

Sunday, April 15, 2018

Yep. He's going to want that TV.

In the living room, the heartless box returned her stare. It knew. It had seen everything the last two years. It was there when she accused him of loving it more than he loved her. Maybe he wouldn't love it as much if, accidentally of course, it developed a huge crack.

The passing vindictive thought tickled Bekah's overworked nerves, prompting a Grinch-like smile to curl up around her toothbrush. She saw the grin in the television's dark reflection as she brushed the sharp peppermint toothpaste into a froth.

Maybe the TV and our crappy hand-me-down dining set. But that's all he's getting. Well, and my heart . . . and my dreams . . . and my future . . .

Bekah's footsteps grew heavier with each thought as she padded through their—make that *her*—Crate&Barrel-stuffed midtown loft back to the bathroom. The hand-scraped hardwoods cooled her bare feet as memories inflamed the brokenness she'd repressed for weeks. She rinsed her mouth and swallowed the one sleeping pill her best friend allotted her after last week's "incident."

Her toothbrush made a hollow *plink* as she dropped it into the cup with the word “Mrs.” emblazoned with a gothic font on the side which now faced the wall. Why did she even keep that thing? She retrieved her toothbrush and dropped the cup into the trash. It could join the pieces of the “Mr.” cup at the county dump.

She smoothed the crinkles at the corners of her green eyes and fished out eye drops to dissolve the spidery red veins painting the whites. Her black hair cascaded to the middle of her shoulder blades when she released the clip keeping her messy bun in place.

Geez, you look like crap. No matter which way she turned her head, she found no reason to challenge her unmerciful assessment. Hot tears spilled over her bottom row of lashes, down her face, and onto her neck. One of them landed on the pendant. She fingered the points of the small gold cross like the security blanket it had become over the last three years.

Her wedding day fell on a picture-perfect southern February Saturday. A faux-Spring warm front encouraged daffodils to open along with glorious pink-flowering crabapple and redbud trees as if nature itself wanted to get in on the party.

“Don’t make me cry, Poppa,” Bekah chastised him as he walked into the church parlor for his first glimpse at his baby girl in her flowing white gown. He swallowed, made a funny face, and laughed along with her mother and bridesmaids.

“You look perfect,” he whispered as he hugged her. “Well, practically perfect. I have one last thing for you.” Her mother joined him as he pulled a jewelry box from his pocket. He opened it and lifted the necklace from the velvet-coated cardboard. “You know you can always count on me. But if there’s ever a time you can’t reach me, let this be a reminder that you can count on Jesus. You are his, regardless of whose daughter or wife you are. He was the first to promise that he would never leave or forsake you, and he won’t.”

The trio fell into a tight hug before Bekah turned and pulled her hair to the side, allowing her mother to fasten the necklace. The rest of the afternoon, from the formal wedding march through the hysterical Beyoncé imitations at the reception, was a silk-and-gardenia-drenched, blurry ball of joy.

A moment spent in the embrace of memories that could never again be relived with happiness and her face heated as anger welled up. She yanked the cross and chain from her neck, dropped them in the toilet, and flushed.

Wednesday, April 25

“Just coffee and something else bad for me.” Bekah smiled at her new friend, Cynda, as she slid into the back booth, careful to avoid the duct tape in the vinyl.

The waitress giggled. “I got a brother you can have.”

“Been there, done that. How about a cinnamon roll?”

Bekah plopped the *Whitman Daily News* onto the Formica table. Seemed thicker today. “Oh, yeah,” she muttered under her breath as she remembered another detail of small-town life. “Wednesday, coupon day.”

A far cry from the world she’d left behind in Atlanta, this Alabama town existed in permanent throw-back-Thursday mode. Nothing seemed to have changed since her freshman year at Whitman University. Comfortable, just right for her do-over, but woefully out-of-date on tech. No way she could find work on job search websites or LinkedIn. You either knew someone who knew someone or checked the ads in the paper.

How long had it been since she’d opened a newspaper three days in a row? Years. The grainy texture on her fingertips combined with the sounds of pontificating farmers and the aroma of sizzling bacon warmed her homesick heart.

“Here you go.” Cynda set her coffee and cinnamon roll on the table. “Doing good today?”

“For a Wednesday.” Bekah pulled the porcelain cup closer and poured enough sugar from the glass container to make the brew almost as sweet as the pastry. Her dad’s tease popped into her mind. “A little coffee with your sugar?”

A quick scan of the classifieds page didn't bring much hope. She highlighted two job opportunities and one rental that weren't in the last two issues and added them to the list on her iPad. *This do-over might be tougher than I thought.*

She flipped her camera to selfie to check her makeup. Where did those split ends come from? No secret to how the puffy patches beneath her eyes got there, but she thought she'd done a better job covering them. And the freckles.

Jeff's new girlfriend didn't have freckles. Maybe that's why he chose her. Or maybe it was her red hair or full C cups. After all, Bekah hadn't changed her personality or her values or goals in the last three years. There must be a reason that she wasn't enough anymore.

Her finger traced the almost invisible cross-shaped patch at the base of her neck. Recent tanning hadn't quite obliterated the outline left by laying out with the pendant on before the night she flushed it down the toilet. That was rash. *He'll notice I'm not wearing it. What am I going to tell him? One thing at a time, Bekah.*

A deep breath. A nibble of ooey-goey cinnamon goodness. A slug of coffee. Her shoulders relaxed as she abandoned her personal critique to soak in her environment. To say this was a "second home" sounded cliché, but it rang true. With her dad and older brother being Whitman U alums, Ona Mae's Deli & Bait Shop was as comfortable as her grandmother's living room.

She'd learned a lot about the place over the years. Miss Ida owned the diner. Her father bought the place for her mother, Ona Mae, back in the '50s. Bekah's favorite feature was the fan overhead, which she assumed was the original. A motor mounted onto the carved ceiling tiles in the back of the room powered three wrought iron and wood ceiling fans, each connected to the motor with a series of wide rubber belts.

Central air conditioning and heating were added when all the merchants on the row paid for

them to revitalize Main Street and keep business from going to the strip shopping centers popping up around the Wal-Mart. Sentimentality kept Miss Ida from getting rid of the fans, and they turned at a thoughtfully lazy pace every day of the year.

The once-white horsehair plaster on the walls displayed a running history of the town and the university. Black-and-white photos arranged in no particular pattern among faded color photos chronicled the city's growth, athletic achievements, beauty queens, and visits from notable celebrities. The wooden floors were worn in a path from the front door to the counter, and the ever-present smell of something being fried hung lightly in the air.

The customers varied depending on the time of day. Professors huddled over coffee while debating intellectual points. Students and shoppers stopped for a quick sandwich. Fathers brought their sons for a treat after a haircut at the barbershop.

Farmers showed up early to talk about the heat and commiserate with others about the breakdown of the American farm. When crops came in, most filled their pickups with produce and parked them in front of the Bait Shop with the tailgates down. While they ate their grits, country ham, and biscuits, customers picked their fruits and veggies out of the trucks. They'd come into the diner to pay and visit a little before they left, usually accompanied with instructions to "say hey" to some relative.

Maybe a few years before Bekah's time here, the interest in organic cooking provided a boost to the business of these hardworking farmers and greatly amused people like Miss Ida. Though she didn't serve frozen or canned foods, the words "farm-to-table" were added as a heading to the vegetable list on the menu.

In Bekah's sophomore year, the opening of a bike trail along the former railroad tracks running behind Main Street attracted a new clientele with sleek fiberglass helmets and enough crotch

padding to make them walk bowlegged. Along with the rest of the storefronts, Miss Ida was happy to cater to this crowd, who loved to call her town “quaint.” She halved the size and doubled the price for “organic” bran muffins and labeled the oatmeal as if it had suddenly become gluten-free.

The tarnished silver bell above the door chimed. Everyone in the place cast at least a glance toward the sound. There came the Whitman icon. Like her diner, Miss Ida didn’t seem to have changed one bit.

Back in the day, some of Bekah’s friends called Miss Ida “The Armadillo” because of her leather-like skin—probably the result of sunbathing slathered with baby oil before the medical and skincare industry pointed out the dangers of this practice. Her thick makeup was punctuated by eyeshadow to her brows in a shade of blue that Bekah imagined might have once matched her eyes. One pair of glasses hung by a twisted cord of Whitman University green and gold around her neck, and another nested in her tightly coiffed brown hair.

The sight of her sparked happy memories. Bekah had spent countless hours here with friends. She’d met Jeff for the first time at the counter. He’d swaggered over without a doubt that she’d swoon. She pretended she thought he was a waiter and asked for a Coke refill.

The sweet memory brought a slight smile until a dozen rotten memories bulldozed it out of the way. Defeat fell like a weighted blanket on her soul. Bekah returned to her breakfast, dividing her attention between her iPad and the entertaining morning routine of the Bait Shop matriarch.

Miss Ida strolled behind the counter, stopping to chat with and rub the shoulders of several diners. Pleasantries satisfied, she disappeared behind a swinging door into the kitchen, emerging minutes later with a red plastic glass and a plate piled high with biscuits and sausage gravy. Once settled on the cracked leatherette cushion of a stainless-steel stool, Miss Ida held court. At almost eight o’clock, only a few farmers lingered. Most of the remaining people she chatted with looked

like bankers and retailers who stopped in for breakfast before opening shop.

After finishing her decidedly non-gluten-free breakfast, Miss Ida picked up her glass and sauntered to the back booth. No invitation necessary. She slid onto the seat across from Bekah.

Her smile exposed nicotine-and-coffee-stained teeth. “Do I know you?”

“I went to school here. Haven’t been back for a while.”

“Oh.” Miss Ida pulled the glasses from her hair and studied Bekah. “What’s your name, honey?”

“Bekah.”

Miss Ida’s faded blue eyes warmed as recognition set in. “Yeah, I remember. You used to come in here a lot. You and that crowd with the quarterback. What was his name? Jack? Jake?”

“Jeff. Jeff Akin.”

“Yeah, that’s it. Akin. Crappy sidearm style but good-looking. Always seemed to be a little full of himself to me. Whatever happened to him?”

“I married him. And you’re right. Wish you would’ve shared your insight with me three years ago.”

“Ah, things not going so good?” Miss Ida scooted to the middle of the booth.

Should such a personal question offend her? Maybe in a normal Atlanta setting, but here it seemed natural. “Things aren’t going at all. I guess he could never love anyone more than himself. He certainly got tired of me quickly.”

Heat rose in her chest and crept its way up her neck. Her hands tightened around her cup like a boa constrictor on a mouse. Time for a nutshell version. “He wants out. We’re getting divorced, and I thought this would be the best place for me to start over.”

Miss Ida reached a bronzed hand across the table to pat her arm. “I’m sorry, honey.”

How strange. The manicured nails and that rock of a diamond ring didn't fit with the woman's Wrangler blue jeans and chambray shirt.

"I'm okay." Bekah repeated the lie that had kept her glued together, if only barely, for months. "I just need a new start. I'm going to take some courses at the W, get a career, get a life. I loved it here. I figured I could come back because I know my way around, but everyone who knew me would be gone. Well, almost everyone."

"Well, don't you worry, doll. Things get better. You don't think they will, but they do." Miss Ida patted her arm again and scooped her way out of the booth. "I'll get you some more coffee."

"I'm good. Thanks. I need to get moving. Only have one day left." Bekah swigged a final sip.

Miss Ida was back pouring more coffee before she could get her things together. "What do you mean, only one day left?"

"I gave myself three days to find a place to live and at least some prospect of employment." She held up the Classifieds page for Miss Ida's inspection. "It's not going so well."

"Let me see." Ida plucked the paper from her and resettled in the booth, adjusting her specs to examine the inked columns. "What kind of job you looking for?"

"Anything to pay the rent, I guess. I have some good office skills, but the way it's looking so far, I might be sacking groceries."

Miss Ida pointed to a listing. "Did you go to this one?"

"Monday. He said I'm overqualified."

"Oh well, don't fret over that. He's dumb as a stump."

Bekah laughed into her coffee, sending bubbles over the cup's edge.

"Well, he is. It ain't mean to say if it's true." She scanned the ads for another second then returned her glasses to their perch in her hair. "You ever wait tables?"

“No, ma’am.”

“All right, just as well. Probably overqualified for that too.”

“Hey, I’m not the one who said I was overqualified for anything. Are you going to listen to the opinion of dumb stump man?”

Miss Ida’s grin widened. “I like you. When would you like to start?”

“Here?” The offer left her stammering. “Well, as soon as I find a place to live, I guess.”

“Don’t tell me there’s nothing available in this town.”

“All the places I’ve been tell me to wait until next month when the semester’s over.”

“Why don’t you do that, then? Come by when you get settled, and if you ain’t found nothing better by then, I’ll get you into an apron.”

“Yeah, I could.” Her pulse raced. Maybe too much coffee . . . or sugar. Something pressed her to confide. “Miss Ida, I don’t know if you’ll understand this, but I’ve been in Atlanta for a while by myself now, going to work every day, trying to act like I’m okay, crying myself to sleep at night. I think it’ll drive me nuts to stay there another month. I’ll keep looking today. If I can’t find a place, maybe I’ll have to change my game plan. Thanks for the offer.”

“Well, wait a second.” Miss Ida cocked her head to the side, used her pinky nail to pry something from between her teeth, and stared at the aged photos on the wall.

What was she thinking?

Miss Ida returned her attention to Bekah and pursed her thin lips together. “How much furniture you got?”

“Not much. Small bedroom suite and living room stuff. Not much at all.”

“Look, I ain’t done this in a long time, but I do know a place where you might could stay.”

Hope. Bekah smiled.

“Come with me.”

Bekah grabbed her things and followed Miss Ida through the kitchen and up a flight of stairs to a door on the landing. Miss Ida retrieved a key from the doorjamb and wriggled it into the lock, wrenched it left, then right. She tugged, pushed, and then kicked the bottom of the door. It creaked open, swinging to a stop when it reached a small buckle in the linoleum floor. Bekah peered through the doorway into the musty time capsule as stale air escaped onto the landing.

“Well, it could stand some cleaning.” Miss Ida squinted as she led the way inside, flipping light switches near the door.

Bekah followed her into the kitchen with more than a bit of trepidation. “Hmm, avocado green floors, fridge, stove . . .” Bekah tugged a drawer open, “. . . and drawer liners. You didn’t feel the need to brighten this up with a bit of harvest gold?”

Miss Ida’s chuckle forced a raspy smoker’s cough out. “So it ain’t been touched since 1975. Well, ’cept for the floors.” She nodded toward the living area where hardwood floors began as the linoleum mercifully ended.

“There was some really nice shag carpeting, but when Sonny lived here, he had this Old English sheepdog he kept up here. Nearly drove me crazy. Anyways, when Howie—that was the dog—and Sonny went, that carpet had to go! That dog didn’t do nothing but shed and poop. I made Sonny pull it all up, and we found this floor. I’d forgot about it, but Sonny did a good job refinishing it. He didn’t have time to do the whole place, but it looks right nice in here.”

Even with a layer of dust, the living area looked a hundred percent more presentable than the kitchen. The refinished floors stretched to the front of the apartment where two full windows looked down on Main Street. Bekah walked over and ran her fingers down the decades-old glass panes, feeling the imperfections that gave slight distortions to the street scene below. Sitting in the

window seat, she surveyed the apartment from this more flattering angle and mentally arranged her furniture.

“Sonny? Was that the last time you rented the place?”

“Rent? Oh, heck no. I ain’t never rented it before. Sonny . . . he’s my son. Not that I shouldn’t have charged him, but I got a kinda soft spot for him.”

“Where is he now?” Bekah asked as she wandered back to the bedrooms.

“In Miami, last I heard. Don’t stay still much—a few months here, a few months there. Big shot now with his own airplane. I guess he’s done good with the money he got from his daddy, but I don’t know. Wish he’d settle down.”

“He’s not married?”

“Was. She didn’t understand him, though. He’s such a fragile person, but I guess that could be looking through mama eyes. He’ll always be my puffy little angel to me.” Miss Ida stopped with a sigh between the side rooms while the thought glossed over her.

It only took her a second to recover and continue the tour. “There’s the bathroom, and this bedroom still has his furniture in it. Sonny used to sleep here when he visited sometimes and stayed out later than he knew I’d like. But you can fill the rest however you want, and I guess we could get you a table from somewheres.”

“Are you sure this is okay? I mean, if you still need it for your son . . .”

“Oh, it’s fine. He don’t come in much, and he can always stay with me or in a hotel for that matter. Anyways, that’s the place. There’s outside stairs and a parking lot off the back of the kitchen, so you don’t have to come through the diner. It ain’t the best place in town, but it’s better than the Bait Shop.”

“The Bait Shop?”

“Yeah. You seen the window, right?”

“Of course. We called the whole place ‘The Bait Shop’ when we were in school. All the kids do. But, after all the jokes, I never saw worms or crickets on the menu.”

“Well, dearie, if you want the tour, come on. I’ll show you the back way out.” Miss Ida unlocked the deadbolt on the kitchen door and led Bekah out onto a small metal platform and down the stairs, talking the whole way.

Bekah had to pay attention to her footing as she kept up with Miss Ida’s pace and monologue. The wobbly metal stairs ended in a small pea-gravel-and-dirt parking area. Miss Ida pointed to the rustic pine-and-stone pavilions a few dozen yards down the slope.

“That’s a rest stop so those bikers—bicycles, not motorcycles, you know—can take a break, get a drink, go to the bathroom, put air in their tires.”

“I know. Spent a lot of time on the trails with my friends. So glad they added these stops along the way. Saved me from using the bushes a bunch of times.”

“I thought the whole thing was a big waste of money when the state started this, but now I see it’s a good thing. Did you know people come from all over the world to ride it?”

“I do. I heard riders speaking different languages sometimes. Guess it’s been good for business.”

“Sure has. New ones opened up. Even the oldies like me spruced up some. New paint, awnings . . . definitely bike racks.”

Miss Ida turned the corner, walking back up to Main Street. “My daddy bought this place for my mama. This was the last building this side of Main Street then. We worked in the deli and lived up over it. My brother, Buddy, he had Down syndrome. Back then, everyone called him retarded or slow. He loved to fish, and he’d roam all over the place, digging up worms, trapping crickets.

Somehow or other, he wound up selling the things outside the deli.”

They stopped on the half-crumbled sidewalk beside a door that seemed to be held together by cracks and peeled paint. The shiny padlock seemed unnecessary since it looked like one strong kick could reduce the door to kindling. A lone window beside the door was boarded up from the inside. Miss Ida took a moment to catch her breath.

“Well, one day it was raining. Buddy couldn’t go fishing, and Mama wouldn’t let him in the deli with the worms, so Daddy brought him around here and let him set up shop in this storage room. He loved it all. He used to say, ‘My shop,’ so proud like. You ever know a Down’s kid?”

Bekah nodded with a smile, thinking of her niece.

“Then you know how happy they look when they smile. It’s like they know the secret of where all the candy is hid. Anyways, he begged Mama and Daddy for a sign on the window with hers, but Mama was trying to be so upscale. Big deal back then to own a storefront on Main Street and they’d paid a lot to have professional lettering on the window. But they always had a hard time turning down anything for Buddy. I kinda think they thought it was their fault he was the way he was, and they wanted him to be happy. Mama made a cardboard sign that said, ‘Bait Shop’ with a arrow pointing around back and put it in the bottom corner of the window. That held him a bit.

“He worked hard on his shop, and I helped some. We cleaned off a big space in the room and set up a table, and he kept his bait in an old fridge Daddy got going. We traipsed all over getting his bait. Back then, kids could roam around all day without any worry. A good bit of people would come and buy bait from Buddy. Mostly being nice at first, I think. But that boy knew where to get the fattest worms! After a while, it got to where he liked the shop keeping more than fishing. Mama said it was just like Daddy because Daddy was Jewish, and you know they always make good businessmen.”

Miss Ida resumed the trek around the building, walking almost as fast as she talked.

“Anyways, he begged to have his sign painted on the window like Mama’s, and Daddy made a crack that when he sold more bait than they sold meat, he would paint Buddy’s sign on the window. I guess God thought that’d be a good joke on Mama because that August a tornado came through, and we lost electricity for a week. They stayed open the first day and part of the second, but then the meat started going bad, and we had to give it away or throw it out . . . no meat, no business. But Buddy didn’t lose a minute of time. He had a fresh product supply on the vacant lot across the street!

“Daddy stayed true to his word, to Mama’s dismay, and added the words ‘and Bait Shop’ beneath ‘Ona Mae’s Deli.’ I don’t know that she ever forgave him for it, but after they were gone, she never took it off.”

“Gone?” They’d arrived at the front door during Miss Ida’s remembering, but Bekah couldn’t let the conversation stop on that cliffhanger.

“Daddy and Buddy died in a car wreck when I was about ten. Then me and Mama ran the place. Then I took over from Mama.” She straightened her shoulders with a deep breath. “Anyways, you go out and look and see what you can find today. If you can’t find nothing better, you have a job and a place to stay.”

With that matter-of-fact goodbye, Miss Ida walked through the glass door to the diner, and Bekah headed to her car, the chinging of the tiny silver bell resonating in her ear.

Saturday, April 28

Elliot Caragin, his stomach churning, stood with his back propped against a centuries-old oak and kicked the worn tire swing with his foot. Over and over, he mumbled the words that needed to be said as he finessed the speech. *Come on, Elliot. You gotta tell them.*

Cheerful voices of five generations in the backyard wafted through the air with aromas of freshly mown grass and pit smoked barbecue. Blue skies. Low humidity. A perfect day for a cookout. He should get back to the party. After all, it was in his honor.

He wiped sweating palms across his T-shirt. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head back onto the rough bark. *Father God, help me.*

“Hey! There you are.”

Elliot smiled at the sound of his dad’s voice. He opened his eyes to see his role model, a Mountain Dew can in each hand, closing the gap between them.

“Your mom was wondering. Not like you to not be in the middle of the fracas. You okay?”

“Just taking a break.”

“Yeah, I get it. Your mom’s side of the family can be a bit much.” There it was. The mischievous smile that people who didn’t know he was adopted swore Elliot got from Jim.

“Yeah. Mom’s family.” Elliot winked, took the soda offering and popped the tab.

Jim tugged on the swing rope. “Gotten a lot of mileage out of this.”

Good. Small talk. “How many times have you changed that rope?”

“Four, maybe five. Listen, Elliot . . .”

Uh-oh. Shifting away from small talk. Elliot broke eye contact and gulped his Dew.

“I don’t reckon I’ve taken the time to say the words, but I know how hard you’ve worked to get here. I’m proud of you, son. I know God has great plans.”

“Thanks, Dad. I couldn’t have done it without you, without knowing you always had my back. And Mom . . . I could’ve been nothing more than another hard-luck story if you and Mom hadn’t . . . you know.”

Jim lowered himself with a slight grunt onto the low stone wall that lined this stretch of his property. He tipped his soda can back, slurped the last sip, then breathed out like a horse resisting a bridle.

“Elliot, your mom and me, we’re the ones who woulda been a mess without you. I never told you this, but we’d had two miscarriages, been told we couldn’t have babies of our own. Can you imagine your mom without babies? Anyway . . . when you came along . . . you, you’re the one who saved us.”

The crack of his voice drew Elliot’s gaze to his face. Wait. Were those tears?

Jim pinched the bridge of his nose and swallowed hard. “I know. You think I’m exaggerating, but I’m not. This thing your mom calls a people quilt, all of our skin colors—black, white, brown, everything in between—it wasn’t always so pretty. My ma, your sweet-as-cotton-candy grandmother, she told me the reason we lost them babies was because God didn’t want a white man marrying a black woman.”

Surely, that couldn’t be right. Still, Dad wouldn’t make something like that up. “Nana? Wow.”

“Don’t judge her harsh. She was just brought up that way. She came around, as you can tell.

Her, your Gramps, a lot of other folks that would surprise you. And you were a big part of that. You showed up looking like a perfect mix of me and your mom. Except for those green eyes, of course. Having you as a baby really made us a family and helped other folks see we were gonna make it.”

“Never realized all that.”

Another wink and his dad’s playful smile returned. “Of course, when we adopted twelve more and had the girls, then they knew we was really serious.”

Elliot grinned. “That may have been a little overkill.”

“Yeah, some people say we’re addicted to kids. Speaking of which, maybe we should get back to the rest of the fam. Everyone wants to spend time with the man of the hour.”

Tell him now. There’s never going to be a perfect time. “Just a minute.” Elliot blew out a huff of air and dropped to the wall beside his dad. He stole a look skyward as he leaned back. Nope. Didn’t seem like the Lord was going to send an angel to intervene. *Just say it!* “I’m not sure everyone’s going to be so proud of me. I just . . . I don’t want to let you down.”

A glance told him he’d totally confused his dad.

“Let me down? Look at you, son. They must’ve been seriously impressed with you at First Baptist to take you straight out of seminary. You ain’t gonna let me or anyone else down.”

Elliot examined the laces on his Chuck Taylors. “What if . . . I don’t go to First Baptist?”

“Hmm. This ain’t a hypothetical question, is it?”

Without looking up, Elliot wagged his head and fished a well-worn letter from his back pocket.

Jim slipped on his bifocals and read the letter. “Is this what you want?”

“I’m not sure it’s what I *want*. But I feel like it’s what I’m *supposed* to do. What do you think?”

Not one to rush to offer his opinion in times like these, Jim scanned the letter again. He folded

it along its obvious crease lines, took off his glasses, and stared across his property. “Of course, your mom and me would love for you to be in Birmingham. It’s a great church and a great opportunity. You’d be breaking the staff color barrier there. Could take you a while to work back up to such a large church with such a great ministry.”

Elliot stammered the explanation he’d been rehearsing in his brain. “I’d forgotten how many letters I’d sent out before I was offered the spot there. I got this letter last week, and I was calling the pastor to decline, but something wouldn’t let me do it. I’ve been praying about it almost constantly, even though First Baptist seemed like a no-brainer. Established program, huge platform, great community and international missions. I think I’d fit in well with the staff. But I haven’t had any peace about it since I got this letter.”

His dad chuckled. “I remember the first time I heard you say you didn’t have any peace about something.”

Elliot knew the story better than he remembered the actual event. His parents had repeated it with great joy over the years. There was no point in trying to stop his dad from reliving the experience now.

“Your mother finally talked me into taking a vacation with all of you. We planned that trip for months. Five kids in the single digits for a fabulous weekend at the beach. The night before we were supposed to leave, you come into our room and tell us you don’t have any peace about leaving the house. So serious, this pouty nine-year-old face looking at us. You were so convinced it was the wrong thing to do that you insisted you could stay by yourself, like that was really going to happen. But we could honestly see how much you were troubled, so we had Virginia and Ray stay at the house.”

“I know the rest of it, Dad.”

“And we’ll never forget. If they hadn’t been here to stop it, the whole place would’ve burnt to the ground.” Jim shook his head. “What I’m trying to say is that I trust this inner peace of yours. Your mom and I will support you wherever you decide to go and whatever you decide to do.”

“I know it seems like a step down, Dad. The pay and the platform are smaller too. But I can’t get away from this feeling that it’s the right thing to do. For some reason, God wants me in Whitman.”

“Well,” Jim stretched as he stood and offered a hand to pull his son up from the wall. “I think we have an announcement to make. Bring that inner peace with you.”