

# LOVE

## NEVER FAILS

CROSSROADS BOOK THREE



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*To Julane. Without you, Cody and Kayla's love story would still be stuck  
in my brain.*



*“And now abide faith, hope, love, these three, but the greatest of these is  
love.”*

*-I Corinthians 13:13 NKJV*





## Chapter One

Kayla Caldwell was surrounded by family, but all alone. The soft music playing through the arena's speakers would be easily drowned out if she shouted what she was thinking. *Why, God? Mom and Dad deserved their quick trip to Vegas. I told them I would be fine here on my own. I lied! I'm not fine. That plane was not supposed to crash.*

Granny Caldwell grabbed her left hand, and Zanna Pruitt her right.

Lights dimmed, and a couple mounted on Mom and Dad's horses brought in the American and Arkansas flags. The crowd stood in response until the flags were posted on either side of the stage in the arena's center.

"Please be seated." Her uncle, Smiley Caldwell, stood behind a lectern on the stage. Their neighbor, Felecia Billings's, oil painting sat propped in front of the lectern. The figures of a man and a woman on horseback riding into the sunset were spotlighted.

"I must start with a confession," Uncle Smiley said. "Although I have been preaching funerals for over twenty years, I was not looking forward to this service today. Losing my brother and my sister-in-law seemed so unfair. I felt the Lord was piling

misery upon misery. But then, my niece, Kayla, set me straight. She didn't ask too much of me. She just wants me to continue the task God has set before me. That includes helping take over the role of parent and guardian for her and to bring God's comfort to grieving people.

"I can do that, because of the promise Jesus made, recorded in the Gospel of John. He said, 'In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And whither I go, you know, and the way you know.' I believe with my whole heart that He has gone ahead to prepare a place for us, for me, for you, for Dub, and for Tina. Now, please join me in prayer."

He could pray—that was his job. Instead, Kayla's mind went back to the conversation he had mentioned. During a late May rainstorm on the way back from Little Rock, Uncle Smiley took her to the site of the awful crash. *To provide closure*, he said. Maybe for him.

Kayla had stared at a pile of debris several yards down the hillside below their truck. She didn't know enough about airplanes to identify what she saw. The remains resembled a metal building after a tornado. Twisted, mangled, unrecognizable. A black stain covered everything. Evidence there had been at least a small fire. She couldn't help shuddering as she thought of what the four bodies must have looked like when the first responders arrived.

"Amen." Uncle Smiley brought his prayer to a close.

Two more speakers stepped forward, adding brief remembrances. Her cousin Junior started a projector in front of the stage. The memorial video Junior and his friend Cody Billings had created filled the large screen.

Kayla looked around at the crowd, mostly dabbing their eyes with tissues. She should be thankful so many people loved her. But, right now, she felt as if she was drifting in the air, like a



balloon that had just been accidentally released. Floating aimlessly, with no idea when she'd feel grounded again.

Cody held his breath as the music began. *Please, Lord. Use this video for your glory.*

As the images faded in and out, Cody remembered the pictures he hadn't chosen. So many included a smiling Kayla between her parents. Pictures of Dub and Tina working at the rodeo, or on the ranch. Pictures of holidays with the rest of the Caldwell and Pruitt families. Pictures of each of them as children and young teens before they came together. But Cody had been drawn to the photos of the family of three. He'd gone back more than once to weed out some of those. Today was not just about Kayla, but he could see how much they all meant to each other.

Comments from kids at school haunted him. Had he done enough to dispel the image they held of the "spoiled" rich kid? Yes, Kayla's parents had plenty of money. Since she was an only child, there had been no reason to withhold material things from her. But she hadn't acted like a total brat. Many others with multiple siblings were more guilty of that.

Instead, he had nursed an impossible crush on her for a couple of years now. Since she was a year older, he'd never gathered enough courage to follow through. Then, his bull wreck brought everything to a halt.

He turned around just before the last few frames to see how she was reacting. Thankfully, instead of making her dissolve in tears, the video brought a smile to her face. Others might appreciate his efforts, too, but more than anything he wanted to reach out to Kayla with this production.

She caught his glance and smiled. His cheeks warmed before he faced the front for the final slide. *Okay, Lord. Thanks for the help. I think this was a success.*

Kayla returned handshakes and hugs as well-wishers filed past. The faces were nothing more than blurs. Words all sounded so hollow. As the last person in the line greeted Granny Caldwell on her left, she stepped forward to stand next to her Grandpa Pruitt, called Coach. Since he had graduated from a wheelchair to a walker, he would need a good break in the traffic before venturing to the ramp leading to the exit.

“Hey, Kayla.” Cody’s deep voice rang out as he rolled up in his wheelchair. “You makin’ it okay?”

“Yeah. I think so. Just glad this is over with.” She stepped to Coach’s left and patted Cody’s shoulder. “That video was perfect. How did you get the songs to fit so well with the pictures?”

“I enjoy that sort of thing.” He moved closer as Coach walked toward the exit. “One of my high school teachers showed a video I did to the journalism teacher at Crossroads, and he told me I should take television production classes in college.”

“I agree. Or maybe even movies,” Kayla said. “You have a real talent.”

“I just don’t think I’d want to be still that long every day, staring at a screen.” Cody moved forward behind Coach.

A hug from behind spun her around.

“I think we’re headed home, sweetie.”

“Okay.” Kayla gestured toward Cody. “This is my grandmother, Suzanna Pruitt. All of us kids call her Zanna. Zanna, this is Cody Billings.”

Zanna stepped up beside Cody’s wheelchair. “Are you the young man who created that video? It was marvelous.”

“Yes, ma’am. I am so sorry for your loss.” Cody shook Zanna’s hand.

“I wish there was a way to show it at the burial service tomorrow,” Zanna said. “But I don’t think it would work at the cemetery.”

“I could make a copy for y’all,” Cody said. “Then, you can watch it again anytime.”

“Great idea.” Kayla walked behind the two of them. “If you email it to me, I’ll download it for Zanna and Coach while I’m at their house. I’m staying with them for a few days after the service tomorrow.”

“Will do! See you soon.” Cody headed down the ramp.

Kayla stood alone at the bottom of the bleachers. If only she could skip the burial service tomorrow. Today’s service had been the perfect way to remember Mom and Dad. Tomorrow would be more of the same, with Zanna and Coach’s church friends. Other than cousins, few people her own age would attend. She sighed.

The video Cody produced had been impressive. How could someone she barely talked to understand her family so well? It would be wonderful if he came to the next service. Why would he travel so far to attend services for people who were not part of his family? A depressing day now seemed even drearier.

Uncle Smiley waited at the bottom of the ramp with her cousin Faith. Kayla’s stomach churned as she pictured the spread of casseroles that waited for them back at his house. Why was it hard to be grateful for the people caring for her? Right now, she just wanted to retreat to the barn, maybe take Sissy for a ride. *Lord, help me paste that smile on for just a little longer. Amen.*

“Thanks for riding with me to Coach and Zanna’s.” Kayla checked her right mirror before exiting the freeway the next morning. “I want to have my truck at their house this week.”

“No problem.” Faith replaced her bottle of water in the cup holder. “Be sure to text me if you’ve forgotten anything you wanted to take to Fort Smith. I probably have most anything you would want to borrow.”

“You’re the best. I guess it was a little crazy to try to go

straight to the pageant without going back home. I would just go today, if I could.”

“I know.” Faith patted her leg. “Funerals are tough. I think it helps other people more than it helps the family. But it’s good to get them over with.”

Kayla passed familiar landmarks—neighbor’s mailboxes, signs advertising insurance agencies and farm implements. Finally, the dirt road she was looking for. “You’ve never been up here, have you?”

“What is that?” Faith peered up through the truck’s windshield.

“A shoe tree.” Kayla stopped the truck under the sprawling oak with old tennis shoes hanging from its limbs. “I don’t even think about it anymore. When I see it, I know where to turn.”

Faith stepped out of the passenger side and stared upward.

“I have never in my life ...”

“Well then, you haven’t lived.” Kayla shouted from the open driver’s side. “Those are my worn-out high-tops, way up there.” She pointed. “I tried tossing them three times, so my oldest cousin Jeremy did it for me.”

“Why?” Faith was still giggling as she seated herself in the truck and closed the door.

“I asked Coach that question once. All he would say is ‘Why not?’” Kayla continued driving down the dirt road.

“I guess that’s the best answer.”

Kayla took a deep breath and blew it out. Mom’s childhood canvas shoes still swung from a top branch of that tree. If she pointed them out to Faith, she would undoubtedly break down.

Her hair tickled her forehead as the breeze from the open window blew it in all directions. On childhood trips to ‘Zanna Camp’ without her parents, she’d escaped the rules and just enjoyed being herself. Maybe this dusty back road would ease her heart.

“Here we are.” She turned next to the mailbox labeled Pruitt and approached the house from behind. Paved walkways

between the outbuildings marked the adjustments made since Coach's accident that happened when she was just a small girl. The paths were perfect when he used a wheelchair, and now his walker.

"What a great house," Faith said as they stopped near the double garage.

"Come around front. You can see the freeway." Kayla's boots hit the blacktop before she led the way to the front porch.

"You know, I think I've noticed this house. So pretty, sitting up here in the trees, far away from the traffic." Faith stood with her back to the porch. "I always wondered where the driveway was hidden."

"Now you know." Kayla ran toward the front porch.

"Hi, sweetheart!" Zanna walked down the ramp to meet them. "Glad y'all made it a little early. The ladies at church have covered me up with cinnamon rolls. Can you two help me out?"

"Of course." Kayla wrapped Zanna in a hug, then stepped out of the way so Faith could collect her greeting.

"Where's Coach?" Kayla started up the ramp.

"Right behind her, as usual." The screen door slapped closed as Coach emerged onto the porch with the aid of his cane.

Kayla bent to hug him. She inhaled the scent of butterscotch and aftershave that was distinctly Coach.

Inside, subdued chatter from the kitchen greeted her as Pruitt uncles, aunts, and cousins finished their breakfast.

"Hi, Kayla!" The chorus of voices fit perfectly in this place.

"Hi, guys. This is Faith, one of my Caldwell cousins." She turned, waving her arm toward the front door.

Her aunt brought a freshly warmed cinnamon roll on a plate and hugged Kayla's shoulders. "I don't want to rush you, but we're expected at the cemetery in thirty minutes." Her calm whisper held a touch of urgency.

"I know. Thanks." She sank her teeth into the delicate sweetness. Hopefully, this wouldn't be the wrong thing to eat with a nervous stomach.

“I think I’ll skip the cinnamon roll.” Faith stopped behind her. “Kayla, can you show me where to freshen up? I’m sure my makeup is a pure disaster.”

Cody added his own “Amen” to the minister’s prayer. Those who had been sitting in the family tent stood to form a line and walked past the closed caskets.

A gravel path led from where he sat to the back row of chairs. He could most likely navigate that. Someone would probably give him a push to the front so he could shake hands. Under the canopy, there was room next to the folding chairs. He hesitated. Back-fence neighbors weren’t really family.

When Junior had suggested they go to a local sporting goods store after the service, Cody offered to drive. His buddy probably needed him to add some diversion from the sadness. That’s what friends did.

Kayla stood and left the front row even before the last mourner. She took two quick steps across the grass.

“Hi.” She stopped just to Cody’s left. “I just couldn’t take it anymore. I know it’s rude, but I’ve had enough.” She folded her hands across her stomach.

“Hey. You don’t have to sit there any longer than you want to. Today is about you, not them.” He wasn’t sure where those exact words had come from, but he certainly meant every one of them. “If you want to go for a walk, I’ll go with you.” He turned his chair around, facing away from the people gathered under the canopy.

“Thanks.” She walked beside him as they passed behind the vehicles parked in the paved lot. “I don’t know why I’m uncomfortable. It was nice and shady under the canopy. I appreciated what the minister said, the songs were great. I needed the prayers. But ... I just didn’t want to hear one more ‘I’m so sorry.’ Does that make sense?”

“Of course, it does.” Cody stopped and turned toward her. “I’ve heard it an awful lot myself after my accident. You just have to realize that people don’t know what to say. ‘I’m sorry’ is a lot better than some other things. In my case, the one that didn’t work was ‘look on the bright side.’”

“What? Why would anyone say that?” Kayla held her hand over her mouth.

“I guess they meant, ‘at least you’re not dead’ or ‘at least you can move your arms.’” Cody shrugged. “I had a lot of forgiving to do when folks struggled to find something to say.”

“Yeah. I’m glad so many are here. Mom and Dad would be impressed and pleased with the services, both yesterday and today.” She took a few halting steps before stopping. “Thanks for being here, Cody.”

“No problem. I’ll miss your mom and dad too.” He rolled along, staying a half step ahead of her.

“Are you in a rush to go home?” Kayla stopped just before the pavement ran out.

“Not really.” He and Junior could go to that sporting goods store anytime.

“I’d love for you to come out to Coach and Zanna’s. I know he’d like to show you his gardens. When we leave, just follow that black car over there. You’ll love their place.” She walked toward the tent, where outstretched arms greeted her with more ‘I’m sorries.’ Cody hoped she could handle them a little better now.

“You ready to go?” Junior approached from his other side.

“Actually, Kayla invited me to her grandparents’ house.” Cody sat beside his own truck. “You want to come out there?”

“Nah. I’ll just ride with Hope and O.D. Dad’s got Granny and Grandpa with him.” Junior waved at his sister, signaling her to wait. “I guess Kayla’s glad you came today.”

Cody blushed.

Junior smiled. “I’m glad too. You’re good to have around now and then. I’ll see you back at home, buddy.”

Cody hadn't expected to be invited home with Kayla's family after this service. Would he feel out of place?

He hoisted himself into his truck. Dad's suggestion for a smaller pickup made sense now. After learning to use the hand controls, this model suited him just as well as the monster he'd driven before.

After the loading device in the truck bed retrieved his chair and secured it, he waited to follow the family car. Wouldn't Kayla be tired and ready to rest after the past two days? Maybe he wouldn't stay long. It was nice to be asked, though. Hopefully, he'd remember not to say "I'm sorry."