all.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes, I'll count to three." The camera clicked a few more times.

She stepped from him, making him stifle a groan. Claudia in the curve in his arm was what he wanted.

"I'll text these to you," she said.

"Pick the ones you like, and we'll post them on social media." Brock pushed his fingers through his hair.

"You don't want pictures of me on your social media sites." She sounded flabbergasted.

"Why not?" He turned and picked up his cane.

"Because your fans want to see you, not someone who works for you."

"I post pictures of friends all the time ... or I used to," he said, remembering he hadn't posted anything in a while. "Fans like a personal side. It makes someone seem real."

"You're very real," she said with a laugh. "The fact that you want to be with your fans is obvious."

"Posting pictures of me with friends lets them know more about me." He moved across the room. "Let's go. I want to get to know as many people as possible before they take me to the dais."

They rode the elevator to the lobby. Brock was glad when Claudia placed his hand on her elbow and guided him off the elevator. Voices filled the area, with some people calling out to him. He faced the voices and grinned. Some people rushed to

him and asked for autographs. He was glad to oblige. He remembered how hurt he'd been when one of his idols had brushed him off when he'd asked for an autograph. He'd determined then that if he became famous, he would treat his fans with respect.

"I'll take you to the mixer." Gregoire greeted Brock and Claudia when they moved through the crowd.

Brock signed a few more autographs, then told the others he'd meet with them later. Some groaned. Others declared they'd stand in line and wait for him.

As he and Claudia walked down the corridor, the roar of conversations grew louder. His heart rate kicked up. He couldn't wait to meet the guests.

When he started his hunt for the most exhilarating mountain to snowboard, he'd done it for the adrenaline rush. Nothing was more exciting than defying the clutches of death as he slid down the mountainside.

He gave his life to Christ, but that didn't erase his thirst for excitement. He still longed for the day when he'd jump from a helicopter into waist-deep snow.

Now he had another mission—meeting the people who followed him. He had a message to share. How many times had he thought he'd die as he raced down a hill ahead of an avalanche? Knowing the jaws of death were snapping at his heels made him go faster. He always won.

The last ride down the hill, he hadn't won. As he clawed his way out of the snow, he knew he was finished. Even though he'd committed his life to Christ the day before, he hadn't realized how seriously God would take him. The day he'd been buried in several feet of snow was the day that everything changed.

When he and Claudia stepped into the banquet hall, the conversations stopped. He felt the intense stares.

"Hey, guys!" He waved at what he hoped were the people.

Laughter broke the tension. People crowded around him.

“Do you want me to take you to your table?” Claudia’s breath was warm against his cheek.

“Not yet.” He tipped his mouth to her ear and felt the soft brush of her hair. He stiffened. Uma had told him she didn’t have any hair. His heart ached knowing she was doing what she could to live a normal life. “I want to meet as many people as I can. They’re the reason I’m getting these sponsorships. Now I have a chance to show my appreciation before dinner starts and someone drags me to the dais. I’d rather sit with the people.”

“I understand.” Claudia laughed softly. “I’ll get you something to drink.”

Before he could tell her it wasn’t necessary, she moved away. Cool air rushed around him making him grimace. If only she knew he’d rather have her near him than something to drink.

“What’s it like snowboarding down a mountain that no one else has been on?” came a young voice.

“Well, I’ll tell you.” Brock turned to the sound. “I knew there had to be more than just sliding down a hill.”

Laughter sounded around him. Brock laughed, but in his mind unfolded his first trek to the back bowls behind his parents’ home in Telluride. He’d been excited when he realized there were mountains he could conquer. He felt Claudia’s warmth and turned to her when she pressed a glass into his hand.

“Sorry, guys.” He held up the glass. “I’m used to snowboarding not talking.” He sipped. Warmth filled him when he felt Claudia’s elegant fingers slip the drink from his grasp.

A bell sounded. People around Brock groaned.

“I guess that means dinner’s ready,” Brock said with a laugh.

“You’re right,” Claudia murmured into his ear. “I’ll take you to your seat.”

“And yours.” Brock turned to her. “You’re sitting with me.”

“Yes,” she said, though he noticed her flat tone.

He knew what she meant. She didn’t like attention.

He didn’t either, but if it gave him a chance to share his testimony, it was worth the discomfort. God had saved him from suffocating in an avalanche. He wanted the world to know. He’d share his escape from death while guests enjoyed their dessert. Would people welcome his testimony or shun it? Shunning him wouldn’t matter. He’d never been afraid. He welcomed any reaction.

“Will you talk to us later?” The voice was young.

“You bet.” Brock grinned. “I’ll stay until they kick us out.”

Claudia offered him her elbow and led him through the crowd. As they moved, people greeted him and told him they liked to watch the videos of him snowboarding. That seemed like a lifetime ago. Would his life return to the way it had been before his accident? After his surgery, he’d know if he’d be free to snowboard down a back bowl.

On the dais, Claudia led him to his chair. Someone set a salad in front of him, though he was too busy greeting those around him to bother with eating. He fell into conversation with a woman seated next to him who had medaled in downhill racing.

“You look familiar,” a man said, and Brock realized the man was talking to Claudia. He didn’t hear her response.

“Didn’t you used to work in the senate office building on Capitol Hill?” the man asked.

Claudia’s response was muffled before she leaned into Brock. “I’ll be right back,” she said and moved away before he could respond.

“I didn’t mean to upset her,” the man said, though Brock didn’t think he was talking to him. He wanted to find out why the man thought he knew Claudia, but that was something he wanted to hear from Claudia.

Why had she left? Did something happen at the senate building that upset her? He didn't want Uma to know that something bothered Claudia because she would push until she got an answer. He had a feeling that Claudia wouldn't answer. If she were pressed for an answer, would she quit?

He swallowed hard. He wanted to protect her. He wanted to keep her by his side. Having Claudia in his life was something he wanted longer than forever.

## CHAPTER 11



Claudia's eyes burned when she stepped into the restroom. An attendant approached her and directed her to an empty stall. Claudia nodded but could barely see the woman through the blur of tears. She grabbed a tissue from the container on the counter, pressed it to her mouth and stepped into a stall.

She didn't sit. She leaned her head against the wall and squeezed her eyes tight. Would this nightmare ever go away?

She recognized the man who had spoken to her at dinner. What was his name? Stuart, she thought. He had been a speechwriter for another United States senator. When she first met him, she thought he was cute and had hoped he'd ask her out. She'd see him when she walked through the halls of the senate building and he'd greet her, but he'd never been interested in her—until today.

How had he recognized her? She looked nothing like she had during her internship. She was heavier and wore a dark wig that covered the tufts of her blonde hair. When she and Stuart met, she'd been a starry-eyed college student who was excited to work for a senator and hoped one day she'd be a senator, too.

Voices sounded as a group of women entered the restroom.

Claudia froze. She had to get out of there. What if they had seen her leave the dais? What if people talked? Brock would ask her why she left. What would she tell him?

When she heard the stall doors close, she stepped out of her stall and approached the wash basin. She was relieved to see only she and the attendant occupied the restroom.

The attendant asked if she needed anything. Claudia couldn't look at her. She was afraid to speak. Dropping her gaze, she could only shake her head.

At the vanity, she pulled eyedrops from her purse and filled each eye. Looking at her reflection, she saw a woman whose pale face was whiter than the snow falling outside, but at least her eyes were brighter. She thanked God that Brock couldn't see her.

That thought etched guilt on the inside of her chest. How could she be glad that Brock was blind? Was her shame worth gratitude for someone else's pain? Her heart contrite, she drew a breath and prayed for forgiveness.

She waited another moment until she felt composed, then rushed to the dining hall. She shouldn't have left Brock. He couldn't see, and he needed her there, but she had needed to calm herself before she pretended Stuart's question hadn't bothered her. She hoped Brock would understand and wouldn't quiz her. Maybe he would. He seemed so in tune with her feelings that he'd probably ask why she left.

As she moved down the corridor, she thought of an explanation to give Brock that wasn't a lie but hardly the truth. Did she need to ask for forgiveness for this, too? She couldn't tell Brock everything. It would hurt too much. She'd say just enough to satisfy his curiosity, then ask for God's grace to cover the rest.

Maybe Brock was too busy with appearances and sponsorships to care about what had happened to her seven years ago—she hoped. Even as a blind man, Brock had a full life.

Claudia stepped into the banquet hall and immediately felt Stuart's gaze on her. Brock stood next to his chair and spoke with a couple of teens who looked like snowboarders with their long hair and wispy beards. She hurried through the crowd, then stepped to the dais.



“I apologize if I said—” Stuart was at her elbow.

“What?” She feigned surprise. “Oh, no, you didn’t say anything.” She stuttered a laugh and moved past him. “Excuse me, I’m going to see if Brock needs anything.”

Stuart looked apologetic. He gave a nod, then stepped back.

Brock signed autographs for the teens. His signature amazed Claudia, and she wondered how he could make it look so perfect. He must have practiced his autograph numerous times because it was a legible signature.

She moved next to him. She could hardly keep from smiling when he turned to her and saw relief in his face. He was a man who truly cared about other people.

“Is everything all right?” He kept his voice low.

“Everything’s fine.” She smiled broadly.

Brock couldn’t see her smile, but others could and maybe were taking pictures. She’d be in those pictures. She wished she could hide from the camera, but that wasn’t possible. She was too tall to hide. She was almost as tall as Brock. For now, she’d mingle and laugh so anyone who saw her photo would assume she was enjoying herself.

She stuttered a surprised laugh when someone spoke to her. She was relieved to fall into conversation with someone who filmed snowboarding competitions.

A man who looked like a snowboarder and looked uncomfortable in the suit he wore stepped to the podium and introduced himself as the chief executive of a snow equipment brand. By the sound of the applause, Claudia assumed he was well-known, though she’d never seen him before. His smile sincere, he welcomed everyone. While he listed Brock’s accomplishments, there was a rustle in the audience as the servers placed desserts in front of each guest.

“Who is he talking about?” Brock asked with exaggerated confusion as he leaned into her.

“You.” She laughed softly. She liked his nearness. His humility was like a beacon to her heart.

“I think he picked up the wrong notecards.” He stuck a finger inside his collar and stretched it.

The applause sounded.

“I guess that’s my cue.” Brock rose.

Claudia rose with him and guided him to the podium. Her hand on his, she touched his fingers to the water bottle in the cupholder beneath the podium’s desktop so he’d know where it was when he needed it. She adjusted the microphone, then placed his hand on it, so he’d know where that was, too. She stepped back but was ready to help when he needed her.

“Good evening.” Brock’s deep voice filled the ballroom. His gaze swept the hall that had grown quiet. In his gentle way, he told his tale of how his life had been a constant search for speed. Even as a baby, he could remember not going fast enough.

“That all changed last spring when an avalanche chased me down a mountainside. Normally, I could beat the snow down the hill. I was always on the lookout for an overhang I could duck into or a cliff I could jump over. I saw nothing. Sheer panic raced through my body. I never took drugs or drank alcohol because the best substance for me was the adrenaline rush. I thrived on fear and knowing I could overcome it.

“I raced down the hill and saw the snow lap my snowboard. The avalanche was like a gentle wave catching up to me and showering me with flakes. Soon it swept over me. I tumbled with the onslaught and basked in the adrenaline rush. I curled myself into a ball. When the avalanche stopped, I shot out my legs and arms creating a cavern in the snow so that I’d have enough air to breathe until I could dig my way out. It was dark. I couldn’t see.” He paused as if letting that sink in. He picked up the water bottle and took a sip. The brief moment dragged on as everyone waited.

“The trouble was I didn’t know if I was digging out or if I was digging deeper into the mountain. I was helpless,” he rasped.

The fear Claudia had hoped never to feel again caught her high in her throat. She stilled waiting for the moment to pass. Brock turned in her direction. Did he sense her fear? She glanced around. No one else noticed. They were riveted to Brock.

“That’s when I saw a light and felt as if someone were telling me to stay calm.” Brock’s voice turned serene. “That someone was Jesus. The day before the accident I had given my life to Christ. I may have been a Christian, but I still lived for myself. Never did I realize my biggest test was yet to come. As I tried to claw my way out of the snow, I honestly believed I would meet my maker at that moment, but God wasn’t finished with me yet. I thought I would die. Now I have life more abundantly.”

Claudia stiffened. She hadn’t realized Brock would share his testimony. He wasn’t speaking at a Christian conference. This was a sponsorship by a snow equipment brand that wanted to expand its business.

She looked at the company’s chief executive. He frowned as Brock closed his speech with scriptures that explained how anyone could ask Christ into their lives. She looked out at the audience. Some people sat riveted. Others shifted uncomfortably.

That was how she felt. Uncomfortable. Abandoned. The moment she needed God, He wasn’t there for her. It hadn’t been just a moment. She hadn’t just fought against the senator, she fought against his supporters who refused to believe her story. She fought against the police who made her repeat her story over and over again.

She had been hurt physically, mentally and emotionally. She began her internship excited and full of hope. She left broken.

Her parents had been devastated. They were the senator’s biggest donors. They had thought the senator was their friend.

Murmurings waffled through the crowd. She glanced at the audience. She couldn't breathe. What had Brock risked by sharing his testimony? He had sponsorships from all over the world. Well-known companies begged him to represent them. Would his speech make these companies cancel their contracts with him?

"I realize that what I shared tonight isn't a popular opinion, but as Jesus shared in the Book of Matthew, I can't hide my light under a bushel," Brock said. "You've been wonderful to support me during my time of need. Your prayers and letters have helped during this trial. I wanted to share the gift that can help you." He gave his closing remarks, offered to talk to anyone who had questions or wanted to chat, and then withdrew from the podium.

Claudia moved to his side and placed his hand on her arm.

Half the audience rose and applauded, the other half looked about. Some looked uncomfortable. Others looked angry.

"You didn't tell me you were going to get all religious." The chief executive's smile was tight as he approached Brock.

"Thanks for allowing me to share what happened to me that day. It was life-changing on several levels. I wanted others to know that Christ can meet us no matter where we are." Brock extended his hand.

Claudia didn't think the executive would accept it. When he did, she released the air from her lungs.

"Yeah," the executive said shortly. "That was a surprise I don't like."

"If you want to talk later, I'm happy to meet with you," Brock said.

"My lawyers will be in touch." The executive's mouth curled oddly.

Pulling his hand from Brock's, he turned away. A group gathered around the executive and nodded anxiously as he spoke. What was he telling them? To never let Brock speak at another convention? To cancel his endorsement?

Claudia doubted that. Because of Brock, the company's sales had to have increased dramatically. If the chief executive canceled the company's sponsorship with Brock, that would leave him in a difficult position. Did he want to make money, or stick to his personal beliefs?

Brock looked after the executive as if he could see him. He pushed his fingers through his hair and turned to Claudia. "I took a chance. I prayed about it. It seemed the right thing to do."

"I'm glad you did," Claudia said. Despite her own battle with her faith, she admired Brock for adhering to his convictions. "There's a group gathering in front of us if you'd like to talk to them."

"Definitely." He grinned.

For the next hour, Brock signed autographs and talked to fans. After a while, the crowd thinned. Soon afterward, the cleaning staff came into the room and stacked tables and chairs.

"We need to go." Claudia kept her voice low and leaned into Brock.

"I was afraid you would say that. I can hear them moving the furniture." Brock laughed dryly before turning to the group who hung on his every word. "I'm speaking at the Christian conference tomorrow night if anyone wants to come to that event."

Some said they would come. Others sounded disappointed.

At least, those at the Christian conference would be eager to hear his testimony. Claudia handed Brock his cane and guided him down the corridor to the elevator.

"The executive of the snow equipment company didn't seem pleased with your speech tonight." Claudia cleared her throat.

"Yeah." His voice was ragged. "That happens. That's something I need to pray about. Like I said, it's hard to hide my light under a bushel."

The elevator glided to a stop, and they stepped into the hotel suite.

“Are you concerned you’ll lose a sponsorship?” There was a catch in Claudia’s tone.

“No.” He turned to her. “Not to be glib, but the sponsorship is about getting more money. I know most people spend their lives thinking they’d be happier if they were rich. I’m here to tell them it will never happen. I have more money than I know what to do with.”

“How many people wish they could say that?” She shook her head in sad disbelief.

When Claudia worked for the senator, one of his causes had been the homeless. As part of her internship, she volunteered to help them. She’d never forget the bleak look in their eyes.

After she’d been assaulted, her pain consumed her. She quit all her volunteer obligations.

“Don’t get me wrong.” Brock swished his cane in front of himself and moved down the steps to the living room. “The money’s nice, but imagine yourself surrounded by snow, trying to dig out and not knowing if you were digging toward freedom or eternal captivity.”

“That’s easy to imagine, though not something I enjoy, but I get your point,” she said. “You want to live, not slowly suffocate.”

“My whole life I felt as if I were suffocating.” He crossed the living room. “My life has been one big search for the ultimate adrenaline rush. I knew if I could find it, I’d be free.”

“But you were free.” She followed him. She didn’t want him to trip, though he seemed to know where everything was.

“No, I wasn’t.” He faced her so abruptly that she bumped into him. “Are you all right?” His hands on her arms, he steadied her.

“Fine. I’m sorry.” She blushed at the heat of his touch on her arms.

His hands weren't smooth. They were rough as if he'd performed manual labor—or spent a lot of time in the cold. Despite the roughness of his skin, his touch was gentle and reassuring. The sensation stirring inside her made her swallow.

He leaned into her making her wonder what he'd do next. She couldn't find out. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe it was something. She stepped from him but didn't miss the flicker across his face.

“Are *you* all right?” she asked.

“Fine.” His mouth curved, and he turned away. He reached his cane to the sofa, then moved to it. “Do you want something to drink?”

Claudia's mouth tipped in surprise. He acted as if he'd go to the kitchen and get her a bottle of water.

“I'm fine, but I'm happy to get you something if you like,” she said.

“I've drunk enough.” He sat on the sofa. “Talking always makes me thirsty. I usually drain the water bottle they set on the podium for me.”

“You did tonight,” she said. She watched him. He seemed to be waiting for something or listening. “Do you want me to get you anything?”

“No, I'm fine.” He turned to her and smiled. “You've had a long day. Why don't you go to bed?”

“My day hasn't been any longer than yours. I'd feel better if you'd let me take you to your room,” she said.

“Are you afraid I'll trip?” He sounded amused.

“No, well, there is that possibility,” she said. “Would you let me take you? Please?”

He seemed so easygoing, but when it came to his independence, he clung to it.

“I can find my room.” He leaned on his cane and rose. “Because I'm tired, it's probably a good idea.”

She placed his hand on her elbow and led him up the steps to the hallway leading to his room. When they reached the door, she pushed it open and led him to the bed.

“Is there anything else you need?” She looked around to make sure nothing was blocking his path.

“I know my way around.” He smiled.

“I believe you. If there’s nothing else.” She started to turn away. His hand on her arm caught her.

“Claudia.” His tone was so serious she was afraid of what he’d say. Would he ask why she’d left during dinner?

“Yes?” Her voice was tremulous.

“Do you cross-country ski?”

“What?” She sputtered a laugh. She’d been nervous for no reason. “I have. I haven’t been in a while.”

“Let’s do that tomorrow.” He moved to the corner and rested his cane against the wall.

“Brock, don’t you think you’ve tempted the fates enough?” She watched him step toward the closet. Why did she feel the need to watch him? He didn’t stumble or falter. He knew where everything was.

He turned to her, surprise on his face, then moved to her and rested his hands on her elbows. The warmth that was becoming too familiar and welcoming coursed through her. She moved from his touch. Despite his tenderness, she found it hard to think.

“The fates don’t exist.” His tone was husky. “Everything’s in God’s hands. So what do you say? Cross-country skiing tomorrow?”

“Where do we do that?”

“There’s a Nordic Center near the hotel.”

“Do you ever take no for an answer?” she asked and was surprised he had to think about the answer.



“I guess I believe in enjoying every moment of life,” he said. “It’s a gift.”

She hadn’t expected that answer.

“How do you cross-country ski when you can’t see?” she asked.

“The way I do everything.” He grinned. “I trust.”

## CHAPTER 12



*B*rock lay in bed and stared into the darkness. He'd been exhilarated after he'd given his speech, but as the adrenaline slipped away, exhaustion took over. If he could get thoughts of Claudia out of his mind, sleep would come.

That was the problem. He couldn't stop thinking about Claudia.

And he thought about Uma. She'd heard about his speech and had called him as he was climbing into bed. Didn't he realize his Christian beliefs could cost him his endorsements?

Was she more concerned about herself or his losing his popularity?

He didn't explain his need to share the miracle that saved his life. She'd heard it before and hadn't been impressed.

"Next time you give a speech, you send it to me," she demanded.

"I'll send it to you, but I won't change it," he said. "I'm talking at the Christian conference tomorrow night."

"Against my advice. Tonight should've made you realize this could ruin your reputation," Uma said, exasperated. "I worked hard to create your image."

"And for that I'm grateful," he said. He wouldn't tell her that God could use him no matter what his reputation.

"Then cancel that speech," she said. "They'll find a replacement."

“I believe God wants me to speak to the group,” he said.

“Are you sure?” Her tone sounded too innocent.

He shook his head. She could mock him, but he knew what God wanted him to do. He wouldn’t change his mind.

“If you want to come to the conference—”

“You know I have a meeting.” Her response was quick. “I’ll call tomorrow night to find out how everything went.” She wished him a good night and hung up.

Brock leaned back against the pillows. He hadn’t told her he would cross-country ski tomorrow. He wasn’t sure he would. Claudia wasn’t thrilled with his plan. Because she didn’t want to go or didn’t want him to go?

That was the problem with being blind—among others. It left him dependent on other people who could easily stand in his way. When he could see, no one stopped him. If he wanted to do something, he did it. He never cared what others thought.

He still didn’t care, but now they had power over him. It was a constant struggle to get it back. Was that what God was trying to teach him? Let go and let God?

Knowing he had salvation was the unfathomable gift. He loved having a relationship with God. Sometimes he wanted to be like King David and bask in God’s love, but in his heart he knew God had taken him on this path to use him in different ways. There was work to be done.

He threw back the covers and swung his feet to the floor. Touching the furniture, he crossed the room to the window. He knew it overlooked the ski slope. Was it snowing? Were the lights on? Were people wandering outside? Great disappointment settled in his chest. Knowing what he couldn’t see returned full force.

Everything would change once he had his surgery. He couldn’t wait to see again.

If he couldn’t sleep, he didn’t want to be in his room. He’d go to the living room, turn on the fireplace, maybe listen to some music. He wouldn’t take his cane. He knew how the

suite was laid out and could feel his way out of his room and down the hall.

Turning from the window, he made a large sweep with his arms. He felt nothing. He was certain he faced the bedroom door. He crossed the room and kicked a chair leg. He grimaced against the pain. If he cried out, Claudia would be at his door.

Touching the wall, he moved down the hall. He caught a subtle fragrance that made his heart kick up a notch. He hesitated at the top of the steps that led to the living room. He heard a rustle and the catch in Claudia's breath.

"Are the lights on?" he asked. There was a fluttering as she moved toward him.

"Yes," she said softly. "Did you need something?"

"You make me sound like a recalcitrant child."

"That wasn't my intention." She sounded chagrined. "I'm heating some milk. I was going to make cocoa. Would you like a cup?"

"That would be nice." He couldn't remember the last time he'd drunk a cup. Maybe when he still lived with his parents.

"Let me help you to the sofa," she said.

"That isn't necessary." He reached out and felt her shoulder. He had expected her hair to cover her shoulder, but this time he didn't feel it. Had she removed her wig?

Sidestepping her, he moved forward. He knew where everything was—the sofa, the tables, the chairs. He remembered what the room looked like before he lost his sight.

In his mind, he had an image of what Claudia looked like. When he regained his sight, he would compare that image to what he saw, but it wouldn't be just a physical comparison. He knew her, and he liked what he knew. It would be hard to separate the inner Claudia from the outer one.

Claudia hadn't moved from the living room.

“Are you watching me?” He stepped to the sofa. Grabbing the arm, he lowered himself to the seat.

“I confess I am, though I’m not sure why.” She laughed self-consciously. “I can see that you know where everything is. I’ll get the cocoa.”

There was that fluttering sound as she moved across the room, making him wonder what she wore.

He felt along the sofa arm until his finger slid over the console that controlled the media. He pressed a button. The soft strains of Carol of the Bells filled the room.

“You picked the perfect music.” Claudia’s gentle footsteps approached him. She pressed a warm mug into his hands. The chocolate fragrance filled the room.

“Not I.” He turned to her and wished he could see her. “The hotel knows I like Christmas music. They fill the queue with Christmas carols no matter the time of year.”

“So summer, winter, spring and fall, you listen to Christmas music?” She spoke slowly.

“What can I say?” He grinned. “Even though I haven’t celebrated Christmas in years, I like the music.” He sipped the cocoa. “This is very good.”

“I’m glad you like it.” The sofa shifted.

She hadn’t sat near him, which was a disappointment. He assumed she was curled into the far corner.

If he knew her better, he’d hold her close. He had a feeling she’d fit very nicely next to him. Her personality fit with his.

“What’s it like outside?” He stared at the glass wall as if he could see.

“It’s snowing.” There was a catch in her throat. “I guess I should be more forthcoming about what I see. The snow groomers have already made one pass down the slopes.”

“That always disappointed me when they groomed the slopes.” He pressed his lips together.

“Because you prefer snowboarding in powder?” she asked.

“It’s a lot more exciting to make that first cut down the mountain,” he said. When he heard her sigh, he asked, “Do you snowboard in powder?”

“I have, though it’s been a while. I tend to live cautiously.”

“I disagree.” He gave a short laugh. “You were an intern in Washington, D.C. I’d say that’s daring.”

“That hardly compares to sliding down a mountain,” she said with hesitancy.

“I guess it’s all in perspective,” he said. “Did you like living there?”

“It was a whole new world. The people are different. The lifestyle is different. It was like being in college. I had to study every night to stay current on the issues.” There was *joie de vivre* in her tone he hadn’t heard before. Her excitement was electric.

“I’d say you enjoyed living there,” he said and wished she’d laugh again.

“At first, it was thrilling because working at the capitol was something I’d never experienced. I’d always been active in politics and had been president of my class in high school, but nothing prepared me for Washington, D.C. My parents bought me a condo near the mall. Every day a driver came to my place and drove me to the senator’s office. I didn’t get a chance to enjoy the view. I was on the phone from the time I left my condo until I reached the senator’s office. Meeting the President was like meeting a rockstar, which I’ve never done, but it was exciting. Her tone grew somber. “After I’d lived in Washington, D.C., for a while, I saw past the veneer and ...” There was a click in her throat.

“And what?” he prompted. He wanted to bring back that moment of excitement. Because she had experienced the adrenaline rush he craved?

“I had planned to work in the senator’s office after I graduated law school, but the longer I stayed, the more it seemed like a better idea to leave.” She choked. In the quiet, he heard a muffled sob.

“Hey, it’s all right.” He reached for her and found her bent elbow. Her hand was pressed to her mouth.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was filled with tears. She moved away.

“Don’t go.” He wrapped his fingers around her wrist. “I don’t want you to leave when you’re like this.”

“What do you mean?” Her voice trembled.

“You’re sad. You shouldn’t be alone when you’re hurting.” He spoke tenderly.

“I shouldn’t be around you when I’m like this.” She stuttered a laugh and sniffed. “The last thing you want is to be around a crying woman.”

“Why wouldn’t I want that?” He was puzzled at her statement. “You’re in pain. I want to help.”

“What?” There was a shock in her voice.

“Are you usually alone when you hurt?” he asked.

“Yes, of course,” she said.

He still held her wrist. He was relieved she hadn’t pulled away. He felt her shoulders lift.

“No one wants to be around someone sad.” She sounded as if she looked at him strangely. “And it isn’t fair to others to be around them when I’m sad.”

“Did you ask them that?” He gave her wrist a slight tug and was relieved that she didn’t pull away. He wanted her closer, but he’d accept her nearness for now.

“No, I just know.” She hesitated. “I’d ask you if you’ve ever been sad, but I think I know the answer.”

“I don’t think you do,” he said and heard the change in her breathing. “Last spring, when I lost my sight, I was hardly elated.”

“I think that’s a given,” she said, and he imagined her rolling her eyes.

“I was outraged. I felt betrayed.”

“How so?” she asked shocked.

“I’d prayed that foxhole prayer to God.” He laughed dryly. “Save me and I’ll do whatever you ask. I didn’t realize going blind was part of the deal.”

“I’m sorry,” she said brokenly.

“It isn’t your fault.” He let out his breath slowly. “It’s mine.” He felt her face come up. “Ever since I was a kid, I mean my first memories, I had this need for speed, and it wasn’t just going fast. I needed to live on the edge. Like taunting death but escaping its jaws.”

“Why?” She sounded horrified.

“I wish I knew,” he said. It wasn’t something he thought about. “My mother is a psychiatrist. She tried to figure it out. She’d talk to me about ways to control the urge with therapy and medication, but I didn’t want to. I realized I was taunting death, but it didn’t seem real. To me, it was a game. I thought I’d escaped the jaws of death because of my own strength and skill. I didn’t understand that God’s hand was protecting me. I always thought I’d win—until I didn’t.”

“You’ve lost your sight, yet you still crave an adrenaline rush,” she said thoughtfully. “Except for your salvation, it doesn’t sound like you’ve changed much.”

“I suppose you’re right. The changes are slow in coming but they are there,” he said smiling. “I should have explained myself better, but knowing I have eternal life has changed me completely.”

“But you still live on the edge.” She sounded confused.

“Not like I used to,” he said. “Maybe it’s a good thing you didn’t know me then.”

“In a way, I wish I had.”

“Why is that?” Now he was curious.

“It would’ve been interesting to know someone who lived life on the edge,” she said.



“Or know someone who was just plain stupid.” He laughed.

“I didn’t say that.” She gasped.

“No, I did, and so did my parents. Now I understand the pain I put them through. When I have my children, I hope I have an idea of how to guide them to a fruitful life and not live selfishly.” He hesitated. He’d just talked about having his own children. Where had that desire come from? His mouth dried. Until this moment, he’d never thought about marriage, let alone a family. He brushed the thoughts aside. “My mother, for all her education and knowledge, wasn’t able to analyze my flirtation with death, though she’s quite vocal with her displeasure with my confession of faith. She thinks I’m crazy for being a believer. She blames that on my lack of education.”

“Education isn’t always found in books,” she said.

“You’re very clever.” He chuckled.

“Because of what I said?”

“That and how you turned the conversation away from yourself and onto me. I don’t need to talk about myself. I know everything I want to know. You on the other hand ...” The urge to hold her and keep her close swept through him.

Women had always been an added benefit of his reputation. Before he’d committed his life to Christ, he could have any woman he wanted. He hadn’t wanted any of them. After he accepted God’s salvation, he didn’t think about women. He thought about the gift he’d received and how much he wanted others to know this gift was theirs for the asking.

“I wanted to know more about you, but you turned the conversation to me. I’m where I started—knowing nothing more about you.” He rippled his fingers around her wrist and wondered at the delicate structure he touched.

“I’ve told you everything.” She slipped from his grasp. The sofa shifted as she moved away and rose. “If we’re going cross-country skiing tomorrow, we need to get to bed. Otherwise, we’re going to be worthless on the trail.”

“You’re right.” He hid his disappointment. He liked being near this woman. He liked her voice and the sweetness he felt in her presence.

She’d be with him until his surgery. And then what?

“Come. I’ll walk you to your room,” she said. When he opened his mouth, she added, “Not because you can’t walk by yourself, but because we’re both going that direction.”

“You’re quick thinking.” He curved the corner of his mouth.

“I’m being honest.” Her voice was light. They walked side by side up the living room steps and down the hall to his bedroom. “I’ve been with you a few days now. I know what you can do. I’ve noticed nothing you can’t do.”

“You’re flattering me,” he said. He’d heard the flattery from others. It was different coming Claudia. He had learned she didn’t say anything she didn’t mean.

When they reached his bedroom door, he was disappointed. He shouldn’t have been. He had spent the time with her that he wanted, but he didn’t want it to end.

“I didn’t say anything you don’t already know,” she said softly.

“At one time I would’ve agreed.” He laughed dryly. “Now I’m not so sure.”

He heard the change in her breathing and expected her to say more.

“Good night, Brock,” she said, simply. She turned away.

He reached for her hand. The tension in his chest eased when he caught it. He smoothed his hand up her arm to her shoulders and cupped her cheek. He pressed his lips to her forehead. He heard her quick intake of breath. He didn’t know why he kissed her. He had to take the opportunity.

“Good night,” he murmured. He stepped into his room and closed the door.

## CHAPTER 13



Claudia hadn't thought she'd fall asleep and was surprised when she woke and felt rested. She touched her forehead. The place where Brock had kissed her. She'd been too surprised to say anything. When he stepped into his room, she knew—he felt sorry for her.

The last thing she wanted was his pity. Her jaw set, she determined to get control of her life again. The question was how.

Brock had asked about her internship in Washington, D.C., something she tried to forget. Every time she looked in the mirror, the reminder was her splotchy scalp showing between the tufts of blonde.

She studied her head. Her hair was starting to grow back. The scabs had healed and were fading.

She bit her lower lip. The urge to pull out the new hair was so overwhelming that sometimes she had to lace her fingers together and squeeze so hard she thought she'd break every bone in her hands.

How she resisted ripping out her hair, she didn't know, but she had a feeling it had to do with Brock. Not that he was interested in her, but his compassion touched her.

She whispered a prayer of thanks that his focus was to regain his sight and get back on the ski slope.

Something else about her was changing—her clothes didn't feel as tight.

After all these years was she finally healing? She closed her eyes and prayed the answer was yes, but she was afraid to hope.

When she told Brock about her life in Washington, D.C., her heart broke as she remembered the optimism she'd felt when she'd first arrived. She thought of those moments now, then braced herself for the pain. The wave swept over her, but this time it wasn't as wrenching as it had been in the past.

She heard movement in the hallway and threw back the covers. Today, Brock wanted to cross-country ski. She thought he was crazy, but she'd go with him. Maybe after he fell a few times, he'd decide to wait until his sight had been restored.

Why was she thinking that? She shook her head. She knew him well enough to know he wouldn't give up. He'd keep trying until he'd memorized the ski trails at the Nordic Center. He was the most determined person she'd ever met.

She slipped out of her nightgown and jumped into the shower. Her hair still damp, she stepped to the closet and pulled on long underwear, thermal socks, a pair of insulated pants and a fleece top. She grabbed her hat and jacket. She wouldn't brush her hair. She couldn't risk the temptation to finger the soft tufts, which would make her want to pull them out.

And she wouldn't bother with a wig. When they left for the Nordic Center, she'd pull on her knit hat and hide her wounded head.

Rushing down the hallway to the dining room, she smelled the fragrant odors of breakfast. She tightened her jaw. Brock must have called room service, something she should've done

She stepped from the hallway as he made his way to the dining area.

"There she is." He turned to her and smiled.

"Good morning." Her voice was light. The lift in her chest made her blink. She couldn't deny she liked being greeted by this person who loved life.

Though last night Brock had shared his shock from his loss of sight, she couldn't imagine him angry. He was good-looking and charismatic—all things that would make most people conceited and demanding. She'd met those people. Brock was genuine.

Heat filled her face when she realized she was staring at him, but why not? He couldn't see her. He looked handsome in the turtleneck and casual pants. His freshly shampooed hair curled about his head.

She glanced at the dining room table. Room service had already delivered a breakfast of fruit, yogurt, Belgian waffles and scrambled eggs. The fragrant odors made her stomach rumble.

"I heard that." Brock cocked his head at her.

"It's the perfect response to a breakfast that smells this good." She rushed to him.

She wanted to make sure he found his chair. His hand was on the back of the seat before she reached him. She didn't know if she should be relieved that he could take care of himself or be disappointed because she hadn't helped him.

"I couldn't agree more," he said. "And don't worry about helping me. I've stayed in this suite enough times to remember where everything is."

"So I see."

"I'm not going to sit until you do." He turned to her. "I'd help you with your chair, but that might prove awkward."

She nodded, then rolled her eyes. He couldn't see her nod.

"That's fine." She moved to her chair and sat.

So did he.

"It feels like a beautiful day." He dropped his napkin into this lap.

"It is." She looked out the window. "It snowed last night so there's lots of powder."

"My favorite word." He grinned.

“When will we leave for the Nordic Center?”

“As soon as we eat.”

“Will it be open? It’s early.” She gave him a doubtful look.

“A lot of the locals ski before going to work or school. This center accommodates them.” He spooned strawberries and whipped cream onto his waffles making her wonder how he knew what to do. “Shall we ask for a blessing?”

“Yes.” Her voice was soft. She had more to be thankful for than she’d imagined.

As they ate, they talked like old friends. Claudia marveled at how comfortable she felt with him. She hadn’t felt that way around a man in years. He was easy to talk to and interested in what she had to say.

An hour later they reached the Nordic Center. A guide named Mitch met them when their limo glided to a stop in front of the entrance. He escorted them inside and led them to a private room where he helped them select their boots and put them on. Afterward, he led them outside to get their skis and poles.

Brock made a face when the guide helped him slip his boots into the ski bindings.

“Just a couple more weeks, and I’ll be able to see what I’m doing.” He stood and grabbed the ski poles. He turned to Claudia.

“I’m ready,” she said. “Go ahead. I’ll follow.”

Brock nodded to Mitch, who gave him verbal cues to exit the lodge and ski to the trailhead. As Brock moved down the path, the guide followed Brock and called out the turns. Claudia followed Brock and Mitch. She had to work hard but was relieved she could keep up with them. She’d seen videos of Brock snowboarding and knew how fast he could move. Was he being cautious because he couldn’t see?

She kept her eyes on Brock praying he didn’t end up in a snow bank. Thankfully, Mitch was watching him and giving him precise instructions. He did everything the guide told him

to. His turns were even and kept him away from the trail's edge. When they reached a fork, he transitioned from one trail to the next easily.

After an hour of skiing, Brock slowed to a stop. Claudia caught up with him and was surprised he was winded.

"I guess I'm not in as great of shape as I thought I was," he confessed and turned to Claudia. "I don't hear you breathing hard. How are you doing?"

"I'm all right, but this is a workout."

"Look out," someone behind them shouted.

Claudia looked up to a skier, who barreled down the trail toward her and Brock. His arms flailed as he struggled to keep his balance.

The guide moved toward Claudia and Brock, but Brock's arm was already around Claudia's waist and pulling her close. Heat poured through her. Even through his jacket, she felt his heart pound. Her own heart beat wildly. He pivoted his skis and moved toward the embankment.

The skier's skis flipped into the air throwing the man to his back. He lay motionless.

"Oh, no." Claudia gasped.

Mitch skied to the man's side.

"I'm all right." The man waved him away. He pushed himself to his elbows and shook his head hard. He stared straight at Claudia, then blinked. His surprise turned into a dry laugh.

Claudia swallowed and stared at the man. She felt the blood drain from her face. Her mouth trembled, but she couldn't stop it.

She had thought she'd escaped the nightmare of seven years ago. She thought she was healing. Now she was staring into the dark eyes of the senator's son—Hiram Blocksdale. His surprise turned into a half smile.

She stiffened, and she felt Brock's glance. He had to feel her tremble, but he didn't let her go. Instead, he held her tighter. Even if she wanted to, she didn't have the strength to pull away.

The guide offered his hand to Hiram.

"I think I can stand." Hiram pulled himself to a sitting position. After a struggle, he balanced on his skis. He stared at Claudia. "Hello, Claudia." His voice was low and filled with something she couldn't identify. "This is a surprise. I travel all over the country. I was wondering if we'd ever meet again. I guess that was the plan in the grand scheme of things."

Claudia didn't speak. She remembered sitting in court day after day with Hiram, along with other members of the senator's family, sitting behind her.

Now she felt Brock's curious gaze and that of the guide. She kept her gaze on Hiram. She didn't trust him like she didn't trust his father.

"I don't blame you for not wanting to talk to me," Hiram said. "That's probably for the better." He adjusted his hat. "I'd say see you around, but you probably wouldn't like that. At least, your boyfriend takes good care of you."

"My boyfriend?" Claudia whispered brokenly, then shook her head. "No, it isn't—"

She felt Brock's gentle squeeze and realized what he was telling her—she didn't owe this man an explanation.

"Brock Amwell." Brock extended his hand though not directly at Hiram.

"You don't need an introduction." Hiram reached for Brock's hand, then introduced himself. He gave Brock a curious look. Had he not known Brock was blind? "I'll leave you to your ski outing."

Hiram skied around them. He dug his ski poles into the snow, then made his way down the trail. Twice he almost lost his balance.



Claudia turned away. She didn't want to watch Hiram. She had hoped she'd never see him or anyone else in the Blocksdale family again, though she was surprised he hadn't lashed out at her. He acted as if he wanted to tell her something. What did it matter as long as that part of her life was over?

She released a slow breath and felt relief. Seeing Hiram again hadn't damaged her as much as she had thought it would.

Looking at Brock, she saw he studied her. His eyes soft, he seemed to sense her discomfort at seeing Hiram again.

"I think we've skied enough for the day," Brock said. "Unless you want to ski some more."

"Going back is fine." Claudia's soft voice hid the pounding in her chest. She didn't want to disrupt Brock's outing. He'd been looking forward to the day, but now that she'd seen Hiram, the memories of her encounter with the senator and the trial that had humiliated her and her family played in her head like a feature film, she wanted to get away from this place.

She'd been hired to help Brock. She had accepted the job so she could get her mind off the past and herself. She vowed to let go of the past and focus on Brock Amwell.

## CHAPTER 14



Claudia and Brock sat in the back seat of the limo and rode to the hotel in silence. Brock tried to make conversation. Claudia wanted to talk about anything except what had happened at the Nordic Center, but her mind pulled Hiram's surprised face into view. She had to put the past behind her. Even if it dogged her, she knew leaning on God would give her the strength to do that. Letting Him do that was up to her.

When the limousine drove them back to the suite, Claudia hoped Brock would be distracted by the speech he'd give at the Christian conference tonight and not about what had happened at the Nordic Center. She was relieved when he told her some of the points he planned to discuss during his speech and asked her what she thought.

She knew about salvation. Her parents had taught her about a loving God. Because of the assault, she wondered about God's love for her.

The limousine stopped in front of the hotel. The valets rushed to the vehicle and helped them out. She and Brock rode the elevator to the top floor, where he stepped out and moved into the suite as if he could see.

There was so much to admire about this man. He'd lost his sight, but he focused on the future—when his sight would be restored. For his sake, Claudia hoped he was right.

"If you want to take a shower, I can order lunch." She pulled the hat from her head. Her fingers touching the soft hair

made her shake. It was like touching a newborn baby. The hair was growing as it should, completely oblivious of her evil urge to yank it out. She had to keep busy. She couldn't think about Hiram or the senator or the assault.

Brock looked at her moment as if expecting her to say more. She bit her lower lip. She couldn't share her nightmare with him. She had to live in the present and look forward to the future.

"That's fine," he said. "I'm in the mood for anything, so order whatever you want. I should be changed by the time lunch arrives." He moved down the hall.

Claudia waited until the door to his bedroom suite closed, then opened her phone and placed the lunch order. She received a notice the meal would be delivered in twenty minutes—more than enough time for her to shower and change. She didn't have to style her hair—she'd wear a wig—and she wouldn't wear makeup.

Stepping into Brock's room, she laid out the clothes he had said he wanted to wear when he gave his talk at the conference that evening. Next, she set out a casual outfit for him to wear until he was ready to change for the evening.

She walked down the hallway to her suite. Slowly she undressed. Leaving her clothes on the floor, she stepped into the shower. Her heart beat dully. She didn't want to look in the mirror. She was afraid of what she'd see—clumps of hair and a body that carried extra weight.

After showering and changing, she walked into the living room as the elevator doors opened, and an attendant pushed a cart into the room. She directed him to the dining room.

"You ordered chili." Brock moved into the room as the attendant left. "Excellent choice."

"It seemed like a good day for it." Claudia scanned Brock's clothing to make sure nothing was twisted or backward. He'd donned each article correctly. She watched him move to his chair in the dining room.

“I quite agree, and you don’t need to make sure I find my chair.” Smiling at her, he sat.

“I’m learning that more each day.” She sat opposite him. “I don’t mean to insult you, but I like to make sure.”

“I’m not insulted.” He dropped his napkin into his lap. After the blessing, he lifted his spoon and tasted the chili. “Just the right amount of spices. How about after lunch we do a little Christmas shopping?”

Claudia’s head came up. Christmas wasn’t a holiday she celebrated, especially after her parents died.

“I don’t have much to do, but I’m happy to help you.” She forced a lightness into her voice.

“You’re that organized.” He grinned. “I’m impressed.”

“I don’t know about organized, it’s just not something I spend a lot of time doing.” Her appetite was lost, and she pushed her plate away. Her parents had always made Christmas special. Aside from the perfunctory gifts of clothes, they usually surprised her with a vacation and let her bring a friend.

“I didn’t mean for you to lose your appetite.” He stared straight at her.

She blushed and dropped her gaze, though she didn’t know why. How was this man so sensitive to her moods? She had to be careful. It was Brock who needed her, not the other way around.

“The chili is filling.” She spoke haltingly and saw in his face he wasn’t fooled. “Christmas shopping is a wonderful idea. Do you know where you want to go?”

“There are some artisan shops on Main Street. I wanted to get something for my younger brother and sister there,” he said. “As for my parents, I haven’t decided what to get them yet, but maybe walking through town will give me some ideas for them and the house staff.”

His enthusiasm for Christmas shopping made Claudia smile. When his brows rose, she realized she’d giggled.

“Is this a private joke, or will you share?” He looked at her as he buttered a hot roll.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh, but it isn’t a joke at all,” she said. “It’s refreshing that you look forward to shopping.”

“’Tis the season,” he said. “And yes, I enjoy it. It gets me out of here and around people.”

“I’m a little surprised that you like to be around people.” She studied him. “I had always thought extreme sports was for loners. You like to be with people.”

“It wasn’t always that way.” His eyes turned thoughtful. “At least, most of the snowboarders I know like to be alone. I did, too. Because I grew up in Telluride, it was easy to get away from people, especially my family. Sadly, I wasn’t much of a big brother to my sister and brother. Though I always enjoyed the rush of flying down the mountain, I sought ways to make it more intense, it was also a way to get away from my parents and the pressure they put on me.”

Claudia’s breath caught. Brock was congenial. She couldn’t imagine him being rebellious.

“I’ve shocked you.” His smile looked sad. “Had I realized how much I hurt those who loved me ... I’m not sure what I would’ve done. For years, what I wanted was my utmost priority.”

“I am shocked,” she said. “You’re not like that now.”

“No.” His smile was slight. “Being caught in an avalanche and then realizing I lost my sight made me seek answers.”

Claudia pressed her lips together. She knew where this conversation was going. What Brock sought was a higher power. He found peace when he found Jesus. She’d known others who had given the same testimony. Their lives had changed. They wanted to share the message. She felt a tug inside her chest. Was that why she was here working for Brock?

No, she had been hired because of her qualifications. Brock had wanted her because she knew how to help someone who met with the public.

“Are you going to eat anymore?” Brock asked. He laid his napkin to the side of his plate.

“I ... I’ve eaten enough.” She stared at her full bowl of chili and her untouched salad. When she’d ordered the meal, she’d been starving. “I’ll notify room service they can remove the cart, and then I’ll contact the limo service.” Standing, she placed her plate and Brock’s on the cart.

“All right.” Brock rose but watched her as if trying to understand why her mood had changed. Maybe he already knew.

She wished she’d found joy in Christmas, but she hadn’t felt the delight of the season in years.

“Let’s plan to leave in thirty minutes.” Brock’s voice was so light she felt a warm stirring in her chest.

That feeling could almost make her look forward to the holiday.



BROCK HAD THOUGHT he’d blend in with the crowd. Celebrities frequented the resort town and freely walked the streets. As a child, Brock’s parents had brought the family here. He’d been amazed to see some of the athletes he’d admired and approached them. Though a few had been annoyed, most were friendly.

With his cane in hand, he and Claudia moved from shop to shop. He had told her what he wanted to buy, and she found the stores that sold the items. She made arrangements to have his purchases delivered to his home in Aspen.

He and Claudia were in a coffee shop when a group of teens approached and asked for his autograph.

“He can’t sign,” a boy said. “He’s blind.”

“It may not be perfect, but I can sign,” Brock said and heard a rustle as if the kids searched for paper for him to write on.

Claudia helped the kids form a line, which drew attention. When Claudia slipped a pen into his hand, his breath caught at the smoothness of her skin. He signed autographs until his hand ached, but he didn't stop. He was grateful for the opportunity to meet the kids.

"I'll be speaking at the Christian conference tonight if you guys want to come," he said.

"You're a Christian?" A girl was shocked.

"I am." Brock signed his name, then lifted his hand. When he felt another sheet of paper on the table, he signed again. "I'll be giving my testimony. My walk with Christ became real to me when I was caught in an avalanche."

"That's foxhole salvation," another boy said.

"God needs to meet us in different ways," Brock said. "Losing my sight got my attention."

"Then what happens if you regain your sight?" someone asked. "Will you forget about God?"

"No, once you meet God, you never forget about Him," he said. "His gentle way of pursuing you makes you never want Him out of your life."

"It's time we go so you can be ready for tonight." Claudia's voice was low. She leaned her mouth to his ear. Her subtle scent brought a reaction he hadn't felt in years.

"Sorry, guys." Brock picked up his cane. With Claudia next to him, he rose. "I'll be continuing this conversation tonight if you want to hear more."

Some of the kids groaned. Others said they'd be there. Brock felt relieved. Knowing God used him, humbled him and made him glad.

When they drove back to the hotel, Claudia said little, but once they entered the suite, she reviewed with him what needed to be done until they left for the conference.

"Would you like something to drink?" she asked and he heard her move toward the kitchen.

“Mineral water,” he said. He listened to her soft footsteps that crossed the room. When they muffled, he knew she’d entered the kitchen.

What had she thought of the afternoon? She hadn’t said much. Had she been a Christian until she’d gone to Washington, D.C.? He knew she’d accused a senator of sexual assault. That had been the main reason Uma didn’t want him to hire Claudia—that and the fact that Claudia didn’t fit the physical mold of what Uma had wanted for him. She believed he should be surrounded by beautiful people. What she didn’t understand was that Claudia *was* beautiful.

Brock couldn’t see Claudia, so he didn’t know what she looked like. He didn’t care. Something within her drew him to her. That she had turned her back on her faith hurt him, but that didn’t change the light he sensed within her. She was different from the others he’d interviewed. He’d known the minute she’d stepped into the room that she was the one he wanted by his side as he greeted people. She knew what to do, but the sweetness about her gave him peace.

When he told Uma he believed God wanted Claudia to help him, his manager thought he was crazy. Maybe he was, but the first day Claudia stood by his side, he knew he’d made the right choice.



## CHAPTER 15



Claudia knew the conference would be buzzing with activity. In high school and college, she'd attended enough Christian conferences to know that music would fill the center and people would be excited. Conversations were a steady roar.

Brock was eager. She felt the electricity of anticipation emanate from him the moment they slid into the limo. All afternoon he had paced the living room, prayed and rehearsed his speech. Several times, he asked her what she thought of this line or that.

If she had been a high school or college student, she would've been excited to hear his remarks. As someone who had lived more life than she cared to analyze, she listened and tried to be objective. She remembered the first time she had heard the salvation message.

It had answered her question. If she died, where would she go? She'd been raised in a church, but not one that answered the question that had flitted in the back of her mind. When she learned that accepting Jesus as her Savior would give her eternal life, she was first in line to answer the altar call. God had great things in store for her. She couldn't wait to live this new life.

In one moment, all her dreams had been ripped away. Now she floated from one painful pinnacle to the next. She had done something wrong. Why else would God have stepped back and let that man assault her?

“It’s crowded.” Brock climbed out of the limo. His broad smile pressed a dimple into his square jaw.

The event center was teeming with people. Claudia moved in front of Brock to keep the crowds of laughing teens from jostling him. A girl saw Brock and screamed his name. The humanity pressed around him.

“I flew from Denmark to hear you speak,” a girl with an American accent said. “I’m an exchange student there. My friends here told me you were coming so I hopped on a plane and flew out.”

“Welcome home.” Brock grinned.

Several teens shoved papers and pens at Brock and asked for his autograph.

Before Claudia could tell them there would be time after his talk when he would meet with the group and talk and sign autographs, he closed his hand around a pen a girl gave him.

“Help me here,” Brock said with a laugh.

Claudia wrapped her hand around his and guided it to the paper that had been placed against another teen’s back.

“I’ll sign as many as I can.” Brock signed another paper. “But remember, I’ll be meeting with everyone after the event.”

He continued to sign until a woman wearing a jacket with the event’s logo on the lapel approached them and said she would take them to meet with the event coordinators.

The group surrounding them groaned.

“Don’t worry.” Brock signed another autograph, then in an Arnold Schwarzenegger accent, said, “I’ll be back.”

Claudia touched his arm and guided him after the woman.

Backstage, they met the event leaders, who eagerly shook Brock’s hand. Their gazes were curious when they looked at Claudia and introduced themselves to her. They guided her and Brock to a room behind the stage and told Claudia to let them know if she or Brock needed anything. Leaving, they closed the door.

“I’d rather be out there with them.” Brock stood in the middle of the room. The corner of his mouth curled. He turned to her. “They don’t expect me to stay in here until it’s time to give my talk, do they?”

“They do,” Claudia said and saw the restlessness in his eyes.

“I need to be out there with them.” Brock moved to the door, making Claudia wonder how he remembered where it was.

“That’s been arranged for later.” Claudia stepped to him and took his arm.

She hadn’t meant to touch him, but his determination alarmed her. Through his sweater, she felt his warmth and strength. For her own sake, she knew she should pull away. Her feelings toward Brock surprised and confused her. She liked being near him but because of her past, she felt wary.

“You may have realized by now I’m not much for following the rules.” His sightless eyes moved from her hand on his arm to her face.

“Yes, I do know that, but I believe they want you to be rested by the time you step onto the stage,” Claudia said.

“I’m plenty rested,” he said. “I need to be with the people.”

Claudia agreed with that. Even more obvious was the people wanted to be with him.

“Mr. Amwell?” A knock sounded on the door. “The group is going on stage now if you want to join them.”

Claudia opened the door and moved to the side.

“I do.” His face glowed as he moved forward.

Claudia stood at Brock’s side and followed the guide down the hallway to the stage. When he stepped on the platform, the crowd cheered. He waved. Claudia followed him and showed him where his chair was, but he wasn’t interested in sitting. When the worship team broke into song, he was on his feet

and singing. She stood at the edge of the stage and kept an eye on him.

He didn't care what he looked like. He was in the presence of God's throne and worshipping Him. Claudia envied him, his love for the Lord—the love she had felt once. Would she ever get that back?

The leader of the event gave a few words and then introduced Brock to thunderous applause. Claudia was at his side and guided his hand to the mic, then the water bottle.

"Mic is here. Water is here." Brock looked at her and smiled. His voice traveled through the microphone and filled the hall. The audience laughed. "Thanks." Looking at Claudia, his eyes filled with gratitude. He turned to the audience and opened in prayer.

Claudia moved to the side of the stage but watched Brock. A man showed her a chair where she could sit. She smiled and thanked him but remained standing. She wanted to reach Brock quickly if he needed her.

When he removed the mic from the podium and paced back and forth, she went rigid. He couldn't see. He was near the edge of the stage. She stepped behind him. She wanted to reach him before something terrible happened. He turned to her and grinned before facing the audience.

"My assistant is afraid I'm going to walk off the edge of the stage." He laughed. The audience laughed, too. "It's funny being blind. You think you won't know where anything is, but the other senses rally to make up for the loss of sight. When I'm talking to you, my voice projects, but I can hear it fall to the stage. A few feet in front of me, I can hear it drop and fade, which tells me that's where the edge of the stage is. People ask me what it's like to be blind and if I miss seeing things. Yes, I miss not seeing the beauty of the snow falling past my window, but now I hear the snowflakes drifting past and falling to the ground."

Claudia's breath caught. She knew Brock had a keen sense of sound, but she hadn't expected the loss of sight to develop his hearing so that he could hear snowflakes fall.

“Some of you may know how I lost my sight, but for those who don’t know, I’ll explain,” Brock said and began the story with his need to feel an adrenaline rush.

When he told of the fear he felt being trapped in the avalanche, Claudia fought against the tears that burned so hot. Her fear of being trapped in the hall with the senator gripped her chest. The frightening feeling of sinking below the surface of a large pool gripped her throat.

“God was with me in that moment,” Brock said.

If Claudia could’ve walked away, she would’ve. She felt a strange ache in her chest. God hadn’t been there with her. When she was alone with the senator, she needed Him. He remained silent.

Brock looked over his shoulder at her. She went still. Glancing at the others on the stage, she saw that no one else looked at her.

“Salvation is for everyone.” Brock looked over the audience. “Rich, poor, black, white, God is calling all of us. If you hear that call today, come forward. I want to pray with you.”

Streams of people filled the aisles and moved toward the stage. The leadership on the stage stood next to Brock, ready to help him down the steps. Claudia moved to his side. He looked at her a moment, then turned to the stairs.

The reception had been different than the previous night when he spoke to the extreme sports enthusiasts at the winter sports equipment symposium. Tonight, no one was disappointed that he’d shared his testimony.

“I’ll help you down the steps.” Claudia placed his hand on her arm.

Through her sweater, she felt his warmth and excitement. That she felt empty inside made her sad.

How had one moment stolen her joy and made her hate herself? Wasn’t that why she pulled out her hair? The therapist had said that she believed her attractiveness had marked her as a target. If she were ugly, she’d be ignored.

Uma wanted to ignore Claudia, but Brock wouldn't let her. She had wanted Brock to be surrounded by beautiful people. With every event she scheduled for him, she made sure he was surrounded by people who garnered attention. Brock would listen to his manager's careful instructions, then make sure Claudia was at his side.

"What good is a pretty assistant when I can't see her?" Brock quizzed Uma, which left her speechless for once. Claudia had been embarrassed and hurt when she overheard the conversation. "Besides, what I know about Claudia is beautiful."

Claudia's jaw tightened. Brock thought she was beautiful? That was a shock, but what Brock thought of her physical appearance shouldn't matter.

She sighed heavily. Being pretty had never been her goal. She had dreams. She had believed God gave her those dreams.

Those dreams disintegrated. Now she wanted to be ugly. She wanted people to ignore her. Being ugly made her feel safe.

When the crowd gathered around Brock, Claudia had thought she'd seen a familiar face. Her heart picked up speed. Had Hiram, the senator's son, attended the event? When she looked again, he wasn't there. She could barely draw a breath. Had she imagined him, or had he decided to leave to avoid seeing her?

Did it matter? He wasn't there now.

It was after midnight when Claudia and Brock climbed into the limo. He was still wired with excitement, though he said little. Was he praying?

Claudia tried to pray, but all her thoughts fell flat. She hadn't prayed in years, though she offered short prayers of thanksgiving that she hoped would open her heart to God's love. Sometimes she felt as if God heard her. Most of the time it felt as if her prayers bounced off brass gates.

"Do you want something to drink?" Claudia asked when they stepped into the hotel suite. She took his coat and hung it

in the guest closet. She hung her own next to it.

“No, thanks.” He didn’t move into the living room. He set his cane against the wall and looked at her. “You must be tired.”

“I should be,” she said, then tightened her jaw. She should’ve told him she was tired so she could go to her room and let loose the confusing emotions building inside her.

“I’m going to stay up for a while,” he said. “But you don’t have to. We return to Aspen tomorrow.”

“Yes, and you’ll want to leave early because the representatives from that German company will meet you on the slope tomorrow afternoon.” How Claudia managed to keep her voice steady, she didn’t know.

“All the more reason for you to go to bed.” He still didn’t move.

“I’ll see you in the morning.” Claudia turned away. As she moved down the hall, the tears that threatened all evening broke free.

“Claudia.” Brock’s voice stopped her. “I don’t think you should leave just yet.”

“Is there something you need?” She forced lightness into her voice. She didn’t want to face him. He couldn’t see she was crying, but he knew. How did he always know?

“No,” he said, his voice filled with compassion. “But you do.”

## CHAPTER 16



Brock knew Claudia wanted to be alone, but he had felt her pain since the moment he'd interviewed her. He couldn't let her go to her room and suffer by herself. He knew better than anyone that there were moments when someone shouldn't be alone.

What did he have to offer her? Nothing. He wasn't a therapist, but when Brock lost his sight, God replaced it with so much more. God had drawn him close, but the blessings didn't stop there. Brock's other senses made him aware of everything going on around him. He could hear more, feel more, smell more. Right now, he sensed Claudia's pain more than ever.

"I don't think you should be alone right now." He kept his tone low. He heard her dry swallow.

"How do you know what I need?" Her voice was soft, but the resentment and confusion echoed in each word.

"It's just a guess."

"It isn't a good ..." She released her breath slowly. "Thanks."

"I know what happened," he said. He waited for her reaction. Did he have to explain to her how he knew? In the age of technology, it was easy to find out what most people wanted to hide.

There was a hesitation, then silence, but Brock knew the walls around Claudia's heart were sliding into place.



*Lord, I blew it. Help me reach her. Sometimes it feels as if she's almost ready to reach out to You. What can I do?*

He wanted to help her. Instead, he was alienating her.

“What do you know?” Her voice broke.

“That there was a trial.”

The broken sob was muffled as if she'd covered her mouth with her hand.

His ears tuned to every sound she made, he crossed the foyer to her. Stretching out his hand he was relieved when he touched hers and felt her smooth skin.

She gave a frightened gasp and jerked but didn't pull away. Tension flowed out of him. It was a first step. Where they went from there, only God knew.

“It's okay,” he murmured. He turned but didn't release her hand. He moved to the living room.

She didn't pull away. Instead, she followed. She made no sound, but he felt the heat of her tears.

He stepped toward the living room. The sound of his footsteps dropped away when they reached the steps. He walked down them as he had when he could see and led her to the sofa.

“Have a seat.” He turned to her. “Do you want something to drink?”

“I can get it.” She turned, her hand slipping from his.

He set his jaw at the loss of her warmth.

“So can I,” he said. “I may not do everything perfectly, but I can find my way around the kitchen.” He turned away.

“Why are you doing this?” Her voice made him stop.

“Because you're hurting.” He faced her. Never more than now did he wish he could see her. He wanted to hold her. She needed to be held.

“A lot of people hurt.” There was no bitterness in her tone, but he felt the pain.

“I’m sorry that they do.” He hesitated. “I’m sorry that you do.”

“But your goal has always been to get the next adrenaline rush,” she said. She spoke without condemnation, but he felt convicted.

Most people admired his quest for excitement—people who didn’t have adventurous spirits but wanted to experience the thrill. In her tone, he heard what he’d learned—that such a goal was for his satisfaction. Now, he’d discovered a quest that satisfied but didn’t leave him hungering for more—to share the gospel.

“It was.” His laugh held no humor. “I’ll get you that drink. What would you like?”

“Water is fine.”

“Water it is.” He turned away and moved into the kitchen, where he pulled a bottle of mineral water from the refrigerator. He filled a glass with ice and the mineral water, then carried it to the living room. He heard a settling on the sofa and understood she had watched him. “You didn’t think I could get your drink.”

“I didn’t mean to insult you.” There was a catch in her throat.

“I don’t blame you.” He set the glass on the coffee table, then sat on the sofa. He caught the subtle scent that left him wanting to be closer to her. His draw to this woman fascinated and perplexed him. Why Claudia? Why now? He’d always had women as friends. This time something was different. “If the situation were reversed, I’d be concerned, too.”

“It amazes me what you sense.” She made a sniffing sound that made him ache inside. He couldn’t take away her pain, but he refused to feel helpless. “It’s hard to believe you can’t see.”

“It’s something I don’t want to accept.” He leaned back into the sofa. “I guess that’s why I try so hard to hear and sense what’s going on around me. I’m looking forward to the surgery that will restore my sight.”

“I want that, too.” The compassion in her tone caught him off guard.

“I appreciate that,” he said slowly.

“You sound surprised.”

“In a way I am. I see now that I lived my life for myself,” he said stunned by what he was confessing. Why did he feel so close to this woman that he’d share these private thoughts? “My walk with Christ has been a journey where I realize what my purpose is. All my life I felt as if people were trying to take away from me what I valued most—living on the edge.”

“Maybe God was preparing you for what’s to come,” she said. “If you’re not afraid to be chased down a mountain by an avalanche, you shouldn’t be afraid to share the Gospel. I saw that last night when you gave your talk for the ski equipment company.”

“I prayed about that.” He gave a dry laugh. “I didn’t write that speech. God did.”

A silence grew between them before she said, “I know.” The sofa shifted as she rose. “It’s late. We should go to bed.”

“Claudia,” he said and felt her still. He pushed himself to his feet. He had wanted to comfort her. He could still feel her pain.

“Like I said, we should go to bed.” She moved away, the barrier of caution sliding into place.

“I don’t want you to think of us as just employer and employee.” He was sorry this moment was slipping away.

*What do I do, Lord?*

“That’s what we are.” Uncertainty was in her voice.

He hid his disappointment. She was right. What could he say? She’d been accosted by someone who had taken more than she was willing to give. He wouldn’t be that person.

When he met her, the connection was immediate. Hadn’t she felt that? Was he reading too much into their relationship?

“Yes,” he said finally.

She moved across the room, then hesitated as if surprised he hadn't followed.

"Go on," he said. "I'll go to bed in a few minutes."

"I feel as if I'm missing something here." She sounded confused.

"No," he said on an exhaled breath.

She hadn't missed a thing. He was missing everything. He'd never felt a connection like he did with Claudia. The urge to want more puzzled him. He didn't want to be just friends, but what did he want? For him, there was no word.

"All right." She sounded unsure.

"It's all right. Go to bed." He hoped his smile would let her know she didn't have to stay.

When she moved down the hall, he wanted to call her back.

And say what?

One thing was clear. He wasn't ready to say anything—yet. He had a feeling he would be ready soon, though he had no idea what he would say.



AFTER BREAKFAST THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Claudia settled into the living room chair. With her tablet in hand, she took notes while she listened to the call Brock had placed on speakerphone and spoke to Uma. Because of the speech he'd given at the conference, word had spread in the Christian community that his testimony had touched people's hearts. Uma and her staff had fielded dozens of calls that morning.

"If you agree to speak at these conferences, it could interfere with your endorsements." Uma's tone was firm.

"And so what would that mean?" Brock asked, surprised. "Less money?"

"Easy for you to say." Uma bristled.

Her tone made Claudia blink. Uma was far from poor. She didn't just manage Brock. She had other famous clients and as a savvy businesswoman had to have negotiated generous fees for herself.

"I'm sorry, Uma," Brock said. "I don't mean to be glib, but this is what I believe I must do right now. If you want to exercise the termination clause in our contract—"

"That's not what I'm saying." Uma's tone softened. "You hired me to protect your career. I'm doing my job. If you want to do these Christian talks, fine, I'll schedule them, but I want you to be aware of what it can do to your reputation. I haven't heard of any negative feedback—yet—but if I do, you'll hear from me."

"I understand." His smile almost seemed sad.

Claudia swallowed hard. There was a time when someone's rejection of Christ's message hurt her, too. That was before God had abandoned her.

"For now, I want to focus on these youth conferences," Brock said. "Send me a list of schedules. I'll decide which ones to fit in."

"You're going through with this." Uma sounded surprised and annoyed. "All right I'll send you the information, but remember, it's almost Thanksgiving, and then comes Christmas. You did ask me to block out some time so you could spend it with your family. And then there's your surgery, which is scheduled before Thanksgiving. After that, you'll need time to recover."

"I remember," he said softly. "And, Uma, thanks."

"Don't thank me," she said gruffly. "I'm against this direction in your career, but if this is what you want, I'll support you ... until you don't want it anymore."

"Thanks." Brock gave a soft snort.

Claudia saw in his eyes that as long as people wanted to hear his testimony, he'd share it.

“I’ll send that list to you now, but don’t forget, you still have endorsement commitments,” Uma said. “That German company is flying into Aspen to shoot their commercial.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” he said. His thoughtful tone made Claudia wonder if he regretted that commitment.

“Good,” Uma said. “I can’t be there but I’ve sent the details to Claudia. She’ll oversee the shoot. I’m available if you need me but call me afterward and let me know how it went.” She discussed a few more meetings with him, then hung up.

“Let’s get to the airport and fly back to Aspen so we can be settled before we meet that ski equipment company.” Brock touched his braille watch.

“The shoot starts at one because that’s the afternoon lighting the producer wants. I told him we’d meet him and the crew after lunch.” Claudia checked her notes.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been on a snowboard.” He had a distant look in his eye. “Tomorrow I undergo surgery.”

Claudia swallowed. This was the surgery that would restore his sight. Her heart picked up speed. With his sight restored, he’d see her.

She hadn’t worn her wig when they were in the hotel suite unless they were expecting room service or the cleaning service. No one saw her. It felt free to leave her head uncovered.

Once Brock’s sight was restored, she’d wear her wig, but she was still far from perfect. She wouldn’t forget how annoyed Uma had been because she wasn’t the svelte woman Uma wanted in the photos the paparazzi snapped of Brock. So far Uma didn’t have to worry. The photos posted of Brock didn’t include her. The paparazzi felt like Uma. A willowy woman with free-flowing hair drew more attention than someone who struggled with her appearance.

When she and Brock returned to Aspen, Nellie had lunch waiting for them. Claudia had no appetite, though she sat at the table while she and Brock discussed his schedule for the

rest of the week. Uma had sent the list of Christian organizations who wanted to book him for events.

“You’re not eating.” Brock looked across the table at her.

Claudia chided herself. She had to remember Brock couldn’t see but was aware of what went on around him.

“I heard that.” He grinned.

“Heard what?” Claudia hadn’t said anything.

“That soft exhale you do when I catch what you’re doing—or not doing.”

“I don’t do that ... do I?” she asked. Brock’s awareness never ceased to amaze her.

“You do,” he said. “You’re working hard on my schedule and ignoring your lunch.”

“I guess I wasn’t as hungry as I thought.” She tried to make light of her loss of appetite. “I’ll eat later.”

“All right.” He gave her a firm look.

“We should head for the ski slope.” She wanted to change the subject from herself to him.

The flicker in his eyes told her he was aware.

“Just give me a few minutes.” He rose.

So did she. She was glad for the commercial shoot. She hoped it would distract him so he didn’t notice so much about her, though she was learning not much distracted him. He remembered everything.

His hand skimming the table, he moved through the dining room. When he reached her chair, he turned to her.

“I’ll meet you in the foyer,” he said, his sightless stare firm. “Ask Russell to meet us in front.”

“All right,” she murmured.

It wasn’t until he left the room that she felt she could breathe. She rested her hand on the table.

Would Brock gain his eyesight? He believed he would. What would it be like to work for him then? What would he think when he could see her?

Did it matter? Once he could see, she'd leave because he wouldn't need her anymore.



## CHAPTER 17



Brock heard his name the minute he stepped from the limo.

“Mr. Amwell.” The man’s voice came closer. “I’m Amos Palmer.”

“Call me Brock.” He extended his hand.

He recognized the name as the director of the shoot. Some of his friends had worked with Amos when they shot promotions for their sponsorships. He had a reputation for being easy to work with while capturing the beauty of the sport.

“This is my assistant, Claudia Temples.” Brock touched the small of Claudia’s back. He liked having her near him.

“How do you do?” Claudia said. There was a rustle as if she shook Amos’ hand.

“We’ve got your snowboard gear over here,” Amos said. “Once the crew straps on your board, we can load you into the chairlift and begin the shoot.”

Claudia’s gentle touch on his arm guided him to a group of voices. The crew that would prep him for the shoot. She helped him into a chair.

“Why am I sitting?” He turned to Amos. “I’m supposed to be snowboarding.”

“You will. I’ve got a crew to prep you for the shots. Just a little makeup, and we should be ready,” Amos said.

“Makeup.” Brock sat up straight. “I don’t wear makeup—not even sunscreen.”

“It’s in the contract.” Amos sounded hesitant.

“The part that wasn’t explained to me.” Brock snorted. He braced his hands on the arms of the chair. He was ready to leap to his feet. He didn’t care if he stumbled. He wasn’t submitting to makeup.

“Rochelle will take care of you. She doesn’t bite,” Amos spoke as if he’d heard that objection before.

“I’d rather she bite than put makeup on me,” Brock said, his tone joking though he wished Uma had explained this part to him. He would’ve had her strike it from the contract.

“Brock.” Claudia’s gentle voice broke through the tension.

He tightened his jaw. Her tone was soothing and full of promise. One word from her and he relaxed.

“We promise it’s a little amount. It’s for lighting. It won’t change your appearance,” Amos said patiently.

Brock nodded. He would be reasonable. Amos was doing his job.

“I’m holding you to that. Go ahead, but if it’s too much...” Brock leaned back in his chair. He didn’t want to make life hard for Amos. He’d discuss this with Uma later. He was supposed to have artistic control over everything that happened on these shoots.

The makeup artist approached him and explained to him each step she took as she applied a cosmetic that thankfully was unscented.

“And Uma approved the background actors for the shoot,” Amos said. “Your snowboarding partner will be Solange.”

“Another thing I didn’t know.” Brock glanced up in surprise making the makeup brush Rochelle slide down his cheek.

He recognized the name of the beautiful model and remembered the sultry face that filled teenage boys’ dreams. If

he hadn't been so consumed with snowboarding, he would've dreamed about her, too. She was a few years older than Brock, but he was certain she'd maintained her looks.

"Sorry, I didn't know." Amos sounded anxious to move on.

"Does Solange know how to snowboard?" Brock asked.

"She's been taking lessons," Amos said. "She's not half bad."

"Because I have artistic freedom, I'll make a change," Brock said.

Everyone around him grew quiet.

"What change is that?" Amos' tone was cautious.

"I want my assistant in the shoot," Brock said with a nod.

Murmurs sounded around him. He felt Claudia's sharp glance. He heard a woman gasp and assumed that was Solange.

"She is photogenic." Amos inserted enthusiasm in his voice.

The way he described Claudia made Brock's heart pick up speed. He detected her inner beauty and had given little thought to her looks. An image formed in his mind.

What did Claudia look like? What color were her eyes? What color was her hair? Uma had said she wore a brown wig, but he had a feeling that she'd chosen that color to hide herself.

"But the shots and angles are set up for Solange," Amos said.

"Sorry, I don't mean to be difficult." Brock had been in enough promos to know how much work went into each one, but he was supposed to be consulted on the crew and talent.

No doubt Uma left him out of these decisions because he couldn't see. She would think she was doing him a favor—and bypassing him saved time.

“Let me consult Uma,” Amos spoke over his phone beeps as he dialed.

“You can call her, but I make the final decision,” Brock said, then lifted his gaze to the makeup artist. “Are you finished?”

“Just a few more touches,” she said, and moved the brush over his face faster. She stepped back. “Amos will take some preliminary shots, then we can decide if anything else is needed.”

Brock made a face. He couldn’t wait to wash off whatever she’d put on his face.

“Amos.” A woman’s voice called after the director, followed by someone running over the snow. “Am I in this shoot or not?”

Brock didn’t hear Amos’ response. Something deep down inside him tightened. He hadn’t meant to cause more problems, but Uma knew he had to be given complete control and approval over all his promotions. If a promotion’s theme didn’t align with his mission, he wasn’t interested.

He knew people would think he was insane for not wanting to do a shoot with Solange. Every day he spent with a beautiful and unassuming woman named Claudia was a day when he had to let the world know beauty was more than appearance—it ran deep.

“Brock.” Claudia’s breath was warm against his ear. “What are you doing?”

“I want a shoot that shows real people. I’m real. Real people will watch the promo. I want to be seen with real people. Not to insult anyone,” he said and looked around. “I’m ready for my gear.”

“Solange is a real person,” Claudia said.

“It’s nothing against her, but this gear has been tested by snowboarders who know what’s good and what isn’t. I should know. I’ve tested it,” Brock said. “This equipment was created for snowboarders who want to test the limits. I used this equipment when I went to Alaska because it’s designed to cut

through powder and make quick, sharp turns. You know what I'm talking about. You said you used the same equipment. You know what to expect."

"I can snowboard. I can't act," Claudia said as if she thought he were crazy.

It wouldn't be the first time he'd heard that tone. His parents still thought he was crazy.

"The shots are breakaways," he said. "Editing will make it look fine."

"Mr. Amwell, my name is Joe. I'm here to help you with your equipment," a man Brock assumed was from wardrobe said. "I'll change your boots, then slip on the snowboard."

"What equipment will you give my assistant?" He felt his snow boots being removed and the snowboard boots slipped onto his feet.

"I'll check with Amos," Joe said. He laced up Brock's boots, then fastened the snowboard to his boots.

Joe moved away. A moment later Brock heard the edge of a snowboard being planted into the soft snow, then movement as if Claudia were strapping on her boots.

Brock stood on the snowboard. He crouched, sprang into the air, turned a one-eighty, then landed. He smiled. He remembered this equipment. His blood pumped, feeling the exhilaration of when he used the snowboard to slide down an Alaskan mountain.

He heard Claudia rise and turned to her. "How's the equipment?"

"It feels ... great," she said slowly, though he heard a smile in her voice. "Like I remember."

"Good! That should make the shoot even better," Brock said, then lifted his head at the approaching footsteps through the softly packed snow.

"I have Uma on the line." Amos pressed the phone into Brock's hand.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Uma didn’t give him a chance to say anything.

“I should ask you the same thing.” Brock kept his voice even. “You didn’t tell me who was in the shoot.”

“Would it have mattered?” she asked.

“Because it’s part of my contract, yes. I’m making a change.”

“I knew I should’ve been there.” Uma’s voice jumped as if she were pacing.

“It wouldn’t have mattered,” Brock said. “This equipment is designed for people who know the sport. I know the sport, and so does Claudia.”

“What do you mean ‘so does Claudia?’” There was a catch in Uma’s voice.

“I mean, she snowboards, and she’s used this equipment,” Brock said. “I also mean I have artistic license.”

“You can’t replace Solange,” Uma said tightly. “Do you know what I went through to get her in this shoot?”

“No, because you didn’t tell me anything about it,” Brock said and heard her surprise. “And I didn’t say she wouldn’t be in it. The contract calls for background actors. What I said is that I want Claudia in my shots. You know I snowboard with experienced athletes.”

“That was when you could snowboard,” Uma said sharply, then there was a catch in her voice as if she’d realized what she’d said.

“I can still snowboard.” Brock kept his voice level.

“You know what I mean,” Uma said impatiently.

“Yes, I believe I do,” he said.

“There’s also the matter of the budget.” Uma sounded calmer.

“If I had been included in the negotiation, as per our contract, it wouldn’t be an issue.” Brock took a breath. “Call

the company's representatives. Find out the cost, and we'll negotiate that."

"All right," Uma said after a moment's hesitation.

"If there's nothing else, I've got a mountain to conquer," Brock said and waited.

"There's nothing else." Uma sounded exasperated but kept her voice low. "I'll call you tonight after I talk to my contact at the company. We can discuss the other promos," she said and mentioned other companies who wanted to retain him before disconnecting the call.

"Are we ready?" Brock held out the phone. He felt Claudia's nearness when she took it.

He heard her say something to Amos when she returned his phone to him.

"Yes, there's something else. Let's talk over here." Claudia's voice was low but strained. She wrapped her hands around Brock's elbow. Her grip firm, she guided him away from the voices that had risen and lowered since they'd arrived at the slope. "I should not be in this shoot."

"You should be." He balanced himself on the snowboard and turned to her.

"Everything's been arranged with Solange, to say nothing about her feelings," Claudia said. "Maybe you never saw her before your—"

"I saw her. I remember her. My decision has nothing to do with her personally," Brock said flatly. "She's on every magazine cover. It's hard to miss her, but she's wrong for this shoot. She just learned how to snowboard."

"You're not the director," Claudia said, shocked. "You and she are the draw to this company's gear."

"People with skill are the draw to their gear," Brock said. "I've worked with this company before. I made it clear during the first promo I did with them that I needed complete approval. I want snowboarders to know that I like the equipment because of the product quality."

“I can see there’s no changing your mind.” Claudia drew a steadying breath.

He gave her a slight smile. He’d listen to her, but with the changes he’d made in his life, it was important that anyone who viewed his promos saw that he was serious about the example he set. Advertisers clamored for Solange because her message was loud and clear and the wrong one for Brock.

“Are we ready to get started?” The grin he flashed Claudia revealed what he was feeling. He couldn’t wait to slide down the slope.

Claudia had no idea what she did to him. He was surprised himself. For once he felt something more than his usual craving for speed. He wanted to tell her about this feeling he had whenever he was near her but now wasn’t the time.

When?

He should wait until after his surgery, after he regained his sight.

If he waited, would he lose this opportunity?

*Help me to know, Lord.*



## CHAPTER 18



Claudia looked past Brock to Amos and his crew. They had marked the snow where the camera crew and drones would set up for the shots, then explained to Dave, who would guide Brock down the hill, what angles and speed he should take for each shot.

“The crew’s ready.” Claudia turned to Brock. “If you’re sure you want to go through with this.”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.” His smile was broad. “Never had I thought I’d reach this point. I thank God I have.”

Claudia swallowed. She prayed he had. She lifted her hand, signaling Amos that Brock was ready.

“Great!” Amos rushed toward Claudia and Brock, followed by Dave.

“Never more than now,” Brock said, the energy emanating from him reminding Claudia of how excited she would feel when she looked at a pristine mountain that she couldn’t wait to snowboard down.

“Dave’s your guide,” Amos said. “He’ll explain the maneuvers you’ll make and when. The slope where we’ll work has been sectioned off.”

“Will there be any jumps?” Brock turned to the slope as if he could see.

“That’s another thing.” Dave’s voice was tight. “The jump is slight, but—”

“That’s disappointing, but a start.” Brock didn’t look disappointed. His body emanated an excitement Claudia envied. He’d lost his sight, yet he hadn’t lost sight of what he loved—snowboarding and God.

While Dave explained the terrain and the maneuvers to Brock and Claudia, Amos set up the shots. With the crew on snowmobiles and the drones hovering, Amos yelled action. Brock and Claudia took off like a shot, with Dave following and shouting the turns. Snow sprayed around them as they cut through the powder.

The background snowboarders, including Solange, snowboarded along the edge, but it wasn’t long before Solange lagged behind. Now Claudia understood why Brock wanted an experienced snowboarder at his side.

“I’m free,” Brock yelled and laughed and whooped.

Claudia laughed, the wind whipping at her face, her heart lifting. She felt free, too, a feeling she missed.

“Jump,” Dave shouted.

Claudia caught the air. She glanced at Brock, who tucked his knees to his chest, then stretched to full height and landed with a thud.

“I did it.” He turned to Claudia and snowboarded straight toward her.

“Brock?” Panic caught her high in the throat. “What are you—”

He caught her around the waist. Picking her up, he swung her around as he turned a circle and headed down the slope. Dave laughed and shouted the turns as Brock buried his face into the open collar of Claudia’s jacket, his warmth and tenderness stirring within her a confusing mass of emotions.

Her heart thrashed. She had thought she’d never want a man this close. The gentleness and compassion of Brock Amwell made her realize a man could care.

For seven years, she’d blocked all feelings. She would never have anything to do with men.

The solid wall she'd built around her heart cracked. For the first time in years, she wanted to be close to a man.

This man?

Dave shouted the stop point. Brock angled his snowboard and sprayed snow around them. Holding her tight, he dropped into a fluffy mound of powder.

"You guys okay?" Dave snowboarded to their side.

"What?" Brock lifted his face and squinted at the guide.

Claudia tightened her jaw against the cold air that swept away the warmth that made her heart overflow. She knew she should move away from Brock. Having him hold her felt good, and it felt right.

"Oh, sure." Brock rolled to his back, his sightless eyes staring at the sky. "I'm fine." He shifted his gaze to Claudia. "Are you?"

"Yes." Laughter bubbled in her throat. How could being tackled by Brock make her feel so good?

The camera crew had stopped the snowmobiles, their cameras still directed at Brock and Claudia. The drones still hovered overhead. The background snowboarders had stopped at the edges of the slope and watched them while they talked among themselves. Solange wasn't with them. Claudia looked up the hill and saw another snowboarder helping Solange to her feet.

Claudia's jaw tightened. If Solange had snowboarded with Brock, the shot would need several takes. Brock's visual impairment could cause further delays.

"Did they get the shot?" Brock rose to his knees, then leaped to his feet. He extended his hand to Claudia. She laid her hand in his palm. His strength emanating through her, he pulled her to her feet.

"We got it." Amos skied to their side. "I'll have to review the shots, but everything looks perfect."

"I don't know if I should be happy or sad." Brock laughed.

“Be happy.” Amos laughed, too. “If you’re up to it, we can get some backup shots, then it’s a wrap.”

“For snowboarding, I’m always up to it.” Brock turned to Claudia. “How about you?”

“That’s fine with me.” Claudia smiled, but she couldn’t forget what it was like to have Brock close. Even more wonderful was that she liked it.



BROCK WAS EXHAUSTED but exhilarated when he and Claudia returned to his home. He had snowboarded, and he’d made it down the mountain.

Amos had said he’d review the footage and let them know if anything needed to be reshot, but said they had enough coverage for a promo that showed Brock’s skill and excitement. It was a good demonstration of the equipment and the ability it would allow snowboarders to achieve.

Brock thanked God one take had provided the footage Amos needed for the promo, though Brock was still disappointed. He hadn’t been on a snowboard in months. His need for speed was overwhelming, though he tried to control it.

He didn’t live for the adrenaline rush anymore. He lived for God, but it was hard to put the old ways behind him.

After showering and changing, he met Claudia in the kitchen, where Nellie had left a meal in the oven. He heard Claudia pull the entrée from the oven. His mouth watered as the fragrance of lasagna and freshly baked bread filled the room.

“I’ll have dinner on the dining room table in a minute,” Claudia said. “Would you like something to drink?”

What he wanted was to hold her close. He had been thrilled to be back on the snowboard, but what he couldn’t forget was wrapping her in his arms and feeling her softness fit perfectly against him.

He snorted his disbelief. Never had he thought anything would be more important to him than snowboarding, then he gave his life to Christ. Was He opening doors to the plan He had for Brock? Was Claudia part of that plan?

She was still cautious, the wall she'd built around her heart firmly in place. Until she was ready to tear it down, he saw no future for them.

"I'll get it." He stepped to the refrigerator and pulled two bottles of mineral water from the shelf. Stepping to the cupboard, he picked up two glasses, and he noticed that she had stilled. "You're watching me."

"Sorry." She sounded embarrassed. "I'm still amazed at what you can do. I mean you snowboarded down a mountain."

"With help." He filled the glasses with ice, then poured the water into the glasses. He carried them to the dining room.

"Not much." Claudia followed.

He heard the tap of a casserole dish set on the table followed by a knife slicing through the entrée.

"After that jump, you knew you were close to the ground and landed perfectly," she said, and he heard wooden utensils click against the side of the salad bowl as she served him. "It's ready. Have a seat."

"I can tell you I can sense when the ground is close, but that sounds crazy." He sat.

"If I hadn't seen how you knew when to turn, I'd agree. Such a statement does sound crazy." She moved to her chair.

He waited until she sat, then said a blessing. "What about you? Did you enjoy today?"

There was a hesitation, making him wonder what she would say.

"I did," she said at last. "Like everyone else, I was a little surprised that you wanted me and not Solange in the promo."

"What happened to her?" he asked.

“I noticed she had trouble snowboarding down the hill,” she said softly. “One of the other snowboarders was showing her how to maneuver her snowboard so she could make the turns more easily. Snowboarding is supposed to be fun not drudgery. Because she was having trouble snowboarding down the slope, that answers my question as to why you wanted someone with more experience.”

“Like any skill, it helps to start learning as a child,” he said. “Adults tend to be cautious because they’re more aware that something beyond their control can happen.”

As they ate, they fell into companionable conversation, but Brock noticed Claudia’s skill at keeping the conversation on everything but herself and Christmas. He had known she had attended Christian youth groups when she was in high school and college.

Those activities weren’t on her resume, and he wondered why. He wouldn’t have known about her involvement if Uma’s staff hadn’t scoured Claudia’s social media accounts to learn about her past.

When she went to Washington, D.C., she joined a church and had been a regular attendee. By the time she finished her internship, she no longer posted on the internet about attending church.

That disappointed Brock. Faith was important to him, and he wanted to hire people who believed as he did. That had applied to everyone except Uma.

He had worked with Uma since she started representing him when he was in high school. Without her, he wouldn’t have a career, and he wouldn’t receive endorsements. When he met Uma, he hadn’t known what an endorsement meant. All he wanted to do was snowboard.

His parents had money. He didn’t need money, but the recognition of his success from his extreme sports victories was nice. The freedom to snowboard all over the world was thrilling—until his life lay in the balance—until he found himself buried under several feet of snow. With death staring him in the face, he knew fear.

After dinner, Claudia rose and took his plate.

“I can help, you know.” Brock stood and reached to the place where he knew the lasagna serving dish would be.

“Because Uma asked you to call her after dinner, why don’t you do that?” Claudia took the dish from him. “I’ll clean the kitchen.”

He understood what she wanted—something to do.

“Your eye surgeon’s office emailed me information about your surgery next week,” Claudia said. There was a clatter as she set serving dishes on the trolley. “After you talk to Uma, I’ll review the preop prep with you.”

Tension rose in his body. This was the moment he had wanted—when he no longer had to live in darkness. What would it be like to see the world surrounding him?

What would it be like to see Claudia?

Her soft footsteps moved into the kitchen.

He turned away. His surgery would be a new beginning.

A swirling mass of emotions churned inside him. It would also be an end.

In the short time he’d worked with Claudia, he had grown accustomed to her, but she was only with him because he couldn’t see. When his sight was restored, she’d move on.

This was an end he wasn’t ready to face.

## CHAPTER 19



Though Brock loved to travel, he was glad to be home. What surprised him was having Claudia in his home, too. It took away the emptiness of the mansion and made the place feel like a home.

After Claudia had their luggage unpacked and stowed, she went to his office to check his emails and phone messages.

Brock stepped to his living room. Before he sat, his phone rang with Uma's ringtone. He removed it from his pocket and gave a dry laugh. She'd never been a patient person.

That she had taken him, a teenager who lived for snowboarding, on as a client had always puzzled him. He'd met some of her other clients at gatherings at her Aspen home and found them to be as prickly as she was.

He wasn't like any of them. They were older and more established in their careers. What potential Uma saw in Brock, he didn't know. He sometimes thought she signed him as a client because she lost a bet.

"Hello, Uma." He lowered himself to a sofa and set his phone on an end table.

Uma didn't bother with a greeting. Instead, she listed the companies offering endorsements and what they were willing to pay. Next, she told him which ones he should accept.

"Send me a list of their board members and the companies' officers and their investments," he said.



“Don’t you think you’re being a little nitpicky?” Uma asked, not hiding her feelings for his interest in the companies.

“Maybe, but accepting an endorsement reflects on my reputation,” he said. “Before, I accepted these endorsements without investigating their interests, which I now realize didn’t always align with mine. Now I want to make sure they do.”

Uma gave a dry laugh. Ten years ago, he was shocked and happy that a company was willing to endorse him. Even before his commitment to Christ, he’d been uncomfortable representing a company whose investments didn’t align with his beliefs. Money hadn’t changed him. It was his faith. Even if he couldn’t afford to be choosy, he would be. If he were a parent, he’d want his children to see him as someone who honored his beliefs.

If he were a parent. He liked knowing there was a possibility, but who would he marry?

*Claudia.*

His head came up. It was as if someone had spoken her name.

What would it be like to be that close to this woman whose easy demeanor made him relax?

When Claudia returned to the living room, he finished his call with Uma.

“Let’s talk about your surgery,” Claudia said to him.

The sofa shifted next to him. He heard her phone notifications as if she searched for information to share with him.

She reviewed with him the time they’d leave his house and when they’d arrive at the hospital. Because Aspen was a town for the wealthy, the best doctors in the nation worked at the local hospital.

“Any questions?” Claudia asked. A tap sounded as she set her phone on the coffee table.

“A complaint. Namely, I can’t eat breakfast,” he said.

When he'd left home as a teen and tried to make it on his own by winning extreme sports competitions, he'd skipped many meals to save money. He had thought the endorsements had saved him from starvation but soon learned that God's hand was in everything.

"Just a precaution to make sure there are no complications," she said.

"I'm assuming those doctors know what they're doing. They're the best in the nation." He lifted his head toward the windows. "Is it snowing outside?"

At this hour, the sun would've set, but he still had to know if it were snowing.

"I'll check." She laughed softly and rose. "The day is coming when you won't have to ask that question anymore."

The day was coming. His pulse hammered in his throat. The end was coming for many things. How much longer would Claudia work for him? He'd write her a letter of recommendation. What would she do when she left? She had been applying for jobs and had mentioned the possibility of working for the governor.

Once Brock could see, he wouldn't focus so much on her scent and the tone of her voice. His mind struggled with the missing piece of what she looked like. She was tall. Uma had told him she was a brunette, but because he knew she wore a wig, he wondered about the true color of her hair.

Uma had also told him she wasn't thin—something that annoyed Uma. When Brock had held Claudia, he liked that she wasn't hard and bony. He'd been struck by her softness. She didn't have to be thin to feel that good against him.

"It is snowing." Claudia's voice echoed slightly as if she faced the glass wall. "And it's snowing hard." She was facing him now. "I'm sorry you can't enjoy it, but the next time you're on the slope, you'll see the powder you'll snowboard through."

His heart shuddered. He remembered what it was like to look down that mountain and see the pristine powder no one

else had touched.

Adrenaline spiked in his veins. He had another reason for living—living for Christ—but remembering what he had seen before the accident helped him to savor the gift of sight. He was grateful that loss of sight had helped him develop his other senses.

Right now he could hear Claudia's gentle breathing. She hadn't moved from the window. Was she enjoying the view?

"What do you see?" he asked.

"The night skiers and snowboarders." She laughed softly as if surprised. She moved toward him. "They've lit the slopes with their illuminated gear."

"After I regain my sight, we should do that," he said and heard her still.

His breathing slowed. Would they snowboard at night? A dull ache gripped his insides. He wouldn't think about what came next. He'd focus on the surgery and the gift of sight it would bring.

"Do you want to take a drive?" She seemed concerned that he would sit and think about his upcoming surgery.

"What I'd like to do is go to church."

"Church?" Claudia sounded stunned.

"Come on. Let's go." Brock stood. "That is if you don't mind driving."

"I don't mind," she said, her tone flat.

Brock tipped his head. Her voice sounded off, but he wouldn't quiz her about it. He liked his church. He hoped she would, too. "Great! Let's go."

He strode toward the closet. He felt the sleeves of each jacket until he touched the rough wool of the jacket he wanted to wear. He pulled it off the hanger. He recognized Claudia's jacket by the smooth fabric on the sleeve and lifted it from the closet, too.

When he turned to her, he was glad she stood nearby. He opened her coat for her. There was a slight catch in her breathing.

“Am I holding this right?” he asked concerned. Things he’d done so easily before had become awkward since he’d lost his sight.

“You’re doing it perfectly.” Her voice traveled as if she’d turned away from him.

He lowered the coat and was relieved when he heard her arms slip into the sleeves. He pulled it into place.

“Thank you,” she said.

He could tell by her voice she now faced him. He heard the rustle of fabric as if she were buttoning her coat.

“You’re going to like this church.” He put on his coat. Facing her, he grinned.

“I hope—” She spoke slowly. “—I do. I’ll get the keys and be right back.”



CLAUDIA WAS IMPRESSED with the lively people crowding around Brock. They didn’t care who he was. Aspenites were used to celebrities. Brock’s friends cared about him because he was their friend.

They were happy to meet Claudia, reminding her of the friends she’d made through church and youth groups. Many of them had called after her assault because they wanted to help her.

She wanted to be left alone, so she never returned the calls. She hadn’t meant to isolate herself, but being around people made her feel vulnerable.

Her throat closed. Eventually, those friends quit calling.

Now that she was around people, she realized she needed to be with those who genuinely loved God. The soft tug on her

heart told her she shouldn't close herself off from people who cared. She tried to ignore the conviction. It should've been a simple decision like the one she'd made when she'd committed her heart to Christ. If only the scar on her heart would heal.

She was glad to meet Pastor Chuck, his wife Sally and their four children. She met several of Brock's snowboarding buddies, including Lachlan, who had been his friend since preschool.

After the service, Pastor Chuck and Brock's friends prayed for his next appointment with the surgeon and for God to guide the surgeon's hand during the procedure. When Claudia and Brock drove back to his house, he said little as though his thoughts and prayers focused on the surgery he would undergo.

Would God restore Brock's sight? Claudia prayed the answer was yes.

When they stepped into the house, the lights and the music turned on filling the great room with Christmas carols.

"It's late," Claudia said, then winced at the strain in her voice. "I'm going to bed, but if you need anything—"

"It is late. Go to bed. I won't need anything," he said.

"You're thinking about your surgery." She looked into his sightless eyes that she prayed would soon see.

"Tomorrow, everything will change or nothing will change." There was mirthless humor in his tone. "Which will it be?"

"I'm believing you will see," she said. "You are, too."

"Yes, I am," he said on an exhaled breath. He moved toward her.

"What are you doing?" She took a step back.

"I don't want you to leave this way." He stood in front of her.

"What do you mean 'this way?'" she asked confused.

“Don’t be angry with yourself because you didn’t hide it,” he said. “I don’t know how else to say this, especially because we haven’t known each other long, but I don’t like that you’re hurting.”

“Brock, you’re reading this wrong.” She laughed nervously.

“If that’s the case, then I apologize,” he said, and she realized he was listening to every sound she made. She couldn’t breathe. “Don’t go like this. Give yourself a few minutes. If you want me to turn off the music, I will.”

“Don’t turn it off. This is your home. You have every right to listen to whatever you want.” Her head came up.

As if knowing he stood near the console. He reached for the control panel, found the power button and pressed it. Silence whispered through the room.

“Brock, you shouldn’t have done that,” she said.

“All right.” He wove his fingers through hers. Turning away, he led her to the sofa.

“Brock ...” She tightened her jaw at the comfort of his touch. She should pull away, but she didn’t. He was a powerfully built man with a tender touch.

“Let’s just sit for a while,” he said. They reached the sofa.

In the few days they’d known each other she’d learned how stubborn, or determined, he was. She sat. He lowered himself next to her.

“Now what?” She looked at him.

“Nothing,” he said. “Except that I don’t think you should leave just yet.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She blinked.

“Then if I’m wrong, forgive me.”

Her breathing stilled. Sadness made her swallow. What she needed—what she wanted—was comfort, but she couldn’t tell him that. That wasn’t his job. These were the moments she should turn to God. She knew that. Then why was it so hard?

“Let it out, Claudia.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

She began to tremble. She fought to control the confusion and the pain surging through her but then gave in. Her cheek against his chest, hot tears pressed through the fabric of his turtleneck.

“No.” Her voice cracked. She tried to lean away.

“Not yet,” he murmured.

“But I don’t want to do this here.” She relaxed but didn’t pull away.

“I’d say it’s too late for that,” he said. “I don’t need to know what changed your mind about Christmas and—”

She swallowed and shook harder.

“It’s okay.” He wrapped her in his arms.

All the pain, all the hurt, bubbled to the surface. Hot tears streamed down her face.

He was taking care of her when she should take care of him.

*What can I do, Lord?*

As usual, she heard only silence. Maybe Brock’s being close was the best thing he could do for her. He rubbed a hand over her back.

In the middle of this gripping pain, she gave thanks.

Maybe God wasn’t silent after all.

## CHAPTER 20



Claudia didn't realize she'd fallen asleep. Feeling the mantle of warmth and strength, her eyes flew open. Her eyes felt raw and puffy. Her head felt cool. Her fingers shook as she reached to her hair and felt the soft tufts—not the stiff wig.

She remembered. When she and Brock had returned from church, she'd gone to her room and removed her wig. She didn't need it when the staff left and she was alone with Brock. She wished she didn't care what others thought, but she was concerned she'd frighten people who saw her without hair. She didn't want to frighten them. The scabs had faded, but the scars still lingered on her scalp where she'd pulled her hair out. It was for others' benefit and not her own that she wore the wig. It was for her benefit because not wearing the wig revealed her terrible secret—she didn't like herself.

Tipping her head to Brock, she saw his sightless eyes directed at her.

"Good morning." His deep voice was soothing and filled with compassion.

"I didn't mean for you to spend the night before your surgery on the sofa," she said guilt-ridden.

"You didn't." The smile over his unshaven jaw pressed dimples into his sculpted cheeks. "It just worked out that way."

"Still, you have surgery this morning." She leaned from him knowing the comfort of his arm around her would fall



away.

His arm stayed in place.

“I’ll be asleep. I’ll be fine,” he said.

“Speaking of, we should get ready,” she said.

“Are you all right?” He placed both of his hands on her shoulders. His face was inches from hers.

“Yes.” She bowed her head. Guilt and embarrassment rolled through her like ocean waves. She hated that last night she’d almost confessed everything to him. The need to unburden herself had been uncontrollable. She was glad she hadn’t told him anything. This morning, she was better—almost better. “Fine. I’m sorry about last night—”

“I’m talking about now.” His voice was firm.

“Yes.” She swallowed, wishing the pain would go away.

*Please, Lord, I’m here for Brock, not myself.*

“Let’s get ready.” She glanced at the clock. “Russell will take us to the hospital in about an hour.”

Brock didn’t say anything. His gaze intense, she knew he was listening as if making sure she was all right.

“What are you thinking?” she asked, alarmed and sensing what he would say.

“I’m wondering—”

“No.” She rose. Panic hit her high in the throat.

“You don’t know what I’m going to say.” He laughed softly and stood. He faced her.

“If you’re going to say you want to cancel this surgery, the answer is no,” she said firmly. “You’ve been waiting for this. You need this. There’s no good reason for you to cancel.”

“You’re a good reason.” He was so close. His head tipped down at her, the expression on his face making blood roar past her eardrums. He didn’t know what he was saying.

She almost couldn’t speak. How could she be a good reason? They hadn’t known each other long, yet she felt close

to him. The desire to have him hold her again was overwhelming, but that wasn't why she was here.

"I'll help you get ready for your surgery." She didn't want to tell him he should think this through. She was afraid of what he'd say—that he had thought it through and canceling the surgery was the decision he should make. She moved away, then looked back at him. "You have time to shower and change. Because you can't eat, we don't need to worry about breakfast."

"You need to eat."

"I'm fine." If she were hungry, she would eat. Food was the furthest thing from her mind. "It's time for us to get ready."

She moved across the living room. Looking back at him, she was relieved he followed. He hesitated in front of her, his mouth a grim line. Wordlessly, he turned and moved up the stairs. She didn't breathe until the door to his room closed.

Quickly, she rushed up the other set of stairs to her suite. Ripping off her clothes, she jumped into the shower and let her own hot tears mix with the shower's needle-sharp spray. If only Brock understood she was saving him. It would be so easy to feel more for him than she should.

He had to undergo surgery. He had to see, not just for his career. He had to see her. He had to know what she was really like. She was everything Uma had warned him about. She wasn't a beautiful model like Solange. Even when she looked her best, she didn't look like Solange, though she knew she'd been considered attractive.

She had been tall, blonde and slender with a good figure—the four characteristics she had proudly thanked God for. Never had she realized those features would be to her detriment.

Had pride been her sin? Was she being punished for that?

She'd had a perfect life. Her parents loved her. Her mother had been her best friend, someone she had told everything to.

Her mother had never been surprised when Claudia confided to her that a boy all the girls liked was interested in her.

Then the senator was interested in her. When he spoke to his staff, his voice had been firm. When he spoke to Claudia, his voice was soft. Her heart beat faster. She'd been flattered. She'd caught the looks of his staff members. Had they understood his interest in her? She swallowed a sob of pain. Why hadn't they warned her?

If ever she needed to talk to her mother, it was now, but her mother was gone. Claudia knew what her mother would say—talk to Jesus. She had tried. She didn't feel better.

She poured shampoo into her trembling fingers and massaged it into the stubble covering her head. Maybe the senator's staff hadn't warned her because she was an intern who would be gone by the end of the summer.

Forcing the nightmare from her mind, she turned off the shower. By the time she'd dried off, the steam had evaporated from the mirror. She stared at her head—at the scabs that tried to heal the painful yanks from her scalp.

*Oh, God, will I ever get past this? Do You want me to?*

The presence filling her with warmth told her the answer. He was waiting—all she had to do was trust.

Hadn't she trusted before?

She applied a minimal amount of makeup. When she finished, her hair was almost dry. She wouldn't wear a wig today. If Brock's vision was restored, she wanted him to see who she was—a woman scarred inside and out. If he thought he was interested in her, seeing her should change his mind.



WHEN CLAUDIA and Brock reached the hospital, she was surprised to see a group bundled against the snow and standing at the hospital entrance. Her mouth dried. These people didn't know Brock personally, but they still cared. Some of the people held signs wishing Brock the best. When Russell

helped Claudia and Brock from the limo, people shouted their good wishes and said they were praying for him.

Everyone was taking pictures, including a young man who looked like he was from the local paper. When he saw Claudia, his smile froze. He lifted his camera.

She tried not to cringe. She had to accept the decision she'd made. She wouldn't hide.

"I appreciate you." Brock grinned and waved at the group.

Claudia touched his arm and guided him into the hospital to an aide, who looked more like a movie star than a hospital worker. The woman greeted them, then told Brock she'd brought him a wheelchair.

"I can walk," Brock said when the aide helped him sit.

"It's just a precautionary measure," the aide said and wheeled him toward an elevator.

On the second floor, the aide entered a suite that looked more like the hotel room where Claudia and Brock had stayed when they were in Lake Tahoe. She wheeled Brock into a conference room where a team was waiting for him. When he sat, they reviewed paperwork and instructions with him.

After explaining the procedure, the team stepped from the room and told Claudia she could stay with Brock until the surgical team was ready. The aide led Brock into a private bedroom to help him change for the surgery.

"The hospital has received a lot of bouquets and gifts for Mr. Amwell," the aide told Claudia after she situated Brock in the bedroom. "Because of our concern for sanitation, we can't allow them in the room, but you can contact the administration and make arrangements to have them delivered to Mr. Amwell's home."

Claudia said she would and wondered how many bouquets Brock had received.

"Where's Uma?" Brock asked when Claudia stepped into his private bedroom. He lay in a bed with wheels.

“She’s on her way,” Claudia said and told him about the text she’d just received from Brock’s manager. “She had an early meeting that she couldn’t reschedule.”

Brock’s smile was knowing as if he knew she wouldn’t reschedule a meeting with financial potential.

“Are you ready, Mr. Amwell?” A tech dressed in green appeared in the bedroom doorway.

“As I’ll ever be.” Brock looked happy and hesitant.

Claudia didn’t blame him. In a few hours, he’d know if his sight could be restored.

The tech wheeled the bed past Claudia.

Brock reached for her hand and took it. “See you soon, and this time I mean it.”

“I know.” Claudia swallowed. “I’ll be praying for you.”

She didn’t know why she said that, but she meant every word.

“I appreciate that.” He squeezed her hand. When the tech rolled the bed forward, Brock’s fingers slipped from hers.

Claudia followed the bed to a sitting room where the tech told her she could wait. It looked more like a living room than a waiting area. Tears pricked her eyes.

Without thinking, she touched her head and flinched when she felt the stubble. Jerking her hand away, she closed her eyes. She couldn’t pull out her hair. That wouldn’t help Brock.

*Help me to be there for him, Lord. Make me strong and give the surgeons wisdom.*

To get her mind off the surgery, she made arrangements to have the bouquets delivered to Brock’s home, then called Glenda and told her to expect the delivery. She was too anxious to sit so she paced the room and prayed.

Her prayers surprised her, but she wouldn’t ignore the need to thank God for salvation. Her prayers then turned to Brock and the doctors.

The more she prayed, the more peace she felt. Her heart beat hard and fast. Was God using this moment to heal her? Joy she hadn't felt in years leaped inside her. Maybe she'd break through this wall of pain after all.

"Where is he?" Uma's voice broke through the cocoon of peace that had enveloped Claudia.

Her eyes flew open. She stared at Uma, whose strange expression made Claudia wonder how much the manager saw.

"He's in surgery." Claudia was relieved her voice remained steady.

"You're not wearing your wig. What happened to your head?" Uma asked.

Claudia stared into Uma's almost vulnerable eyes, then released a slow breath. "It's called trichotillomania, but I think you know that."

"That you pull your hair out." Uma stepped to the bar and pulled a soda can from the refrigerator. She opened it and took a drink. "Yeah, I heard something about that. I hadn't seen you without something covering your head." She nodded to the refrigerator. "You want one?"

"No, thanks."

Uma shrugged and walked to the window that overlooked the forest. The ski slope in the distance was crowded with skiers.

"Your hair looks better than it did when the media posted the pictures of you and Brock at the sledding hill." Uma openly stared at Claudia's head. "Are you getting better?"

Claudia snorted softly. How would she know? Every day was a struggle.

Uma's phone rang. The question forgotten as she answered it and stepped from the room.

Claudia tensed against the threatening tears. Her bald head was a reminder of what she did to herself and what the senator had done to her.

She didn't want to think about herself. Brock was undergoing eye surgery. She needed to think about him—and she needed to pray for him.

Uma's voice carried from the other room, though Claudia ignored what she said.

A woman from the hospital's concierge service came and asked if she and Uma wanted anything to eat or drink.

"No, thank you." Claudia smiled at her. She couldn't eat if she tried.

"I could go with a gin and tonic, but you probably don't serve that here." Uma looked serious.

"No, I'm sorry, we don't." The concierge smiled politely. "But I have a menu here if you'd like to order something." She extended a laminated sheet covered with an elegant script.

"I'll take the bacon and scrambled eggs with Texas toast, coffee and orange juice." Uma glanced at the menu. Her phone rang, and she turned away.

"Are you sure I can't get you anything?" the concierge asked Claudia. There was pity in her eyes. Because the woman worked in a hospital, she probably knew what Claudia had done to herself.

"No, thank you." Claudia smiled. If the woman only knew how unappealing food was right now.

The concierge nodded and left. A few moments later, Uma's breakfast arrived, but the manager ignored it and continued with her phone call. Apparently, she hadn't been hungry after all.

A nurse stepped into the room.

"Mr. Amwell is on his way back for recovery." She pressed a button that propped open the wide door.

"How'd he do?" Claudia could hardly breathe.

"Yeah." Uma disconnected her call. Her eyes eager, she stood next to Claudia.

"The doctor said he did well," the nurse said reassuringly.

“When can we see him?” Claudia wouldn’t relax until she could judge for herself how Brock had done.

“Right about now.” The nurse turned to the door as a bed rounded the corner.

Brock lay in the middle, his eyes wrapped in gauze. Though he had shaved this morning, a stubble covered his square jaw. He lay still as the tech wheeled the bed down the hall to Brock’s private suite. Claudia and Uma followed.

In the bedroom, the tech situated the bed next to the monitors. The nurse and the aide moved the equipment from the poles on the bed and set everything up in Brock’s room.

“We’re going to wake him now.” The nurse smiled at Claudia and Uma, then turned to the bed. “Mr. Amwell, do you feel all right? Can I get you anything?”

“I just want to see.” His voice was ragged. He shifted in the bed and turned his head to the nurse. “When can I do that?”

“The doctor will be here soon to discuss the healing process,” the nurse said.

The room was a flurry of activity with medical personnel entering, typing notes into their tablets and checking Brock’s vitals.

Uma said little between her phone calls. Claudia could only stare at Brock. When the staff left, an aide had brought him a lunch tray. She offered to bring Claudia and Uma a tray. Claudia declined.

“Someone brought me a tray earlier.” Uma laughed softly. “But I forgot about it.”

“Would you like me to bring you another?” the aid offered.

“No, thanks.” Uma waved dismissively. “I have a dinner meeting. I’ll save my appetite.”

“How are you feeling?” Claudia moved to Brock’s bedside.



“I’d be better if I could see.” He sounded weary. He turned his head to her.

“You will soon,” Claudia said. She gave his hand a reassuring squeeze and was relieved when he clung to her. He probably wouldn’t do that after he regained his sight and saw what she really looked like.

Uma moved to the bed. Her gaze went immediately to Claudia’s and Brock’s clasped hands.

Claudia didn’t pull away. She expected Uma to make a comment, but the other woman said nothing. She didn’t even ask Brock how he felt. She took another call and walked out of the room. When she returned, she told Brock she’d come back later and left.

“Your house is filled with bouquets and gifts,” Claudia told him. “I’m sorry the hospital wouldn’t let you keep them here.”

“Since I can’t see yet, I guess it doesn’t matter,” he said.

“Yes, but you could smell them,” she said. “And I can tell you what they look like.”

“Two more days, and I’ll be able to see everything,” he said.

Two more days. Claudia felt her blood receding. She braced herself for the reaction she knew would break her heart.

## CHAPTER 21



A crowd had gathered around the hospital the day Brock was scheduled to have his bandages removed. The local television stations from Grand Junction set up satellite feeds in front of the hospital as did a couple of podcasters, which made him laugh. He wasn't a rock star. He was a snowboarder.

He was grateful he hadn't been confined to bed those past two days but found it frustrating that he had to remain in the hospital. He spoke to his parents several times a day. They pumped him with medical questions, none of which he could answer. He told them to call the medical team. Because his parents were medical doctors, they'd understand better than he did what was going on.

While he waited to heal, he wandered the corridors, but there was little else for him to do. Claudia remained at his side, a solid presence he appreciated.

When she led him to the window overlooking the hospital entrance, the crowd cheered. He waved at them and wished he could see them. He wished he could join them. He would soon. Until the doctors gave their approval, he was to remain isolated.

He took in the scents, the sounds, the softness of the hospital bed's sheets, and the magic in Claudia's voice. Whenever she spoke to him, the tone made his blood warm.

He was glad his hospital suite accommodated Claudia. He loved having her by his side. She was the gentleness his soul

craved as he moved through darkness and yearned for the light.

Uma buzzed in and out of the hospital suite with a phone to her ear. He hadn't expected her to visit him because their negotiations could be conducted over the phone or computer. In her peculiar way, she was showing she cared.

Friends and relatives he hadn't talked to in years called, texted and emailed to wish him well.

"I take it my surgery gained media attention," he said to Claudia when he disconnected a call from a cousin he hadn't seen since he was nine.

"People care about you," she said in that tender voice that soothed his soul.

He swallowed. He cared about people. When his sight was restored, he would be free to show more people how much he cared. He could come and go as he pleased. He wouldn't have to depend on anyone.

He wouldn't have to depend on Claudia.

A hole opened in his heart. What would that mean?

On the second day following his surgery, Brock was sitting up in bed. Claudia helped him pull a robe over his pajamas.

Uma was visiting with him when a medical team entered his suite and prepared the area for the bandage removal.

"Are you staying?" he asked Claudia and heard her hesitation.

"If you want me to," she said haltingly.

"I do."

"Then if the medical team approves, I'll stay."

"What about me?" Uma looked worried.

"By all means, you should stay." Brock laughed.

The team approved having Claudia and Uma in the room. If they hadn't, Brock would've found out what needed to be done to let them stay.

The doctor came in, told Brock to keep his eyes closed and snipped the bandages. When they fell away, the darkness faded slightly. Through his lids, he was seeing light. His pulse leaped in his throat knowing God had answered his prayers. In only a moment, he'd have his sight.

"Okay, Mr. Amwell. You can open your eyes slowly," the doctor said.

The first thing Brock saw was the doctor's smiling face. He hadn't expected the man to have a mustache.

"What do you see?" The doctor peered into Brock's eyes.

"You." Brock couldn't help but laugh.

"How's the vision?" the doctor asked.

"It's clear." Brock blinked. Relief flooded him. "Like before the accident."

He turned. First, he saw Uma, whose broad grin made him relax. Next to her stood a blonde woman, her smile apprehensive.

His heart lifted. Claudia. She was as beautiful as she sounded. Had knowing how beautiful she was on the inside made her outer beauty more radiant?

"Claudia," he murmured her name. He was aware of the jerk of Uma's head as she looked from him to his assistant.

"Hello, Brock." Claudia's laugh was soft and even more musical. The blush covering her cheeks made his heart warm. Had she blushed because he could see her? "It's like we're meeting for the first time."

"Except I know you in the important ways," he said gently.

The thin hair covering her head hid most of the scabs on her scalp. His gaze moved to her large blue eyes and creamy skin that made her angelic. The green top she wore smoothed over her curves. A corner of it was tucked into the waistband of her faded jeans that had cuffs rolled up to expose her ankle boots.

He couldn't control the hammering in his chest. He wasn't sure he wanted to.

"When can I leave the hospital?" Brock asked the doctor but kept his eyes on Claudia.

She dropped her gaze.

His chest tightened. He hadn't meant to make her uncomfortable, but he couldn't control how glad he was to have her in his life.

"Not so fast." The doctor laughed. "We need to monitor you."

"How long does that take?" Brock jerked his gaze to the doctor. "I want to get out of here."

"I understand," the doctor said. "Let's observe how you do. We've scheduled some therapists to come in and work with you so we can observe how your eyes adjust to the light."

"I can't go outside?" Brock didn't hide his disappointment. He'd lived in darkness for months. He was ready to live in the light.

"Let's give it a day," the doctor said. "The repaired nerve is still delicate. You don't want to overtax it."

"Meaning I could lose my sight again." The realization made his heart shudder. He'd never wish to live in darkness on anyone.

People with sight could still live in darkness. He had experienced that first-hand. He had been spiritually blind.

"I don't want to take any chances." The doctor rose. "Why don't you rest for a while? I'll be back in a few hours to check on you, but if you need to see me sooner, notify the staff."

Shouts sounded from outside. Claudia moved to the window and looked down, then turned to Brock. Uma stepped next to her and stared down.

"They have signs," Claudia said, bemused. "They know your bandages were removed. They want to know if you can see."

“What do you say, Doc?” Brock turned him. “Can I go to the window?”

The doctor’s mouth tipped as if he were weighing the risk. Finally, he handed Brock a pair of plastic sunglasses that were almost opaque. “Put these on.”

“Thanks, Doc.” Brock slipped them on, then waited while the doctor fit them snugly around his face.

“Try that.” The doctor leaned back.

Brock stared through the plastic that shaded everything. When he looked up, he saw Claudia standing next to him.

“I’ll make it,” he said, his voice ragged.

Her eyes dark with concern, she nodded but waited.

He rose, every nerve ending in his body snapping with anticipation. He felt more nervous than when he jumped from a helicopter into pristine snow. He stepped to the window. That he could walk without someone guiding him filled his throat with emotion. He leaned into the glass and looked down.

Someone shouted and pointed. Others looked up. When they saw him, they waved their signs and cheered. Some held up their phones to take pictures.

A wave of emotion swept over him. Had they come just to find out how he was doing?

A man carrying a camera with the local station’s logo tipped his lens to Brock. Other photographers gathered around him with their cameras.

Brock couldn’t hold back the sensations rising in his chest. His eyes burned. Lifting his hand to the glass, he waved. The people below shouted louder and waved back.

“Don’t overdo it.” The doctor was at his side.

Brock swallowed and nodded. Giving a last wave, he turned from the window. Everyone in the room watched him.

“Are you all right?” Claudia asked with compassion in her tone.

“Getting used to seeing again, I guess will take a while.” He looked around the room at the pictures hanging on the walls, at the medical team who watched him cautiously, then to Uma, who almost looked afraid. He tipped his head to Claudia and smiled. She had no idea how much he wanted to hold her.

“Take it easy.” The doctor lifted his tablet. “Remember, this procedure is experimental. You don’t want to do anything that will jeopardize the result. If you need anything, have the front desk contact me right away. I’ll be making rounds, but I can break away and come back.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Brock said. “All I need to do is get used to seeing again.”

“It may take longer than you think,” the doctor said.

“As long as I can see, that’s all that matters,” Brock said. “Can I read?”

“Let’s wait a day.” The doctor looked apologetic.

The medical team moved out of the room. Uma’s phone rang with a call she needed to take. When she finished the call, she bundled up to leave for a meeting.

“But I’ll call when I’m finished to see how you’re doing,” she said and left.

The quiet in the room closed around Brock. He’d lived in darkness for so long, he’d forgotten what it was like to take in the sights. His senses were on overload as he scanned the furniture surrounding him. It wasn’t spectacular, but that he could see color made him want to see more.

“Do you want to rest for a while?” Claudia asked, and he sensed her nervousness.

“I’d like to take a walk.” He rose.

“Except the doctor warned against overtaxing yourself.”

He exhaled roughly. There was a time when he would’ve ignored his doctor’s advice. Now he wouldn’t do anything that would plummet him into darkness again. His heart ached knowing how many people lived in spiritual darkness. He

sensed a darkness floating around Claudia. What would it take to pull her out of it? Would she even listen to him?

“How about some music?” Claudia pulled her phone from her pocket.

“Would you mind reading to me?” Brock asked softly. He couldn’t remember ever wanting anyone to read to him. His mother was so busy with her medical practice that she never had time. The nannies his parents had hired to take care of him, his brother and his sister were exhausted by the end of the day, but when they did take the time to read, he’d been thrilled.

“Sure.” Claudia’s eyes filled with surprise. “A lot is going on in the world. Would like to hear some news?”

“Actually, I’d like to hear some scripture,” he said and saw the shock in her eyes. That he’d made the request surprised himself.

“Okay.” She drew out the word, then picked up her phone. “I’m sure I can find a recording—”

“Would you mind reading to me?” he asked.

“You want me to read the Bible to you?” She paled. Her wide eyes shone with surprise. Panic flickered in their blue depths.

“What is it?” He felt her fear.

“Nothing.” She looked around the room, then back at him. “I can read something from my phone. Is there a particular scripture you want to hear?”

“John chapter three.” He hesitated. “I put a Bible in my suitcase. He stepped to the closet and pulled out the Bible. He handed it to her. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Yes,” she said softly. She took the Bible but didn’t look at him.

He’d felt her resistance to discussing faith since she’d started working for him. Had he said something wrong? Her resume and social media sites had been filled with Christian



references—for a while. Her summer in Washington, D.C., changed everything.

She opened the Bible to the book of John.

“Would you start with chapter three?” Brock asked.

That made her blink. She stared at the Bible and turned the page.

He relaxed in his chair and listened to the words spoken in Claudia’s clear voice. He didn’t close his eyes. He wanted to see everything. The peace he felt whenever he heard God’s Word built inside him with great joy.

““For God so loved the world ...”” she read.

He’d never tire of hearing those words.

Claudia’s voice faltered. His face came up. She was more pale than before.

“What is it?” He sat up straight.

She looked wounded and rose. The Bible fell from her lap and crashed to the floor.

“Oh, I didn’t mean ...” With trembling fingers, she reached for the Bible.

“I’ll get it.” He was on his feet and moving toward her. He wrapped his fingers around her arm. “What is it?” The tears streaming down her face made his heart wrench.

“I’m sorry, Brock, I can’t read that.” The sound she made was soft and broken.

“The Bible? That’s fine,” he said gently, though his throat dried at the turmoil in her voice. “Do you want to read something else?”

“Okay.” She looked relieved. She wiped away a tear. The gaze she lifted to him made a knot tighten in the pit of his stomach.

He couldn’t let her stand before him looking lost and in pain. He did the only thing he could. He laced his fingers through hers, pulled her to his chest and held her close.

## CHAPTER 22



Claudia went hot with humiliation. She had been reading what used to be her favorite scripture. Now it made her cold inside.

And why had she broken into tears in front of Brock?

“I can’t ...” She tried to pull away.

His embrace firmed, then slowly loosened. She swallowed at the comforting strength that slipped away. His touch had more meaning than words.

Her heart swelled with so much pain it had no room for meaning.

“What is it?” Brock tipped his gaze to hers.

“It’s hard to read that scripture ... any scripture.” She couldn’t look at him. His faith was new. She didn’t want to destroy the hope he’d found—the hope she no longer trusted.

“I’m sorry,” he said the sincerity in his voice making her wish she hadn’t said anything.

“Please don’t be sorry. I remember what it was like when I first gave my life to Christ.” She looked at him through her tears. Her heart lifted at the softness in his eyes. “I envy you that,” she murmured and looked down.

“You don’t feel that way anymore?” he asked.

How she desperately wanted to say that she did, but what was the use? Nothing about her faith filled her with awe.

“Maybe prayer will bring it back,” he said.

She scoffed. How many times had she heard that line? How many times had she convinced herself it was that simple?

“Maybe,” she said.

“You don’t believe that.”

“I guess this is proof I walk by sight and not by faith.” Her voice cracked on the last word.

“Don’t go through this alone.” Brock drew her back to him and guided her to the sofa. “If you need to talk about it ...”

“When you interviewed me, you asked me about the gap in my resume.” She gave a soft exhale. What she felt she could no longer keep to herself.

“Yes, I was wondering why you left the senator’s office before you’d completed your internship,” he said, “but you explained that you were accepted to the international program at Oxford. I read online about the suit you filed against the senator.” Something flickered in his eyes.

Panic threatened to overwhelm her. She’d told no one what had happened until her parents had cornered her and demanded to know. By then she had gained fifty pounds. She’d pulled out most of her hair leaving a bare scalp covered with bleeding scabs. Her parents took her to every doctor imaginable. It was a Christian doctor who gained her trust so that she was able to explain the assault.

“It was as if the gates of hell had opened and swallowed me whole.” She couldn’t hold back the tears. “For years, I tried to move past the pain, but when I thought everything would be fine, something would happen. Like when we were at the Nordic Center, and I saw the senator’s son.”

She tried to speak, but her voice froze. The tears flowing freely, she swallowed convulsively.

“Claudia.” He breathed her name and held her close.

Wrenching sobs of shame mingled with frustration. It was as if the senator were standing before her and laughing at her helplessness.

“It isn’t too late,” Brock clasped both her hands in his. “You’re not powerless. You can make this right. I understand it will never be as it was before, but I can help you find someone —”

“I tried, and you’re right it didn’t make anything as it was before.” She stuttered a breath. “I made so many people angry. I was accusing the most beloved senator in the chamber, an advocate for women’s rights, of something vile. While I was in court defending myself, the court of public opinion vilified me. Every day I woke wondering if this was really God’s will. Should I go into therapy and forget what had happened to me? But always the answer was no. During the trial, my faith was never stronger. I felt so close to God as if He walked beside me.”

“But then something happened,” Brock spoke slowly. He looked at her as if he remembered something.

Claudia couldn’t speak. The unthinkable had happened, and she felt as if it had been an answer to prayer. At that moment, the guilt had been overwhelming. She couldn’t live with herself.

“I remember,” Brock spoke slowly. “The senator was killed in a plane crash on a trip to Antarctica. When the rescue team arrived at the crash site, there was evidence that the senator had survived but had frozen to death.”

“I felt responsible.” She choked and nodded. “My parents still wanted to sue his estate, but then our attorneys informed us that our chances of winning were slim and that we should file a complaint with the Congressional Accountability Act. We did, and we received a settlement that was larger than the lawsuit.”

“You still didn’t feel justified,” Brock said.

“No, there was no satisfaction that someone died and in a horrific way.” She wanted to forget the joy her family and friends had expressed. “What he did to me was unconscionable, but I never wanted him dead. I didn’t even want to sue. I just wanted him to admit what he’d done. I

found out later that I wasn't the only one he'd assaulted, but that didn't make me feel better."

"I'm sorry that happened." His expression changed, softening as he searched her face.

"I suppose you're wondering about my hair." She reached for the soft locks she was afraid to touch, then curled her fingers into her palm. Just when she thought she'd conquered this destructive behavior, the overwhelming urge would sneak in, like an evil reminding her how weak she was. She'd been weak when the senator had accosted her in the hallway. She'd been weak when she'd tried to resist the urge that she believed would make her ugly. Being attractive was a punishment, not a benefit.

"You don't have to tell me," he said with a tenderness that made her heart ache.

"I wasn't sure why I did it at first, but the doctor helped me to understand I blamed my looks for what the senator did to me," she said, realizing how strange it was for her to blame herself for another person's actions. "I was afraid I'd be assaulted again, so I did the only thing I thought would protect myself. The senator had told me I had beautiful hair—something he should never have said to me, but I was too naïve at the time to know that. I didn't want anyone to like my hair so I removed it."

"But you knew you hadn't solved the problem," Brock said.

"You're right. I felt no peace," she said, fighting the pain that sank its talons into her heart to drag her into the familiar pit of hopelessness. "And believed God had rejected me."

"But that isn't true," he said quickly.

"I'm not so sure." She shook her head. "For years I begged for healing, but if this is healing, I don't want it."

"I'm glad you shared this with me." He took her hand. "Now I know how to pray for you."

"You don't have to do that." She exhaled slowly, knowing what she would say would hurt him and her.

“That’s what our faith is all about.” He rested his hands on her shoulders. “This is how we communicate with God. This is how His power is unleashed.”

The hot prick of tears reminded her of God’s betrayal. He had promised rest for the weary and heavy laden. She felt turmoil.

“I know.” Her voice shook.

“But you don’t believe.”

She didn’t want to answer. She lifted her gaze to his.

“Give it time.”

How much time was needed? Seven years hadn’t been enough. Would it take ten years? Fifteen?

“I have something else I want to discuss with you.” He looked into her eyes. “I’ve been getting a lot of requests to give talks at some Christian ministries. I’d like you to assist me with these meetings, help me with scheduling and accompany me to the events. In other words, continue to be my assistant.”

“We had agreed that this position would only last until you had your surgery,” she said.

“And then afterward, if my sight was restored, we’d discuss if it were necessary that you continue in this position or if you’d accept another one.” His eyes studied hers. “Did you find something else? I know you were talking to the governor about working for him.”

“He needs to hire a chief of staff and believes I have the qualifications, but nothing’s been confirmed.” She had hoped to line something up by the time Brock no longer needed her, but she hadn’t received any firm offers.

“Are you interested in continuing to work with me?” There was a hesitancy in his voice.

“For now, yes,” she said, ignoring the doubt throbbing in the back of her mind.

Was she the right assistant for Brock? His faith was new and blossoming. Her faith was tenuous at best. Still, she liked working for Brock. She liked Brock. Working for him was a safe way to keep her feelings for him in check. As long as she worked for him, she'd never reveal what she really felt.

## CHAPTER 23



*B*rock was relieved when Claudia agreed to be his assistant, even if it were temporary. He wanted to leap into the air. Looking into her eyes, he sensed her reluctance.

“What is it?” He tried to ignore the hesitancy in his chest. His heart wanted to jump.

“Nothing.” Her smile broad, she stepped from him. “I suppose we should get to work on your schedule.”

He watched her a moment. He knew something was wrong, but if she wouldn’t tell him, how could he help her? He’d give it time. He hoped he had enough. He pulled his phone from his pocket and texted her the list of Christian organizations who had invited him to speak.

When she received the text, she opened the message on her phone and scanned the list.

“Any comment?” he asked and watched her beautiful blue eyes study the screen. For as long as he lived, he would love the color blue.

“This is a heavy schedule.” She gave him a thoughtful look. “It doesn’t leave much time for endorsements or snowboarding.

“About that.” He pushed his fingers through his hair. “I know that accepting these invitations will conflict with the endorsements I received. I’ll need to discuss that with Uma and maybe cancel some events.”

“You’re under contract.” Her eyes widened.



“All contracts have an out.” Brock gave a soft laugh. “Uma’s a tough negotiator. She made sure I wouldn’t be held liable for any change in a decision I might make.”

“What about snowboarding?” Claudia zeroed in on his true love in life. He’d scheduled everything around snowboarding.

“I think I’ve done enough,” he said. “I thought about it and prayed about it. If I don’t do it ever again, I won’t miss it.”

She looked at him as if he were crazy.

“I’ll still compete until I feel it’s time to stop.”

“All right.” She exhaled slowly. She still didn’t look convinced. “Then that leaves you more than enough time to accept these invitations. I’ll contact the organizations and make arrangements.” She started to turn away, then looked back at him. “There is one more thing.”

“What’s that?” He lifted a brow. He was so glad he could see her expressive face. That she would continue to work for him made him wonder about something else.

Where did they go from there? He was her boss. He didn’t want to cross that line, especially because of her assault. He wanted her to trust him. Her ability to trust had been damaged. Still, he couldn’t deny the feelings he had for her. Now that he could see her, they’d become more intense.

“It’s almost Thanksgiving,” I didn’t want to bring it up before your surgery, but now that it’s over and a success, did you want to make plans?”

That gave him a start. How many times had his parents invited him home for Thanksgiving? He’d declined the invitations because he was in search of the mountain that gave him an adrenaline rush.

“When is Thanksgiving?” he asked.

“Why am I not surprised you don’t know that?” she said with a laugh. “It’s always the fourth Thursday of November.”

“Then it’s next week.”

“Which means this year it falls on your birthday. Do you want to make plans?” She lifted a brow.

“I haven’t celebrated my birthday in years. There’s no reason to start now. Should we invite people over to celebrate Thanksgiving?” he asked confused.

“Why not? You have the room.”

When he bought his home, he’d never been sure why he’d let the interior designer convince him to buy a formal dining room set. He thought he’d have parties, but snowboarding had been more important to him than entertaining.

“What do you do for Thanksgiving?” he asked, then wished he hadn’t when he saw the flicker cross her face.

“I haven’t celebrated since I lost my parents.” The sadness filling her eyes didn’t take away their jewel-like sparkle.

“I’m sorry,” he said. She’d lost so much. “Since neither one of us has celebrated the holiday in a while, let’s host the celebration here.”

“That isn’t why I suggested it,” she said in alarm.

“I know.” He wanted to lessen her unease. “But it still seems like a good idea.” He frowned again. “Who should we invite?”

“You are new to this, aren’t you?” She laughed. “It’s a good time to get together with family and friends. How about your family and a few friends?”

“Is there anyone you want to invite?” He wanted to be inclusive.

“Let’s start with your list.” She pulled out her phone. “Because we’re getting a late start, most people may have plans by now. Who do you want to invite?”

“My parents, my brother and sister, Pastor Chuck and his family, a few of my snowboarding buddies and Uma,” he said.

Claudia glanced at him.

“She may not accept. She never takes a day off.” He laughed, then turned serious. “I’m not sure my parents will

accept. They're both workaholics."

"It doesn't hurt to ask," she said.

"I'll talk to Nellie and see if she can whip together a dinner." He pulled out his phone.

"You don't need to do that." Her hand was on his.

"I think I better," he said surprised. "I have no idea how to cook a turkey. Do you?"

"I used to help my mother prepare Thanksgiving dinner." She smiled. "It's been awhile, but I still remember a few things." She dropped to the sofa and tapped on her phone before showing him the screen. "How's this for a menu?"

"It looks like Thanksgiving." He still couldn't believe she would agree to make the dinner.

His mother never made dinner. Brock had never seen her in the kitchen. She'd always had a personal chef. She hired a catering chef when she and Brock's father entertained, which was frequently.

"I'll place an order and have everything delivered." She tapped on her phone.

"Are you sure you don't want some help?"

"I'll let you know." She flashed him that smile that made him realize he could feel so much more for her than he already did.

Her barriers were in place.

His were slowly tumbling down.

## CHAPTER 24



Claudia had shown more confidence than she felt when she told Brock she'd cook Thanksgiving dinner. She had spent a day preparing sweet potato casserole, cranberries, dinner rolls and pumpkin pie.

Thanksgiving Day, she rose early to stuff the turkey and put it in the oven.

Everyone Brock invited accepted his invitation—including Uma, who had asked Brock to repeat the invitation. She couldn't remember the last time she'd celebrated Thanksgiving, which made Claudia's heart ache.

She knew Uma wasn't thrilled that Brock had hired her as his assistant. Still, Claudia admired the woman. She worked in a man's world, which meant she had to work harder than any man, and she was a success.

Brock's parents were overjoyed to receive the invitation. Though Brock had bought his Aspen mansion seven years ago, his family had never visited because Brock was never home. He'd spent his life seeking the next thrill.

Thanksgiving Day, Claudia watched Brock greet his family, Uma and the other guests and wondered about this change taking place in his life. In the few weeks since they'd first met all he thought about was snowboarding. That had been the reason he wanted to regain his sight. In the few weeks that Claudia had known him, he'd changed from someone who fought against his confinement—his blindness—to someone who wanted to connect with people.

She knew what had changed him. God had. He let God into his life, and God began a miraculous work in him.

Heat rose in her throat. She'd always known what God could do in a person's life if that person would let Him.

She held back. She couldn't forgive. The senator had been the person who had attacked her, but she blamed God.

Why was she thinking about this on Thanksgiving Day? She should be grateful that she had a job—more grateful that the urge to pull out her hair had lessened. Was God working that miracle after all?

Because she had left her hair alone, it had grown in uneven lengths over her head. She wanted to look presentable on Thanksgiving Day, so the day before the holiday, she had scheduled a haircut appointment. Now her hair covered her head like a soft cap. When she returned from the appointment, Brock told her she looked nice.

She blushed but was pleased. Was she finally living in the present rather than the past? She was afraid to hope.

After Brock introduced his parents, Bobbi and Wayne, and his family to Claudia, his brother, Travis, scanned the great room.

"Can I look around?" he asked.

Brock's sister, Michelle, stood next to him and nodded eagerly.

"Sure." Brock laughed. "Go ahead."

One of Brock's snowboarder friends, Rider, brought his girlfriend Avery and their daughter Lila, who was just learning to walk. The toddler shot across the great room. Avery, who looked like she was barely out of high school, chased after her.

"Sorry." Avery scooped Lila into her arms. The toddler squirmed and stretched her toes to the floor. "This place is so much bigger than our trailer. She doesn't have much room to walk at our place. This is like going to the park for her."

"She's fine." Brock grinned. "Let her roam free."

Avery looked around at the sculptures scattered throughout the room.

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” Avery said cautiously.

Claudia wondered at this young woman who took her responsibility as a mother seriously. She’d learned a lot in her short life.

Avery set Lila on the floor and walked her to a sculpture of an Indian riding his horse to rescue a young woman from a charging buffalo. She explained to her daughter the scene that fascinated the toddler.

As Claudia watched mother and daughter, she pushed down the pain that edged its sharp corner on her heart. At twenty-seven, she had thought she’d be married and have started her own family. Since the assault, she’d been afraid to get close to a man.

She turned away and saw Brock talking to his other snowboarder friend, Lachlan, who attended Brock’s church. Brock glanced at her. A slow smile spread across his face. Did he understand that Claudia wanted a child of her own? If only the desires of her heart weren’t complicated.

Pastor Chuck and his wife Sally brought their four children. Pastor Chuck was filled with as much joy as he was when he preached at his church. His sons were as eager as he was to meet everyone at the gathering. His daughters stayed close to their mother, who smiled with the sweet peace Claudia knew could only come from God.

Uma came alone. Her eyes lit when she saw the crowd filling the great room and easily moved about making sure she met everyone.

“Does anyone want anything to drink?” Claudia asked after the guests had arrived. Some munched on the party nuts sitting in bowls around the great room.

Eager to discover what was in a bowl, Lila charged across the room, Avery at her heels.

“I’ll have a scotch, neat.” Uma flopped into a chair. “What a week I’ve had.”

“Sorry.” Brock’s mouth tipped. “No scotch. Would you like a glass of tea?”

“No scotch?” Uma’s mouth dropped, then she waved dismissively. “Forget it. Wine with dinner will be fine.”

“We don’t have wine either,” Brock said.

Uma made a face. “This is the first ... Never mind. I’ll take that glass of tea.”

“Coming right up.” Brock grinned and stepped to the bar that looked like it should have been loaded with liquor with its ice buckets and taps. Instead, it was filled with sodas, various brands of designer water and a coffee urn.

“I’m going into the kitchen and put the finishing touches on dinner,” Claudia said. “We should be ready to eat soon.”

“I’ll help you.” Sally followed her along with her two daughters.

“So will I.” Bobbi walked after them.

Avery picked up Lila and went into the kitchen.

“What is this? The women go to the kitchen. The men stay out here?” Uma asked.

“You’re welcome to stay with us.” Brock smiled at her.

“What are you guys going to talk about? Snowboarding?” she asked.

“That’s a good place to start.” Brock laughed.

“I’ll go to the kitchen.” Uma pushed herself to her feet and crossed the room.



THE KITCHEN WAS FILLED with talk and laughter, reminding Claudia what it was like when her parents would invite friends over to celebrate the holiday. Sally rinsed the boiling potatoes and then showed her daughters how to whip them in the mixer. Claudia was surprised and relieved to find that Brock owned a

mixer, along with other kitchen appliances he didn't know he had.

While one of Sally's daughters manned the mixer, the other one helped Sally take the turkey from the oven and then remove the dressing from the turkey. They placed the turkey on a platter so it could cool before someone carved it. Claudia wondered who that would be. She'd watched her father carve the turkey. Did Brock know how, or had he been consumed with snowboarding and never learned? He had said he hadn't celebrated Thanksgiving with his parents in seven years.

Bobbi was eager to help. She removed the rolls from the oven and placed them in a bread basket.

Uma looked lost in the kitchen, making Claudia wonder if she'd ever prepared a meal. Uma moved next to Sally. With intense fascination, she watched Sally and her daughter whip the potatoes.

"You're a pastor's wife." Uma sipped her tea.

"Yes, I am." Sally smiled at her before helping her daughter mix a stick of butter into the potatoes.

"What's that like?" Uma asked.

"It's very exciting." Sally grinned. She showed no surprise. "No day is the same. I wake each morning looking forward to what God has in store for me."

"Really?" Uma's eyes widened. "I thought it would be boring with all that praying."

"All that praying is what makes it exciting." Sally laughed, which seemed to confuse Uma even more.

Avery looked at Sally for a moment before turning back to the salad she was tossing. When Lila stood on tiptoe and snatched a carrot stick from the counter, she squealed and dashed across the kitchen. Avery shook her head and chased after her.

Claudia smiled as she watched Avery pursue her daughter but couldn't ignore the ache of sadness. What would it be like to have a daughter ... or a son? She turned back to the gravy



she was making. Her throat closed hot and tight. She couldn't imagine being married. She couldn't imagine being that close to a man. Falling in love would make her vulnerable. She would never drop her guard.

"Need any help in here?" Brock stood beneath the archway that separated the kitchen from the dining room.

No one responded. Instead, all the women looked at Claudia.

"We're doing fine." She laughed nervously. Her heart filled with an emotion she'd never felt before. What would it be like to be married to Brock? She'd no doubt his life would move from one pinnacle of excitement to another.

Why was she thinking about Brock? Whatever God had planned for his life, she would never be a part of it. Not because of what had happened to her, but because her faith in God would never match his. She could never forgive God for letting such a horrible assault happen to her.

It hadn't ended with the assault. She relived the violence every time she closed her eyes. Occasionally, on a slow news day, a reporter would dig up a story about the trial. Internet sites and newspapers picked it up.

"We're almost ready. I hope you're not starving." Claudia forced a lightness in her tone that made Brock frown.

Sally's face came up. Claudia saw in the woman's eyes that she had noticed Brock's frown, too.

Brock looked past Claudia to the turkey resting on a china platter on the counter. "I guess this is my moment to show that I'm responsible for Thanksgiving dinner."

"Do you want to carve the turkey?" Claudia's gaze followed Brock's.

Everyone else in the kitchen quieted. Brock, who had avoided accountability, was taking charge. Claudia glanced at Bobbi and saw a sheen in her eyes. Had she never thought her son, who lived from one thrilling moment to the next, would assume a leadership role? She hadn't been with Brock in a while, so she wouldn't have seen the change in him. Claudia

only knew because he had told her what he was like before he committed his life to Christ.

“Now would be the perfect time to learn. Fortunately, there’re a few experts around to give me some tips.” His eyes shone.

“We’re ready now.” Claudia swept her hand toward the turkey.

Brock carried the platter into the dining room. Claudia and the others scooped up the side dishes and followed. Soon everyone was seated around the table. They joined hands, which surprised Uma, but she took the hands of the others. With heads bowed, Brock prayed a blessing that filled Claudia’s heart. Her throat hot, she joined the others in conversation and the passing of the serving dishes.

She had always thought Thanksgiving with her parents had been one of joy and gratitude. Brock was giving her a new memory that she would keep close forever.

After they finished Thanksgiving dinner, Claudia brought a birthday cake into the dining room. Everyone broke into a rousing rendition of the Happy Birthday song.

“I thought we weren’t going to celebrate my birthday.” Brock dragged a hand over his face.

“It’s kind of hard not to when everyone here knows today’s your birthday.” Claudia laughed.

The guests piled gifts in front of Brock. In his eyes shone the realization that he understood how much these people cared about him.

Some of the gifts were joke gifts. Many were homemade. Uma had knitted him a cap, which shocked him. When did she learn to knit? Uma shrugged. Apparently, Uma was full of secrets.

He was touched by Claudia’s gift—a Bible—which she had bought because now he could read.

Claudia hadn’t known Brock before he’d accepted Christ, but she could still see the great work God was doing in his life.

The draw to him was hard to resist, but she'd stay with him until she knew it was time to go.

She didn't want to interfere with his walk with God.

## CHAPTER 25



*B*rock's days filled quickly with requests for him to give his testimony. Those were the invitations he wanted to accept. His problem was that they conflicted with requests to promote his endorsements. How did he choose? The endorsements supported him. It made it easier to accept the invitations from those who wanted to hear his testimony. As nonprofits, they had little to give. When they gave him a meager offering, Brock couldn't accept it, so he donated it back to the ministry. They needed those donations. He didn't.

He was sitting in his office and praying about what to do next when Claudia entered his office with more invitations from ministries. She sat on the other side of his desk and read the list to him.

Every time she spoke, he was struck by her musical tone. He had hired her because he needed help after he lost his sight. His sight had been restored, but he still liked having her around when he attended events. She knew how to coordinate the endorsement and ministry schedules. When they attended the events, she managed his time before he gave his speech. Afterward, she helped him as he spoke with audience members and sponsors to make sure he had a chance to meet those who waited patiently to talk to him.

Meeting the people was the main reason he spoke at these ministries. Many were hurting. The world was filled with pain. God using him to help one person made attending the event worthwhile.

“My schedule is getting full.” He glanced at his calendar and gave thanks that he could see it.

“I’ve noticed.” Claudia laughed softly. She arched a brow as if prompting Brock to make the necessary decision.

“Because I can’t be in more than one place at a time, and because there are only twenty-four hours in a day, I’m going to have to be more particular about which invitations I accept.” He released a slow breath. He’d known for a while he’d have to make this decision. He had hoped it wouldn’t come to this. He looked at Claudia and saw the surprise in her eyes.

She had grown more beautiful every day with the soft wisps of her hair falling past her ears. Her creamy skin shone in the afternoon light drifting through the windows that lined his office.

“I agree.” Claudia drew a breath. “But which ones do you decline? Uma has sent a list of companies that have been waiting for you to endorse them. You’ll need to make a decision regarding those companies, too.”

“I think those are the requests I’ll have to decline.” He gave her a direct look. He expected the delicate arch of her brow. He leaned back in his chair.

“You know Uma will have a word regarding that decision,” she said as if she didn’t envy him having that conversation with Uma.

“Which is why I’ll have that conversation with her now.” He pressed the speed dial on his phone. When Claudia rose to leave, he motioned her to stay. She gave him a doubtful look but lowered herself to the chair.

As expected, Uma had plenty to say. That Brock was taking control of his own life was something his manager struggled with. When he was young, he counted on her to make all the business decisions. Because of the payout, Brock had thought he was accepting the right sponsorships. When he learned that these companies had views and had made investments that conflicted with his own standards, he wondered at his wisdom. Now he wondered if that prick of

conscience was God. It had taken losing his sight to hear what God had to say.

“You do know how hard I worked to get you these deals.” Uma sounded calm, but Brock knew her skill at saying the right thing to get what she wanted.

“I do, and I appreciate that, but I think God is leading me in a different direction,” Brock said.

Uma muttered something about Brock following the wrong path. There was a time when he would’ve agreed, but now he leaned on God for His wisdom and guidance. He asked God to give Uma peace.

“If you change your mind, call,” Uma said. “I can’t guarantee I can save this offer, but you know me. I’ll give it my best shot.”

“You’ve been the blessing I never expected.” Emotion filled Brock’s throat. “I have much to thank you for.”

“But you’re still walking away.”

“For now. If that changes, I’ll let you know,” Brock said, knowing he was trusting God in a way he’d never expected.

“I’ll stay in touch, just in case,” Uma said.

“I hope so. I’ll always consider you my friend.”

“Let’s not get too mushy,” Uma said, but Brock didn’t miss the feeling in her tone.

His heart ached knowing Uma didn’t have a lot of friends—only business associates.

He hung up the phone and looked at Claudia. “Now, let’s decide which events I should accept.”

It was almost lunchtime when he and Claudia finalized the events he would schedule before Christmas. He had invited his family to spend Christmas with him, which thrilled his brother and sister. Though they lived in a ski town, they couldn’t wait to spend the holiday skiing in Aspen. He had also invited Rider and his girlfriend and their baby, but they hadn’t responded yet.

Though Rider had come from a privileged background, his parents didn't approve of his lifestyle and had become estranged. Knowing money was tight for Rider, Brock wanted his friends to spend the holiday with him. He hoped Rider would accept.

Christmas was also Claudia's birthday. He wanted to make that day special for her. She had said she didn't celebrate Christmas. His heart drummed heavily. He understood why, though he prayed God would change her heart. Did she celebrate her birthday?

"If you want to take a break, I'll make us some sandwiches for lunch, then we can review the other invitations." Claudia's blue gaze made Brock's blood warm.

He'd had friends who were girls—women—but he'd never had a girlfriend. He'd been so consumed with snowboarding and pursuing the next adrenaline rush, he never took time to get to know a girl, though he knew some girls were interested in him. He saw how girls distracted his friends. He didn't want a distraction. He wanted to snowboard. When he received endorsements and Uma's representation, he was shocked and thrilled that snowboarding could be lucrative.

"Lunch sounds good." He followed Claudia into the great room and looked toward the windows that framed the ski slope. He needed to be on that slope—with Claudia.

"Is everything all right?" Claudia moved next to him, her gaze following his.

"Something's missing." Brock scanned the room from its designer furniture to its original art and sculptures.

Claudia's confused expression made him want to laugh. Nothing had changed about the room, but he knew what was missing.

"It's almost Christmas," he said, making her blink. "We don't have a Christmas tree."

"I'll call the lot on Main Street—" She pulled her phone from her pocket.

“I have a better idea.” His hand on hers made her still. Reluctantly, he withdrew his hand. He hadn’t meant to startle her. He smiled, hoping to ease her tension. “Let’s get our own tree.”

“You want to drive to the Christmas tree lot?”

“I want to—” He strode to the guest closet and pulled out their jackets. “—cut our own Christmas tree. There’s a farm not far from here that grows trees for those who want to trek into the woods and find the perfect tree.” He gave her a hopeful look. “If that sounds okay with you.”

“I’ve never done that before.” She looked confused. “How do you do that?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll call the farm and find out.”

Claudia nodded. “I’ll warm up the SUV—”

“It will be easier if we take the snowmobile.”

“How deep in the woods is this farm?” Her eyes shone.

“It’s about a half-hour drive from here. I’ll hook a toboggan to the snowmobile so we can cart the tree back to the house,” he said. “We can go now and come back for a late lunch.”

“That’s sounds perfect. I’ll change and be right back,” Claudia said, excitement in her voice. She rushed up the stairs.

A few minutes later, the freedom Brock felt as he guided the snowmobile through the pristine snow reminded him of his extreme sports days, but he knew this freedom was more than a ride down the mountain. This freedom was rooted in God’s love.

When they reached the tree farm, he met the proprietor to make payment arrangements and for directions to the area where the taller trees grew. He followed the trail to the area on the other side of the hill and slowed the snowmobile.

“Keep an eye out for the perfect tree,” he said over his shoulder.



“I found it.” Claudia almost squealed. “It’s that one. It’s tall enough so we can put it between the staircases. It will reach the vaulted ceiling.”

“You have a good eye.” Brock laughed. He parked the snowmobile and eyed the tree.

“Do you think it’s too big?” Claudia stood next to him. She worried her lower lip.

“No, I think it’s perfect.” He grinned.

He lifted an ax from the storage beneath the seat of the snowmobile. Standing next to the tree, he chopped the trunk. When it tipped, he jokingly yelled, “Timber.”

It didn’t fall backward. It tipped to the side. Brock’s eyes widened. The tree aimed straight toward Claudia. She froze.

Dropping the ax, Brock dove toward her. His hat flew from his head. Wrapping his arms around her waist, she took a breath when he pulled her into the curve of his body. Tucking himself around her, he wrapped his hand around her head and pressed her to his chest.

His heart pounded wildly as he rolled over the snow and away from the falling tree. It thundered to the ground. Snow sprayed around them. Claudia gasped and hid her face against him. The feel of her in his arms made his pulse hammer.

“Are you all right?” he asked raggedly. He touched a gloved finger to her chin and tipped her face to his.

“I’m ... I ...” Her jaw worked but no words came. She stared at him as if seeing him for the first time.

The emotions rising in his chest were strange and welcoming and confusing. Looking into Claudia’s blue eyes, he felt something he couldn’t explain. He’d spent years rarely giving a girl a second glance. He’d seen what relationships did to his friends. When they became involved with girls, they’d get distracted. Soon their competitive ranks dropped, and they’d withdraw from the snowboarding competitions.

Brock couldn’t give up his adrenaline rush—not for any girl. Sometimes, he laughingly thought he’d spend the rest of

his life on his snowboard. He had money. Did he need love?

Did he want to spend the rest of his life alone? That was the answer he was afraid to know.

Then he realized God planned everything. Had He planned this moment with Claudia, or was Brock reading too much into this? He still sensed her reluctance to get close.

His gaze moved from Claudia's eyes to her soft lips that parted. Her eyes reflected his confusion. Something was changing and with that would come more change—a change he hadn't expected.

"I'm fine." Claudia breathed.

A muscle worked in his jaw. The desire to kiss her, to taste her sweet lips and hold her close was so overpowering, he felt his control slipping. He wanted Claudia.

In a soft voice, the reminder came—he was her boss. He wouldn't cross that line.

Stifling the urges he wanted to give into, he rose to his feet. Taking her hand, he helped her stand. When she pulled her hand from his, he wanted to grab onto the warmth that slipped away.

"I'll strap this to the toboggan." He turned to the tree and raked his fingers through his hair. Picking up his hat, he shook off the snow and pulled it over his head.

"I'll help you drag the tree," Claudia said softly.

"I can do it," he said. "Can you get the rope in the storage bin? That way we can tie it to the toboggan."

When they reached the house, they brushed snow from the tree's branches and laughed when it sprayed them. Because Brock's staff had left for the day, they carried the tree into the house themselves.

"Do you have a tree stand?" Claudia shed her coat and draped it over a kitchen chair. She took Brock's and hung it over the chair next to hers. In her eyes shone the doubt that he would have anything that would help them support the tree.

“Believe it or not.” Brock stepped to a closet beneath the staircase. “My mother took pity on me and sent me a crate of Christmas decorations the year I moved into this house. I wasn’t sure what to do with them because I hadn’t planned to spend Christmas here, so I shoved it into this closet.”

“Then, I think it’s time for these decorations to make their debut.” She helped him push the crate next to the Christmas tree. As she pulled the boxes of Christmas ornaments and lights out of the crate, Brock didn’t miss the emptiness in her eyes.

A wave of disappointment made his stomach drop.

*Please, Lord, let this be the Christmas that brings her back to You.*

## CHAPTER 26



“We need to make decorating the tree more festive.” Brock sifted through the boxes of ornaments that he’d never looked at when his mother had sent him the crate.

He opened a box where delicately shaped ornaments gleamed beneath the great room’s recessed lighting. He glanced at Claudia and saw she’d opened another box. She lifted a sparkling bulb from the packing. Her face shining, she fingered the bulb that shone in the rays that filtered through the skylights.

“Like make popcorn and cocoa?” she asked. He liked the light in her eyes.

“Except I don’t know how to make those, and Nellie has left for the day.” His mouth tipped with apology.

“Luckily, those are easy to make.” She moved past him to the kitchen.

He followed. He was curious to know what she’d do, and he wanted to be near her.

After searching the cupboards, Claudia found the popcorn and cocoa and placed the items on the counter.

“What can I do?” Brock watched her move around the kitchen as elegantly as if she were a ballerina.

“Get ready because this is going to be good.” Claudia poured milk into a pan. Looking over her shoulder at him, her smile spread wide.

He took a breath to still the wild beating in his chest. Never more than now had he wanted to cup her face and kiss her.

While the cocoa simmered, Claudia poured popcorn kernels into another pan. She shook it over the stove, then emptied the buttery morsels into a ceramic bowl.

“Ready?” She picked up a tray filled with the bowl of popcorn and two steaming mugs of cocoa.

“You’re finished?” he asked with raised brows.

“Naturally.” Her laugh was musical. “Popcorn and cocoa aren’t rocket science.” She strode past him into the great room.

He followed.

She set the tray on the coffee table, lifted a mug and handed it to him.

“Cheers!” Her smile brightened, she tapped her mug against his and took a sip, before setting it on the coffee table. “Now it’s time for the fun stuff.” She moved past him. With a hand on her hip, she surveyed the tree.

“First, we need to put that tree in the stand.” He moved next to her. Catching the sweet fragrance of her natural scent, he held his breath. Whatever he was feeling toward her, he liked. He dragged his gaze away from Claudia, her smooth skin and her soft, blonde hair.

He gripped the tree. Claudia sat cross-legged on the floor and guided the trunk into the stand. After making sure it was secure, he pulled out a string of lights and wrapped them around the tree. Claudia marveled at the ornaments she lifted from each box. The cocoa mugs were emptied and the popcorn half eaten when they stood back to admire the great room’s transformation.

Where had his mother found so many unique ornaments? Were some of them family heirlooms? She hadn’t said.

Claudia found wreaths and artificial boughs in another box. She hung a large wreath on the entrance door, then

wrapped the boughs and lights along the stairs' banisters that led to the galleries.

"I never imagined the house could look this good." Brock dropped his gaze to Claudia, whose slight smile warmed his heart.

"It's amazing what a few lights and Christmas ornaments can do." Claudia looked as impressed as he felt.

"I'd say it's more than that." The stirring in his chest was a feeling that made him want to be closer to Claudia. What would it be like to look into those blue eyes for the rest of his life?

The thought caught him off guard, but he didn't reject it. He welcomed it. He'd been a snowboarder who thought of nothing but flying down dangerous mountainsides. Now the stirring within him brought desires he hadn't known existed. He wanted to be close to someone. To spend the rest of his life with someone.

To marry someone.

He wanted that person to be Claudia. Looking at her, he saw her beauty, but the person on the inside had a beauty that shone and drew him closer.

"Claudia," he whispered raggedly, relieved to see the woman who had stood by his side when he'd walked in darkness. Turning to her, he took her hand and pulled her close.

Her soft gasp made it hard for him to breathe. Her large eyes filled with wonder and something else.

His heart beat wildly in his chest. There was so much he wanted to do, but she was his employee.

He wanted her trust.

Her pale face made his jaw clench. When she slipped her hand from his and stepped back, heat rose in his throat. What had he done?

"I'll put these boxes away." Turning, she stooped and stacked the boxes into the crate.

“Claudia.” He helped her stack the boxes but watched her. “I never meant—”

“Please don’t say anything,” she rasped.

“I have to say something.” His heart beat dully. He had been thinking only of himself.

Everything between them seemed to be moving in one direction. But she was healing from the assault. Sometimes the pain in her eyes was so deep, he wasn’t sure she could heal, but he’d give her as long as it took. Never more than now did he realize that she was the woman who fit perfectly in his life.

Had he ruined a future for them?

*Now what, Lord?*

Her phone rang, and she glanced at the screen. “One of the California ministries is calling.” She turned away.

“I should join you on the call.” His voice made her still.

“You’re right.” Her smile was soft, but her eyes said something else.

“Let’s go into the office.”

They moved to Brock’s office and put the call on speakerphone. The director of the church was glad to have Brock come and talk to his congregation. The community was near a ski area. Most of the members skied and snowboarded. Brock would fit right in.

Claudia turned on the computer and opened Brock’s calendar. He stood behind her. He reviewed the bookings but couldn’t get out of his mind what it was like to be this close to Claudia. Any chance he had to be close to her, he valued.

They talked to the director about the dates they’d schedule for Brock’s speech, then they talked about the ski season. Brock’s heart rose when the director said the ski area was expecting a record snowfall that year.

After the conference call, Claudia fixed them a late lunch that she picked at. Brock wanted to talk to her about what he was feeling toward her but wasn’t sure how to approach the

subject. He was her boss. She'd already had a conflict with a previous boss—the senator. He was scheduled to record a podcast in thirty minutes. Discussing feelings wasn't something he could squeeze in between lunch and recording a podcast.

*I have to tell her, Lord, but when?*

He was disappointed when silence settled over him. He wanted an answer, but he knew—now was not the time to share what he felt for Claudia. As hard as it was, he kept his feelings to himself.

After lunch, he went to his studio where he recorded his conversation with a Christian snowboarder and his wife. Claudia worked with him to get the connection, then marked the spots where the recording engineer would later insert sponsorships for companies whose equipment Brock had approved.

When they finished, they uploaded the episode to the engineering company that would transmit it to the podcast sites. Though Brock could have engineered the podcast himself, he let Claudia help him. He liked having her work at his side.

It was late when they stepped out of the studio and went to the kitchen, where Nellie had left a dinner of stuffed chicken, wild rice and sauteed vegetables in the refrigerator. On the counter, she'd left a note with instructions for heating the meal.

While they ate, Brock told Claudia about the sponsorship event Uma had scheduled for him in Santa Fe, New Mexico, that weekend. A Christian organization in the area had asked him to attend their event the next night.

Claudia said little and ate even less.

“There's something about this event that bothers you.” Brock set down his fork. He wondered at the concern knitted in Claudia's brow.

“What?” Her eyes came up and her lips parted. “No, it's fine. It's a great opportunity.”



“But what?” He studied her blue gaze that shifted away.

“I’m thinking about my purpose here.”

“If it’s because of what happened this afternoon, I apologize,” he said, alarmed. Why had he let his feelings get away from him? He didn’t want a careless moment to push away the woman he wanted in his life.

When he’d first hired Claudia, he knew that after he regained his sight, she’d leave. His sight had been restored, but he still needed her. She had agreed to stay until it was time for her to accept another offer. He didn’t want to accept that possibility.

“It isn’t that.” She shook her head slowly.

“If you think you’re not needed, you’re wrong.” He kept his voice steady. “You’re needed now more than ever.”

“What I do anyone can do.” She took a breath.

He was afraid to breathe. What was she about to tell him?

“I had told you the governor was considering me as his chief of staff,” she said, the words made his heart beat heavily. “Today, his office emailed me and offered me the position.” She lifted her gaze to his. The glistening in her eyes made them jewel-like.

He swallowed hard. Every argument he could give her to reject the governor’s offer filled his mind, but he remained quiet. First, he’d let her speak.

“It’s an opportunity for me to get back into the political scene—meet people the way I did before ...” She dropped her gaze.

The haunted look in her eyes made him want to remind her that she had left the political scene. Why did she think it was time to return?

*What’s Your plan, Lord?*

“Claudia, I can promise you that what happened between us this afternoon will never happen again.” He forced a calmness into his voice. The feelings he had for Claudia came

flooding back along with hot shame. He knew she wasn't ready to return what he felt toward her. Would what he'd done prevent her from ever having feelings for anyone, and not just him?

"It's more than that," she whispered hoarsely. Looking at him, he saw in her eyes the wealth of emotions he hadn't expected.

"Tell me."

"If you need help with your scheduling and the podcasts, I can set up interviews. I have connections. I can find the right person to help you with that." Her gaze shifted, indicating she wouldn't explain her reason for leaving.

He didn't need a reason. Their feelings for each other weren't that far apart. The only difference was that she had been hurt. That pain had destroyed her ability to trust. What he had done had severed any hope that she would get past the pain and move forward. He'd proved that he couldn't be trusted either—the last thing he wanted.

"I'm sure Uma can help with any final decision-making," she said.

"Uma and I don't always agree when it comes to hiring someone." He laughed dryly.

"She has people experience," she said. "She'll give you good advice. My working for you was only supposed to be temporary anyway."

"Sometimes, plans change," he said. When he saw the look in her eyes, he wished he hadn't said anything.

He was still learning about his relationship with God, but he knew that God should be involved with his decisions. Didn't he pray about every invitation he received? That was something that annoyed Uma. She had a gut instinct—he should trust what she felt. She had told him Claudia was the wrong person for his assistant, but he knew it was because of her physical appearance—she wore a wig, and she wasn't slim.

When Brock met Claudia, he couldn't see her, but he knew she was the right choice. He had thought he'd sensed God in her spirit, but now he understood. Though she still didn't trust God, He remained at her side, silent and ready. God was still with her.

"Did the governor tell you when he wanted you to start working for him?" Brock asked.

"As soon as possible." Her mouth curved sadly.

That was a blow below the belt.

"I don't want to stand in your way." Stretching his legs out, he leaned back in his chair. "Feel free to leave when you're ready. If you want a letter of recommendation ..."

"That would be nice. Thanks," she said. "If you want me to help you with the interviews ..."

"Because Uma helped me before, I'll ask her to help me again," he said, knowing his manager would be thrilled when he asked—and she'd be disappointed when she learned he'd make the final decision.

"Then I'll pack tonight and leave in the morning." She moved her chair away from the table.

Realization hit him high in the throat. He wanted to be with her. Her birthday was Christmas Day. He had thought they'd spend that day together. He had assumed that without saying anything to her.

She was leaving.

"Where will you go?" He hadn't meant to ask, but he wanted to make sure she would be safe. "Where will you stay?"

"The governor's office manages apartments near the capitol," she said. "Because I sublet my apartment, I'll stay there until the sublease expires. I'll clear the table. Are you ready for dessert?" She rose and picked up their plates.

"Not now." He picked up the serving dishes and followed her into the kitchen, where she stowed the leftovers in the refrigerator.

In silence, they cleaned the kitchen before she awkwardly said she'd start packing. She hesitated as if wanting to say more. There was plenty he wanted to say, but without God's leading, he knew he'd make everything worse.

What could be worse than Claudia leaving? He snorted softly. When he'd lost his sight, he had thought that was the worst thing imaginable. Then he met Claudia. As he grew closer to her, he had thought he'd always be with her.

Had that thought been selfish? She was still recovering from a harrowing ordeal. She didn't need any interference from him. When he wanted to take the situation into his own hands, he loosened his grip on his own urges. Never had he struggled with such desire.

Never had he wanted to be with a woman the way he wanted to be with Claudia.

*Lead me, Lord. You've given me an opportunity to spread Your Word. I let Claudia distract me. Please forgive me. Yes, I want to be with her, but she needs You, not me. Whatever You have in store, I know it's Your best. In You, I trust.*

## CHAPTER 27



*I*t was snowing when Claudia left the governor's office where she had worked for the past year. She climbed into the back seat of the limo the governor provided for her as his chief of staff and relished the warmth and the quiet.

Snow fell softly against the windows reminding her when Brock had told her being blind had taught him how to hear the snow fall. She listened. Could she hear it falling? She shook her head. She couldn't hear something that gentle, but she could still remember how she felt when Brock told her what he could hear. And she could still remember what it was like to be with him.

Where was he now? What was he doing?

She closed her eyes. She had left Brock to pursue her lifetime dream. She'd worked for the governor for a year. Most of the time she was too busy to think about the direction her life should take. It was in the quiet moments—like now—when she wondered if leaving Brock had been the right choice.

When she started working for the governor, she'd been shocked and dismayed to meet the senator's son, Hiram, at a fundraiser. When he nervously smiled at her, she knew God was giving her a chance to heal, and so she approached him.

How many people there knew of her history with the senator and his son? Her stomach tightened knowing within the hour the internet would show pictures of her and Hiram talking.

As painful as it was, she had to put this part of her life behind her. She wanted to heal. She wanted to be whole again.

“I wanted to tell you how sorry I am about what happened.” Hiram spoke before she had a chance. He kept his voice low.

Claudia was too stunned to speak but kept her features schooled.

“As you know, during the trial other women came forward to testify about what my father had done to them,” he said. “But because they didn’t want the media attention, they remained anonymous.”

“My attorneys told me,” Claudia said. That she remained calm could only be by the grace of God.

“I feel partly to blame because I knew how my father treated women,” Hiram said. “I saw how he treated my mother. I should’ve said something, but he was my father. I kept thinking that the man I loved couldn’t be all bad. Now I pray that God works all things for good.”

“You can rest assured He does.” Claudia marveled at the peace flowing through her.

The governor approached her to introduce her to one of his donors. When Claudia finished talking to them, she saw that Hiram had left. As she fell into conversation with the other guests, she could only marvel at God’s perfect plan for her life. That Hiram had apologized was something she’d never expected. What else did God have planned for her?

The miracle was that no one posted pictures of her and Hiram talking at the fundraiser. Peace filled her. God was truly miraculous.

As the limousine drove down the street, Claudia looked out the window and watched the traffic creep through the snow. Horns honked. Pedestrians rushed down the sidewalk or slipped into shops or restaurants. A group of carolers stood on the corner and sang while greeting the throngs that passed them.

She stared at the Christmas decorations arching over the street. The store windows were filled with Christmas trees, wreaths and ornaments. Displays showed Santa and his elves making toys and packing his sleigh while the reindeer pawed the ground. How could it be Christmas already? She hadn't decorated her apartment for the holiday, and she wasn't sure she would. She had planned to spend the day with friends who also wanted to celebrate her birthday.

How would Brock spend the day? She tried not to follow his career but would catch snippets of his extreme sports events on the internet. Whenever he was interviewed, he always took the opportunity to discuss his faith. Sponsors had his smiling face featured in the ads for their products.

Occasionally she received emails from churches announcing Brock as their guest speaker.

How many times had she wanted to go? How many times had she talked herself out of it? She was on the career path she wanted. She was working with a governor who would campaign to be the next senator. After the holidays, she'd resign her position as chief of staff and run his campaign.

When she left Aspen and returned to Denver, she knew she could no longer hide from God. She was glad to find a church that led her on the path to healing.

Now, God was working in her life. Her hair had grown back, and she'd lost some weight. She was surprised when men showed interest in her, but she wasn't interested in dating.

She tried to convince herself that she didn't need to date, that her career was enough, but if that were true, why couldn't she get Brock out of her mind?

During the past year, she had called Brock once to let him know she was settled in her apartment and liked her job. Her heart floated when she heard his voice. She closed her eyes. How she wanted to tell him what she felt for him, but the hesitancy in her heart made her keep the conversation simple. They talked about her job and his travels.

When she disconnected the call, she was shaking. She couldn't call him again. Talking to him unearthed emotions she struggled to control and left her confused. God wasn't a god of confusion. He would show her what He wanted for her. She would give Him time.

She had kept in touch with Avery, Rider's girlfriend. Shortly after last Christmas, Avery told her Rider had moved out of their trailer. Claudia's heart broke to learn they had gone their separate ways and prayed for God's healing in their lives and for Lila, who loved her daddy.

The next time Avery called, she told Claudia that Brock had invited her and Rider to attend Pastor Chuck's church. Rider didn't want to go, but Avery did and brought Lila with her. Soon after, Rider changed his mind about attending church and decided to go.

Claudia closed her eyes and thanked God for answered prayer. She knew Brock would be glad. The next time Avery called, she told Claudia that she and Rider were back together and were planning their wedding.

"I'm so happy for you. Be sure to invite me to the wedding," Claudia had said jokingly, before realizing that if she attended, she would see Brock.

Her stomach dropped. What would it be like to see him again? Avery would tell Brock if she were coming. What would he think? What if he were seeing someone else? She hoped Avery would tell her so she would be prepared.

Why was she even worried? With the governor's schedule filling, she may not have time to go.

But she'd want to go. She'd want to see her friends get married.

She'd also kept in touch with Uma. When the manager learned she had quit working for Brock, she'd called her and offered her a job.

"Why would you do that?" Claudia asked, confused. "You're the one who didn't want Brock to hire me."



“Let’s face it. You’ve been through a lot,” Uma said, making Claudia wonder how much the manager knew about her past. Her lawsuit against the senator was supposed to be sealed, but Washington, D.C., was filled with leakers. It would be easy to find out what had happened to her. “I didn’t think you were up to the job. You surprised me. You’re a go-getter. The type I need to help me build and maintain my clientele.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, but I have to decline,” she said.

“Why?” Uma asked. Movement sounded through the phone as if she had sat up straight. “I’d pay you more than what you’re making at the governor’s office.”

“I appreciate that, but this is the career I’ve always wanted,” Claudia said and thanked her. “If I change my mind I’ll let you know.”

“Don’t bother,” Uma said. “I’ll keep in touch. I want to make sure I’m there when you change your mind before you work for someone else. You’re wasted on politics. You belong in entertainment.”

“I don’t agree, but I’ll keep that in mind,” Claudia said. “I never expected you to like me, let alone want to hire me.”

“So I was wrong. I’ll be in touch,” Uma said, unaffected by Claudia’s comment, then took another call.

The limo slowed to a stop in front of Claudia’s apartment building. Claudia told the driver not to get out. She didn’t want him to stand in the snow.

She climbed out of the limo and raced through the snowflakes and into her building. In the lobby, she collected her mail and rode the elevator to the top floor, where her apartment had a panoramic view of the twinkling city lights.

She stepped inside and basked in the warmth. Setting her mail, her purse and laptop on the hall table, she turned on the music and hung her coat in the closet before rushing to her bedroom to slip out of the suit that had become her work uniform.

Dressed in sweats, she picked up her mail and took it to the kitchen, where she poured herself a glass of mineral water. Sitting at the breakfast counter, she flipped through her mail and sipped her water. She stopped when she saw the elegantly addressed invitation. She glanced at the return address. It was the wedding invitation from Avery.

The lift in her chest knowing that Avery and Rider would marry was followed by a knot twisting in her stomach—if she went to the wedding, she'd see Brock. Tall and powerfully built, he'd be hard to miss. Because he was Rider's best friend, he would be the best man.

If she went, she'd watch Brock during the entire ceremony.

How hard would it be to attend the wedding and have to see Brock again? She'd call Avery and tell her she couldn't make it.

That would be taking the coward's way out. Avery was her friend. She couldn't decline the invitation because of her fears.

*Oh, Lord, give me strength. I know I should attend, but is seeing Brock worth the pain?*

She'd eat dinner first, then decide, but as she heated a bowl of chili in the microwave and sprinkled some cheese onto the boiling mixture, she knew what her answer should be. She dialed Avery's number.

"It's so good to hear from you." Avery sounded breathless. Was she chasing after Lila?

Claudia's throat dried. What would it be like chasing after a little one who was ready to set the world on fire?

The thought made her freeze. She would've liked to have had a family. Instead, she'd focused on her career. There was only one man she wanted to date—Brock Amwell—but when they had been working together, she'd been too damaged to consider a relationship. Besides, he was her boss. She wouldn't cross that line.

"I had to call," Claudia said and ignored the confusing thoughts about her feelings for Brock. She pushed away the bowl of half-eaten chili. She'd finish it later, though the

thought of eating cold chili made her grimace. “I just received your invitation. Congratulations!”

“I hope you’re calling because you plan to attend,” Avery said tentatively.

“Yes, of course,” Claudia said quickly, then closed her eyes. That hadn’t been her intention. Now what did she do? “Do you want me to come early? Do you need help with anything?” She tightened her jaw. She was digging herself in deeper.

“I have plenty of help, but if you want to come early, it would be great to see you again,” Avery said.

“I’ll see what I can work out,” Claudia said. “The governor’s campaign is heating up, but things slow down during the holidays.”

They talked a few minutes longer before Claudia heard a loud crash, and Avery said she had to catch Lila before she destroyed the trailer.

Claudia stared at the congealed bowl of chili. She was going to see Brock again. She went cold, then hot. What would that be like? She thought of his soft brown hair and his gray eyes filled with compassion.

Why was she afraid to see a man who had been nothing but kind to her?

It was because of how they left the relationship. There was no denying their attraction to each other, but he’d been her boss. Though Brock would never treat her the way the senator had, she felt shame that the feelings she had for Brock were more than she should have for her boss.

When the governor offered her a job, she took that as a sign. She had wanted a career in politics. God was giving her that chance.

Wasn’t He?

Her phone rang. She reached for it glad to have a break in these thoughts running through her mind. When she glanced at

the screen, she froze, then pressed the speaker phone. “Hello, Brock.”

## CHAPTER 28



Air seeped from Brock's lungs. It had been too long since he'd heard that musical tone. How many times had he wanted to pick up the phone and call Claudia just because he ached to hear her voice? Thankfully, God had given him the strength to turn away and throw himself into his work and his ministry.

Had it been worth it?

He closed his eyes. Every day away from Claudia had been empty.

"Hello, Claudia." His voice was low. He snorted softly. So much for concealing his emotions. "How are you?"

He wanted to say more. Namely, he wanted to know why she hadn't kept in touch, but then why hadn't he kept in touch with her? His excuse was that he knew working for the governor was the opportunity she'd been seeking. Secretly he hoped she would decide that wasn't what she'd wanted after all.

"I'm fine. I guess you talked to Avery." Her voice was soft and gentle.

How he'd missed that sweet sound along with everything else about her. His memory of her laugh filled him with joy.

"Yes, she said you planned to attend the wedding," he said. "I'm looking forward to seeing you again. It looks like you've been busy arranging the governor's schedule."

“He does keep me busy.” Her laugh made him close his eyes and savor the sound. “And I see you’ve been traveling a lot for your competitions and your ministry.”

His mouth tipped. He liked knowing that she was following his career.

“I’d like to see you again, Claudia,” he said. “Can you stay an extra day?”

“Yes,” she said simply.

Lifting his gaze to the heavens, he breathed a thank you.

“The rehearsal dinner is Friday night. Would you be my date for the evening?” The calmness in his voice covered the thrashing in his chest.

“Yes,” she said. Did that mean she wasn’t seeing anyone? The warmth in her voice brought back the memories of when he held her close, felt the softness of her hair and inhaled her sweet scent.

He had seen pictures of her on the internet so he knew her hair was longer.

“Where will you stay?” he asked.

“At the Deauville on Main Street,” she said.

“The rehearsal starts at five-thirty so how about I pick you up at five?” Suddenly he felt nervous as if he’d never asked anyone for a date. That was almost true.

“I’ll be ready,” she said.

The conversation turned to her job with the governor, then his latest competitions and his ministry. After Claudia left, Uma’s staff had taken over his scheduling. He had expected Uma to ignore the ministry requests, but she had been fair and devoted equal time to the ministry and the sponsors. Brock still kept track of the competitions. He loved to travel and meet people. Those were the opportunities for him to share God’s Word.

No matter where he went, he still thought of Claudia. He missed her but prayed she was doing what she loved.

Now God was bringing them together again.

Where did they go from here?



CLAUDIA STARED at her reflection in the hotel mirror. How she had changed since she'd last seen Brock.

Her hair now fell in a sleek bob. Though she hadn't lost all the weight she'd gained, she was slimmer. For the rehearsal, she wore a chiffon pantsuit with embellished shoulders and a string of pearls. She wanted to look nice though she knew most of the wedding party would dress casually.

When she'd arrived at the hotel, she'd received a call from the governor. When the first thing he said to her was not to worry, she was worried. What was he about to tell her?

He took a deep breath, then he told her someone had filed a complaint against him, but that he could easily prove the allegations were false. His legal team had handled everything.

The discomfort Claudia felt when she hung up made her throat fill. The governor had been nothing but kind to her. Surely the accusations were wrong.

At five o'clock, her phone rang. Her old insecurities flooded back when she saw Brock's name flash on the screen. She shouldn't be nervous. Brock was her friend. She was chief of staff for the governor. She managed a large staff to make sure that every speech and every event reflected well for the governor. She shouldn't be worried about what Brock thought about her. He respected her.

If she were honest, she also left Brock because her and Brock's relationship was changing. He had been her boss. She knew he'd never do to her what the senator had done, but the pain of the assault had scarred her. She was healing, but that took time.

She still struggled with the hurt that God had allowed the attack to happen. She wanted a relationship with God. She couldn't let unforgiveness steal the love God had for her.

Her feelings for Brock confused her, too. God was doing great things in his life. She didn't want her battle with her past to interfere with what God had in store for Brock.

So she left.

Now she was back.

Brock had invited her to be his date for the rehearsal dinner. That had to mean something.

Did it mean more than she wanted?

All her life she'd known what she wanted. Now she had it. Would she continue on this path? If so, it would be without Brock. He had his career and ministry. If the governor won the senatorial election, she would move to Washington, D.C., the place that still held bad memories. Could she trust God to heal her from that nightmare?

If she did move to Washington, D.C., it would be years before she returned to Colorado—and it would be years before she saw Brock. She swallowed. She may never see him again.

The phone rang again. She picked it up and headed for the closet to get her coat.

"Hello, Brock." She made her voice light.

"Hello." There was so much feeling in his voice, she closed her eyes against the emotion filling her heart. "I'm waiting in the lobby."

"I'll be right down."

"I can't wait." His voice was husky.

Her pulse rocketed. She couldn't wait either.

The elevator ride to the lobby seemed to take forever, with people getting off and on each floor. She was alone when the elevators opened on the main floor.

Brock sat in a winged chair by the fireplace. As she stepped out of the elevator, Brock's gaze shifted to her. The reflection in his eyes said he liked the way she looked.



Never taking his eyes off her, he rose from the chair. She strode toward him and extended her hand but couldn't ignore his recently cut hair that covered his head in tousled curls. His eyes shone in his face tanned from his extreme sports competitions. He wore a turtleneck, khakis and a blazer that covered his broad shoulders.

Brock took her hand, pulled her close and kissed her cheek.

"You look wonderful," he said with that quirky smile that made her heart tumble inside her chest.

"You look great, too." She tried to sound professional but couldn't ignore the heat flooding her cheeks. So much for pretending to be a sophisticated, career-oriented woman.

"My car's out front." He nodded toward the hotel entrance.

He didn't seem to want to release her hand, but when he did, he touched a hand to her waist. The gentleness was a reminder of last year and what she was starting to feel for this man.

It also reminded her of her decision to leave Aspen. She hadn't been ready for a relationship with Brock or any man. Her relationship with God needed healing. She had a chance to pursue a career in politics.

Her decision had been the right one. She had learned to let God love her, she had learned to forgive, and she had a career in politics.

Now for the third question. Was she ready for a relationship? Brock's feelings for her were evident. Could she be honest with herself and express what she felt toward him?

"How's everyone?" Claudia didn't know why she asked that question.

She talked to Avery a couple of times a week. She spoke with other friends, including Pastor Chuck and his wife, and Uma at least once a week. Uma was a wealth of information. She knew everything about everyone—including people Claudia didn't know, though she knew most were celebrities.

“Rider and Avery are excited about the wedding.” Brock flashed her that tantalizing grin before putting the SUV into gear and merging into the Aspen traffic that crowded the tiny town on a Friday night. “Uma’s been traveling a lot to her offices in New York and California but flew into town for the wedding.”

Walking into the church was like old home week. Everyone descended upon her and was filled with questions about her new life and job. Claudia should’ve been thrilled. Instead, she remembered how much she’d loved living in Aspen and working for Brock.

She caught a glimpse of him standing back with a smile on his face and letting her have her moment. When she had worked for him, he was the one everyone surrounded.

Soon the wedding party gathered in their places for the rehearsal and followed Pastor Chuck’s instructions. Claudia’s heart melted when she watched Brock stand next to Rider. He lifted his gaze to hers, his smile slight, but it was the wealth of emotions in his eyes that startled her. She felt the surprised glances of several friends who seemed to notice what passed between her and Brock, but she watched the wedding party. This day was for Avery, Rider and their daughter, Lila. She wouldn’t let anyone else’s assumptions interfere with what she wanted for her friends.

Lila understood her important job as a flower girl and sprinkled imaginary rose petals along the runner as she led the bride down the aisle. Following the rehearsal, the wedding party drove through the gently falling snow to a restaurant on Main Street. Brock never left Claudia’s side as she happily greeted old friends.

After dinner, a band set up on the dais and played dance tunes. Several in the wedding party moved to the dance floor.

“Would you like to dance?” Brock’s voice was warm against her ear.

“All right.” She kept her voice low so it wouldn’t crack.

Brock's fingers firmed around hers as he drew her to her feet. When they reached the dance floor, he touched a hand to her waist. She melted beneath his touch. Why did being with Brock have to stir these sensations in her heart? They hadn't seen each other in a year, yet they were picking up where they left off.

She ached knowing that in two days she'd drive back to Denver. These feelings for Brock felt so right. She had the job she wanted and the life she wanted. She wasn't ready to walk away.

*Lord, You're not being fair.*

Soon the crowd thinned as one-by-one guests bid each other good night.

"Sorry, I didn't take you back to the hotel earlier." Brock helped her with her coat. "I selfishly wanted to spend more time with you."

"It's been nice." She looked into his eyes.

They said little as Brock drove her back to the hotel. Several times Claudia tried to start a conversation about what was next for Brock with his ministry and sponsorships, but soon the discussions slipped into silence.

At the hotel, Brock walked her to the elevator and kissed her cheek. He looked disappointed when she stepped into the elevator. He was still standing by the elevator doors when they slid closed.

Claudia leaned her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. Never had she felt awkward around Brock, but tonight the possibilities of what could happen between them were blaring like a marching band.

How could there be a future with Brock? Their worlds were far apart.

She should have been grateful, but instead, she felt empty. God was giving her what she wanted—a career in politics. Why did it seem all wrong?

## CHAPTER 29



*B*rock parked his SUV in his garage but didn't get out. Several times that evening he had a chance to tell Claudia about what he felt for her. His feelings for her were stronger than before.

She talked about her work with the governor and the senatorial campaign. The more she talked, the more he knew—she still had dreams of a political career. He wouldn't stand in her way. He remembered the night she had told him she thought she had lost her dream. Now he saw that God had restored it along with a strong heart for Him.

He climbed out of the SUV and walked into his empty house. He moved into the great room where the towering tree twinkled with lights. The fresh scent of pine filled the room. Memories of how he and Claudia had chopped a Christmas tree, brought it back to the house and decorated it filled his mind. He had just regained his sight. That he could see Claudia was the greatest gift of all.

This year he'd taken Rider, Avery and Lila to the Christmas tree farm, where he and Rider chopped down a tree for himself and them. When Lila wasn't buzzing through the snow, she sat in Avery's lap and watched in amazement as the trees tumbled to the ground.

Brock looked at his Christmas tree now. The lights twinkled and the ornaments glowed. Beneath the tree sat a small box tagged with Claudia's name.

He hadn't bought what he wanted to give her—a ring. Instead, he'd bought a sapphire pendant that matched the deep blue of her eyes. He had the necklace engraved with *More than words*.

Words would never be enough to express what he felt toward her.

When he first bought his home, he had planned to turn it into a party house but wasn't sure why. He'd never enjoyed parties. When he'd been invited to parties, he was the last to arrive and the first to leave. Because he traveled all over the world with his competitions, he was too busy to attend parties.

God knew what He was doing. He had protected Brock from a lifestyle that could've been a downward spiral that he had seen so many of his friends take.

It wasn't until he lost his sight and committed his life to Christ that he saw the real purpose of the house—to raise a family. To raise a family, he needed a wife, and he wasn't dating anyone. He'd never met anyone he wanted to date—until Claudia. But she had a dream to pursue.

He let her go.

Now he didn't know why he was still living in this house. He didn't need it. A house was for a family, which he didn't have. He didn't want a house, he wanted a home.

*Is that not Your plan for me?*

He exhaled roughly. He didn't want to know the answer to that question.

His phone rang. His pulse leaped and he tried to push away the hope that Claudia was calling. Pulling the phone from his pocket, he glanced at the screen. Uma. He stifled his disappointment.

“Hey, Uma.” He pressed the speaker phone icon and set the phone on the hall table, then shed his coat and hung it in the closet. He walked past the Christmas tree that dazzled with its blinking lights and glowing ornaments. He flicked a switch. The room fell into darkness. Picking up his phone, he climbed the stairs to his room.

“Hey, I finally got that Swiss company to agree on a contract that pays more than we discussed. I’m emailing it to you now,” she said.

“I want to sell my house,” he said.

“What?” Uma hesitated, which had to be a first for her.

“I don’t need a house.” He stepped into his bedroom and draped his blazer over the hanger on the butler chair. “I could use a new set of luggage.”

“I already bought you your Christmas gift. Why do you want to sell your house?”

“Because I’m never here. A house is for a family. I’m sure there’s a family somewhere that could make better use of this place than I do.”

“Not everyone who owns a house has a family,” she said. “Look at me.”

Brock remained silent. Uma lived in a mansion on Red Mountain with the other billionaires, many of whom were single. Uma would never marry.

Before, he never thought about living in a mansion alone—because he was never here. Now he knew, this wasn’t what he wanted.

“Can you call one of your Realtor friends and tell them I want to sell this place?” he asked.

“I can, but maybe you should sleep on this and see how you feel in the morning,” Uma said. The compassion in her voice struck Brock. For once she wasn’t thinking about money—she was thinking about him. Maybe there was more to Uma than he realized.

“Fine,” he said, though he knew he wouldn’t change his mind.

Brock went to his office, opened the email Uma had sent him and scanned the contract. They had given him everything Uma had requested. He stared at the payout—more than he’d ever thought he’d make in a lifetime, let alone with one sponsor.

“I’ll stop by tomorrow before the wedding and get your signature,” Uma said. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Don’t worry, I’m fine.” He gave a dry laugh. “I realized I don’t need a house because I’m rarely in Aspen anymore.”

“We’ll talk about that tomorrow,” Uma said. She talked a little longer, making Brock wonder if she was still worried about him. After reassuring her he was fine, she wished him a good night.

That was a first. Uma wasn’t into formalities.

Brock got ready for bed, but he still wasn’t tired. He climbed into bed and propped pillows behind his back. With his Bible open, he started to read. He was relieved at the peace filling him. Selling his house had to be the right decision.



BROCK’S MORNING meeting was quick but tense as Uma explained the contract to him, then listed a litany of reasons why he shouldn’t sell his house. Brock said little, not because he agreed, but because he couldn’t get his mind off Claudia.

Uma’s bigger surprise was when she asked him about salvation. In the quiet of his home, he shared with her the scriptures that explained the need for repentance and salvation through Christ. Together they prayed as she confessed her faith and thanked God for her salvation. When Uma left his home a few minutes later, there was a softness in her brown eyes that were usually hard and brittle.

Brock’s mind filled with thoughts of Uma and his concern for Claudia as he dressed in the tux he’d wear for Rider’s wedding. Stopping at the Christmas tree, he picked up the gift he’d bought for Claudia. He had wanted to invite her to spend Christmas with him, but she had planned to be in Washington, D.C., that week.

He slipped on an overcoat and headed for the door when his phone rang—Claudia’s ringtone. His heart lifted, then dropped. Last night, he had told her he’d pick her up. There

was no reason for her to call him unless she didn't want him to pick her up.

"I have a conference call with the governor regarding the campaign." Her voice held sadness. "Please tell Rider and Avery how sorry I am. I'll come as soon as I can."

Brock almost wished he weren't Rider's best man. He'd have gone to the hotel and waited for her. Now he didn't have to worry about what she'd think when he gave her the Christmas gift. He may not have that chance.

He was at the church and seating guests when Claudia rushed into the sanctuary. His blood warmed when she looked around. She was breathtaking in a maroon dress that swirled above her ankles. Her hair fell in soft waves to her shoulders. Most everyone had been seated. The guitarist and the keyboardist at the front of the church played softly. When Claudia's gaze met Brock's, her eyes shone like jewels. She should be wearing the sapphire pendant he'd bought for her.

He seated the guests, then strode toward her.

"How was your conference call?" he asked, his voice low.

"It's complicated." She gave him an apologetic smile.

His mouth tipped slightly. He knew her meaning. She had planned to stay an extra day after the wedding. Would she leave sooner? The ache in his chest was a reminder of how much he'd miss her, though he didn't know why. There was nothing between them. They hadn't seen each other in a year. In a couple of days, he'd be on his way to Canada for a competition. If Rider and Avery hadn't planned a wedding, how much time would've passed before he saw Claudia again?

He showed her to her seat, then joined Rider and the groomsmen in front of the altar. With his hands clasped, he watched the bridesmaids make their carefully rehearsed procession down the aisle followed by Lila, who smiled as she dropped rose petals.

Avery made a beautiful bride with her glowing smile and simple dress.



What would Claudia look like as a bride? Brock shifted his gaze to where she sat. His heart beat hard and fast.

She wasn't sitting in the sanctuary.

## CHAPTER 30



Claudia felt her phone vibrate in her purse. She tightened her jaw. She had come to Aspen to watch her friends marry. She didn't want to spend the entire ceremony in her car talking to the governor about a past indiscretion the media had uncovered. She had agreed to work for the governor because of his impeccable record and his dedication to his family.

She swallowed hard as the image of the smirking senator approaching her in the hallway of the senate building loomed in her mind. Miserable and aching, she tried to hold back the tears that she knew this young woman would have wept every night as she tried to block the image of someone older and more powerful robbing her of her dreams and her dignity.

After Claudia's conversation with the governor this morning, she searched the internet to learn more about the young woman. A strong Christian, she had worked for the governor when he was president of a school board. Because of the governor's integrity and support for women's issues, her accusations were doubted. A bungled investigation followed by a settlement had silenced the woman.

Until a reporter digging through old newspaper accounts learned of the indiscretion and approached the governor for a statement.

Claudia's stomach tensed so hard she felt sick. If the governor were innocent, why had he hired a publicity firm? When she asked the governor that question, he casually said he was doing what all public officials do. Someone was attacking

his character. He was protecting his image, which was his right.

Was he innocent? There was no proof that he'd done anything wrong. It was this woman's word against the governor's, except that after the assault, she'd gone to the hospital. The governor's DNA was on file.

Claudia touched her fingers to her temple. Her head felt ready to explode.

*What should I do, Lord? This was my dream job, but I can't work for someone who harmed someone else. If I leave and then learn the governor told the truth, will I have missed an opportunity You gave me?*

*Did You give me this opportunity?*

Claudia sat in her car and shook. Closing her eyes, she prayed for wisdom. The peace God gave her confirmed what she always knew.

*For I know the plans I have for you plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

He loved her and would give her His best. Claudia felt relief knowing He would lead her in the right direction.



WHEN THE CEREMONY ENDED, Brock watched the bride and groom stroll down the aisle amid cheers and applause and joyous music. He should've been happy for Rider and Avery, but he couldn't get Claudia out of his mind. The place where she sat remained empty. He moved to the aisle where the smiling maid of honor looped her arm through his. His smile pasted in place, he escorted her down the aisle.

Conversations filled the church as guests basked in the joy of the ceremony.

Brock's heart hammered as he looked around for Claudia. She wasn't there.

Pastor Chuck ushered Brock and the maid of honor into his office so they could witness the marriage certificate. Brock didn't want to be impatient, but he needed to find Claudia.

She had said there was a problem at the governor's office. When he asked about it, she said it was complicated. What did that mean? What if she had to return to Denver?

In the pastor's office, he joked and laughed with the others. He wouldn't let his problem ruin this day for his best friends. These were the moments that God allowed so Brock would learn to trust Him.

He had waited a year to see Claudia again knowing that maybe they weren't meant to be together. Every time that thought rose inside him, he pushed it away. He didn't want to believe that, but all the signs were there. A future with Claudia seemed less likely every day. Was his faith strong enough to accept that?

He tightened his jaw. He had to do what was right for himself and Claudia.

When he stepped from the office, most of the guests had left for the reception. Outside, a limousine waited for the bride and groom.

"I'll see you there," Brock said when he helped Rider, Avery and Lila into the limo. He started to close the door when Rider caught it.

"Are you all right?" He gave Brock a questioning look.

"Fine." Brock grinned. He didn't want his friend to worry on the most special day of his life. "I'll see you at the reception," he said and closed the door.

He watched the limo drive away, then looked around the nearly empty parking lot. No one sat in the cars that remained.

Had Claudia left? Could she not have waited to tell him?

Snow fell around him, settled in his hair and stuck to his eyelashes.

"I didn't expect to see you still here," Pastor Chuck, his wife, Sally, and their children stepped from the church. Pastor

Chuck's gaze dropped to Brock's tuxedo now collecting snow on his shoulders and in the folds of his sleeves. "And standing in the snow."

Sally and her children greeted him before rushing to their SUV.

"I was just seeing Rider and Avery off," Brock said, then winced. Judging from the amount of snow that had collected on his tuxedo, they'd left a while ago.

"It will work out." Pastor Chuck stepped to him and laid a hand on Brock's shoulder.

Brock frowned, not sure what Pastor Chuck meant, but the knowing look in the other man's eyes said he knew—Brock was concerned about Claudia.

"I'll see you at the reception." Brock smiled wistfully. He had thought Claudia coming to the wedding had been an answer to prayer. Doubt was the predator that ridiculed him for presupposing God's intentions.

Claudia wanted a career in politics. By placing her in the governor's office, God's intentions for her were clear. The popular governor would be elected senator. Claudia would move to Washington, D.C.

He strode to his SUV. Today, he would think about Rider and Avery. There would be time to think—and pray—about God's plan for his future.

*Please let her be all right.*

He brushed the snow from his SUV, then climbed inside. He hadn't thought to check his phone for a message or a text from Claudia until he started the engine. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the voicemail icon circling on his phone's screen.

*Thank you.*

He pressed play on the dashboard's display screen.

"Brock. Hi." Claudia's sweet voice filling the passenger compartment made Brock close his eyes. "I'm sorry I had to leave, but there was something I had to take care of."

Leave? Had she left town?

Air seeped from his lungs.

She hesitated. He swallowed feeling the emotion she struggled to control.

A beep sounded.

“I’m sorry, Brock,” she said. “I’ll have to call you back.”

Brock sat in his SUV and watched the snow collect on the windshield. He had to call her. He had to make sure she was all right.

He dialed her number. The call rang to voice mail.

“Claudia, it’s Brock. I got your message. I just want to make sure you’re all right. Call me back, okay?” He disconnected the call.

The reception wouldn’t start for another half hour. Brock could drive to the hotel and talk to her there. Once he knew she was all right, he’d drive to the reception.

Without her? He may not have a choice.

When he reached the hotel, he let the valet park his SUV and dashed to the front desk. The clerk checked the registration. His apologetic look made Brock’s stomach drop.

“She checked out.” Brock’s tone was flat.

“About an hour ago,” the clerk said.

Brock thanked the clerk, then crossed the lobby to the valet.

What was Claudia dealing with? Whatever it was, he wished he could be there to help her.

If she needed his help, would she have said?

After tipping the valet, he drove to the reception, but his mind was filled with thoughts of Claudia.

And he prayed.

When he reached the reception, he found a parking place a good distance from the entrance and walked through the snow.

The laughter and singing that greeted him when he opened the door was the salve his soul needed.

“You made it.”

“Where’ve you been?” Friends shouted and dragged him into the banquet hall filled with round tables covered with blue tablecloths and surrounded by white chairs.

Bouquets of white and pink flowers sat in the center of each table. Smorgasbord tables stood next to each wall. A towering wedding cake decorated with trailing roses was the *pièce de résistance*.

Brock moved through the crowd and greeted friends as he made his way to the bridal table. He took his seat next to Rider. The chair next to his had been intended for Claudia.

After the meal had been served, friends gathered around the bridal table with their speeches.

“Be nice,” Avery warned jokingly, as she stroked the soft hair of her daughter, who had collapsed in her lap.

Brock innocently touched his chest as if he couldn’t be anything else. He picked up the microphone and wiggled his brows at Rider. His friend rolled his eyes.

“Rider and I have been friends since high school. The teachers were always thrilled when we ended up in the same class together,” Brock said as chuckles waffled through the crowd.

“You were the instigator,” Rider said with a laugh.

Brock’s mouth tipped, and he looked back at the audience. “We remember things differently. But I do remember the first time Rider saw Avery.” He turned to the bride, whose eyes widened. “He said, ‘That’s the woman I’m going to marry.’”

Avery’s lips parted as she looked at her husband. A sheen filled her eyes. Rider leaned in to kiss her.

Brock smiled and turned to the audience. “God’s plan was perfect.”

The entrance door to the reception hall opened blowing in snow and someone huddled in a coat. The hood fell away revealing blonde hair.

*Claudia!*

Brock stared into shining blue eyes and struggled for air while he tried to remember what else he'd planned to say about his friends. Other guests turned to see who had distracted him.

A smile froze on Claudia's face as she looked hesitantly into the eyes of those who watched her. When an attendant offered to take her coat, she smiled gratefully and shed it.

Somehow Brock managed to finish his speech and leave everyone laughing. He shared his good wishes to the bride and groom, then handed the microphone to Lachlan.

Brock stood back while others spoke, but he couldn't take his eyes off Claudia. Just when he'd prepared himself never to see her again, here she was. What did that mean?

He tried to control his heart jumping around his chest. How could it mean anything more than that she'd solved whatever problem had risen?

With the speeches finished, the music played and guests gathered on the dance floor. Brock moved through the crowd but kept his eyes on Claudia. He didn't want her to disappear.

She raised her gaze to his.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked.

"I'd love to." Her smile was soft.

Taking her hand, he led her to the dance floor. Touching a hand to her back, he relished her warmth and her hand gently resting on his shoulder.

The world fell away as they swayed to the music. For as long as Brock could hold Claudia, he'd never let her go.



## CHAPTER 31



Claudia basked in Brock's comforting embrace. His closeness and his tender touch loosened emotions she no longer wanted to control. Had this been what God had been telling her? Was being with Brock where she belonged? When she was with Brock, time stood still, yet she felt it fleeting.

She'd just made a decision that changed her life forever. Did that mean there was a future for her and Brock? That was what she wanted.

"I went to the hotel to find you, but they said you'd checked out," Brock said.

"They did?" Her head came up. "I'm sorry I missed you. I had to switch rooms. The room I had checked into had developed a plumbing problem so they moved me to another room. I guess the move hadn't been updated in time."

"Did you get my messages?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, Brock, but I didn't think to check." Her chest squeezed tight. She'd been so caught up with the decision she'd made she hadn't thought Brock would be wondering where she was.

"That's all right." He held her close and twirled her around. "You're here with me now."

The bustle in the banquet hall brought Claudia's attention to Rider, who held Lila and Avery. The bridal couple and their daughter rushed from the room amid a flurry of rose petals and blessings, then the guests bundled up to brave the falling snow

and followed them outside. Claudia and Brock collected their coats from the coat room.

“You didn’t eat,” Brock said as they watched the limousine drive away. He turned to her. “Would you like to get something to eat?”

“That would be nice,” she said, though after what she’d been through today, she had little appetite. She wanted to spend time with Brock before she left—before she had to decide what direction she should take with her life.

“We can take your car back to the hotel.” Brock took her hand and led her across the parking lot. “Then drive to the restaurant from there.”

After Claudia left her car in the hotel parking garage, Brock helped her climb into his warm SUV. They said little as he drove down Main Street, which had been decorated with lights and wishes for a merry Christmas, then turned onto a country road that led to a quiet chalet restaurant known for its American cuisine and more exotic entrées.

“I’m assuming you worked out everything for the governor’s office,” Brock said after they were seated in a secluded part of the restaurant, and the server took their orders. He gave her a tentative look as if he were praying for her.

“I don’t know if the problem was resolved or not.” Looking into his eyes, she saw the surprise she expected. “I resigned.”

He said nothing, giving her the space she needed.

Emotion filled her throat. She could see God keeping her and Brock apart because he deserved more than a woman with her complicated past.

“Something happened in the governor’s past that had been carefully concealed until recently,” she said, her voice flat. “You’ll hear all the details soon enough.”

“I’m not interested in the governor,” he said. “I’m interested in you.”

That brought her head up.

“I’m sorry that happened. I know you wanted a career in politics,” he said. “What will you do now?”

“I think it’s time I quit searching for opportunities.” The confession eased the tension that she hadn’t realized was building in her shoulders. “I’ve been rushing around and second-guessing what God wants for me. It’s time to take a step back and wait. Uma had offered me a job. I thought I’d call her and see if she still wants to hire me. If so, I’ll work for her until I know where God wants me.”

Brock’s mouth flattened.

“Did I say something wrong?” She peered into his eyes.

“No, but I want to give you something else to think about.” He reached across the table and laced his fingers through hers, his touch reassuring and making her pulse quicken. “Is there a chance for us?”

When she had worked for him, the feeling had frightened her. His walk with God was new. She struggled with her faith. Now she saw that God had separated them for a reason. Being away from Brock allowed God to heal her and realize her first love for Him.

“I was afraid to think that,” she stammered.

“That’s what I thought.” Brock’s eyes were clear, direct and filled with compassion. “You have no idea how many times I wanted to call you after you left, but there was that little nudge telling me to give you time.”

“I hadn’t realized how much time I needed.”

“What about now?” Brock asked, his voice soft but filled with hope.

“God has put me in the perfect place,” she said.

“I hope that perfect place is with me,” he said.

“What do you mean?” she asked. She wanted to make sure she understood what he was saying.

“I love you, Claudia.” His voice was husky.

She almost couldn't breathe. Never had she expected to hear those words, let alone from Brock, but hearing them sounded so right.

"I fell in love with you the first time I heard your voice. I couldn't see you, but your sweetness opened my heart to you. I knew you were beautiful on the inside, which was what mattered, and I knew I wanted to marry you."

"Marry?" Her mouth trembled.

"Is that so surprising?" He looked at her, a twinkle in his eyes. "Did you have no idea how I felt?"

"I suspected, but it was hard to accept."

"Please accept it," he said with a wealth of emotion. "Now you know how I feel. Will you marry me?"

"Yes, I love you. I want to marry you." The floodgates of her heart opened, revealing what she had trapped inside.

Love had been searching for the open door to step through. As she healed, love had patiently waited.

*Love is patient; love is kind ...*

How was it that this man who could've had anyone patiently waited for her to let God work His best for her?

*Oh, Lord, while I anxiously searched for Your best, the best was Brock and he was here all the time.*

Brock reached into his coat pocket and withdrew the pale blue gift box wrapped in a white bow. He placed it on the table between them.

"What's this?" Her stomach tightened strangely. She recognized the trademark packaging for the elite New York jewelry store. She hadn't thought Brock would go there, let alone buy a gift—a gift for her—from that place.

She recognized it as a box that would hold a piece of jewelry, but she never expected to receive such a chic gift from Brock. The man was full of surprises.

"It's something I planned to give you Christmas Day, but since ..." The wealth of feelings in his eyes scooped air from

her lungs. “Open it.”

She took a breath. She didn’t want to fumble and drop the beautiful package. Untying the ribbon, she fought threatening tears as she opened the box and stared at the sapphire pendant reflecting the lighting.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered. With trembling fingers, she removed it from the box. The pendant turned over revealing the inscription—*More than words*.

“I’m not sure I could ever express what I feel for you.” Brock stood. Keeping his gaze on her, he rounded the table to her chair. Taking her quivering hand, he drew her to her feet. He slipped the necklace from her hand. She turned and smoothed her hair over her shoulder. His warm hands placed the pendant around her neck and hooked it into place. He turned her to face him. He admired the jewel that matched the color of her eyes.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “You planned this.” She gave him a sly smile.

“Actually, I didn’t. My only plan was to spend one last evening with you before you returned to Denver.” The emotion in his eyes made her heart flutter. “When I didn’t see you at the reception, I thought you’d returned to Denver, not that I was thrilled with your leaving without my seeing you, but I accepted it ... reluctantly. Now that I have you here, I don’t want to let you go. Right now, I want to kiss you.” His eyes twinkled.

“I want that, too.” Claudia could barely hear herself speak over the roar of blood surging past her eardrums.

Brock’s powerful arms slipped around her waist. He bent to her, his lips gently touching hers. The rush of pleasure made her melt against him in his firm yet tender embrace. Her heart beat rapidly. Never had she imagined love could be so gentle and stirring. She savored the taste of his lips against hers. His strong arms told her he’d hold her forever.

Her mind a swirl of emotions, she thanked God for giving them this miracle of love and bringing her and Brock together.

They were two very different people. It thrilled her to know God's hand was on them and leading them on the path He had planned from the beginning.

## EPILOGUE



Christmas morning, Brock pulled quiche from the oven and set the glass baking dishes on trivets.

“It smells wonderful.” Claudia stepped into the kitchen and inhaled deeply.

Brock glanced at her, though he wanted to stare. His heart lifted at the simple white dress that hugged her curves. She had twisted her hair at the nape of her neck, exposing the sapphire pendant he’d given to her two weeks ago. It glowed in the morning light.

“You should’ve called me when you got up.” Claudia looked around the kitchen as if trying to find something she could do. “I wanted to help you cook the breakfast.”

“There wasn’t much for you to do.” He smiled at her. “Nellie prepared the brunch before she left last night. She gave me specific instructions on how to reheat everything. All I had to do was place the dishes in the ovens and set the timer.” Moving to her, he held her close. “Happy birthday,” he murmured and kissed her. How many more times would he get to do that? “And Merry Christmas.”

“Thank you, and Merry Christmas to you.” She kissed him back.

From outside came the sound of car doors closing and voices approaching the house.

“Right on time.” Brock grinned and reluctantly slid his arms from around her waist.

“I hope they like our Christmas surprise for them.” Claudia looked over her shoulder at him and flashed a smile.

“They’ll be surprised, but I think they’ll like it,” Brock said. He stepped to the refrigerator and pulled out the glass bowl filled with raspberries, strawberries, currants and sliced almonds.

“It’s a good thing Pastor Chuck can keep a secret,” Claudia said with a musical laugh that made his stomach tip over.

Brock agreed though he wouldn’t have minded if Pastor Chuck had shared their Christmas plans with at least his wife.

Their guests streamed into the house with happy birthday wishes for Claudia and sharing Merry Christmas hugs for each other. They chatted as Brock and Claudia served coffee, tea and cocoa.

With everyone settled, Brock caught Pastor Chuck’s eye and signaled him that he and Claudia were ready.

The pastor’s nod was nearly imperceptible, but Uma noticed.

“What are you two planning?” she asked.

“We’ve invited everyone here to celebrate this blessed holiday. We have something else to share with you. Today is also our wedding day,” Brock said.

“I knew it,” Uma said with a firm nod.

Others looked at Brock, then Claudia in complete shock.

“Are you ready?” Brock turned to Pastor Chuck.

“Whenever you are,” he said.

With everyone seated and quiet, Claudia and Brock stood before Pastor Chuck, who opened with prayer. Grinning broadly, he began the ceremony leading Brock and Claudia through their vows and the exchange of rings.

After the marriage certificate, which they had picked up from the county courthouse yesterday, was signed with Rider and Avery as witnesses, everyone exchanged gifts, then gathered around the table to enjoy the Christmas brunch.



Nellie had made a small wedding cake which everyone enjoyed.

The children were exhausted when their guests gathered their broods and ushered their families through the snow to their cars.

“It’s so quiet.” Claudia closed the door, then turned toward the kitchen.

Brock caught her hand. When she looked at him surprised, he drew her to him and gathered her into his arms. Kissing her, he tasted her warm lips and relished the feel of her curves tucked neatly into the angles of his body.

“I love you, Claudia,” he whispered raggedly. He withdrew and took in the love for him that shone in her eyes.

“I love you,” she murmured.

Slipping his arm behind her knees, he held her close and carried her up the stairs. In his room, now their room, he laid her on the bed. Lying next to her, he drew her to him and relished the smoothness of her skin, her kisses warm and soft.

At last, he could love her the way he had wanted to since that day he had heard her voice. Closing his eyes, he relished her love for him and thanked God for the many blessings He’d bestowed upon them and the blessings that were to come.

God’s plan and His love were perfect.

Merry Christmas, dear Reader!



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Love,

Laura

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native of California, Laura Haley-McNeil spent her youth studying ballet and piano, though her favorite pastime was curling up with a good book. Without a clue as to how to write a book, she knew one day she would.

After college, she segued into the corporate world, but she never forgot her love for the arts and served on the board of two community orchestras. Finally realizing that the book she'd dreamt of writing wouldn't write itself, she planted herself in front of her computer. She now immerses herself in the lives and loves of her characters in her romantic suspense and her contemporary romance novels. Many years later, she lived her own romantic novel when she married her piano teacher, the love of her life.

Though she and her husband have left warm California for cooler Colorado, they enjoy the outdoor life of hiking, bicycling, horseback riding and snow skiing. They satisfy their love of music by attending concerts and hanging out with their musician friends, but Laura still catches a few free moments when she can sneak off and read.

