

MINIATURE  
ROSE



# DANIELLA

JOANN CARTER



**What had been the beginning pangs of a headache during the meeting were now a full-blown migraine.**

Dani leaned her head against the back of her seat and tried to brace her head from the bumps in the road.

Harrison asked, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Dani shook her head miserably. "When I get a migraine like this, it just needs to run its course."

"Can I get you something to eat or drink?"

She felt nauseous at the mere thought of food. She shook her head again.

"I've got some cold water in my ice chest. How about a cool cloth for your eyes?"

Dani would have normally found his Good Samaritan act amusing, but right now she was in so much pain, emotionally and physically, that his kindness almost hurt her heart as much as her migraine hurt her head. The contrast between the two men she had come to know in the past few months was startling as the facts were laid bare before her.



Daniella

by

JoAnn Carter

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

## **Daniella**

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Contact Information:

[titleadmin@whiterosepublishing.com](mailto:titleadmin@whiterosepublishing.com)

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC  
[www.whiterosepublishing.com](http://www.whiterosepublishing.com) PO Box 1738 \*Aztec, NM \* 87410

Publishing History

By Grace Publishing, 2008

First White Rose Edition, 2009

**Published in the United States of America**

## Dedication

This book is dedicated to God my Savior. Through His power, nothing is impossible.

A special thanks to the wonderful guys in my life: Glenn, Joshua, Jeff, Jonathan, Jeremy, and my dad, Ivan. You are my real heroes day in and day out. I love you all very much!

And, I would be remiss if I didn't say thanks to all those who support me. From my publisher and editor, Elizabeth West, to my writing buddies who are willing to read through the rough drafts, to those who pray for me and offer an uplifting word—it's through your love, encouragement, and example that this book is possible.



## Praise for JoAnn Carter

MR. BECKMAN'S SECRETAY "... is such a sweet romance that you will smile all the way through it. Ms. Carter has written such unique characters that are so real their lives touch you...I enjoyed the strength the characters have in their own faith and convictions. It is very refreshing to see such honesty in a story...Wonderfully done, Ms. Carter." Matilda ~ Reviewer for Coffee Time Romance

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BY THE BOOK "... was a very light and romantic read. If you want a short, quick and lighthearted read for an afternoon, this one is for you." Reviewed by Maisha Walker for The Road to Romance

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TEACHER' S PLANS "... I highly recommend this book and this author. I can guarantee a great read and an author who will become a "must-read" in your library...And the ending was definitely a surprise." Brenda Talley ~ The Romance Studio

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SWEET REST "...JoAnn Carter blends a mystery with a love story and the growth of the strong willed Leah. Mike has always let God guide his life. No matter what others expect he preferred to pray and have faith in the direction he's sent. Leah prefers to do things her own way. Stuck in a situation she can't control she has to rely on God's guidance to survive. Characters and dialogue add some suspense to the story and keep us guessing until it's all tied together." Dee Dailey ~ The Romance Studio





“For nothing is impossible with God.”

~Luke 1:37

## Prologue

Daniella’s nine-year-old heart hammered in her chest, like a jackrabbit chased by a hound dog, as the boy stormed toward her.

“Hey, you little runt. Give me that bat!”

The heavy wooden club dropped from Daniella’s grip and landed with a puff of dry dust. The pungent smell of dirt overwhelmed her, and, coughing, she waved away the cloud of grit with a chubby hand.

The granules hadn’t even settled before the bully sneered. “You ain’t never gonna be on my team, fatso. You ain’t good enough.”

Daniella took a step backward; her breath came in quick, shallow gasps. She hated gym class even more than cooked liver.

The large boy loomed over her, and the gym teacher, Mr. Hunt, called out, “All right, Troy.”

The boy continued to stare holes into her. Daniella somehow managed to drag her gaze away from him and looked across the field to where Mr. Hunt stood on the sidelines. He called out in a gruff voice, “I said, that’s enough.”

Troy spat in the dirt, narrowly missing the toe of Daniella’s worn left sneaker. “Aw, why do I always get stuck with the nerds?”

Mr. Hunt scrubbed a hand over his sweaty face and sighed. “Troy.”

Troy groaned. “Yeah, yeah, I know.”

Slump-shouldered, Mr. Hunt said to Daniella, “I

want you to pick up the bat and at least *try* to keep your eyes on the ball this time.”

Daniella’s pulse pounded in her ears, making the teacher’s voice sound miles away. She fixed her eyes on the bat and wished the ground would swallow her up whole.

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The relentless *beep, beep, beep* of the alarm startled her awake. Dani slipped one hand from beneath the flannel sheets to slap the snooze button. *Same old stupid, horrible dream*, she thought, burrowing deeper under the covers. *Just a dream, but...*

She rolled onto her back. Dani knew she had to get a grip, had to *do* something about this disruptive nightmare she’d had since elementary school.

Unfortunately, she’d always been one of those “once I’m awake, the night’s over” types. Even though she knew she hadn’t had enough sleep, she flung the covers aside and slid both feet into her slippers then shuffled toward the window. One quick tug at the bottom of the shade sent it flapping and snapping to the top, and the warm winter sun, peeping over the horizon, slanted across her room and revealed its disarray.

The clutter certainly had accumulated over the years. Stuffed animals scattered across the red carpet stared sightlessly through wide, shoe-button eyes. Her desk—littered with dictionaries, magazines, monitor, and computer tower—sagged from the weight of its burdens. Rumpled bed linens spoiled the look of her beautiful canopied bed, while Precious Moments figurines collected dust on the bookshelves. Even her baby blanket, crocheted by Aunt Thelma, still hung over the back of Grandma Faye’s overstuffed chair. She really did need to get a grip, because the nightmare had overflowed from her

dreams into just about every area of her life, as if to prove she had no control over anything at all.

Like every other morning in her twenty-six years of life, Dani squeezed her eyes shut, hoping to blot out the ugliness from her room and from her very existence. But if pretending for those few tranquil seconds that her life was, indeed, in order hadn't worked in all these years, she had no reason to hope it would work today.

Eyes open and teeth clenched, she folded her arms across her chest and straightened her spine. She had to start somewhere. Preferably right after work.

## Chapter One

Dani's job at Mr. Beckman & Sons, Inc. was her safe haven. Messy as the rest of her life had been, she'd always been a great secretary. The role fit and had become as comfortable as an old worn shoe. Since the place was busy enough to require a full-time receptionist, Dani was spared the task of taking and making calls. She worked with efficiency and ease behind the closed door of her small and blessedly secluded office.

Her decision to get a handle on things buoyed her and put a pep into her step that she normally didn't feel at this hour of the morning. As she neared Jillian's reception counter, Dani smiled. "How's our 'mommy' doing today?" she sing-songed.

Jillian patted her tiny belly, which was starting to bulge a bit, and rolled her eyes. "I've come to the conclusion that being pregnant isn't all it's cracked up to be. I was up half the night, running back and forth to the bathroom."

Dani shrugged out of her deep green coat. "Upset stomach?"

"I don't want to talk about it. I can't go two hours without needing to run to the john."

Dani hung her coat in the hall closet and said over one shoulder. "It'll all be over soon enough. Nine months isn't forever."

Jillian put her hand on her hip. "Excuse me, that's six and a half more months. Let's not prolong this any more than necessary."

Dani held her hand up. "Oops, sorry about that—my bad."

Jillian threw her arm back to her side. "I just

wish somebody had warned me. I didn't expect it to be this way."

"What did you expect?"

Jillian slow-jogged toward the bathroom. "I don't know, but not this!"

Dani stepped into her office and scooted around the small desk, barely big enough for her laptop, before she turned on the radio perched on the shelf containing assorted office supplies. The soothing sound of classical piano filled the former supply closet, which now was her home away from home. Humming along with the tune, she placed her purse beside the two stubby filing cabinets that held the fax and copy machines. Here, Dani prided herself on efficiency. As Grandpa used to say, "Everything has a place and everything's in its place."

Pity the mindset never followed her home.

Dani reached down to turn her computer on.

Jillian knocked gently on the door. "May I come in?"

*Goodness*, Dani thought, *why the shaky voice?* "Of course you can." Rolling her desk chair closer to the door, she invited the expectant mother to sit. She gave her friend's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Hey, you okay?"

Jillian shook her head, sending auburn locks across her pretty face. "I'm supposed to be upstairs in a half an hour to take minutes at the board meeting."

"Bummer," Dani said, winking. "Those things are so boring they could put a night owl to sleep."

Her friend didn't even attempt to smile. "I'm not up to it today. Besides, I can't expect them to pause every fifteen minutes while I race to the ladies' room."

Dani held her breath, hoping Jillian didn't want her to step in and do the—

"Could you cover for me today?"

The music faded as her mind whirled. "I'm

horrible at taking notes. Maybe you should ask Georgia. She—”

“She’ll mess it up. The poor thing means well, but you know she can’t add two and two without a calculator, let alone take minutes for the board meeting.”

That was true enough, still...

“If you won’t do it,” Jillian said on a sigh, “I guess I’ll hafta tough it out.”

It was plain to see her friend was in no condition to sit through a long, humdrum meeting. Dani made a mental note to loan Georgia that book beside her computer at home: *How to Remember Anything*. “No, no, no...I can’t let you do that.” She stifled a frustrated sigh. “It’s no big deal. I’ll cover for you.” She forced a smile she didn’t feel. “I’m happy to do it.”

“Good grief,” Jillian teased. “You look like someone headed for the dentist.”

“You know me. I’m just not good around people.” With a shrug, she added, “At least at the dentist’s, there’s Novocain.”

Jillian chucked despite herself as she half ran toward the bathroom. “Thanks, Dani. You’re a lifesaver.”

Now it was Dani’s turn to sink into the chair. Elbows on her desk, she rested her chin in a cupped palm as an idea began to take shape in her mind. Maybe if she got there before the board members, they wouldn’t even notice her.

Dani stood, grabbed the minutes from the last meeting and her laptop, and headed for the stairs. By the time she reached the top, she was huffing. *How’d everything get so out of shape?* Her dreams, her bedroom, her fear of people, even her body.

Dani didn’t have time to come up with an answer, for even before she’d seated herself in the far corner of the conference room, two men in crisp, dark business suits blocked the doorway. She

recognized the taller one immediately, after all he was the owner, and wondered if everything in his life was as polished as he was.

“Can I help you?” Mr. Beckman asked.

It all seemed to happen at once, and she was powerless to stop it: rapid blinking, swallowing, the heat of a blush. She stammered, “Uh, um...no, Mr. Beckman.” Maybe she didn’t look as bad as she sounded. *Why, oh why didn’t corporations provide Novocain?* she wondered helplessly. “I’m, ah, I’m...filling in for Jillian. She’s not feeling so well today, see, and—”

“We passed her on the way up here. She didn’t look so good,” he said. “Glad you offered to step in for her.”

*Offered to step in for her? What a laugh.*

Mr. Beckman smiled as Dani willed herself to breathe. “I know it’s unheard of these days, but would you grab some cups and a pitcher of ice water?”

“Sure,” Dani agreed. As she headed out the door, she heard him add, “Jillian usually makes us a pot of coffee, too. Would you mind?”

“No problem, sir. I’ll get right to it.” She was thankful she could finally leave the room. As she worked in the small kitchenette next door, she called herself all kinds of a fool for letting her hands tremble and for slopping a skinny trail of water from the sink to the Mr. Coffee. *Oh, calm down,* she scolded herself. *So you’re not a social butterfly, but you know how to make a mean cup of coffee.* She couldn’t have won a beauty contest in her size twenty-four K-Mart blue light special outfit, but she could pull off this last-minute gig with dignity.

Dani reentered the conference room and set up the coffee bar nice and neat. Cups, spoons, sugar and creamer, napkins, and tumblers for the ice water. Finally, when she was all done, she poured herself a glass and took her seat while the rest of the big

shots filed into the room.

Dani did her best to hide her displeasure. *You'd think guys with all this money could think for themselves, instead of duplicating the fancy conference rooms they'd seen in Hollywood movies.* The elaborate crystal chandelier's glow lit the mahogany and brown leather furnishings, brightening the deep green carpeting and maroon walls.

Hopefully, she thought, pulling her computer closer, the cheap little rubber feet on her laptop wouldn't leave skid marks on the polished glass of the enormous table.

She might have done fairly well in Tinseltown herself, Dani mused, because it was evident from the execs' bland expressions that she'd hidden her apprehension well. Finally, much to her delight, Mr. Simon Beckman brought the meeting to order.

The click-clack of her computer keyboard drowned the pulsing of her heart. At least, she hoped so. Because once Mr. Beckman's son started to talk, she all but lost any ability to concentrate.

Harrison's rich, warm baritone voice filled the room. No doubt that voice could calm a fussing baby or Aunt Pam's yappy dog. She could only imagine how glorious it would sound whispering sweet nothings in her ear, and then she promptly scolded herself for reading too many romance novels. Good-looking executive plus frumpy, overweight secretary did not equal a "happily-ever-after" in the real world.

Mr. O'Malley's abrupt question interrupted her daydreaming. "What about the Clarke contract, Harrison? Could you tell us about that?"

Dani's gaze flickered back to Harrison's handsome face. His light brown hair, cropped short in the back, had a few stubborn bangs, which fell forward each time he bent over his papers. It somehow made him seem more approachable and real than anyone else in the room.

Harrison sighed. "I've looked things over at least three times to make sure there were no discrepancies, and there weren't. Over the past two months, we've lost four large contracts to other marketing firms, and Clarke's is one of them."

His father said, "I'm sure you're all well aware of the ramifications of what this could mean for us financially." Tension in the room grew like dandelions in the summer sun, and Dani felt like squirming in her chair.

Mr. Galloway coughed into his hand. "I'd rather not think of that right now."

"I don't blame you, but it is something we need to consider." Clearly perplexed, Harrison said, "These companies are well-established outfits we've been servicing for years. From the response I've had in the past, they have always been more than satisfied with our work." He ran his hand through his hair as he admitted, "I'm at a loss as to what the reason may be. I just hope this won't become a trend."

Dani could sense Harrison's concern, not only about the contracts but also for each employee of the company and the stability of their jobs. That made him appeal to her even more.

Mr. O'Malley shuffled his papers and cleared his throat. "Why don't we call some of the CEOs we know well and ask them why they didn't want to renew their contracts?" Several heads nodded in approval as he continued. "If that sheds any light on some type of common thread, then we should meet together again." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "As soon as possible."

Harrison agreed, and the tension knot in Dani's shoulders uncoiled as the topic was tabled and they moved onto the next point of business.

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Dani felt confident she had taken excellent minutes as the meeting drew to a close. As an added bonus, she could now put faces with the names she frequently saw on paper. She closed her laptop and placed it in the case.

That caught Mr. Galloway's attention. "Where's our charming Jillian today?"

Dani flinched. Did it only seem like everyone suddenly stopped what they were doing and stared at her? She stammered, "She's not feeling well."

"Ah, too bad...too bad..." Mr. Galloway shook his head in sympathy and snapped his briefcase shut.

Dani let out a silent sigh of relief as he turned and talked to Mr. Kelly, another board member. She didn't waste a moment and gathered up the rest of her things.

She *almost* made it to the door. The voice she had been admiring all morning called out, "Ah...excuse me, miss. Could you wait just a moment, please?"

Dani felt frozen in time. Being the only "miss" in the room, it would be very difficult to pretend he wasn't addressing her. Should she? Or even better yet, could she?

She pasted a stiff smile on her face and reluctantly turned around. "Yes?"

Harrison approached her in his quiet manner. "I'd like a copy of the minutes as soon as possible, please. Would you bring them to me when you're finished?"

Dani nodded. "Sure thing." She didn't wait to see if he needed anything else; she simply fled from the room toward the stairway. Forget the elevator. She didn't want to chance being detained any longer. *Besides*, she reasoned to herself, *perhaps if I used the stairs more often, I'd be in better shape.*

When Dani reached the safety of her office, she closed the door firmly behind her and leaned against it, more thankful than ever for a space of her own.

Then, with energy generated from nerves, she worked vigorously on her notes for about a half hour. She looked down at the last sentence she wrote and realized the minutes were all compiled. *Great. Rather than postponing the dreadful task of going back upstairs, I've expedited it.*

Dani procrastinated as long as she could. She fixed a few words here and there to make it sound better, responded to a few morning phone messages, and then finally printed the minutes. No longer able to put off the worrisome assignment, she headed over to Jillian. "Harrison—Mr. Beckman asked me to give him a copy of these minutes, so I've got to go run these upstairs. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Jillian waved her away in a nonchalant manner. "Harrison always likes to have a copy the same day. No rush. Take your time."

*I'd rather take my time over a good cup of strong coffee.* As she walked away, Dani thought, *Oh, Jillian, feel better soon. This is so out of my element!* Before she knew it, she found her feet planted outside Harrison's office. She stared at the brass nameplate on the door as she braced herself before lightly tapping twice on his door.

"Come in," Harrison's voice faintly called.

Dani hesitated a moment. Her palm felt moist and clammy on the cool doorknob. She took a deep breath and opened the door. The delightful woody aftershave Harrison wore greeted her like an unspoken challenge, inviting her to step into his masculine world. Only problem was, she hated challenges. She brushed those thoughts away like a pesky fly and glanced around the room. It suited him well. The warm masculine hues reminded her of his comforting voice.

Harrison cleared his throat, and her eyes went directly to him. His suit jacket was thrown over the back of his leather chair, and he had loosened his tie. Dani's pulse galloped at the sight of him. He was so

pleasant to look at, so assured—everything she wasn't. Suddenly, Dani realized she was staring, and her face felt warmer than the furnace Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had been thrown into.

Harrison smiled a clear, bright smile that would do a Colgate commercial proud. "Hi."

It took all the resolve she had, and then some, to pick up her lead feet and take two steps into the room. "Um, hi."

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Harrison watched this attractive but peculiar woman stand awkwardly by his door. It looked as if she wanted to hide behind the inter-personnel folder she was holding. "Come on in," he said as he left his desk to walk closer to her, hopefully to put her more at ease. "I promise not to bite."

That seemed to make it worse. Her rosy cheeks turned deathly pale against the frame of her long, dark blonde hair, which flowed down her back in silky strands.

Harrison resorted to grabbing for words, like the metal arm in a toy machine, hoping he'd come up with something. "You're really quick. Thanks for dropping the minutes off. I always like to review them while the meeting is still fresh in my mind."

She held out the folder with the notes and spoke so softly he had to bend down to catch her words. "I understand, Mr. Beckman."

Harrison took the folder from her extended hand. Her hand seemed so small, and he had the strangest desire to protect her from whatever inner battle she was fighting. "I'm sorry. I know you've been with our advertising firm for quite a while now, but until today, I've never met you." He added with a smile, "Forgive me, I'm horrible with names. What's yours again?"

Her eyes grew wide. With a nervous catch, she

said, “Daniella Duncan.”

“I like that name. May I call you Daniella?”

She shrugged. “Everybody calls me Dani.”

“I think I prefer Daniella.” Still studying her face, Harrison added, “Somehow, Dani doesn’t seem to fit you.”

“Oh, Dani fits me all right. It sounds short and fat.” Her hand clamped over her mouth, and her eyes grew even wider. Harrison’s heart nearly broke when she asked, “Did I really say that out loud?”

It had been drilled into his head since he was a boy never to talk to women about two things: their age and their weight. Now, what should he do with this hanging hot potato? Ignore it. “I didn’t hear anything if you didn’t.” He tried to continue with the previous introductions. “Everyone calls my father Mr. Beckman, so I go by Harrison.”

“Okay. I’ll try to remember that.” Daniella seemed to have reached her limit; she looked like a cat being chased by a mouse, desperate for escape. “Um, I really need to get back now, so...”

“Sure. Thanks again.” Harrison didn’t even know if she heard him as she turned and left with quick steps.

He stood quietly by his door and listened to the clickety-clack sound Daniella’s shoes made on the linoleum fade into a soft pitter-patter as she retreated down the hallway. He shut his door while contemplating the strange woman who was just in his office. *Pretty but strange...yes, definitely strange.* Finally, he shrugged his shoulders and went back to the tasks at hand.

## Chapter Two

Dani put the documents from the meeting into the board members' mailboxes and made her way to her office. Her phone rang before she could even sit down. "Hello, Dani Duncan speaking."

"Dani." Jillian wasted no time in preliminaries. "I don't know what's going on, but I've just been informed there will be another board meeting tomorrow. Do you know what's happening?"

Dani sank into her chair. Her thoughts drifted to Harrison and his concern for the company. Out of everyone in the boardroom, why was he the first person she thought of?

"Dani?"

"Oh, sorry. Guess I was daydreaming." She tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear and asked, "Did you get a chance to look over today's minutes yet?"

"Not in detail." Dani could hear Jillian rummaging through papers. "I skimmed over them, but I didn't see anything that would require another meeting."

"I don't think this is going to be public knowledge; it could unnecessarily alarm people."

"Got it," Jillian said.

"They've lost a few big contracts over the past few months. Young Mr. Beckman, I mean, Harrison was calling up some CEOs to see if there was a common link between the reasons they were not renewed."

"This isn't good." Jillian apparently had put two and two together as she said, "So, he must have discovered some important information for the

board.”

“That’s my guess.”

“Hm.”

Dani played with the cap of her pen. She couldn’t get Harrison off her mind. If anyone could get to the bottom of things, she was sure he could. “Jillian, if you don’t need me to type the minutes for you after the meeting tomorrow, would you keep me posted on the outcome?”

“I might be able to do one better than that. If this stomach of mine doesn’t settle, I’ll need to stay close to the bathroom. I might need you to cover for me again tomorrow.”

Dani took a quick breath. She’d get to see him again? Then the reality of what that meant hit her like a ton of bricks. *Oh, I can’t do that—not again.* Her comfortable world was falling apart bit by bit, and she felt helpless to stop it.

“No need to worry about it now, though. Let me see how things are going tomorrow, okay?”

Dani reluctantly agreed. What else was there to do?

“Come on, things weren’t that bad upstairs were they?”

Dani considered the meeting and realized it wasn’t as bad as she had thought it would be. She softly admitted, “No, but still...”

“All right, all right. We’ll see, okay?”

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The next morning, Dani walked as casually as possible over to Jillian’s desk. “So, how’s it going?”

As soon as the words were out, Dani knew acting was definitely not her thing. If Jillian didn’t pick up on her anxiety, she’d have to be blind.

Jillian laughed. “I’m feeling surprisingly well, thank you.”

Dani felt herself relax. “So, that means I’m off

the hook for the meeting this morning?”

Jillian tapped her pen on the desk and lifted an eyebrow. “I’ll make you a deal...you tell me why you came in here this morning dreading it so much, and then I’ll consider it.”

There was no way Dani would verbalize her interest in Harrison or her lack of courage and self-confidence to Jillian. After all, those qualities, or lack thereof, were as plain to see as the nose on her face. As for the other, she’d die of embarrassment if anyone found out. Instead, she said the first thing that came to mind. “Well, take Mr. Galloway for instance...”

Jillian waited in vain for Dani to finish her sentence. “Mr. Galloway?”

Dani looked over her shoulder then whispered, “Haven’t you ever noticed his cheek twitches when he’s concentrating on something? It gives me the heebie-jeebies!”

Jillian, in a most unladylike manner, laughed so hard she began to snort. Doubled over her chair, as far as she could go anyway, she tried to catch her breath. “You’re an absolute stitch.” The ringing phone inspired Jillian to breathe deeply as she reached for the receiver. “Okay, okay, you win...this time,” she said quickly to Dani before answering the call.

Dani waved her thanks and walked into her office.

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The board meeting concluded, and Jillian went directly to Dani’s office, closed the door behind her, and said, “Oh boy, this is not good. Harrison discovered the contracts have been bought out from under our feet. There’s a common thread linked to some big rival company, R&P. I don’t know how they do it. Somehow they find out what the previous

contracts had been sold for and are underbidding us at every turn.”

Dani scratched her head for a moment. “That’s really strange. Perhaps I’m being paranoid, but I was just looking for the Phillips account. I spent a good half hour or so, and I can’t find it anywhere.”

Jillian eyebrows rose. “Really? I had that folder out yesterday because I was working on the rewrites for the renewal. We’re putting our bid in on Thursday.” She opened the door and walked over to the filing room with Dani at her heels. “I know I put it right here...” She opened the drawer and quickly shuffled through the hanging files, but the folder was gone. “That makes no sense unless...”

“You think someone is taking the files?” Dani asked wide-eyed.

Jillian shrugged her shoulders. “I wonder. It’s a serious enough matter to consider the possibility. Let me think here for a moment.” She snapped her fingers. “I’ve got an idea, but it would be asking you to take on a very big, tedious job.”

“What is it?”

“I think we should take an inventory of our hard copy files.”

“That makes sense.”

“I’ve got a master list on my computer you can check against. That’s the only way we’ll know for sure if, and which, files are missing.”

Dani looked at the walls lined from ceiling to floor with filing cabinets and squared her shoulders. “Now this kind of job is right up my alley, even if it will take forever.”

Jillian headed for her computer. “I’ll start printing that list out right now. Then I’ll type up today’s minutes.” She looked over her shoulder and added, “If we do find anything missing, we need to tell Mr. Beckman or Harrison right away. Actually, I think we should mention our suspicions to them even now.”

“Don’t you think it may be a little soon for that?”

“Perhaps, but better to be safe than sorry.”

Without hesitation, Jillian picked up the phone and dialed directly to Harrison’s office.

He picked up on the second ring. “Harrison here.”

“Hi, this is Jillian.”

Dani couldn’t make out Harrison’s words, but she could hear his deep rumbling voice answer something in reply. Did her palms feel sweaty because of the implications of the missing file, or was it merely the feelings he was able to stir up in the pit of her stomach? Instead of opening that can of worms, Dani concentrated on what Jillian was saying. “I think Dani has found something worth mentioning to you. While we were in the meeting, she noticed the Phillips account file is gone.” She paused and listened to Harrison then said, “Yes, I know...sure. We’ll see you in a few.”

As soon as Jillian replaced the receiver, Dani asked, “What did he say?”

“He’s coming down to talk to you.”

Dani sat down with a thud in Jillian’s chair. As if winded, she said, “He is?”

Jillian looked at her and narrowed her eyes. “Dani, you’re not...you couldn’t be falling for the boss’s son, could you?”

Dani was quick to shake her head in denial. “He’d never give me a second glance.”

Jillian didn’t have time to reply before the elevator door opened, and Harrison strode out and walked directly to Dani. He glanced into her small office and asked, “Is this where you work?”

Dani mutely nodded.

“May we use your office, then?”

The thought of the small confining space rattled her nerves. “Um, sure.”

“Good.” He walked with a confident stride into the office. Dani almost bumped into him when he

stopped abruptly. He turned around to face her and said with a twinkle in his eye, "Well, this is rather, shall I say, cozy. Only one chair."

Dani craned her neck back to see his face. She was never more conscious of her five foot one stature. *Good grief. He must be over six feet tall.*

"Perhaps we'd be more comfortable in my office?" Harrison offered.

Not wasting a second, Dani scooted out of the small room. "Sounds good to me. That way, Jillian can come too."

"Fine," he said to her retreating back. "We need to check how secure our files are kept. Jillian will be a help."

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Harrison offered the women chairs with the wave of his hand. "Please make yourselves comfortable."

Much to Dani's dismay, rather than sitting behind his desk, he pulled out the chair and scooted it around the desk until he was next to her. He grabbed a legal pad and pen off his desk and sat down. At that moment, she knew he had something in common with her dad and brother...the clean, crisp sent of Old Spice. *If he wants me to be able think, a little more distance would be nice.*

Harrison struck a pose with his pen. "So, what have we got?"

A *crush* was on the tip of her tongue. Thankfully, Jillian saved her by going into the details of their search. When she was done speaking, Harrison rested his head against the back of the chair and tapped his chin with his pen. "I think we need to make some changes in our operating policies to tighten security."

Dani swallowed hard. She had several ideas that might help, and on one hand, she wanted to say

something so he didn't think she was a space cadet; on the other hand, if she opened her mouth would it only serve to remove all doubt? She decided to play it safe by asking, "Do you have any suggestions?"

He looked at her for one second—one minute—or was it an eternity? She squirmed under his intense gaze until she felt like she would crack. He blinked and then blinked again as if seeing her for the first time. "We're going to have to keep the records under lock and key."

Jillian was right on board. "I agree. I already mentioned this to Dani, but I think we should take inventory."

"Excellent suggestion. The moment anything looks suspicious, let me or my father know."

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Dani had worked with meticulous care for the past month and a half on the inventory. If she was not in her office, or covering a board meeting, she could be found in the filing room. Finally, the last folder was checked off and her task ended. Dani came out of the room with her hand resting on her lower back.

"You look pretty today," Dani said as she admired Jillian's pink floral maternity top.

"Thanks." Jillian beamed at the praise. "I'll only be able to wear this for four and a half more months."

"Is time going fast?"

Jillian grimaced. "About as fast as it felt when you were bending over those bottom drawers." She rested her hand on her stomach. "I can't wait to meet this little one."

"Tell me about it." Dani rubbed her back. "Well, do you want the good news or bad?"

"Good news, please."

"I'm finished. We should celebrate."

“That is good news. How many files did you find missing all together?” Jillian asked.

Dani looked down at her master copy. “There were the four that Harrison had mentioned at my first board meeting, plus three others.”

Jillian shook her head. “Who do you think took them?”

Dani shrugged her shoulders. She wished she could solve the mystery, but she still had no clue.

“What’s the bad news?”

“That *was* the bad news. We’re no closer to finding the culprit who took the files now than when we started.”

“Well”—Jillian shrugged—“the disappearing of office files has stopped for the time being. No one would dare try to steal any of them now.”

Dani wasn’t so sure. “Who knows? If they’re serious enough, I don’t think a lock will stop them. I made an appointment for later today to give Mr. Beckman the final account tally.”

Jillian shivered. “Oh, let’s stop talking about this. It makes me nervous.” She looked toward the file room and then turned back. “Hey, didn’t you say something about celebrating the close of your project? Let’s go get a cup of hot chocolate.”

Dani looked at her watch. “I need to be back by two.”

“No problem.”

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Dani was all set to meet Mr. Beckman. She waited outside his office, flipping through one of the magazines off the polished end table. Harrison’s voice startled her, and she jumped a little. Over the past weeks, she had seen Harrison off and on. She was beginning to feel slightly more relaxed around him, something she would have never dreamed possible. Now, her heart didn’t pound in fear and

shyness but something different. Something exciting, expectant.

“Daniella, my father called and asked if I could meet you. Unfortunately, he’s been detained.”

“Oh...” She picked up her folder and wondered what she should do. “Should I talk to him tomorrow?”

Harrison flashed her a bright smile. “No need. Come with me and show me what you have there.” He strode to the plaid couch under the window where they could see the entire empty lobby. “Since no one’s here, this should be fine.” He offered her a seat on the couch with a wave of his hand.

Dani visualized in her mind’s eye the few remaining inches of space there would be after she sat down, and her mouth grew dry. Harrison, obviously clueless to her discomfort, asked, “Are there any new files missing?”

“Just the seven I told your father about as we found them.” Dani, still standing, handed Harrison the paper from her folder. “This is the complete list of account names which are missing.”

“Daniella, please sit down.” Harrison shook his head as he looked over the list. “This is amazing.” He offered her a small grin and added, “And so are you. Thank you for all your hard work.”

Dani’s face grew warm at the compliment. “It was no trouble.” Not near as much trouble as finding her way out of the shell she’d been in her entire life. That old saying, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure? Well, the only ounce she held was good intentions. So where, she wondered, did that leave the cure?

### Chapter Three

The Pennsylvania countryside always held a fascination for Harrison, but today he hardly noticed how winter was fading into spring on the deep green fields or the blue skies over the golf course. Something else weighed on his mind.

“Dad.” Harrison paced back and forth behind his father’s golf cart. “How much do you know about this R&P Marketing Firm?”

Simon’s club hung in the air as Harrison waited for an answer.

“Dad?”

Simon managed to whack the tee rather than the ball. “R&P stands for Rice and Peters.”

That name sounded vaguely familiar, but why? “Rice...Rice, where have I heard that name before?”

Mr. Beckman gave up on the game and ran his hand through his hair, saying, “Perhaps your mother?”

“That’s right.” Harrison snapped his fingers as the puzzle pieces began to fit together. “Isn’t he the man she was engaged to before she met you?”

“It shouldn’t surprise me that you remember. You always were one for details.”

Harrison’s mind wandered. “Do you think he’s holding a grudge against you about Mom or something?”

“I don’t need to think anything. I know it for a fact. It’s been this way ever since we were in college. Only in the past, he’s never gone this far in trying to destroy our company. We’ve got a leak from the inside, son. He’s behind it. Of that I’m sure. What we need to do is find who it is and soon.” Another golf

cart neared. "Let's finish this conversation later, somewhere a little more private. In the meantime, tell me what you know about Daniella Duncan."

"Daniella Duncan?" Harrison worked to hide his grin. Telling his father about her wouldn't be hard to do, because since they met, she never strayed far from his mind. "She's a bit of an odd duck, but I like her. She's a good employee. Why do you ask?"

"Do you think we can trust her?"

"Without a doubt." Harrison couldn't imagine anything dishonest in this soft-spoken woman.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm quite confident."

With a satisfied nod, Simon said, "What would you think about her traveling with you to New Jersey?"

Harrison held back his surprise. His father was a real go-getter, whereas Daniella was so quiet he was surprised his father noticed her at all. Still, the idea held appeal. There was no doubt about it, she was shy—painfully so. Perhaps he could help her. "I think it's a great idea."

"Good. It's settled then. I'll speak with her and see if she's willing."

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"Dani...look...look...!"

Dani deposited the hot cup of tea from the break room on Jillian's desk. "What?" She glanced at Jillian's rounding tummy. "I don't see anything."

Jillian eyes grew round with disbelief. "You couldn't see that kick? I think if the baby was playing football, it could have made a field goal." She stared off into space. "It's a boy. It's got to be, with a kick like that."

Dani snickered. "What, like no girls are good athletes?"

"Hm, I guess you've got a point there." Jillian

sighed and picked up her tea. “And to think I still have four more months of this.” Totally changing the subject, she blew off the steam rising from her cup and said, “Dani, I know these past few months have been hard for you.”

“Well, I have done a few new things that I thought I’d never do.” Dani thought about all that had changed in a relatively short period of time. Her job role had been expanded, she was trying to exercise at least semi-regularly, and this past weekend, she even cleaned out her room at home. Granted it took her three days, but it was done. Yes, things were looking up. “It hasn’t been too bad.”

“You’ve done great. You’ve handled the front desk, covered meetings, and such, just like a pro.” With a smile, she added, “I just wanted to say thank you.”

Dani brushed off Jillian’s thanks. “I guess I’m doing all right, but you do it a lot better.”

Jillian’s interoffice pager went off. “Hold on a sec,” she said to Dani, as she picked up the shiny black phone. “Jillian here.” Her eyebrows lifted higher the longer she listened. After what seemed like a lifetime, Jillian said, “Yes, sir. I agree. I think she would be the best one for the assignment.” After another long pause, she said, “I’ll do that. She’ll be there in about five minutes. Thank you.”

Jillian hung up the phone and turned to Dani. A challenge sparked in the depths of eyes. “An adventure is awaiting you upstairs. Mr. Beckman would like to see you.”

Dani’s eyebrow shot up in surprise. “Why does he want to see me?”

Dimple flashing, Jillian teased her. “Uh-uh. I’m not telling. You need to find out firsthand.” With an impulsive gesture, she hugged Dani, then shooed her off. “Go get ‘em, girl!”

Dani was totally confused. She rolled her eyes and thought, *Women and their hormones!* “Now,

what's gotten into you?"

Jillian gave Dani a little shove toward the elevator. "Sorry, no time to chat now. But when you get back...well, let me put it to you this way, I'm going to try to clear our calendar for the rest of the day, and we're going out for a late tea or coffee. We're going to salvage what we can out of this day." The elevator door opened, and she ushered Dani in. "See you in a while."

Dani pushed the gray button to the executive third floor suite. The doors swished closed and the bell dinged. She was still trying to grasp what was happening when the elevator door opened. Mr. Beckman's personal secretary, Mrs. Potts, was waiting. She wore a bright and friendly smile that matched her cheerful, pale yellow suit. "Hello, Daniella."

"Hi."

"Mr. Beckman is waiting for you in his office." She motioned for Dani to follow her. "Come right this way."

Dani wondered what this meeting was all about as she entered his office. Mr. Beckman stood up from behind his desk and offered her one of the leather wingback chairs in front of him. She sat down gingerly, as if it were an egg carton rather than a firm seat. Mr. Beckman took his time straightening up some documents that were on his desk. After what seemed like an eternity, he looked at Dani with a direct gaze and spoke. "I have a proposal for you. My son feels quite confident you can be trusted."

Her face grew warm. Harrison was talking about her to his father? What could that mean?

"Before I go into the details, I want your word that you will not make any decisions until you've had time to think things over." Dani nodded in agreement and licked her lips as he continued. "I am pleased with the work you have done. Especially in the last few months. When you are delegated new

responsibilities, it is not always easy.” With an encouraging smile, he added, “It has not escaped my attention that you’ve handled them well, showing great efficiency and skill.”

The growing tension Dani felt while sitting across the large mahogany desk from him eased as she realized Mr. Beckman was pleased with her work. Greatly relieved, Dani almost giggled as a clear image of a child sitting in the principal’s office popped into her head. She fought to maintain a straight face. “Thank you, Mr. Beckman.”

Mr. Beckman waved her thanks away. “What I’m proposing now is quite different than anything you’ve done before.” He seemed to consider his words while he gazed out the window for a moment. Then, without preamble, he abruptly turned back to her. “You know all the ins and outs of the Quinn & Jones company. You’ve been involved in all meetings concerning them to date, and you have been solely responsible for all their files. You’ve also had personal phone contact with many of their employees in the last several months.”

*How would this change my current responsibilities?* Dani wondered.

Mr. Beckman continued. “Harrison is going to New Jersey to assess the possibility of a merger with our two companies. He needs a right arm. Many of our board members agreed you would be the best person to handle this for us.”

Dani’s eyes grew large as what he said sank in. *Harrison and...* “Me? New Jersey?”

He nodded then said, “Yes, and I’m giving Harrison full responsibility of deciding if we should partner with Quinn & Jones. They have the potential to secure the Harriet contract, which both of our companies have been working on together. Not only do they need this substantially large contract, but I’m sure you are well aware that landing a large contract would be welcomed here,

too. Without your knowledge and skills, they could lose the chance of getting it. As a favor to the company, I am asking you to consider taking on this project.”

Dani’s mind churned with questions and conflicting emotions. Her heart did funny things as she wondered what it would be like to work so closely with Harrison. She needed some space and time to sort through things. “I appreciate the offer, but I do need to think about this.”

Mr. Beckman smiled. “That’s all I wanted to hear.” He picked up a thick packet of papers. “This is the complete job description, including all the little details, such as the length of the project and things like that. I want you to take it home and look it over.”

Reaching out her hand, Dani took the packet he offered.

Mr. Beckman said, “We’ll be in touch.”

Dani turned to walk away, saying nothing about the thoughts swirling in her head. Suddenly, her secretarial mind took over as she turned back and said, “Thank you for considering me capable of this type of job. I will look these over and get back to you.”

Mr. Beckman dismissed her with a nod of his head and returned to the work waiting for him on his desk.

## Chapter Four

*Ding.*

The elevator doors opened and Dani stepped out in a daze.

Jillian looked up from her desk and called out to her, "Are you okay?"

Dani nodded, and Jillian followed her to the small office. As soon as she closed the door, Jillian asked, "How'd it go?"

"I take it you know what his proposal was?"

Jillian nodded. "He told me on the phone before you went upstairs. I think he's absolutely right, too. You are the perfect assistant for this job."

Dani wasn't as convinced. However, she was sure her friend would try to remedy that, here and now, if she didn't say something. "Are we still on for that coffee?"

"Oh, sure. I just need to make one more phone call and I'll be ready." Before opening the door, Jillian looked back over her shoulder. "Give me about ten minutes."

"That's fine."

As soon as the door closed again, Dani breathed a sigh of relief. She crossed over to her desk, put the proposal down, and flopped into her chair. She leaned forward and rested her head in her hands. *What's wrong with me? Most people, if in my shoes right now, would be elated. And here I am...rather than jumping at this opportunity, I am scared stiff.* Dani felt the beginning pangs of a migraine. She picked up her heavy head, reached back for her purse sitting on the filing cabinet, and started rummaging through it to find her medicine. After

locating it, she opened the bottle and tipped two small tablets into her palm. Alarmed by a quick tap on the door, she looked up to see Jillian.

“That didn’t take as long as I thought it would. I’m all set if you...” Dani put the medicine bottle down, and Jillian said, “Oh, bother. Is it one of those awful headaches again?”

Dani reached for her water. “It’s a migraine.” After washing the pills down, she said, “It’s not too bad yet. I’m hoping the medicine will kick in before the severe pain does.”

Jillian looked disappointed. “Does this mean you’re not up for a cup of tea?”

Dani really didn’t feel much like going. She’d much rather think the situation through by herself, but she didn’t have the heart to tell that to Jillian. “Well, I think I’ll be okay for a while. We just won’t stay too long.”

Jillian nodded. “It’s a deal. Let’s get going, then, shall we?”

Dani sighed and picked up the thick folder to take home with her. “Do you want to just take separate cars and meet there?”

Jillian shrugged her shoulders. “Are you okay to drive?”

Dani couldn’t help but chuckle. “You’re going to be a good mom.”

Jillian’s face grew a becoming shade of pink that almost perfectly matched the favorite maternity top she wore.

“I’ll be all right.” Dani turned off the office light. “It’s just around the corner.”

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Dani held the door as Jillian walked into the coffee shop. The little bell jingled as the door closed behind Dani.

Dani loved the different coffeepots from around

the world decorating the deep windowsills. Instantly, she knew she had made the right decision to come. She appreciated the relaxing atmosphere of the quaint shop and felt herself calm at once as the aroma of fresh coffee greeted her. The women placed their orders, fixed their hot drinks, and settled into one of the many nooks and crannies with a table set for two.

Jillian asked, "Well, what do you think about the job offer?"

"I don't know what to think yet." Dani stirred her spoon around, watching the caramel color swirl in her cup. "Mr. Beckman didn't go into many details. That's all in the folder he gave me."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but by the tone of your voice, you don't seem too thrilled about this opportunity." Jillian tipped her head to the side. "What's holding you back?"

"I'm such a homebody. I love the open spaces here in Pennsylvania. New Jersey is so busy and crowded."

Jillian's eyebrow rose.

Dani put her spoon down and said, "But I guess you can tell that's really not the issue. To start with, what would it be like, traveling with Harrison in a car for three hours? I'm nervous enough around him as it is."

"So I've noticed." Jillian chuckled. "And that's an opportunity many girls would enjoy."

"Jillian." Dani put her elbows on the table and pushed her hair back. Whether from her headache or just from it being bottled up inside her for so long, she would never know, but she blurted, "I need help. I'm twenty-six, and I still live at home with my parents. I never date or even go out for that matter. I'm tired of living like a turtle, but I don't know how to stop. I'm self-conscious of my weight and how short I am. I feel like everyone is always watching me, when in reality it's more likely that no one

notices me at all. I'm going to end up an old maid."

"Oh, Dani." Jillian reached across the table and squeezed her hand. "I don't think you're right on either account. People do notice you, but not because of your stature. It's because of who you are on the inside."

"You sound like my mom again."

Jillian chuckled. "Well, I'm not taking that as an insult. She must be a very wise woman."

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By the time they finished their tea, Dani's migraine was subsiding. She didn't want to chance it, however, so she decided to go home and rest for a while. But as her head hit the pillow, questions about the approaching project popped into her mind, one after the other. Unable to relax, she tossed and turned. Finally, she had enough.

She threw her feet over the side of the bed and sat up. *At this rate, I might as well get up and look over the job proposal again.* Dani pulled the blanket off the bed and headed into the living room with her bundle. She settled into the couch, snuggled her favorite cozy green blanket around her, and grabbed the folder off the coffee table.

An hour and a half later, absorbed in its contents, she felt her stomach grumble. She glanced at the clock on the wall and was amazed at the time. *Mom will be home any minute. I better put this away so I don't get the one hundred-question riot act.* As she tucked the folder under some magazines, she heard the rattle of the front door.

Dani went out to greet her. "Hi, Mom."

"What are you doing home so early, dear?"

"Migraine. Jillian let me come home a little early."

Mom's forehead creased. "Oh, sweetheart, I was hoping that since you hadn't had one for so long,

they were gone.”

“It’s not real bad this time. I think I would have been fine to work the whole day. It’s just that I never quite know how quickly this medicine will work.”

Mom hung up her coat then turned back to Dani and said, “Well, if you’re feeling better, I’ll go fix us a nice hot dinner.” She walked toward the kitchen, while saying over her shoulder, “Your father is not going to be home for dinner. Your brother got a deer earlier this morning, so they’re over at his place doing the guy thing.”

“Really?” Dani followed her mother into the kitchen. “How big was the deer?”

“The poor thing. I think Tom said that it was probably only about a year and a half. He said it was a two-pointer or something like that.” She took the chicken breast out of the refrigerator and asked, “Why do guys like to hunt, anyway?”

Dani merely shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know.” She tried to hide a smile as she thought about her parents. Because her dad and brothers loved the outdoors, Mom tried to pretend she hated it, just to be able to walk to the beat of her own drum. Dani wanted to steer clear of the whole thing, so as she watched her mom wash the chicken breast, she asked, “What can I do to help?”

Mom smiled. “Just go rest on the couch for a while. I’ll have this done in a jiffy.”

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The sunshine had been calling to Dani all morning through the office window. It was no surprise to see many other employees had the same idea of eating lunch out on the picnic tables surrounding the large oak tree.

When she realized she would have to share a table, Dani was tempted to turn around and go back into her office and eat her rice cakes in peace.

Harrison, standing behind her, said in her ear, “Are you looking for a place to sit, Daniella?”

Startled, Dani turned around and saw he held a lunch tray in his hand. “Oh, um, I was just thinking that perhaps I should go back inside.”

“No need for that.” Harrison pointed with his chin. “It looks like there are a few empty places over at that table. Come on.”

Harrison walked in front of her, and Dani found her feet propelling her forward as she wondered why she always wound up in these kinds of situations. By the time she reached the table, Harrison had already greeted everyone with a friendly hello. “Ah, and here is Daniella.”

Dani did her best to meet each person’s eye for a brief moment as they said ‘hi’ before she put her leg over the bench. *Oh, please don’t let the bench sag as I sit down!*

If it did, no one seemed to notice as they returned to their previous conversations. However, it was enough. She made up her mind then and there that she would start exercising at least once a day—every day. Apparently, three times a week wasn’t enough. She needed to do something about her weight. Granted, there were a lot of people much heavier than she was, but she was tired of how her weight made her feel. It was time to make a change, and by golly, she would!

Harrison opened up his bottle of iced tea and said, “I’m glad I noticed you coming out here for lunch. I’ve been wanting to talk to you.”

“You have?” Dani’s attention was quickly diverted off her own personal problems. She lowered her voice. “More trouble?”

“No, no. It’s nothing like that.” He added a mayonnaise packet to his turkey sandwich, which nearly made her drool. Thankfully, his voice removed the temptation to stare at his food. “I heard my father spoke to you about going to New Jersey

with me.”

Dani gulped and wondered how she was going to be able to eat a bite of rice cake. Harrison might be the best diet tool ever. “Oh, that...um, yes. He did.”

“What do you think?”

*Think, think...* “Oh, right. Well, I guess I was flattered he thought me worthy of going.”

Harrison beamed. “I agree with him.”

Dani’s stomach dropped to her toes and then grew queasy as her stress level reached the breaking point. She shut her eyes tightly for a moment and then blurted, “I don’t know if I should go.”

“Why?”

Softly, she muttered, “I’m not very good with meeting and speaking to people in person.”

“I think you’ll do fine.”

Dani felt like rolling her eyes. “You don’t understand.”

Harrison looked into her eyes for a full minute.

Dani lowered her gaze.

“I understand more than you realize.” Harrison lifted her chin with one finger until she looked at him again before he continued. “I admire your honesty, and I thank you for sharing your concern with me. However, you are indeed the one I would like to have go with me.”

Dani wondered *how* she was supposed to respond to that—if she could even respond at all. She wasn’t sure if it was his touch or his words doing funny things to her heart.

Silence stretched for a while. “Do you need a little space to think about what I’ve said?”

Dani felt a twinge of guilt as she realized he was offering to leave the table, but she openly admitted, “If you wouldn’t mind, I would.”

“Not at all.” He smiled as he picked up his tray. “But please think about it some more before you make a decision.”

“I will.” Softly, she added, “Thank you,

Harrison.”

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Monday morning came, and the world looked a little brighter. Over the weekend, she had taken a walk in the park and had begun a new routine of stretching for twenty minutes after breakfast with an exercise tape. Dani knew she didn't look much different—yet. But, the scale said she was down five pounds, and she felt better about herself than she had in a long, long time. Besides that, she was eager to get to work to tell Jillian and Mr. Beckman her decision. It was high time to take another step toward her goal of change.

Dani was about to open the door, but Jillian beat her to it from the inside. With flushed cheeks, Jillian grabbed Dani's arm and pulled her into the building. “Come with me where we can speak with a bit more privacy.”

As they walked toward her office, Dani asked, “What? What is it?”

Right after the door closed behind her, Jillian started in. “I had a very interesting morning. In fact, so much so, I feel like I should be able to go home now.”

Dani offered Jillian her chair and said, “Why don't you start at the beginning?”

Jillian rubbed her fingers across her forehead. “I came in early this morning because I wanted to catch up on some work that I let go on Friday. When I got here, I was surprised to see our department's filing office lights on.”

“The lights were on?”

“Yeah. I didn't think much of it at first. That was, until I went to the door and saw Sally putting some folders in an attaché case. I had no idea what she was doing here so early, but I never thought...well, anyway I asked her what she was

doing. It was apparent she hadn't heard me come in because she nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw me."

"What was she going to do with the files?" Dani gestured with her hands for Jillian to continue.

"Dani, don't you understand? She's the leak."

Dani's eyes bugged. "Sally?"

"To make a long story short, she's been paid to take the files and gave them to R&P."

Dani's mouth hung open. In disbelief, she said, "I had started to assume like you, that we weren't going to have any more problems with missing files."

Jillian nodded her head. "Yep, it's true. Apparently, this was her first attempt since the door has been kept locked."

Dani felt completely shocked, clear to her toes. "I wonder how she got involved in this mess."

"I don't know, and I wouldn't have believed it either if I hadn't seen it myself." Standing up, Jillian walked to the door. "Sally's in with Mr. Beckman now. It doesn't look real good for her."

In an absentminded way, Dani said, "No, I wouldn't think so."

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After making sure it was okay with Mrs. Potts, Dani tapped on Mr. Beckman's door.

Mr. Beckman's brisk voice called out, "Come in."

Dani popped her head around the doorframe. "Would this be a convenient time to talk?"

"Of course, come in. I could use some good news after a morning like this one. You *are* bringing me good news, are you not?"

Dani half wondered, had she previously decided not to accept the job, if she would have changed her mind at this moment, just to avoid conflict. Thankfully, she didn't need to dwell on that thought. "Yes, I would like to accept your offer."

“Stupendous!” He stood up and came around his desk to shake her hand. “I’ll look into a temporary replacement from the pool to handle the days you’ll be gone from time to time.”

“Thank you. That would be a great help to the rest of the staff downstairs.”

“Shall we go tell Harrison of your decision?”

Dani’s heart lurched. As much as she craved some things to be different in her life, change didn’t come easy. She knew she was being a chicken, but it had been an emotional morning. “If you don’t mind, sir, I think I should head back downstairs. The staff is pretty shaken by the news of what happened this morning with Sally.”

“Yes, I suppose they would be. Well then, by all means, you go right ahead. I’d be more than happy to speak to Harrison on your behalf.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“No, it is I who thank you.”

## Chapter Five

Dani found herself in the car sitting next to Harrison en route to New Jersey and wondering if the past two weeks had been merely a dream. She pinched herself, just to make sure. Harrison kept up an easy flow of interesting conversation, making Dani feel at ease. Surprisingly, the intimate atmosphere of the car didn't make her feel self-conscious; rather, she felt very comfortable, as if she were taking a drive with an old friend. It didn't take long for her to discover that they had many interests in common outside of their work. The biggest was their mutual love for cars. Since she was the only daughter in the family, Dani had been taught by her brothers to look at many details and features of each car they passed on the road. It was a family game they had played ever since she was a little girl. Each sibling would try to beat the others at naming the make and model of the car as they drove by.

Another thing they had in common was they both had brothers. Harrison was one of three boys. They spent a good half hour or so simply talking about their siblings. Dani, very comfortable conversing with Harrison by this point, could no longer hold her curiosity in check and asked, "So, what's it like to be the son of Beckman Inc.'s owner?"

Harrison shrugged. "It's got its good and bad points."

She watched his profile and wondered what that meant. "Care to expound upon that?"

"It's not always easy trying to follow in your father's footsteps."

"What do you mean?"

“Sometimes it’s real stressful. Dad has a different way of going about things than I do.” He looked out his side window and murmured, “I know he wants what is best for me. I just wish he’d give me a little more space.”

Dani nodded her head in agreement and admitted, “I can relate to that. My mom is great at trying to organize my life.”

Harrison grinned. “Some parents think that’s their job.”

Dani didn’t want to talk about their parents. She was more interested in finding out what made Harrison tick. “Do you like your job, Harrison?”

“Yes, when you ask me point blank like that, I’d have to say that I do. The work is very fast-paced, once the ball gets rolling. It’s almost as if it energizes me. Don’t misunderstand; it has its slow times as well.” He looked off in space and dreamed out loud. “I don’t know, perhaps one day I’ll break free.”

“You mean do something different?”

“No, not really. I want to have a company of my own.” Harrison looked stunned at his own confession. “I don’t know why I told you that. I’ve never told another soul that before.”

“I’m honored then.” Dani pretended to button her lips. “And mum’s the word with me.”

Harrison chuckled at the face she was making.

After riding for about fifteen minutes in companionable silence, Dani found herself daydreaming as she stared out her window. She pulled herself out of her musing when she realized that Harrison had asked her if she went to church anywhere. Dani cleared her throat. “Yes, my family and I go every week.”

Harrison smiled his friendly, easygoing smile. “That’s great. I wish I could say the same for my family. Just my brother Sam and I go.”

Dani thought he wasn’t going to say any more as

silence once again descended like a comfortable blanket in the car.

Still watching the road closely, he suddenly admitted, "Sam came home one day to tell my whole family he met Jesus." Harrison shook his head at the memory and smiled. "What you need to realize is that Sam was always the different one in the family. We all thought it was just another one of his crazy phases. But, from that day on, his life really started to change. It was slow, but steady."

Harrison's hands drummed on the steering wheel as he reminisced. "I couldn't figure out what was making him so different. He was actually turning out pretty likable for the first time in our lives. Then one day I got tired of him asking me to check out this group he had been going to at our high school, and I agreed to go with him." With a snicker, he said, "I would have never guessed in a million years I would find myself in some sort of religious club. It sure wasn't my scene. But once I got there, I saw they were just regular kids having fun together."

He glanced over at Dani to make sure he had her attention. "They played a lot of games, ate good food, and then had a real short Bible devotion. Much to my surprise, I ended up really liking the club. After about four months or so, some of the things they were talking about really made me think. The biggest issue they brought up in my mind was the question, 'Do you know where you would go if you were to die right now?' That one made me sit and do some hard contemplating on my life." The muscle in his jaw twitched back and forth as he clenched his teeth. After a minute, he said, "I realized then that 'Harrison' wasn't as great as I once thought. I mean, I wasn't a really bad kid or anything, but I knew I didn't deserve to go to heaven, if there really was such a place. The fact was, death scared me. Know what I mean?"

Dani squirmed. This was uncharted waters to her. Of course, she had gone to church her whole life, but it was never anything this personal. She was very comfortable thinking there was a God up there somewhere, that was, as long as He didn't affect her life here and now. She felt an odd combination of confusion, curiosity, and unease all at the same time. However, she didn't have much time to dwell on it because she knew Harrison was waiting for her to say something. Softly, she said, "I think everyone is a little afraid of dying."

Harrison considered her statement for a minute and tilted his head to the side as he acknowledged her comment. "It's different now, though. I'm no longer afraid of what will happen. I guess sometimes I do wonder about the 'actual' process of dying, but I know there is a God, who lives in Heaven, and I am sure as a child of God when I die, I will be in Heaven with Him." Harrison slowed the car as they approached an amber light. After stopping, he suddenly turned to her. "How about you?" He rested his full attention on Dani.

She held her breath for a minute and then slowly exhaled. *This is getting way too heavy for me.* She couldn't help the sigh of relief escaping her lips as the light turned green. Pointing out the windshield, she said, "Green light."

Harrison quickly shifted his intense gaze back to the road as he put his foot on the accelerator.

Dani tried to think quickly. Did she have that kind of assurance in the afterlife? Not really. She said vaguely, "Some people, who were on the brink of death, say they saw a bright light." She shrugged her shoulders. "I guess it's something we won't really know about until it happens. Uh, do you think we could stop at the next rest area?" Sheepishly, she added, "Nature is calling."

"Oh, sure thing. Sorry, I should have asked you a few miles ago at the last service area."

Dani smiled, thankful they were off that intense topic. "It's not a big emergency. I think I should have laid low on the coffee this morning though."

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After they settled back into the car and were once again on the road, Harrison started talking about Quinn & Jones. "I'm hoping by our visit there today, we will know clearly if we should partner with this company or not."

Dani, extremely interested, turned her body into the seat so she could see him better. "Would you mind me asking why your father is considering this partnership?"

"Dad's been wanting to expand for quite awhile now. Many of the members on the board of directors advised him to merge with a smaller company. So finally, after a lot of research and looking for just the right fit, they found Quinn & Jones."

"What's in it for Quinn & Jones?"

Harrison laughed. "You're not afraid to ask questions are you?"

Some of her shyness returned. "I'm sorry if I'm out of line. I'm usually not so nosy."

"No, no. You're fine. I'd rather have you asking me these questions than guessing at answers," Harrison assured her. "Anyway, this merger would simply mean a greater chance for Quinn & Jones to secure larger contacts."

Dani scrunched up her eyebrows as she tried to understand. "Do you think partnering with a smaller company is worth the potential problems? I mean, isn't there a chance they could pull Beckman's down?"

"There are always risks when you're involved in the business world. But to answer your question, yes, I do think it's worth it. Dad needs fresh perspective and ideas."

“Why? Things are going well on a whole, aren’t they?”

Rather than answering that, Harrison threw her off guard by asking, “What do you think about change?”

“Change?” She didn’t know how to answer. What was he really asking? There had been so many changes over the last few months and still many things she would want to be different if she could, like her weight—after all, that was one of her goals. On the other hand, she liked things to stay as they were, comfortable like. For example, her office.

Harrison nodded. “Most people cringe at the idea of needing to change something. But if a company wants to stay in the forefront of the industry, that is exactly what they need to be willing to do.”

“Oh, that kind of change.” Dani cleared her throat. “Well, I guess I’m like most people then. I’m not a big fan of the word.”

“Hm.” Harrison stole a quick peek at her before looking at the road once again. “But if we don’t get some new ideas, Beckman’s is in jeopardy of growing stale, and that is something we can’t afford to do. It’s a fine line to walk. You need to be willing to try new things and employ new techniques but never put your integrity, or the company’s, on the line.”

Dani stared at the shiny black dashboard. “I never even thought about that. But are you serious? Do you really think that’s a danger for Beckman’s?”

“Let me put it this way, Quinn & Jones is small, but it shows great potential. We want, no, we need this to be a win-win situation.” Dani’s eyes grew large as Harrison continued. “I’m confident that with our help, they will be able to get the Harriet contract.”

Dani nodded as she thought about the task ahead of her. She looked at Harrison’s large, capable hands resting on the steering wheel and thought, *If*

*anyone can pull these companies together, he can.*

Harrison slowly blew the air out of his cheeks. "I just wish we hadn't been on the losing end here for the past month. I'm counting on Sally's word that nothing got out on the Harriet account. Now that we know where the leak was, I'm hoping we'll be able to get things back on the right track."

Dani agreed. "It was so unfortunate. Sally seemed to really like her job."

"Hm."

"Hadn't she been with the company for something like five years? I wonder why she did it."

Harrison sighed and rubbed his hand behind his neck as if to ease out the tension. "I don't know. Money does strange things to people. On the bright side though, now we know this R&P Co. is looking for blood. Our lawyers are having them investigated. Like I said, hopefully things will be put to rights before they hurt any more companies."

Dani was still very curious. She had the feeling there was more to this. Like the skin of an onion, money was only the outer layer. "I know R&P stood to gain a lot financially with the files of information on our company's contracts, but do you think there may have been some other reason?"

Harrison's face visibly flinched. "There is." He took a quick glance at Dani and added, "But it's confidential and I gave my word. Besides, sometimes things are better left unsaid, if you know what I mean."

Dani's heart went out to Harrison. She read his body language loud and clear to say he was uncomfortable. Since she knew the feeling well, she let it go. "I guess so."

Harrison gave her a smile. "If and when the person whose confidence I hold is ready to speak, I promise I'll tell you what I can." Downshifting the car into second gear, he turned into the Quinn & Jones parking lot. He also switched gears in their

conversation. “In the meantime, let’s just pray this partnership is meant to be.”

Prayer was the furthest thing from her mind as butterflies began to dance in her stomach at the prospect of meeting new people.

## Chapter Six

Harrison opened the conference room door and ushered Dani in. She wasn't sure if it was the stale air greeting her or the uncanny hush that fell over the group that made her uneasy. She gulped as she looked around at the board members and executives of Quinn & Jones, Inc. The gray walls seemed to blend with the people's expressions. She searched for a friendly and open face, but not one greeted her.

Finally, a man stood up and extended his hand to Harrison. "Hello. I'm Larry Gibbs."

"Ahh," Harrison said, shaking his hand. "You're the acting president. It's nice to meet you. I'm Harrison Beckman, and this"—he pointed to Dani—"is my assistant, Daniella Duncan."

"The pleasure is ours." He cleared his throat and looked toward his fellow employees. "Mr. Beckman..."

"Harrison, please."

Larry nodded in consent. "Harrison, then, please come in and sit down." As Harrison and Dani took their seats, Larry continued. "It is important to us that we understand each other. Our board is disturbed and concerned about the rumors we've heard regarding stolen contracts. Can you tell us more about this?"

"Sure. I appreciate your waiting to speak with us in person about this." Harrison looked directly at the people sitting around the table as he said, "It is true, there have been four contracts lost due to stolen information. However, we're on top of what was happening. We now know someone was paid to take our information to a company called R&P. This

person has been caught, and we are not expecting any more trouble.”

“Has this ever happened to your company in the past?”

“No.” Harrison shook his head. “And I’m hoping it never will again.”

Harrison put the group at ease with his relaxed and confident replies. Dani thought, *He’s so good with people*. She couldn’t help but smile as she remembered he introduced her as “Daniella.” He wasn’t afraid to walk to the beat of a different drum; he was the only person besides her parents who called her Daniella. While Harrison was busy fielding their questions, Dani prepared her laptop so she would be ready to roll.

Larry had everyone introduce themselves and share what their position and responsibilities were in the company. Dani, thinking it might be something helpful later, made quick notes of the employees’ comments on her computer. It seemed to take quite a while for them to get through all the people in the room. The small space they were occupying was quickly becoming stuffy. It seemed as if there were at least fifty people in the compact room, rather than the fourteen who were actually there. After the last man introduced himself, Harrison did something quite unexpected.

“It seems to me we would be able to get a lot more accomplished in a shorter amount of time if we met in smaller groups of say...three to five people. We can answer any detailed questions you may have regarding your specific department. After that, we can meet together as a large group to wrap things up.” The group seemed as relieved as Dani at the opportunity to be able to leave the very warm room.

Looking around the table, Harrison’s gaze rested on Dani for an instant before he continued. “So, if you give me about fifteen minutes or so with Daniella, we’ll put together a few different cell

groups to meet with. I'm sorry if this is causing you any inconvenience."

"No, it's no trouble at all," Larry said. "Why don't we just meet after lunch?"

Harrison nodded. "Sounds good to me."

"I'd be willing to stick around to help, if you would like."

Harrison gave Larry one of his good-natured grins. "Thanks, I know you're a very busy man. We'll manage fine here. That is, unless you really wanted..."

Larry dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand.

"Well, folks, that's all for now, then. Daniella and I look forward to meeting with you again. Before you leave, I wanted to say up front, thank you for the honor and privilege of seeing Beckman's Inc. as a company you want to partner with. I am very hopeful we will be able to work together in the future. However, if for some reason things do not work out for this partnership, we wanted you to know that we've enjoyed getting to know you over the past few months." He looked directly at Larry and added, "Your work ethics have impressed my father, and that is not an easy thing to do. So, I commend you and your employees." He addressed the group again. "We'll let you know the tentative schedule as soon as we have it finished." The room rapidly emptied with satisfied smiles and quiet murmurs.

Larry hung back. "Harrison, we've asked you some pretty tough questions because we wanted to know exactly what has been happening at Beckman's. In the same way, we need to reciprocate. I just found out our stock has taken a nosedive over the past week. If we don't secure a major contract soon, we may be out of business."

Dani felt her eyes bulge. One of her grandmother's old expressions came to mind: out of

the frying pan and into the fire.

“Larry, I know you’re in a stressful position.” Harrison kept his face clear of all expression. “I hope you don’t mind my saying this, but in the years my family has been in this business, I’ve learned if you get caught up in the heat of the moment, you are likely to make unwise choices or even mistakes.”

“Lord knows, I don’t want to do that. I have a lot of people I need to think about right now.”

“Thanks, Larry, for telling me about this. I am still hoping and praying we both will know clearly if we are to make this partnership a go or not.”

“Well, I’m not the praying kind, but you go right ahead.” He clapped Harrison on the shoulder. “We need all the help we can get.” With that, he walked from the room.

Dani wiped her sweaty palms against her skirt, envious of Harrison’s calm, easygoing way. She was nervous enough for both of them. “Does anything intimidate you?”

Harrison grinned slowly. “Sure...you do.”

Dani’s heart pounded in her chest, and she raised an eyebrow. “Me?”

Harrison chuckled and then shrugged it away. “Never mind about all that.” He crossed the room to the table in the corner where Dani had placed her supplies and asked, “Are you ready to get to work?”

Now, that was something Dani knew she could handle. “Definitely! Where do you want to start?” They worked together for about twenty minutes before Harrison got up and stretched as she wrote the last of the names down.

“I’m getting hungry, how about you?” Dani nodded in agreement, and Harrison continued. “I need to call my father to touch base with him.” He pointed to the papers in front of Dani. “Would you take those over to the secretary? She’ll be able to give them to the right people.”

“Sure. Where do you want me to meet you?”

Harrison's hand rested on his stomach. "How about the cafeteria?"

"The cafeteria it is then." Dani chuckled for the first time since they arrived.

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Dani ran her hand over the smooth counter of the reception desk. "Excuse me."

The secretary looked up from her computer and moved her phone piece out of the way. "Yes?"

"Mr. Beckman asked me to drop this off to you." She pushed the papers toward the secretary. "This is the scheduling for the rest of the day."

"Great. I'll make sure everyone gets word."

"Thanks. Um," Dani looked to her left then right. A large man with a short black beard approached the desk as she asked, "Could you give me directions to the cafeteria?"

The man, close enough to hear now, said, "I'd love to take you to the cafeteria. After all, I'm headed there myself."

The secretary seemed relieved. "Oh good, Maxwell, that would be great. I am the worst person to ask for directions. I could get a map lost, if you know what I mean."

Dani, feeling a little uncomfortable, looked around to see if Harrison were anywhere to be found. Maxwell, as if sensing her reluctance, waved her on. "Come on, it's this way."

With no other alternative in sight, she followed him. After a few feet, they came to an elevator. He pressed the down button and turned to face her. He watched her so intently, Dani was sure she blushed to the hair roots as she looked at her feet.

In his deep voice, Maxwell said, "You have the most beautiful blue eyes I have ever seen."

His comment shocked Dani. She quickly looked up at him.

“And, no, if you are wondering, that is not just a line. By the way, let me introduce myself. The name is Maxwell Triton. It’s truly my pleasure to meet you, Ms...”

Never one to be handed many so-called lines, Dani found she was embarrassed while at the same time truly flattered. As the elevator bell rang, she said in a quiet, shy voice, “Dani...Dani Duncan.”

“Oh, so you are the famous, efficient secretary of Beckman’s.”

For the remainder of the way, Maxwell talked Dani’s ear off, while skillfully weaving compliments in and out of their conversation. Dani briefly mentioned she wanted to find Harrison, but Maxwell quickly brushed it aside. “Ah, he’ll be able to find us with no trouble. Don’t worry your pretty head about him.”

By the time they reached the cafeteria and had gathered their lunch, Dani felt at least five inches taller as Maxwell asked for the pleasure of eating with her. Her heart rejoiced at the attention she was receiving from this handsome man—all that dieting and exercise must finally be paying off.

Dani didn’t even notice Harrison enter the room. Her eyes were fastened on Maxwell, who was telling her in great detail about how impressed he was over the reports and correspondence she had written. It wasn’t until Maxwell stopped mid-sentence that Dani realized someone was standing next to her chair. She glanced up and her gaze finally met Harrison’s.

“I’m glad you found your way. I almost got lost. It was a little confusing, huh?”

Dani, as if awaking from a dream, said, “Oh, ah...Harrison, have you met Maxwell yet?” Maxwell stood up and offered his hand to Harrison. “He actually was the one who brought me here.”

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Harrison was prepared for the firm grip most businessmen exchange. Rather, the clasp Maxwell offered was cold and limp like a dead fish. Harrison couldn't disengage his hand fast enough! In his mind, a limp handshake spoke volumes about a person. For better or for worse, his father had taught him a firm handshake told others you were a man with confidence and oftentimes even integrity. With this in mind, a red flag went up in the back of Harrison's mind with regards to Maxwell. However, it appeared Dani didn't have any reservations about him. Harrison glanced back and forth between Dani and Maxwell with a questioning look. Finally, his gaze rested on Dani. *I guess I'm just reading too much into his body language.*

Trying to shake his uneasy feeling, Harrison said, "I guess I'll go get some lunch." As he left the table, his pager went off. He looked down at the number and recognized it was a call from his father's secretary. He made a quick decision and addressed Dani, "I'm going to grab a bite to go. I've got some business I need to handle. Would you like me to come back to get you when I'm finished?"

Dani seemed about to agree when Maxwell interrupted. "I'll take you back upstairs after lunch. After all, I have to go up there myself." He said to Harrison, "Why make that extra trip?"

Harrison waited for Dani's response.

"He's got a point. Thanks anyway though, Harrison. Should I meet you in the conference room again?"

Harrison, resigning himself to her decision, nodded his head. "That's fine. I'll see you in about a half hour, okay?" As he walked away, he tried again to shake off the black cloud that seemed to have descended over him. Finally, he prayed, *Lord, give me wisdom concerning the business at hand here and all the people that are involved. I pray especially for*

*wisdom concerning Maxwell. I don't know what is making me uneasy, but may I be as wise as a serpent and as harmless as a dove in regards to him. He thought about all he was trying to accomplish and concluded by praying, May Your will be done here. Amen.*

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“Hey, Dad. You called?”

“Sorry, I couldn't get your call awhile ago. How's the lay of the land looking?”

Harrison switched his cell phone to his other ear. “Larry Gibbs seems like a good guy. They had a few questions about the rumors they heard.”

“I don't blame them for that.”

“Me either.”

“Is something wrong? You don't sound like yourself.”

Harrison laughed. “You know me too well, but actually nothing is wrong. I just have a lot on my mind. Larry Gibbs mentioned a nosedive in stocks this past week, but we know how that goes. Anyway, Daniella and I are going to meet together with them in smaller department groups after lunch.”

“Sounds like you have everything under control, just like I knew you would.”

Harrison grinned. “I don't know when we'll be able to wrap things up here today, but I'll be sure to have Dani send you her notes when we're done.”

“Great. See you in the office tomorrow then.”

“Bye, Dad.”

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Dani was sure Harrison must have been pleased with the way the meeting went. She finished reading the notes off her computer and reached for her case on the back seat. “So, what do you think, Harrison?”

“Generally speaking, I like them.” Harrison put on his right turn signal and looked over his shoulder before switching lanes to get on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. “Quinn & Jones seems to strive for high standards and quality.”

“Um. I got that impression as well.”

“I enjoyed getting to speak to the department heads.”

Dani nodded. “Me too. So, where does that leave things as far as the partnership is concerned?”

Harrison took a deep breath. “I’m going to pray about it some more and talk to a few people.”

“And then?”

“Then, if I get a green light, Larry and I were thinking about giving it a six-week trial period.”

“Won’t that be hard to do? I mean, the first six weeks will most likely be crazy. How will you be able to tell by then?”

“Oh, I’m not so worried about that.” Harrison grinned. “This just gives Larry the go-ahead for the contract he’s after. If he’s able to secure the contract within the six-week trial period, we will co-sign. However, that will not be contingent on a merger between our companies.”

“You’re a good guy, you know that?”

Harrison touched her cheek and then dropped his hand back to his side. “Thanks, Daniella.”

Dani laughed. “You’re the only one besides my parents who calls me that.”

“Do you mind?”

Dani tilted her head to the side. “No, I don’t mind.”

Harrison nodded. “Good.”

## Chapter Seven

Dani enjoyed Thursday morning's early sun streaming through the tiny window in her office. She felt it in her bones; it was going to be a good day. Even her weight wasn't bothering her as much as it usually did lately. Yes, things were finally coming together for once in her life. Maxwell was interested in her, and if Harrison decided on the merger, she'd see him quite often in New Jersey. Then there was Harrison himself. What a great guy! What would it be like if he were the one interested in her? She shrugged and let that thought go; after all, it was miracle enough that one man found her attractive.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the in-house phone line rang. She clicked the save button on her computer while answering, "Dani here."

Harrison's voice greeted her. "Daniella, I just got off the phone with Larry Gibbs. We've decided to go ahead with that six-week trial period. Would you please write up an agreement and let me look it over? I'd like to have it faxed to him by this afternoon."

Dani felt like jumping up and cheering. "Sure. What would you like in it?"

"Check your e-mail. I have all the particulars, but not in format."

"Got it. I'll have it to you in, say"—Dani looked at the clock on the wall facing her desk—"an hour or so."

"Great. How about lunch at twelve to look it over together?"

*Lunch with Harrison?* See that—yet another perk in her day. If only she didn't have to count the

calories. Oh well, maybe she'd splurge today. "Sounds good. See you in a bit."

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Harrison entered the lunchroom, whistling a tune. He spotted Dani already seated and waved to her before reaching the lunch line. He filled his tray with a cafeteria-style greasy cheese-steak and fries and then headed for her table.

Dani was concentrating on a letter in front of her. As he pulled out a chair, she looked up.

With a welcoming smile, Harrison said, "Hey, Daniella, how's it going?"

Dani quickly put the paper down. "Hi, Harrison." She took a deep breath and smiled. "It's going." With a glow about her, she practically bubbled, "Well, it's going very well. In fact, I'd even dare to say...great!"

He picked up a fry and dipped it in ketchup. "Wow, what's up?"

Dani laughed. "Do you remember Maxwell from Quinn & Jones?"

A chill went down Harrison's spine as he nodded.

She continued. "We've been communicating back and forth quite a bit." She held out the printed e-mail. "He says we should get together this weekend and catch a movie or something."

"But he's almost two and a half hours away."

Dani grinned broadly and looked down at her sandwich. "Maxwell says the time it would take to drive here would go by quickly because he'd be thinking of me."

It was all Harrison could do to keep from choking on his Pepsi. "You're interested in Maxwell?"

She dropped her gaze and softly said, "He's a very nice, attractive man. And he likes me." She

glanced up and hesitated for just a moment. “Yes, I’d enjoy getting to know Maxwell better.”

Harrison, not one to date much, felt out of his comfort zone with the personal turn this conversation had taken. However, he knew whenever he became interested in a woman, he wanted to be sure they would share the same beliefs. After all, he had seen too many homes split and suffer heartache over the core issue of faith and values. So, putting aside his reluctance, Harrison asked, “Is he a Christian?”

Dani shrugged her shoulders. “I guess so.”

“You guess so? What’s that mean?”

“I don’t think he’s Buddhist or anything like that.”

Harrison felt a little bewildered. “Does he go to church?”

Dani laughed. “Oh, Harrison, I don’t know. We’ve never talked about it.”

He frowned.

She tried hard not to smile. “If it makes you feel better, I’ll ask him about church. How is that?”

Harrison didn’t feel any better. In fact, he had a nagging feeling he needed to warn her about wolves in sheep’s clothing. The look on her face, however, told him that she was in no mood to listen. After a moment’s hesitation, he finally said, “Do me a favor and just take it real slow. There is something about him...”

“Once you get to know him better, I’m sure you will like him.”

Harrison put his hand up to stop her from interrupting him. “That may be so...even though I highly doubt it.”

*Beep, beep.* Harrison’s pager went off. He looked apologetically at Dani and said, “This thing always picks the worst times to beep.” He glanced at the number. Frustrated at the interruption, he sighed. “I’m going to have to take this lunch with me. That

was my dad. I've got to go see what he needs." As he put his things back on the tray, Harrison returned to the former topic. "Please, at least ask Maxwell about church. I don't want to see you get too attached to him and be hurt in the long run."

Dani merely smiled at him. "Okay...okay."

"By the way, you did a great job on writing the agreement up with Quinn & Jones. Thanks for sending it back to me so quickly."

"With all the information that you gave me, it was a piece of cake."

"Next Tuesday, Quinn & Jones is meeting with the company that is a prospective contract holder. They asked if I would be present."

"Do you need me to go?"

"I'd appreciate that."

Dani gave him a thumbs up. "Count me in, then."

Harrison took a long look at her, nodded, and then turned away. "I'll see you later."

He grumbled to himself all the way down the corridor, then suddenly stopped walking as a thought hit him like a ton of bricks. *Why does her seeing Maxwell matter so much?* He lengthened his stride to cover the remaining steps to his father's door as he argued the fact. *Impossible...How could I be interested in her? She's a coworker after all, and I've only known her a few months. She's a friend, merely a friend.*

Harrison was thankful when he finally had his hand on the doorknob. He knocked twice before he opened the door.

"Ah, good. Harrison," his father said as he stepped into the office. "I need to talk to you about the Fletcher account."

Harrison took a deep breath and tried to put all thoughts of Daniella to the back of his mind, if not out of his head all together.

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Saturday arrived and Maxwell, armed with the hamper full of food that Dani had prepared, popped the trunk lid and set it in then firmly closed it. “Looks like you packed enough food for an army.”

Dani opened the passenger door and before she slipped in said, “I made a few special things for you.” If he only knew how long she had labored over the food. It took her over two days of baking and cooking for this one picnic, but it was worth it—he was worth it.

Maxwell, by this time, had joined her in the car. “Just so long as you don’t eat too much.”

Surely, she must have heard wrong. “Excuse me?”

He glanced over, and his gaze traveled from Dani’s sneakers to the baseball cap resting on her head. “You don’t need any more weight.”

Daniella had two options: she could get mad at him or she could get mad at herself. If she had her choice, she would have picked the first, but she couldn’t, because what he said was true. Tears pricked her eyes, and the day she had looked forward to since she met him lost its sparkle.

Maxwell placed his hand on her shoulder. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. Don’t take it too hard.” He laughed. “After all, I like women with a little flesh on their bones.”

Dani wished she could shrug it away like it didn’t bother her, but the truth was it did. No matter how much she dieted, would she always be the fat runt? She blinked rapidly, willing the tears to go away. Finally, she turned to watch Maxwell back out of the driveway. After putting the car in drive, he winked at her and said, “We’re off.”

“Yes, we’re off,” Dani echoed. At least Maxwell liked her despite her weight. All the more reason he might be a “keeper.”

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Monday morning, both Harrison and Dani were back on their way to New Jersey for a meeting at Quinn & Jones. During the ride, Harrison noticed Dani was a bit subdued. “Everything go all right this weekend?”

“Hm?” She turned her attention off the road and onto him.

“How’d the date with Maxwell go?”

Dani’s smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Good, thanks.”

Harrison hated to drag things out of people, but he couldn’t seem to help himself. “Do you still like him?”

“Oh, yes. Maxwell’s a great guy. We went to the park and had a picnic lunch. The weather was beautiful—a perfect day to be outside.”

Harrison wanted to feel happy for her, but instead her comments had the opposite effect. He was downright miserable. “How about church? Did you ask him?”

Dani grinned. “I did, and I’m pleased to let you know that he does attend.”

“Where?”

Her brow puckered. “I don’t know. I didn’t ask.”

Harrison couldn’t figure it out—couldn’t figure her out. He rolled his eyes and gave up trying, at least for now. *Women!*

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Harrison felt his attention fading as Mr. Brumell pressed on in his monotone voice while he presided over the contract meeting. *Stay focused.* He looked up and caught sight of Maxwell in the hall.

Mr. Brumell’s speech broke, and Harrison cleared his throat. Larry looked at him as he said, “I

move that we take a fifteen-minute break.”

It was quickly seconded, and Harrison fled the room. He found Maxwell flirting with the secretary just outside of the conference room. Harrison approached him with his arms crossed over his chest. “Got a minute?”

Maxwell looked up in surprise. “Sure.”

They took a few steps away from the desk before Harrison said, “Daniella told me you had a picnic this past weekend.”

Maxwell’s smug expression turned curious. “That’s right.”

“Don’t toy with her.”

“Hm...so what do we have here?” Maxwell raised an eyebrow. “An overprotective, jealous boss?”

“Oh, there you are Maxwell.”

Both men turned to see Dani approaching.

Maxwell gave Harrison a grin and then turned on the charm. “Hi, sweets.”

Harrison almost groaned as Dani closed in the remaining few feet.

“I knew you two would get along once you got to know one another.” She placed her hand on Maxwell’s arm.

Both men eyeballed each other. Maxwell was the first to turn away. “How about a drink? They’ve got a Snapple machine in the lobby.”

“Sounds great.” Dani turned toward Harrison. “Want to come with us?”

“No. No, thanks.” After one last look at Maxwell, he said, “Remember what I told you.” With that, he headed back to the conference room. It was going to be a long fifteen minutes.

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Dani changed from a person with practically no social life to a gal who was out several nights a week. During the first month or so, she enjoyed

Maxwell coming to visit her once or twice a week. However, the tide had slowly turned as time passed. Maxwell's visits to Pennsylvania had slowed down as Dani's visits to New Jersey picked up. Maxwell often asked for Dani's help on things in his office, and she was glad to oblige him. After all, she had convinced herself that Maxwell was the one for her. She was going to do everything in her power to secure that position. With the merger running smoothly, it was not unusual for Maxwell to ask her to collect bits and pieces of information on accounts at Beckman's for Quinn & Jones for future reference and then bring them with her when she was visiting him.

Not only that, but since she was so busy, healthy eating habits and exercise were thrown out the window. Now, she found herself in the pattern of eating everything in sight and then, after the guilty feelings assailed her, she would practically starve herself for the next day or two. Well, today wasn't going to be one of them. So, when Jillian asked her to join her for a break, she jumped on it. Only, something wasn't right. Jillian sat very still gazing into her coffee cup.

"Jillian, are you okay?"

"Huh?" Her head snapped up. "Oh...Yeah, I'm fine."

Dani waited patiently to see if she would say anything.

"I was just thinking about a girl I knew in high school." Jillian chuckled and shook her head. "Wow, it seems like a lifetime ago in some respects."

Dani teased, "That's because it was."

Jillian rewarded her with a swat of her napkin. "Can we be serious for a minute? The girl I was thinking about. Her name was Rita. She was, or should I say, she had the potential to be a really beautiful girl. I'm sure that under any other circumstance, guys would have flocked to her. But

there was one problem. She wanted so badly to be liked by the entire male population that she actually pushed them away.”

“Um. I’ve seen that happen too.”

“If it wasn’t so sad, it would have been funny.” She went on to explain, “Whenever you saw Rita walking into a room, you would see all the guys try to be the first one out the door.”

“Now, that’s something I haven’t seen.”

With a tear trailing down her cheek, Jillian continued. “That is, all but one guy that she met her junior year: Frank. He was a real jerk, and everyone knew it but Rita. She did her usual chasing, but this time the guy didn’t run. He took everything she offered to him and then some.”

“Jerk!”

“You said it. They dated only a short while before she was pregnant. As soon as he found out he was going to be a father, he dropped her like a hot potato.” With a deep sigh, she said, “Even when I think about it now, I get upset over the fact that Rita felt like she needed to chase boys around to be loved. Not to mention feeling sad for the baby that was born unwanted by its teenage parents.” She took a steadying breath before she added, “And mad...mad at Frank for using Rita so completely and selfishly.”

“I hate stories like that.”

“Me too.”

“So, why are you sitting here thinking about it?”

“Why? That’s a good question. Dani...” Jillian fiddled with a corner of her napkin until she finally looked Dani squarely in the eyes. “You’re a very special girl.”

“Me? What does this have to do with me?”

Jillian held up her hand and went on. “You’re pretty, intelligent, have a great sense of humor, and along with a million other things, you’re a very caring, loving person. There have been many times

when I've seen a look of interest in a guy's eye toward you. You've always been so shy before, though, that you wouldn't even be aware of it."

Dani blushed at Jillian's compliments. In her mind, she denied every one of them as they were spoken—especially about men's interest.

Before she could protest, Jillian continued. "Then finally, a guy comes along that you could not ignore, and he is able to attract your attention. I was so excited when you first told me about Maxwell." After taking a sip of her black coffee, she said, "But something's changed. It...well, something doesn't feel right anymore."

Dani sat back in her chair, feeling very defensive about the way the conversation was flowing.

"You used to tell me how Maxwell was coming over to your house, but now he never comes. You're always the one running to him."

Jillian must have seen the rare storm brewing behind Dani's eyes, because she put her hand on Dani's arm as if to comfort her. "It's because I care about you. I just wanted, or should I say, needed to tell you. Be very careful. When the guy is no longer taking the initiative, rather just taking advantage, it's time to say 'adios' before it's too late."

Dani wanted to cry. Some of the things her friend said hit her heart hard. Still, she didn't feel like Maxwell was taking advantage of her. It was merely that Maxwell was busy lately, and he didn't have the time to come. She, on the other hand, had plenty of free time. *It's what works for us. After all, I'm not chasing him.* Hesitantly, she questioned, *Am I?* She picked up her cup. "I need some space to think. I'm going to my office for a while. I'll catch up with you later."

"I feel like the bad guy. You don't hate me too much, do you?"

Even though Dani's heart hurt from some of the

words her friend had said, she knew they were spoken in love. “Of course I don’t hate you. I need some time to think, that’s all.”

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Mr. Galloway’s chin quivered as he spoke. “I’ve called this emergency meeting because our law firm, Marco & Sons, has found some activity happening.”

“What do you mean?” Harrison asked before his father had the chance.

“They hired private investigators to help them with the case against R&P. All has been quiet since Sally was fired, but I’ve just been notified that they’ve seen some confidential names and numbers.”

“Could they be found through an outside source?”

Mr. Galloway shook his head. “No, they are convinced these things could only be generated from our company.”

Mr. Beckman buried his face in his hands for a moment. “How can this be happening again?”

“Do these PIs have a good reputation? Can we trust them?” Harrison asked. Mr. Galloway nodded, and Harrison sighed. “This means there’s another leak.”

Mr. Beckman stood up and pushed his chair back with his legs. “Keep me posted. As soon as you hear anything, I want to know about it.” With that, he strode from the room.

Harrison said, “Thanks for your quick work in letting us know about this.”

“It wasn’t something I was looking forward to.”

“Well, let’s just hope you won’t have any more news like this for us.”

## Chapter Eight

Dani, preparing for another trip to Quinn & Jones, Inc., rushed out of the shower. At the oddest times, like now, she thought about the conversation concerning Maxwell she and Jillian had around the break room table a month ago. *I feel like I am constantly on the defense in regard to Maxwell, not only with Jillian, but with Harrison, too. Oh well, this is Jillian's last month to work, I can hang in there.*

She looked at the clock and gritted her teeth, *Oh great...it's already seven thirty. I can't believe I overslept today of all days. I'm supposed to be at the office in an hour. I'm never going to make it at this rate.* She longed for the extended, bright summer days that were still a few months away. Dani tried to prioritize what absolutely needed to get done in the next half-hour. With her stomach grumbling, she walked to her bedroom to blow dry her hair.

A sense of excitement stole over her at the thought of seeing Maxwell again. Mentally going through her wardrobe as she styled her hair, she decided to wear her pink silk top. Maxwell had once told her that this top made her look like a beautiful rose. To complement the blouse, she settled on her gray pants. She thought again of Maxwell and smiled as she made her way to the kitchen to grab a tiny bite to eat.

Her mother was busy preparing breakfast for her father.

"Morning, Mom," Dani said as she walked into the kitchen. "How did you sleep?"

Mom turned to her. "Pretty well." She flipped an

egg. “You seem to be chipper this morning. Are you ready for your trip?”

Dani poured herself a cup of coffee. “Actually, I somehow forgot to set my alarm clock last night and overslept.” She sat down at the table and put her chin on her fist. “Do these short winter days seem to be hanging on an extra long time to you this year, or is it just me?”

Her mom chuckled. “Well, in past years you were always in bed at a decent hour.” With a smirk, she added, “But that’s not quite the case lately, is it?”

Dani grimaced. “Now is not the time to mention a lack of sleep, Mom.”

“Ah, young love.” She turned back to the stove and asked, “Would a few eggs help?”

Dani’s eyes perked up. “I don’t know if it will help my lack of sleep, but it does sound good. I’ll take one please.”

Her mother put her hand on her hip. “You’ve been eating like a bird. You’ll wind up sick.”

Dani shrugged. “You gotta do what you gotta do. This weight won’t come off by itself.”

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Cold February air hit Dani’s face as she opened the front door. It made her turn and march right back inside. As she worked her way up to her bedroom, she thought, *That old cardigan may not be the best thing to look at, but it will keep me comfortable. Besides, I can always take it off when I see Maxwell.* As she was ready to head out the door again, the phone rang. In a hurried tone, she answered, “Hello?”

“Hi there, love of my life.” Dani smiled at Maxwell’s words. “I wanted to make sure you didn’t forget that file on the Conrad account.”

Dani patted the bag on her arm as she said, “It’s

in here. I'm on my way out the door now." She looked back down the hall to make sure her mother wasn't overhearing their conversation. "I was just thinking about you..."

Maxwell asked her, "Are you missing me, my sweet?"

Dani giggled like a schoolgirl. "Now, that would be letting the cat out of the bag." She glanced at her watch and realized she needed to leave right now. Quickly ending any thought of flirting more, she said, "I'll see you in a few hours, okay?"

In a confidently sly voice, Maxwell said, "I'm counting the minutes."

Dani sighed. "Me too. Goodbye, for now."

After replacing the phone receiver with a sense of optimism, Dani was on her way. She reached the parking lot with a mere five minutes to spare. Harrison was waiting outside the double doors of the office building with his briefcase in hand.

He greeted Dani with a cheerful wave as she pulled the car up next to him. She rolled down her window and said, "I think you are as eager to get on the road this morning as I am."

Harrison grinned. "I guess I am. Why don't you park right over there? We'll take my car."

"Sounds good to me." Dani parked her rusty old tan Ford Escort—aka, her "tin can"—where Harrison had pointed, picked up her belongings, and walked to Harrison's car.

He held open the passenger door of his sporty Eclipse and waited for her to get in. After she was settled in her seat, he closed the door and made his way over to his side of the car. While he was fastening his seat belt, Dani said, "You know, you don't have to hold the door open for me. After all, I can take care of myself."

He simply said, "Daniella, I don't want to start this morning off arguing with you. Women are meant to be cherished. Please let me have the honor

of holding the door for you.”

Since he put it like that, Dani had nothing to say. Tongue-tied for a moment, she softly said, “Well, okay, then.”

In an abrupt change of topic, Harrison asked, “How’s Jillian doing nowadays?”

“She’s holding her own. I’ve noticed she gets winded pretty fast, but I’ve heard that’s par for the course.”

“I saw her last week, and she looked good, but a little uncomfortable.”

“I’m sure going to miss her when she’s gone.”

Harrison glanced at her. “Have you thought about applying for her position while she’s on leave?”

“Me? Do you really think I’d do well with her job?”

“I do.”

Dani nodded. “Jillian told me that too. I don’t know.” She looked out the window for a minute and then chuckled. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’ll give it some more thought.”

“Good. Now that’s settled, we’ve been working on this project with Quinn & Jones for nearly three and a half months. What do you think about it?”

Dani was a little surprised by his question. “Well, I think the company has what it takes. What do you think?”

“I suggested to my father last week that we make our relationship with them official.”

Dani was excited. “That’s great!” Harrison didn’t seem very happy, though.

“So, what did your father have to say?”

“I don’t know if you remember this, but he’s allowing me to make the final decision.”

Dani shifted to her left side so she could see him better. “So, what’s the problem? Are you worried about something?”

Harrison glanced at her. “With all that has happened over the last several months...I’m

referring to the way R&P managed to secure the bids of several companies...” The frown in Harrison’s forehead became more pronounced. “Yes, I’m concerned.”

Dani cut in. “But that was a long time ago, and there hasn’t been any more trouble since then.”

“That’s what I thought. I recently found out, though, that’s not the case any longer. We just lost two more contracts, and the private investigators who have been hired to work on this case have shared with us some unsettling news.”

“That’s horrible,” Dani said, wide-eyed.

“Don’t I know it. I’m afraid”—he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel—“if this continues to happen, it would not be a secure position for Quinn & Jones. Because of that, I’m reluctant to have them enter into a partnership with us.”

Dani was shocked.

“Do you think I’m being too cautious?”

“No, Harrison. I think you are very wise. I can’t believe this is happening all over again.” They were quiet for a minute before Dani asked, “Could the contracts have been lost for some other reason than sabotage?”

Harrison shook his head negatively. “You always have the chance of losing a contract here and there, but this is way above and beyond the normal trend of our company’s history. We’ve always been able to offer a fair bid. But this is a totally different situation. The private investigators feel the information that R&P had could have only been generated from within our company.”

That didn’t set well with Dani. “Oh no!”

“Precisely.”

Dani’s heart went out to Harrison. She had never met a nicer, more sincere person, and she only wanted good things for him. Without thinking, she reached out and touched his arm. “It will work out somehow. Be honest and up front with Quinn &

Jones. If it's meant to be, it will happen."

It wasn't until Harrison covered her hand with his own that she realized her hand was resting on his arm. "I know it will. One way or the other, it's in God's hands now." Dani shyly pulled her hand away as Harrison said, "Thanks for your concern. It means more to me than you know."

Dani wondered what he meant by that, but her thoughts were preoccupied with Maxwell. The rest of the trip was uneventful, and they made good time. In fact, they arrived half an hour before anyone expected them. An excited Dani waved to Harrison before she left to look for Maxwell. She called over to Harrison, "I'll meet you in the conference room at eleven."

Not waiting for his reply, she bounded off.

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Dani, panting with the exertion of running to Maxwell's office, stood outside the door for a minute, trying to catch her breath before she knocked. Granted, the shortness of breath wasn't as bad as it would have been a few months ago, but one thing was certain, exercise was no magic potion for an instantly thin and healthy body. The door was ajar, allowing the voices inside to be heard in the hallway. Dani didn't pay any attention until she heard her name mentioned.

With a harsh laugh, Maxwell said, "Dani? No worries there. This girl is eating out of the palm of my hand. In fact, she's bringing the Conrad account information with her right here, to my office today. You couldn't ask for better than that."

Dani's stomach did a funny dive as his words sank in. *No...it can't be...* Her mind raced as she thought of all the files Maxwell had asked her for. She slumped against the wall and covered her face in her hands as she saw clearly for the first time

what had happened. *Oh...what have I done?*

She needed to run—anywhere, anywhere at all to get away. She quickly scanned the area and saw the ladies' room sign on a door. Dani stumbled her way there in spite of the fuzzy vision caused by tears and ran into a stall. She locked the door behind her and frantically tried to recall what information on accounts Maxwell had requested from her. *What a blind fool I've been. Why did I never question or at least suspect that he was using me for information and the access I have to Beckman's accounts? I'm such a nitwit!*

*I was trying to help him.* Tears spilled down Dani's face so fast she felt like Niagara Falls. *Whatever am I going to do now? Who can I turn to?* She grabbed a wad of toilet paper and cried out, *God...if You are real, real like Harrison says, somehow help me. I've been so deceived. How am I ever going to face Maxwell and sort this mess out? Or greater yet, how can I tell Harrison what I've done? Not only did I lose my heart to a fool, but now...I may lose my job because of him.*

Dani heard the bathroom door open, so she tried to stifle her sobs. As she worked on composing herself, she busied her hands by opening her purse to see if she had an extra compact or some foundation. She found some at the very bottom of her purse and put it on, hoping it would conceal some of the red blotches she was sure covered her face. She glanced at her watch and flinched as she realized she only had ten minutes to get it together. The compact didn't do much, so she leaned over the sink to splash cold water on her face while lecturing herself. *You have got to pull this off. Don't you dare let Maxwell know that you are on to him yet. Just pretend you left that Conrad file at home. You've got to think this thing through before you act.* She dried her face and concluded, *The only thing to do now is concentrate on your work and do a good job for*

*Beckman's. Worry about tomorrow later.*

After applying another coat of foundation on her face, Dani was particularly thankful for her secretarial type mind on a day like today. She tried to center her thoughts on the work ahead. For the first time in her life, Dani found it hard to focus as she walked toward the conference room where Harrison was waiting. Hopefully this meeting would not take long.

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Two hours later, the meeting ended and Larry opened the door. Dani saw Maxwell waiting in the hall. She had the oddest sensation of being hot and cold at the same time and momentarily wondered if she dared to stand as he walked into the room. Would her knees hold her up? She didn't need to wait to find out.

"Hello, sweets."

Sounding slightly winded, Dani said, "Maxwell..."

"I became concerned for you. You never came to see me."

"Oh." Dani looked around the room, hoping something would give her the inspiration she needed. "Harrison was in a hurry to get here." She crossed her fingers behind her back and added, "We took his car, and I forgot the files you wanted in my car and..." Her voice petered out. "I'm sorry."

With a hawk-like gaze, he stared at her for a moment that felt nothing short of an eternity. "Is that so?"

Harrison joined them. "Is everything all right?"

Dani did her best to seem casual. "Sure. I know you need to head back home right away, so I'll just get my things. I'll be ready in a second."

"Fine."

"Call me tonight, sweetheart," Maxwell said.

“I will.”

Maxwell leaned forward and brushed her lips with a kiss. Dani took a quick step backward. Maxwell raised an eyebrow.

Trying to sound nonchalant, she said, “Not here, Maxwell.”

“I’ll talk to you tonight.” With that, he turned and strode from the room.

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What had been the beginning pangs of a headache during the meeting were now a full-blown migraine. Dani leaned her head against the back of her seat and tried to brace her head from the bumps in the road.

Harrison asked, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Dani shook her head miserably. “When I get a migraine like this, it just needs to run its course.”

“Can I get you something to eat or drink?”

She felt nauseous at the mere thought of food. She shook her head again.

“I’ve got some cold water in my ice chest. How about a cool cloth for your eyes?”

Dani would have normally found his Good Samaritan act amusing, but right now she was in so much pain, emotionally and physically, that his kindness almost hurt her heart as much as her migraine hurt her head. The contrast between the two men she had come to know in the past few months was startling as the facts were laid bare before her.

Dani could now clearly see Maxwell was out for all he could get; Harrison was always looking for what he could give. Where Maxwell took advantage, Harrison was often taken advantage of, at least in her eyes. Where Maxwell inflicted hurt telling her she needed to watch what she ate, Harrison tried to

heal telling her she looked pretty in this or that. *I've got to stop thinking like this. It's not helping this head of mine.* Turning to Harrison, she mumbled, "A cool cloth would be nice. Then I'm going to try to sleep."

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Harrison pulled the car over to get the cloth. After they were again settled, he waited until he was sure Dani was asleep, and then, while still praying for her, he softly touched her cheek with his fingertips. *Lord, You know my heart even better than I do. What is Your will in this? I have grown very fond of this woman.* He took his hand away and asked, *Will she ever stop seeing that Maxwell fellow? And if she does, would I scare her away if I asked her on a date?*

One of the old Bible verses he had learned as a teen suddenly came to mind, "Be still, and know that I am God." Harrison smiled. *I'll take that as a "wait," right?* Again, clear as a bell, he remembered, "Be still, and know that I am God."

*Okay, I'll do my best to be still.*

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Dani sat on her bed, tapping a pen against her teeth, as she thought about how to write this letter to Harrison. She knew she had no other choice. No matter how hard it might be, Dani needed to offer her resignation if the company deemed that appropriate after what had happened. How she would manage to give up her job, the only thing left she had to enjoy, eluded her, but she'd manage somehow, somehow—she had to. The shrill sound of the ringing phone interrupted her musing. Looking at the caller ID, she saw it was Maxwell. Her heartbeat quickened. *There's no way I'm going to*

*answer that, she thought as she turned the ringer off and picked up her pen once more. This is not going to be easy. Still, if I'm able to put down what happened with Maxwell in writing, my feelings won't get in the way. And Harrison deserves to know; he needs to know.*

## Chapter Nine

Arriving at work the following day, with her letter to Harrison firmly tucked into her purse, Dani wanted nothing more than to be able to unload her grief to Jillian. But before she confided in her good friend, she knew she needed to speak to Mr. Beckman and tell him all that had happened. Reluctantly, she dragged her feet up the steps outside of the building. *I want to tell Mr. Beckman and Harrison what happened with those accounts like I want a hole in the head. But because of me, they are losing contracts. I have no other option; I need to fess up. Ugh. This is ugly, embarrassing, and hurtful business.* Finally, after taking two deep breaths, she gathered up what little courage she had and entered the building.

She took one look at Jillian's face, and her own worries dissipated. She quickly asked, "What's the matter? Are you okay?"

Jillian tried to smile, but it fell flat. "It just these awful pains in my back. It's like a knife. I wish it would go away. Every time I try to concentrate on this work...wham!" She looked at the piles growing on her desk and sighed. "I guess it's a good thing this is my last week here. I haven't been getting a whole lot done anyway."

Dani, wanting to be helpful, asked, "Would changing positions help at all?"

Jillian despondently shook her head. "I've tried that. I've been squirming around here for the past two days." Almost as if an afterthought, she added, "I missed you here in the office yesterday. How did the trip go?"

It was Dani's turn to fidget. "If you're asking business-wise, it went fine. Other than that, it was the worst day of my life." Dani saw Jillian wince. A fearful concern swept over her. "Should I call the doctor or something?"

Jillian, looking a little frightened herself, said, "I guess maybe I should. The pain goes from my back and wraps right around to the front. But the baby isn't due for another month. The doctor said I'll probably have what are called Braxton Hicks contractions."

Dani had no idea what she was talking about.

Jillian clarified her statement. "They are just pre-labor pains as my body is getting ready." As another pain gripped Jillian, Dani decided to take action.

Without a trace of her usual lack of assertiveness, Dani took charge. "Nevertheless, I think you should call." She reached for the phone book and asked, "Do you have the number with you, or should I look it up?"

Jillian reached for her purse. "I have it in here somewhere." Suddenly, a funny look crossed her face. "Um...Dani, something just happened." Jillian slowly stood up and looked down at her seat.

Dani walked to the side of the desk and saw that the chair and floor were saturated. Quickly grabbing her friend's arm, she said, "Sit down!"

Jillian said, "I'm not sitting in that. The chair is soaked."

Dani reached for the paging system and paged for Harrison. *He'll know what to do.* "I know...I know." She felt the panic rise in her like air bubbles in a fish tank. "Will you be okay here for a second? I'll get another chair real quick."

"I'm fine."

Dani ran into her office and pulled her chair from behind her desk. The chair bumped all over the place in her haste to get to Jillian. She almost

cleared her bookshelf of all the books. Finally, the chair was free. Nearly tripping over one of the fallen books, Dani made it out her door.

There stood Jillian in tears.

“Oh no...wha-what’s wrong?”

“I can’t have this baby now. Tim’s not even here. He had to go on an overnight business meeting.”

Relief washed over Dani as she realized Jillian was physically okay. “Well, I think this baby has other plans.” The inner office phone rang. Dani scurried to pick it up. “Harrison? Thank God! Jillian’s in labor. Her water broke...Tim’s away and—What do I do?” She listened for a moment. “Right. I’ll call them right away...Yes...Got it. Thanks.”

After hanging up the receiver, Dani realized she still had her office chair in her other hand. She desperately tried to gather her wits as she put down the chair and helped Jillian lower herself into it. While dialing 911 with one hand, Dani yanked a wad of tissues from the box with the other and handed them to the sobbing Jillian. Still on the line with the dispatcher, she picked up another line and called the OB doctor to inform him Jillian’s water had broken and an ambulance was on its way to take the mommy-to-be to the hospital. By the time the calls were made, Harrison had arrived with his magical voice and talked in soft tones to calm the fretful Jillian. For each concern she expressed, Harrison gave her the answer she needed to hear. Finally, they heard the siren out front, and Dani was able to hang up the phone with the dispatcher as the paramedics came through the double doors. While taking Jillian’s blood pressure and settling her in a wheelchair, they listened to the case history from both women.

Jillian reached for Dani’s hand. In a pleading voice, she asked, “Stay with me?”

Dani tightened her hold on Jillian’s hand for a

moment. "You bet." By this time, many of their fellow workers appeared to see what was happening. Harrison fielded their curiosity to give Jillian as much privacy as possible.

When they were ready to leave, Harrison caught Dani's eye. "You go ride with her in the ambulance. I'll pick you up at the hospital. It doesn't matter what time you need me to come. You know my home phone if you need to reach me."

Dani sent him a grateful look. "Okay. I'll talk to you in a while."

Harrison raised his voice so he could catch Jillian as she was wheeled out the door. "I promise I'll be in touch with Tim before I pick up Dani. I'm praying for you!"

With that, they were ushered into the back of the waiting ambulance.

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Dani gazed with tears in her eyes at the miracle she had witnessed moments ago. She looked deep within the bassinet and studied the tiny form wrapped tightly in a receiving blanket. Softly, she said, "He is beautiful."

Sometimes it was too difficult to articulate words. She tried to think of what to say and ended up shrugging her shoulders. "He's so...well, perfect."

Jillian had a glow of pure contentment as she settled to rest. "He is, isn't he?" She sighed. "Dani, you were great all the way through this..." About to nod off, she murmured, "I owe you one."

Dani stood there looking at the little one. The brand-newness and innocence of the baby touched her deep within her heart. After long moments of watching him, the stark reality of her own unclean heart, her worldly attitudes, and mortality hit her hard for the first time in her life. *Where did that innocence go?*

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Dani decided to find the cafeteria. Somehow, eating always made her feel better, at least temporarily. She checked to make sure Jillian was still sleeping and then went on her mission.

Dani walked down the hallway she thought would lead her to the cafeteria. She got confused when it turned out to be a dead-end used only for hospital personnel. She turned around and retraced her steps. She hadn't noticed any particular rooms on her way past the first time, but this time, she looked at the wall and noticed a sign with the word "Chapel" engraved on it. She hesitated for a moment before peering inside. From inside the room she heard someone ask, "Can I help you?"

Dani's feet seemed to have a will of their own, for the next thing she knew she was entering the room. "Well, um..." *Oh boy, now what do I say?* Her gaze caught and held fast the beautiful stained glass depiction of Jesus in a garden. "Wow, that is really beautiful."

An elderly woman, with pure white hair pulled back into a French twist, smiled gently and said, "Thank you. That is a picture of the Mount of Olives where Jesus prayed." She offered Dani her hand. "My name is Pricilla. My husband, Fred, is the chaplain here. I do a few little odds and ends from time to time."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Dani."

"Is there something I can help you with or pray with you for?"

Dani hesitated.

"If you would prefer, Fred should be back in forty-five minutes or so."

"Oh, no, no. I'm fine. Actually, my friend just had a baby." Pricilla and Dani shared a smile. "He's a gorgeous baby boy."

Warmly, Pricilla said, “Well, congratulations. There is something very special about newborn babies, isn’t there?”

As if she were a balloon with a pin pushed up against her, Dani blurted, “I’ve gone to church my whole life. I’m a good person. I don’t even drink—well, maybe just a little at weddings—but there was something I saw when I looked at that baby that made me question things. I’ve been hoping somehow being a good person would be enough for God. Is it?”

“Um.” Pricilla shook her head. “I believe it isn’t the things that we do or don’t do, but rather what *Jesus Christ* did for us that makes us acceptable before God.”

“I try to be good, but I’m always missing the mark and messing up. I think somehow I’ll do better next week. It’s like my diet.”

“You are not alone. But, I’ll say this again. I don’t believe it’s about how good we are, but how good God is.” Pricilla sighed. “There are many people who believe there is a God but will one day end up in hell because they’ve not trusted Him to be their Savior. They try to do it all on their own. Here, let me put it this way; perhaps it will help. Knowing God is kind of like the difference between knowing *about* a famous person and knowing them *personally*.”

It was as if a light bulb went on in a dark room. “How do I do that? How do I know God personally?”

Pricilla rested her hand on Dani’s arm. “Simply ask.”

“That’s it?”

Pricilla laughed. “The Bible says in the book of John you must be born again to know God and live with Him through all eternity. That ‘birth’ happens when you ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord of your life. Ask Him to forgive your sins and thank Him for His sacrifice of dying on the cross to pay for your sin. Here, let me show you some verses...”

## Chapter Ten

Filled with a deep peace, Dani left the chapel and walked back to Jillian's room. As she entered the doorway, Jillian asked, "Where have you been? I thought maybe you left me already."

Dani smiled. "Nope, I didn't, and I must say, this has truly been the best day of my life, and I owe a big part of it to your little one." With an impulsive gesture, she kissed Jillian's cheek.

"Wait a minute here. I think this has been one of the best days of my life too, but..." She studied Dani for a moment and then asked, "Have I missed something?"

With a grin, Dani said, "It's a long story I promise to tell you about, but right now I think I should call Harrison. It's getting pretty late."

Jillian looked at the clock. "You're right. Besides, I'm anxious to know if he was able to get hold of Tim." Just as she said that, the door opened and both Tim and Harrison walked in.

Tim rushed over to Jillian. "Are you okay? I can't believe I missed it. Where is the baby?"

Jillian reached for Tim to give him a kiss. "I'm doing great. I wish you had been here too, but at least Dani was able to be here. And as for your son..." Tim's eyes got big at her last words. "The nurse just came in a little while ago to give him a bath and whatever else needed to be done."

"Wow." Tim sank down on the bed. Apparently, the adrenaline that must have kept him going since he heard of his wife's impending delivery popped like a balloon. "I think I'm tired enough to have given him birth myself."

Jillian swatted his arm. "What a bunch of posh. You know nothing about it, bud!"

Tim merely smirked as he reached to kiss her again.

Harrison cleared his throat. "Um, I guess we should give these two a little privacy, huh?"

Jillian broke away from the embrace with her husband. "Harrison, don't you want to see the baby?"

Without a second's hesitation he said, "You bet I do."

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and said, "The nursery is on your way out. Let us walk with you." She reached for Tim's hand as she stood up.

Tim grabbed hold of her. "Are you okay to walk?"

Jillian laughed. "Women have been giving birth for ages. I'll be fine." Tenderly stroking his face, she added, "But thank you for looking out for me."

Harrison looked at Dani and grinned.

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Harrison and Dani left the hospital shortly after their stop in the nursery. As they walked to the car, Dani's heart skipped a beat at the thought of telling Harrison about the life-changing decision she made for Christ just hours before.

"I've been a little worried about you." Dani looked up at him in surprise as he asked, "How's your headache?"

"Oh, much better, thanks."

"Before the meeting yesterday, you seemed distracted. Was everything okay?"

Dani put her hand through her hair. "Not really." Should she give him the letter now before she talked to Mr. Beckman? No, that didn't seem right. Instead, she said, "It's been a hard few days for me. It's not that I don't want tell you about what

happened, but I need to talk directly to your father and to the person involved and try to clear things up a bit before I can tell you about it.”

“No problem.” Harrison unlocked the door for Dani and a smile lit one corner of his mouth.

Dani felt like she smacked into a Mac truck. Maxwell was an imitation of a man—Harrison was the real deal, and she suddenly realized that she was glad, because as much as she had been in love with the idea of being in love it was Harrison who really held her heart.

“Dani?”

Her face burned as her head snapped up. “Yes?”

“You all right?”

Her mouth grew dry. Having this newfound knowledge and sharing it were two totally different things. “Just thinking—that’s all.”

Thankfully, Harrison didn’t seem to have a clue as to where her thoughts had wandered. He walked around the car to unlock his door and asked over his shoulder, “So, what was it like to watch the miracle of birth?”

“It was beautiful and...” Unable to wait any longer, she said, “Harrison, that little boy wasn’t the only birth that happened this afternoon.”

Harrison glanced at her with a wrinkled brow. She was tempted to rub it out but thought better of it. “Here, let’s get in the car. I’ll tell you on the way home.”

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As soon as Harrison was seated, Dani started telling him about the events that followed Jillian’s giving birth. He stole glimpses of her every chance he had while he drove. Every emotion she felt, he could clearly see written on her face. Finally, wanting to give her all his attention, he pulled the car over.

Dani never stopped her flow of conversation. “Pricilla made it clear to me that while I thought I was a Christian, what I’ve been taught and all my head knowledge was for naught...because it never made it to my heart.”

Harrison leaned his head against the back of his seat as he realized why the Lord had asked him to wait before pursuing a relationship with her. He focused his thoughts back on what she was saying.

“So, Pricilla sat down with me and the Lord opened my eyes, and I asked Jesus to become Lord of my life.”

“Wow. I always just assumed...when I should have...” He shook his head, trying to expel that line of thinking. “It’s a good thing that nothing takes God by surprise.” He turned to Dani and said, “We need to celebrate. What would you like to do?”

Dani gave a carefree laugh. “Oh, I don’t care. You pick.”

Harrison smiled back. “I can do that. Let’s start by going to the Christian bookstore and picking out a Bible. We’ll get it engraved with today’s date in it.”

“What a great idea.”

## Chapter Eleven

By the time Dani finally got home, it was much too late to call Mr. Beckman as she had hoped to do. *I'll go see him first thing tomorrow.* She frowned, dreading the thought. *Somehow I need to talk to Maxwell as well. I wonder what he is thinking now? He must know that I'm onto him.* Dani prayed, *Lord, I don't know how to handle this situation. Please give me wisdom.*

The telephone next to her bed rang. Without thinking, she picked up the phone and tucked it under her chin as she pulled back the bed covers. "Hello?"

Maxwell's smooth voice answered back. "Well, hello, kitten. Where have you been?"

Dani turned around and sank down onto her bed. She cleared her throat and wound the phone cord around her finger. "Maxwell, you're calling late."

"I've been trying to reach you since yesterday," he said tersely.

"Last night I wasn't feeling well. I went to bed as soon as I got home. Today I spent my day at the hospital. Jillian had her baby."

Dani doubted if there was an ounce of sincerity when he said, "Oh, that's nice." His tone of voice sounded as slick as castor oil and as equally welcomed. "I was wondering what happened on Tuesday."

"What do you mean?"

"When I spoke to you in the morning, everything was all set for you to bring me the Conrad file, but when you got there, you never came to see me."

Maxwell did little to hide his frustration over the turn of events. "Then that Harrison fellow whisked you away after the meeting." Suddenly, he stopped talking. Dani could hear him take a deep breath. "What's up, love? You've never let that happen before."

Dani needed some time to think. This was all happening too quickly. After all, it wasn't every day she needed to confront someone who was stealing and using her as the gopher. "Well, I had an awful migraine."

"I'm sorry to hear that." His voice, which had once made her heart melt, became so obnoxious to her she had a hard time even holding the phone to her ear. "You're not mad at me now are you?" After a moment's silence, he added, "Oh, are we to have our first lovers' quarrel? You must tell me what I've done."

Dani felt ill at his use of the word *lovers*. "No!" Gaining more control of her voice, she said a bit more gently, "Gracious, no, nothing like that. I just haven't had the chance to call you back." She prayed for some type of insight on what to say. "Look, do you think we could have a cup of tea or something together? We need to talk."

"Ah, I would love to. Shall I come to see you tomorrow?"

Dani put her hand up to her forehead. *Of course he wants to come here, now that there may be a glitch in his plans. Oh, what a fool I've been.* "Sure, what time is good for you?"

"It's been too long, sweetheart. How about if I meet you for breakfast at Beckman's before you have to go on duty?"

Dani couldn't hide the surprise in her voice. "Breakfast? But...but that means you would have to leave at—"

"No time is too early to see you, my love." When Dani didn't say anything right away, he added,

“Besides, there are a few things I need to attend to there in Pennsylvania. How about if I pick you up at, say, seven thirty? That would give us a good hour and a half before you need to get to work. I’ll just swing around and drop you back home after you’re done working and I’m through with my business.”

Hesitantly, she said, “Well, I guess...”

“Good. I’ll see you then.”

Dani stared at the phone as the line went dead. She replaced the receiver on its cradle and put her head against her pillow. *Oh, Lord, what a mess I’ve gotten myself into this time.* After a second, she realized, *But it’s different now. I’m no longer in it alone.* Peace flowed once again through her heart. *Thank You, Lord, that I can rest in You. Help me to trust in You and Your will.*

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The alarm went off, and Dani reached over to push down the button. She looked up at the ceiling and tried to clear her groggy head. Suddenly, she remembered all that had happened yesterday in the chapel. She pinched herself to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. As if floating on a cloud with that newfound sense of peace, she went to the mirror to see if she looked any different. Her blonde hair was slightly greasy and stringy, and her double chin was still there. She simply refused to look any further. *The insides are different, but I’m still stuck with this body.* She took a step closer to the mirror to look at her eyes. *I’ve heard it said somewhere the eyes are the window to the soul.* For some reason the thought of a person’s soul brought Maxwell to mind again. She stepped away from the mirror and, grabbing her things, headed for the shower. *I don’t have time to waste. He’ll be here in a while.*

The hour sped by, and she knew Maxwell would be arriving at any moment. Dani felt like she needed

to talk with God. However, not having practice at that sort of thing, she didn't know what to say. Instead, she hunted for the old Bible she knew was somewhere on her bookshelf. *Oh, Harrison*, she thought with a sense of excitement, *I can't wait for my new Bible*. She found the old book, and brushed off the fine layer of dust that covered it, and fingered the bold engraved letters on the cover. She turned the Bible and it opened to Hebrews, chapter eleven. The heading caught her eye. "By Faith."

*Hm, this should be interesting*, she mused and started reading. "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible."

She stopped there and contemplated the definition of faith. *Sure of what we hope...certain of what we do not see*. She tucked that thought in the back of her mind to consider more thoroughly later and continued to read about the faith of Abel and Enoch. Her eyes finally focused on verse six, and she fell in love with the words as soon as she read them. "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him." *That's exactly the piece I was missing for all these years. Faith, plain and simple.*

Her mother's voice called Dani from her contemplation. "Dani, the doorbell is ringing. Can you get it?"

"Sure, Mom. It's probably my breakfast date. I'll see you later."

"Okay, hon. Have a good day."

Dani grabbed her jacket. On a whim, she picked up her Bible as well and put it in inside her large purse. "Thanks," she called to her mom before opening the door.

She wasn't sure if it was the blast of chilly air that made her shiver or the piercing look in Maxwell's eyes as he greeted her. "Hello, love."

She closed the door behind her. "Hi, Maxwell." They both stood on the porch for a moment, looking at one another. The silence made Dani feel fidgety. "It's a little chilly this morning, isn't it?"

Maxwell didn't even try to kiss her. Rather, he looked at her closely, as if to see if she was talking in riddles. He took her by the elbow and steered her to his car. "Shall we go? I was thinking about going to the cafeteria at Beckman's so it would be convenient for you."

Dani was a little surprised at his consideration for her and slightly confused at this turn of events. The cafeteria was always busy at Beckman's. It would be good to go where there were sure to be a lot of people. *I'll feel more comfortable.* She nodded in agreement and said, "That's fine."

The ride to Beckman's took about fifteen minutes in actuality, but in the stillness of the car, it felt more like a lifetime before they came to a stop in the parking lot. Maxwell turned to her with one eyebrow raised. "Shall we?"

Dani just about tripped over the doorjamb in her haste to get out of the car. She stood up straight and took a deep breath, trying to regain her composure. *Lord, she prayed, I feel like I'm on pins and needles here. Please give me clarity of thought, and wisdom, and most of all...faith.*

Maxwell dryly commented, "You don't seem quite like your usual graceful self."

Once again, he took her elbow. They entered the double doors and made their way to the cafeteria in silence. While they were waiting for their food, Maxwell played with the corner of the napkin he had grabbed earlier as they made their way to the table. Finally, with a hawk-like gaze, he said, "You are not a very convincing liar. Do you want to tell me what

really happened on Tuesday?"

Dani knew this was it, time for the confrontation. "Yes, I need to do that." She brushed her hand through her hair, thinking of how to phrase her words. "Harrison and I made really good time on the way to New Jersey. Because we arrived a little earlier than planned, I went to see you before the meeting." She looked away for a moment and saw their number was flashing. Thankful for the distraction, she said, "Our egg sandwiches are ready." Maxwell cursed under his breath and jumped up to retrieve them.

As soon as he passed her the food, he questioned, "So, what happened that you didn't?"

Her face flushed at the memory. "Well, I did go up to see you. Your office door was ajar." Maxwell's gaze was so intense that she defensively said, "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but when you said my name, it drew my attention to your words."

The muscle in the side of Maxwell's cheek worked back and forth.

Dani leaned her body back until she felt the back of the chair. With the intense desire to just finish the conversation, she said, "To make a long story short, the fairy tale romance is over. I heard what you said about having me wrapped around your finger. The stark reality of what our relationship really was is what we need to face now."

Relief filled Dani now that it was out in the open. Maxwell, on the other hand, nervously drummed his thumbs on the table. "And what exactly do you think our relationship was?"

"You've only been using me to gain information to sell."

Maxwell's face grew red. He chewed on his bottom lip and asked, "So, what are you planning on doing?"

Dani lifted her shoulder in a shrug. "I guess the only thing I can do is tell Mr. Beckman the truth."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wished she could retract them.

The vein on the side of Maxwell's temple was protruding. He whispered, "It's a shame...we were having so much fun too, weren't we?" He crumpled his coffee cup in one hand and then stood up and stormed out of the cafeteria.

Dani shivered. *What will he do now?*

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Harrison was eager to see Dani. With a spring in his step, he entered the office building. First, he looked into her office to see if she had arrived yet. After finding that she wasn't there, he walked over to the lobby desk. With a bright smile, he said, "Good morning, Aimee."

With a shy grin, Aimee, a new employee to the staff, returned his greeting. "Good morning, Mr. Harrison."

"Just plain Harrison is fine," he said as he glanced down at his watch. "Hm. Quarter to nine." With another grin, he asked, "Would you please let me know when Daniella gets in?"

"Yes, sir—I mean, Harrison." Clearly flustered, she stood up and said, "I noticed her coat is already here, but I haven't seen her yet. When I do, I'll buzz you right away."

Nodding his head, he said, "Thanks. See you around." He left the foyer and whistled as he made his way to his office.

His father's secretary greeted him as he passed her. "Well, good morning, Harrison. You seem chipper today."

"Yep." He looked at her pale green dress. "Did I ever tell you that you look great in that color?"

Mrs. Potts bloomed under his compliment. "Well, thank you."

Harrison continued toward his office.

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Dani was emotionally spent and felt as if she had just been raked through the coals. After Maxwell stormed out of the cafeteria, she debated whether she should go directly to her office and start on her work or see Mr. Beckman right away. After a moment's thought, she decided to collect her coat and take a little walk outside to clear her head.

As soon as Aimee saw Dani, she gave her a cheery smile. "Harrison asked me to buzz him when you got in."

Dani ran her fingers through her hair. "Well, please don't buzz him quite yet." Aimee looked a little confused so Dani said, "I am just coming back from a rather difficult meeting with someone. I feel like I should take a little walk outside. Give me about fifteen minutes, and then I'll be officially here."

The smile returned to Aimee's face. "Got it."

As Dani started out, her stride was long and quick. Taking deep breaths of the fresh morning air felt good. Her mind, having a will of its own, didn't allow her to revel in the sense of newfound freedom she felt. Instead, it replayed the events of the morning. Suddenly, a sense of impending doom descended upon her heart. It wrapped itself around her so tightly that she felt as if she couldn't breathe. She tried to shake it off by praying, *Lord, I'm not sure where to go from here. Give me wisdom as I go to talk to Mr. Beckman. Help him to forgive me for unknowingly preventing the company's chance at a fair bid...and please give me the courage I need to face this! I feel so weak.* As she neared the front door, she knew it was time to face the task at hand. She opened up the door with a purposeful pull.

Aimee's eyes darted back and forth in a nervous fashion, between Dani and her office door. "Ah, Mr.

Beckman is waiting for you in your office.”

Totally surprised, she said, “Really?”

At a curt nod of Aimee’s head, Dani stepped forward and inched the door open.

Mr. Beckman was seated behind her desk. His hands were folded in front of him with his thumbs tapping against each other, revealing his impatience. “I’ve just come from a very interesting meeting,” he said as soon as he saw her.

Dani shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she thought, *That makes two of us then.*

Mr. Beckman blew air out of his mouth as he massaged the bridge of his nose. “It has come to my attention you have been involved in trying to sell information to a fellow named Maxwell.”

Dani’s jaw hung open and she felt for the edge of the desk as her knees grew weak. That slimeball had somehow managed to turn tables on her while she was outside walking. How did everything get so muddled so fast?

Mr. Beckman, in a no-nonsense voice, questioned, “Do you have anything to say about this?”

Dumbfounded, she said, “You think I’ve been trying to sell information to Maxwell? But that’s crazy!”

“Really? Would you care to expound?”

“It’s he who is selling information!”

Mr. Beckman did not look the least bit happy. He snapped at her, “Don’t even try that finger-pointing.”

“But, I’m telling you the truth.”

“Truth...ha! If what you’re saying is valid, why didn’t you come to me? Our company is losing money.”

Dani’s brain froze. In a state of shock, she remained in mortified silence while the accusation hung heavily in the air. “I only found out on Tuesday about Maxwell. And I was going to tell you. This

morning in fact.”

“It is Thursday, if you haven’t noticed. I realize that Jillian had her baby yesterday, but there were many hours where you could have contacted me between Tuesday and now.” Mr. Beckman was clearly disgusted. “I don’t have the time nor patience to deal with you at this moment.” He stood up and strode to the doorway. “According to Maxwell, there is evidence he will be sending me.” Turning back to look at her, he added, “I personally will be investigating this further. For the meantime, I suggest you take a leave of absence, starting in five minutes.”

“But...”

Hesitating a moment before opening the door, he said, “I’m also aware of the friendship you and Harrison have shared in the past. My advice to you is stay away from my son.”

Dani didn’t even hear the door close as he left. She buried her face in her hands. *How can this be happening to me?*

## Chapter Twelve

The antique clock hanging on the Jillian's living room wall ticked loudly. Dani became mesmerized as she watched the second hand march steadily around.

Jillian returned from putting little Aaron down for his nap. "Dani."

Dani jumped a few inches off her seat. "What?"

"I've had to call your name three times before you heard me. What's up with you, girl?"

Dani's eyes flooded as images of her day drifted through her mind. One lone, warm tear escaped and trickled down her cheek. She spoke so softly that Jillian had to lean toward her to hear what she was saying. "Things aren't going well at work."

"Oh, come on. It can't be that bad."

If Dani weren't so upset, she would have laughed. Instead, she said, "I was given a mandatory leave of absence this morning."

Jillian jumped clear off the couch. "What!"

Dani flatly said, "I can't go back to work because Mr. Beckman has been led to believe I was trying to sell company information."

"I don't understand."

Dani uttered the single name, "Maxwell."

Jillian's eyes grew wide before she fell back onto the couch, grabbed the pillow, and punched it.

A thick blanket of silence permeated the room. Dani broke it after a few minutes. "I feel so stupid. I can't believe how easily I was deceived."

"I've had my reservations about Maxwell." Jillian punched the pillow again. "That scoundrel. Details, give me the details. What happened?"

Dani told Jillian all that had transpired over the

past few days, starting with her trip to New Jersey and ending with Mr. Beckman's accusation.

"Of all the rotten luck." Jillian's sympathy showed through her bright blue eyes. "What did Harrison say about all this? He'll listen to you."

"I haven't spoken to Harrison." Dani sniffed and tried to look on the bright side. "Some good has come in this past week."

"Oh, yeah? Like what?" Jillian demanded.

"Aaron."

Jillian's eyes swiftly softened. "Yes, Aaron."

"I haven't told you this yet, but after Aaron was born and you were napping, I felt restless so I went downstairs. Guess where I ended up?"

Jillian shrugged. "The gift shop?"

Dani shook her head. "Nope, the chapel."

"The chapel?" Jillian asked with a raised eyebrow.

Dani gave her a wobbly smile. "I spoke with a woman named Pricilla, and she helped me get right with God."

"Oh." Confusion marred Jillian's face, and she squirmed a little uncomfortably in her seat. "Whatever. After all, I guess you need any help you can get right now. If you're good with the man upstairs, so much the better."

Dani softly asked, "Can't we all use His help?"

"You're not going to get weird on me now, are you?"

Dani laughed for the first time since she spoke to Mr. Beckman. "It wouldn't be anything new, would it?"

"Got me there."

With a serious tone, Dani said, "Jillian, thanks for listening."

"I wish there was more I could do."

"You've done more than you know. You helped remind me that I'm not alone in this. I have friends and family that love me and a God who is with me."

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Dani entered Mr. Beckman's office building with trepidation, as if she were headed for the gallows. Heather, the secretary sitting in the spacious lobby, sent her a curious look. Dani greeted her by saying, "No, I didn't sell out. At least, not intentionally."

Heather's chin dropped. "I didn't say anything."

"Not verbally, but it's written all over your face."

Heather looked around to make sure no one was listening before she leaned forward. "We were all so shocked when we heard the news. But I told the girls I didn't think the rumors were true."

Dani pushed her purse back up higher on her shoulder. "Thanks. Now if I can just convince Mr. Beckman of my innocence."

"Good luck."

Dani nodded. "I have a feeling I'm going to need more than that," she said and headed for the elevator.

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As soon as she entered the office she could tell the cards were stacked against her. She would have had to be blind not to notice the pink slip Mr. Beckman held in his hand.

"Here," Mr. Beckman said in his gruff manner. "This is for you."

Dani knew she was wearing her heart on her sleeve as a wet tear slipped down her cheek, but she didn't even care. "I know you won't believe me..."

"You're darn right I won't!" He stood up behind the desk and managed to tower over her at the same time. "I have all the proof I need."

Had it been a few days ago, this devastating circumstance would have been the end for her, but now it was different. Nothing on the outside had

changed, a pink slip was still a pink slip, and yet her heart was able to hold onto the hope that God would see her through this. Dani shook her head, accepted the slip that was shoved close to her face, and calmly said, “I know it seems that way to you now, and while I did do a foolish thing by giving Maxwell company information, it was done in my ignorance—not for gain.”

“Out! Get out—and stay away from my son!”

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Dani, thankful to be home, closed her bedroom door and walked toward the window. The meeting had not gone well, and while she knew God was with her, she still hurt. She looked up to the sky and prayed, “Lord, I need Your help.” The phone rang, and Dani cut her prayer short. “Hello?”

“Daniella, can you meet me for dinner tonight?”

“Harrison.” Dani’s heart leaped to her throat. “I’d...I’d...” Her eyes start to tear. She impatiently rubbed at them. Defeated, she said, “I can’t. Your dad...”

“Daniella, forget about that for now. I need to know what happened.”

She rested her head against the glass window. “It’s not what you—”

“Meet me at Glenn’s Café at seven.”

“Harrison, your dad told me not to see you again.”

“I know what he told you. He told me the same thing.”

“It’s not worth risking your neck for mine.”

“Let me decide that, all right?”

Silence held the line before she finally asked, “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Softly, she said, “I’ll be there.”

As she placed the phone back on the cradle, she

felt more depressed than ever. What did she have to offer to a wonderful man like Harrison? She was fat, jobless, and altogether useless.

Dani sat on the side of her bed and held her head in her hands. More out of frustration than anything else, she reached for the Bible on her nightstand. *Okay, Lord. I'm drowning here.*

She opened the scriptures to 2 Corinthians, chapter ten. As she read, it felt like God's loving arms wrapped around her, assuring her that she belonged to Him and that she was something special, a creation of His. Then, the words in verse twelve popped out and ministered to her soul like medicine to the sick. "We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise."

*I don't need to compare myself with others.*

She went over to her mirror and thought, *You may tell me I'm less than perfect, but I don't need to measure who I am by a silly mirror and human standards, because I'm God's girl now.*

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Dani didn't think she'd be able to eat a thing—not because of the diet, but because of nerves. However, by the time she told Harrison everything, the salad he had ordered for her had all but disappeared and she was glad. Somewhere along the line over the past few days she had come to realize that she needed to make good food choices and exercise to maintain her health, but the extreme was not where God wanted her to be. It pulled all the focus away from Christ and put it on herself instead. She knew the balance would be hard to maintain, but suddenly the challenge didn't seem nearly as intimidating as it once would have.

Meanwhile, Harrison had listened to her without interruption, and as soon as she finished, he sat back against the booth and sighed. "So that's what happened."

"I'm sorry." She felt like she was babbling, while the water fountain of tears she had been holding in overflowed. "I hope you'll be able to forgive me."

Harrison reached across the table and covered her hand with his own. "It's already done."

"You believe me?"

"Of course, I do."

"Just like that?" Suddenly, she remembered the note she had written and wanted to give to him. She pulled it out of her purse and handed it to him. "I wrote this the day I found out about Maxwell using me for the company information. I wanted to give it to you the day Jillian had her baby, but I never got to."

Harrison took the letter, but didn't open it. Instead, he looked at Dani as if he wanted to say something but changed his mind. "I think it's time for me to do a little investigating."

Dani choked on her sip of iced tea. "What do you mean?"

"I had a not-so-pleasant note on my car windshield."

Dani's jaw dropped. "Was it a threat?"

"Not directly."

"Do you think we should go to the police?"

Harrison played with his straw for a moment. "I think it's a little too soon. I'd like to see if I can come up with some concrete evidence first."

That seemed like a no-brainer to her. "But you have a note."

"It's not signed."

She shook her head. "I don't like it. It's too dangerous. If anything happens to you, I'd...I'd..."

Harrison squeezed her hand. "I'll call the police as soon as I can."

“What do we do in the meantime?”

A small grin cracked Harrison’s face for the first time. “My church is having a Bible study tonight.” He glanced at his watch. “We still have time to make it. Want to go?”

Dani pulled her hand away and held her head in her hands. How could Harrison be so...unruffled?

“Hey, you okay?”

Dani looked up into Harrison’s concerned eyes and knew at that moment what love was. *I love him, Lord. I love Harrison. And he can be hurt because of me. Please, please keep him safe.*

“Dani?”

“Hm? Oh, church...sure, we could use some guidance.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Chris, who was leading the Bible Study for the night, tucked his Bible under the chair and glanced around the room. "Before we start, are there any prayer requests?"

Dani's eyes grew wide as she saw Harrison nod. *He wouldn't, would he?* she wondered.

"I'd like prayer for Dani."

Dani's face grew warm as she begged him with her eyes not to say more.

"She's looking for a temporary job."

Her mouth hung open. *I am?*

Chris asked, "Can you do any secretarial work?"

Harrison laughed. "That's her specialty."

"Really?" Chris became excited. "Our church secretary is leaving for a three-month sabbatical in two weeks, and we still haven't found anyone to fill in for her. We've been praying for someone to step forward."

"What would I need to do?" Dani asked with a spark of interest.

"Call the church tomorrow and talk to Carol. She's our secretary, and she can fill you in on the details and set you up for an interview if you're interested."

During the Bible study, Dani could hardly concentrate on the scripture they were studying, for an overwhelming sense of rightness took preeminence in her mind. She felt as if the pieces of some great big puzzle were being moved around and fit into place, but she had no idea what the picture was going to be. It was exciting, nonetheless.

\*\*\*\*

Dani tucked the phone under her chin. "Harrison, I got it. I got the job."

"I didn't think for a second that they would turn you down."

Dani laughed, a lighthearted sound. "There is such a sense of freedom in realizing God is in control. I mean, like...over everything. Even in getting fired. He knew where I was going to end up being needed."

"That reminds me of a book I just read on Corrie ten Boom. Have you heard of her?"

"I think so...is she the one who was in a concentration camp?"

"Yup. Her family hid Jews. She often said it was through the darkest of days she knew God's presence the greatest. You know, we can learn of God and about Him, but it's through the trying times we learn to know Him and the comfort of His presence."

Dani sighed. "I'm beginning to understand that there's no such thing as coincidence. I think some things God ordains and brings about to happen for His own purposes."

"And some things He allows to happen for us to learn and grow closer to Him."

"I need to hang around you more often."

"I wouldn't mind."

"You wouldn't?" Her heart pitter-pattered. Could Harrison have somehow grown to care for her as she had him?

"Dani." He sounded a bit frustrated. "There will be time to talk about that later. As for now, I've come across some evidence."

All thoughts of romance flew out of Dani's head. "You did?"

"Yup. I'm going in to talk to Dad, and then I'm headed to the police station."

"What did you find? Can I do anything?"

He ignored her first question and said, "Just pray."

Dani wrung her hands. "I will."

"When I get home, I'll give you a call."

"I'll be waiting."

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Harrison approached his dad's office with the note he had found tucked in his windshield and rapped twice on the door. He didn't bother to wait for the usual, "Come in."

"Harrison, what's up?" Mr. Beckman took off his wire-rimmed glasses and dangled them from his long fingers.

"This is," Harrison said as he placed the paper on his father's desk.

Mr. Beckman put his glasses back on, and his eyes grew wide as he read the note. He looked up and sputtered, "What's this nonsense?"

Harrison folded his arm across his chest. "I believe it can be defined in one word: Maxwell."

"Maxwell?"

After running a hand through his hair, Harrison took a seat by his father's desk. "I think you may have jumped the gun a little too quickly with the story he gave you about Dani. Yes, she was involved but unknowingly. She was just one of his pawns." He held up a hand to prevent his father from speaking. "I know what he said made sense, but did you at least look into his story and allegations?"

Mr. Beckman put a hand to his tie and stood up. He stroked his chin and then finally said, "No, it didn't seem necessary, but since you seem to think this note is from him, perhaps it does warrant a look-see. I'll call Sam to check into it."

"I'm already on it, and Sam's pulled up some history that concerns me. Maxwell is just an alias. His real name is Martin VanStorm. He's wanted in

Texas for theft, aggravated assault, and attempted manslaughter.”

“What?” Mr. Beckman sank back down into his chair with a thud.

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“So, there you are.”

Dani’s blood ran cold as she stood up from the flowerbed she had been weeding. “Maxwell. What...what are you doing here?”

“You had to stick your nose in it, didn’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know very well what I mean. Now, just what should we do about it?”

“Maxwell”—she licked her dry lips—“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but you’re scaring me.”

“Good.” He took a step closer, and she held her plastic handled garden trowel up as if it could guard her.

Maxwell laughed. “And what do you think that’s going to do for you?” He grabbed her wrist with one hand and squeezed it tight.

She held on with a death grip for as long as she could while she frantically tried to free her wrist.

“I’d let her go if I were you.”

Both of them turned toward the voice. Maxwell dropped his hand as soon as he saw the officer.

“Is he bothering you, miss?”

Dani swallowed hard and couldn’t speak, until she saw Harrison round the corner of the house. She ran and flung herself into Harrison’s arms.

“That’s him.” Harrison nodded to the police officer, who started to read Maxwell his rights while handcuffing him.

She couldn’t stop shaking. “I was so afraid.”

Harrison looked at Dani’s wrist and gritted his teeth. “Thank goodness he won’t be able to touch you

again.”

A second officer approached them. “Would you two please come down to the station to file a report on this?” The first officer led Maxwell past them. He spat on the ground, missing Dani’s shoes by a fraction of an inch.

Dani pictured Troy from her school days and smiled at the irony. “Full circle,” she murmured.

“What’s that?” Harrison asked as he lowered his head closer to her.

She smiled. “Childhood story. I’ll tell you later.”

The officer cleared his throat.

“Yes.” Harrison nodded. “We’ll come down straightaway.”

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As they drove to the police station, Dani asked, “How did you know to come to my house?”

Harrison wore a guilty expression. “I’ve been having a private eye follow Maxwell. I didn’t know if he would be dangerous or not, but Dad and I discovered some more information about him, and I was not about to chance it. The detective had orders to call the police right away if Maxwell were ever to approach your home.”

“Wow!”

“I was at the station already, so I was there when the call came in, and they let me come with them to identify Maxwell.”

“I’ve never been gladder to see anyone in my life!”

Harrison gave her a crooked grin. “I kind of guessed that,” he said as he pulled the car over.

“What are you doing?” Dani asked.

“I’m hoping I guessed something else right, and I want to be able to have your full attention.” He unfastened his seat belt and turned to face her.

“You do.”

He reached for her hand. "I love you, Daniella Duncan. Do you have any feelings for me at all?"

"You...you..." She held her free hand up to her throat. "Love me?"

"Forever."

Dani let her head hit the back of the seat and said, "I like the sound of that. Forever. That's how I want us to be."

"Daniella?"

"I love you too, Harrison."

He smiled a slow smile and reached across the seat to brush his hand across her cheek before he lowered his lips to meet hers. His kiss was all Dani had ever dreamed it would be as the word "forever" echoed into her heart.

She sat up with a start. "What about Maxwell, and your dad, and work, and..." Harrison's kiss cut her off.

After the tender kiss, he touched the tip of his nose to hers. "Remember that freedom in knowing God is in control?"

Dani snuggled closer. "Um hm."

Harrison wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "Let's let Him sort all that out."

Blissfully she sighed, "Forever."

A complimentary devotional, written by JoAnn Carter as a companion to this story, is available on her website at <http://home.comcast.net/~jo.glenncarter/site/>

## About the Author

Hi! My name is JoAnn Carter. I live in Vermont with my wonderful husband of 17 years, four children, and the best dog in the world...Ginger. In the past I've worked as a Licensed Practical Nurse, apple orchard guide, and substitute teacher. Currently, I'm a home-schooling mom. In my spare time, (when I'm not writing) I read and write reviews for our local Christian Radio station, The Light Radio Network. I also enjoy speaking at schools and our local libraries.

I love to write. I've learned so much and find that everyday I've more to learn. It's my desire to be a blessing to the folks who read the stories I have written. I pray their faith will be strengthened by the characters and lessons they learn.

I love to hear from my readers. You can contact me by visiting my webpage:

<http://home.comcast.net/~jo.glenn Carter/site/>

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