

REBUILDING

Joy



Ren@Vations Inc. * 3

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MERRICK



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*To my daughters, Ellen Merrick and Emily Merrick-Jay.
You've brought me joy unmeasured, and joy is a decision we make
every day. It's only through Jesus that we can experience true,
everlasting joy.*

*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,
for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.
And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and
complete, lacking in nothing.*

James 1: 2-4 (ESV)

Chapter 1



May

The sounds of the café receded into the background as a tide of feelings washed over her.

I can do this.

Darcy Emerson Sloan closed her eyes and forced the knot in her chest to subside. Tears were near the surface, but she refused to let her mom know how inadequate she felt to take on the responsibility of the café.

Especially today.

By herself.

Alone.

As the owner-manager.

Mom deserved a break. She'd opened the café when Dad died, using his life insurance money to build a business that made her a successful businesswoman. She and Darcy would much rather have had Dad, but it had been a good life for them.

And now it was Darcy's turn to be in charge.

When Mom married Steve Reno a year ago, after being a widow for fifteen years, she had started talking to Darcy about the possibility of her taking over the business. She'd been proud of the work her daughter had done while she and Steve were on their extended honeymoon trip to Alaska. It was a gift—a gift from her Mom and her late father. For her, she reasoned, the café had seen her through tough times and taken her mind off the indescribable pain of losing a husband unexpectedly.

But I'm not Mom.

"Sweetie?" Her mother touched her arm lightly. "Are you okay?"

She opened her eyes and smiled, coming back to the present. It was a little wobbly, she was sure, but it was there.

I always smile.

"I'm okay, Mom." No one had to know that under the guise of "I'm good, how 'bout you?" Darcy was hurting. Her feelings of inadequacy were rooted deep, through no fault of anyone. It was just her and the stuff life had thrown at her. "Biscuits are in the oven, bacon is cooking, and eggs are broken and ready."

Mom looked at her closely, realization and sadness dawning on her face. "Oh, Darcy. I'm so sorry."

Darcy had trouble meeting her eyes, and it would be time to open the café any minute now. She couldn't go out there and wait on people with tears running down her face, but she wanted to. "About what?" She lifted her chin defiantly, continuing to roll silverware into paper napkins. It was a nice, mindless task.

"I know what today is." Mom clutched her arm, forcing her to glance up. "Look at me, sweetie."

"It's fine, Mom. I'll be okay." She gave a short burst of

laughter. Bitterness came through. “Stewing about it won’t change a thing, will it?”

Four years. Four years since the sergeant in a Class A uniform had knocked at her door with news no Army wife wanted to hear.

When the dreaded news came that Justin wasn’t coming back, she was seven months pregnant. A product of Justin’s last leave and a quick trip to Hawaii for their second anniversary.

“There’s stewing, and then there’s grieving.” Mom’s eyes held the tears Darcy should be shedding, probably. But she couldn’t. Not today. “It’s okay to grieve.”

Darcy shook her head. “Can’t. Don’t have time.” She took a deep breath and looked her mother in the eye. “Is Mandy working today?”

Mom glanced at the clock hanging over the order window and nodded. “She’ll be here at seven-thirty.”

“Good. Looks like good weather for fishing, so we may have a breakfast rush.” If there was one thing Darcy didn’t want to talk about, today of all days, it was her feelings, a black hole she had no intention of exploring. Not today.

“I can stay. I should have thought. Let me do this for you.”

“Mom, I’m fine. If I’m going to be running the place, you’re going to have to give me the chance to take care of things no matter what’s going on. Right?” She stared her mother down, trying hard not to grit her teeth. “Wasn’t that what you had to do?”

She has more tears in her eyes than I do. Aw Mom, cut it out.

“Besides, you and Steve haven’t had a day to call your own in ages, and here you are, checking to make sure the biscuits are made.” She grinned. “You newlyweds have to have your time alone, don’t you?”

Mom smirked. “Watch it, young lady.” She heaved a sigh,

looking at the clock again. Their outing was business-related, as usual with Steve Reno, but he'd promised his wife a little fun along the way. "If you're sure. Steve would understand, you know."

"I know he would, and I love him for it. Really, I do. It'll be good for me to stay busy." She reached out to hug her mom and then backed off to look her in the eye. "Jimmy's here to take care of the short-order menu for breakfast, and I'll wait tables until Mandy gets here. When the next shift gets settled in, I'll start making the bread and Jimmy can help me with the lunch prep."

"Sounds like you've got it all under control." Mom's eyes were moist. "I'm proud of you, you know."

Darcy shook her head. "I'm not sure why, but it's a nice thought."

"You really don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"That you are a special young lady and you can do whatever you set your mind to."

From your mouth to God's ears. But then, I'd have to trust in a living God for that to work, wouldn't I?



DEL RENO LOOKED in the rearview mirror, took off his cap, and smoothed his hair back before he entered the café.

I need a haircut.

No time for that today. He was supposed to meet Nick at seven thirty, and he was running a few minutes late.

Nick's truck was already parked on the street in front of the building, so the plan was to get breakfast, consult with the tenant—in this case, Darcy—and then get to work. He paused for a moment before entering and closed his eyes. He had

imagined he could smell bacon cooking from his house just up the road, but here? Here, it was a siren call in the aromatic sense.

RenoVations Inc. Construction had been hired by the owner, Roxy Reno, to remodel the apartment above the Clementville Café for her daughter, Darcy, and the twins. The apartment atop the pre-war building—*but which war?*—was located on the single strip of businesses in the tiny town of Clementville, Kentucky. It had been empty from the time Roxy remarried last summer until last fall when Darcy and the children moved in. He frowned a bit. He'd never had a problem with the idea of Roxy living above the café, but Darcy and the kids? She was taking too many chances. The nearest neighbor was a few streets away, and she lived ten miles from the county seat in Marion and the nearest law enforcement.

Not that I have any say in the matter.

He shook his head and pulled the sparkling glass door open, setting off jangling bells. At the sound, the waitress—in this case, his cousin Mandy—was alerted.

She raised her hand in a friendly wave. “Hey, Del.”

“Hey, Mandy.” He grinned at his youngest cousin. She was of average height and only came up to his shoulder. “Nick here yet?”

“Yep. He stepped back to the kitchen to ask Darcy something. I'm assuming about the renovation upstairs. She's minding the ship today.”

“Gotcha.” He followed her to the counter, nodding as she poured him a cup of coffee.

“The usual?” His cousin raised an eyebrow and put a hand on her hip.

Del eyed her over the menu. “Are you saying I'm predictable?”

“Uh, yeah.” She cocked her head to one side. “Two eggs, over easy; an order of bacon, extra-crisp; biscuits and jelly—”

“Hey, sometimes I order gravy.”

“Yeah, well, only on special occasions.” She continued her list. “And grits.”

He twisted his lips, wondering how he could get around this lawyer-wannabe’s uncomfortably accurate prediction. Truth was, he loathed his routine and was tired of everyone thinking they knew what was going on in his head. “I might surprise you today.” He perused the menu for a moment and, decision made, laid it on the counter. “I think I’ll have the pecan waffle, thank you very much.”

Mandy laughed. “I’ll get your order in, O Great Unpredictable One.”

“Thank you.” He held up his hand as she moved to walk away, remembering something. “Hey, how was your law school graduation?”

She beamed. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement, but she shrugged casually. “It was okay. The usual long-winded speeches and uncomfortable seats, but wonderful.” Wrinkling her nose, she looked apologetic. “I wish I could’ve invited the whole family, but they only gave me ten tickets, and I wanted Grandma and Grandpa to see their youngest grandchild walk across the platform to get my diploma, and then by the time you add my brother and wife, sister and husband, and some of their kids..”

“And Clay.” He quirked a brow, laughing when he saw her face tinged with red.

“And Clay.” She took a deep breath and shook her head. “Now I’m studying for the bar exam in July. I waitress to stay sane.”

“You’ll do great.” Del winked at her. “You were always the smartest one in the family, you know.”

Mandy leaned over the counter and whispered. “I know, let’s keep it our secret.”

“What secret?” Nick Woodward scooted onto the stool next to Del. “Good luck. Since becoming a part of the Reno family, I’ve learned that in Clementville, you’re related to everyone in town, and everybody knows your business, as well.” He laughed, clearly not worried about missing a bit of news.

“No big secret, simply confirming what we know to be true. Right, Del?” She winked at Del as he chuckled. “How ’bout some coffee, Nick?”

“Please.” He thanked her as she put a mug in front of him and turned to retrieve the carafe.

Del looked around, taking note of Darcy flitting from table to table. He took a sip from his steaming cup of coffee and turned to his best friend and business partner. “How long’ve you been here?”

“About twenty minutes. Traffic was light between here and Kuttawa.” Nick smiled up at Mandy when she filled his cup and put a menu in front of him. “Just give me what Del’s having.”

“Pecan waffle and syrup?”

Nick turned to Del, his jaw hanging open. “What’s wrong with you? You sick or somethin’?”

“I decided I no longer want to be so predictable.”

“What’s wrong with predictable?” Nick frowned and then looked at Mandy directly. “I’ll have waffles too, and a side of bacon.”

Del raised a hand. How had he missed bacon? He’d come in dreaming about it. “I’ll have bacon, too.”

Mandy turned to add the item to Del’s ticket and put Nick’s on the order wheel between the counter and the kitchen.

“Did you talk to Darcy about the kitchen countertops upstairs?”

“Yeah. She’s good with quartz since her mom insisted on it.” He lifted one side of his mouth in a grin. “The extra cost made her balk at first, but Roxy won her over. She’ll come upstairs to look at samples when she can shake loose.” Nick took another sip of his black coffee. “Living here has to be more convenient for her.”

The business partners agreed that with two growing preschoolers, she needed the space, and the apartment had square-footage, all right.

Del shook his head. “It will be. On the other hand, I hate to think about her hauling the kids up and down those stairs.”

Nick chuckled. “I don’t think an elevator is in the budget.”

“Probably not.” Del gave Nick a sidelong glance.

“Besides, Darcy’s young. Now when you get to be our age...”

Del glowered at him. “Speak for yourself, old man.”

“Hey, you’re older than me.”

“By two months.” Del took a sip and set the cup down when Darcy came up to them with the coffee pot.

“Hey, Del. Need a warm-up?”

Del saw something in her expression. Sadness? “Sure. You doin’ okay today, Darcy?”

She took a deep breath like she was trying to shake something off. “Never better.”

Del nodded, regarding her closely. She was avoiding him. Something was wrong.

But I have no right to ask her what it is.



NICK COULDN’T HELP but notice the change in atmosphere when Darcy, as opposed to Mandy, walked up to the counter. He shook his head. Del had it so bad, and Nick knew exactly

how he felt. He'd been the same way about Del's sister, Lisa Reno, a year ago.

When he and Lisa reconnected after a few years, they'd both lived different lives. Totally different lives. Lisa had temporarily moved to Texas, where she'd had a serious relationship with a guy who, for a time, destroyed her confidence in herself. Nick had married the woman who was, then, the love of his life and lost her and their unborn child to a senseless traffic accident. It had almost destroyed him mentally and spiritually.

Lisa was the one who made him realize God might have more than one love in mind for him. He smiled every time he thought of her and their whirlwind courtship and engagement. Now if they could just speed this wedding thing along. Every week felt like a year.

"Why don't you go ahead and move into your house?" Del was pouring syrup over his pecan waffle. It smelled so good Nick was glad he'd ordered the same thing.

"I promised Lisa I wouldn't move in until I could move in with her, and that she had free rein to fix it up any way she pleased." He shrugged, snorting quietly. "Therefore, I'm still commuting from Kuttawa until after the wedding."

"You are way too nice to her. You know that, don't you?"

Nick laughed. "Probably." He puffed out his chest. "But then, she's worth it."

Del shook his head. "People in love are ridiculous."

"Don't knock it until you've tried it." Nick glanced from Del to Darcy. Seemed as if his old friend Del kept an eye on the lady at all times, and Darcy was studiously indifferent.

Do Del and Darcy think nobody knows? I guess there's hope for even the most stubborn of people.

Del seemed to gather his thoughts. "Anyway, back to the apartment."

“Yeah.” Nick took a bite of the luscious pecan waffle dripping in syrup, closing his eyes with pleasure. *Aw, man, these are so good.* “Besides the countertops, I want Darcy to look at the master bath before we do the rough-in plumbing.”

“Ripping out the plaster was painful.” Del sighed.

“I know. It was the only way to get the layout she needed.” Nick stared straight ahead, thinking. “I asked Roxy if she wanted the electrical done now or in phases.”

“It’s going to be hard to do it in phases if she and the twins are living in it.”

“I know. I have a feeling it’s going to be full steam ahead, which means they’ll have to move out for a few weeks.”

“If Dad has anything to do with it—and you know he will—we’ll be up to our necks in plaster dust by the end of the week.”

Nick laughed. “So much for semi-retirement, huh?”

“The man doesn’t know the meaning of the word. Roxy just thinks they’re having a day out. His main destination is the supply house in Owensboro.” Del scraped the remaining syrup from his plate with the last piece of bacon. “How are the wedding plans coming along?”

Nick held up his hands. “As far as I know, swimmingly. Lisa said she would let me know when she needed my help, which is fine by me. At this point, we both want to have this planning stuff over and be married, already.”

“You could always elope, and then I wouldn’t have to wear a tux.” Del looked at him hopefully.

“You know that’s not going to happen.” Nick shook his head. “Lisa is worried about leaving anyone out. I told her nobody cares as much as she does, and that just made her mad.”

Del laughed out loud, causing Darcy, Mandy, Jimmy in the

kitchen, and several customers to turn their way right about the time the door bells jangled again.

“Keep it down, man.” Nick looked around, embarrassed.

Del tried to stop laughing, but couldn’t. “I could have told you that the one thing Lisa Reno can’t stand is when you tell her a truth she doesn’t want to hear.”

“Now you tell me.”



LISA RENO JUMPED from the driver’s seat of her Ford Explorer and made her way to the door of the café, glad the sun had come up, at least. Poor Nick. He’d had to leave before sunrise. The sunny almost-summer day was a blessing after all the rain they’d had in the last few weeks.

The aroma of baking biscuits and breakfast food reached her before she heard the bell on the door emit a loud “clang,” and instead of everyone looking at the door, their attention was on her boys, Nick and Del. She sidled up to her fiancé and kissed him on the cheek, surprising him.

Lisa laughed at the guilty expression on his face. “What?”

“You surprised me, that’s all. Good morning.” Nick turned and claimed her lips with his, driving all thoughts of questions out of her mind.

Mmmm...Maple syrup...

“What are you guys having for breakfast?” She claimed the stool next to Nick, unrolled her silverware, and placed the napkin in her lap before checking out their nearly-empty plates. “Looks—and tastes—like something that requires syrup, surprise, surprise.” She grinned, looking at what little food was left. “Ooh, pecan waffles. Nice choice.”

“Hey Lisa, need some coffee?” Mandy was manning the

coffee pot this time while Darcy took orders from customers who had come in right before Lisa.

“Hi, Mandy.” She thought for a minute.

Do I have time for a full breakfast? Do I WANT a full breakfast? She sighed. “Yes to the coffee, and I’ll just have a sausage and biscuit sandwich.”

“Good deal,” Darcy said, nodding. “Jimmy made up a bunch for a to-go order and had a few left. Still fresh.”

“Perfect. Thanks.” Lisa watched Darcy walk away, wondering.

“How do you run on such a small breakfast?” Del snorted at her order.

“For one thing, my breakfast won’t be loaded with sugar, so I won’t have a sugar crash around eleven o’clock, and for another, I have a dress fitting tomorrow.” She shrugged. “Besides, you’re nearly done, and I’d hate to make you wait for me.” She winked at Nick and gave her brother, Del, the stink eye, which only made him laugh.

“Who said we were going to wait?”

“I think the ‘Reno’ in ‘RenoVations Inc.’ includes me, right?” Lisa smiled when Mandy filled her coffee cup with the steaming elixir. “I may be a coffee snob, but you can say one thing about the coffee here. It’s amazing.” She took a whiff and then brought the mug to her lips to check the temperature. “Mmmm, perfect.”

Darcy presented her sausage-biscuit with a flourish. “Here you go, Lisa. Jimmy’s outdone himself in the biscuit department today.”

She admired the flaky height of the steaming buttermilk quick bread expertly split to contain the over-sized sausage patty, which had been fried to perfection. “I’ll say. I hate to bite into it.” She held up a finger and then pulled out her phone to take a picture of the masterpiece. “I’ll tag you on Instagram.”

Darcy laughed. Lisa could sense that something was bothering her, but she didn't want to ask her here in the café.

"Darcy, I have a dress fitting tomorrow. Want to come with me? If you do, it will give me an excuse to eat out and do a little wedding shopping." She cut her eyes at Nick. "And it's for sure that Nick can't go with me, because I don't want him to have any idea what my dress looks like."

Darcy tilted her head, seeming to consider. "What time? I planned to take off a little early tomorrow to do grocery shopping."

"My appointment isn't until four o'clock. We could fit in a supermarket stop." Maybe they'd have a chance to talk.

"I'll see what I can do with the kids. I'd hate to think about my two Tasmanian devils in a bridal shop." Darcy shook her head.

"Hey, that's my niece and nephew you're talking about." Lisa grinned. "I'm sure they'd be fine, but you need some time out, too." She looked at Nick and Del for backup. "Right?"

Del had a thoughtful expression on his face, eyeing Darcy. "I don't mind watching them."

Darcy paused, a tiny frown appearing between her brows. "Are you sure?"

He waved off her concern. "I'll be here working anyway. How hard could it be? I can pick them up at preschool and feed them supper, and then I can take them to my place or come to yours. Whatever works for you?" He seemed worried that she wouldn't accept the offer.

Lisa did a double-take. *He's never babysat kids in his life.*

Darcy was thoughtful. "It would be easier to keep them here at the apartment - all their stuff is here, and they can go to bed earlier. And you have a key." She bit her lip and looked across the counter at Del. "You're sure?"

"Wouldn't have offered if I wasn't."

Lisa stared at her brother. *He wants a shot at this.*

While she was pondering this new development, she watched him shoot Darcy a smile as he got up from the counter and retrieved his check.

“That settles it, then. I will be your babysitter for the evening. I know we’ll have a great time.”