

two

Sam stood on the deck, his mouth wide open. His family had worked hard on this party, and everything was perfect. The tables were covered in navy and red, Belmont's school colors. Banners, balloons, and cutouts of guitars and Bibles were placed around the deck and on the tables. He laughed at the combination.

"What do you think?" his sister-in-law asked.

He side-hugged her. "I can't believe you guys did all this, Cassie. I love it!"

"I can't take much credit. Your mom, Hannah, and Wendy did most of it. Kyle and I got here a few hours ago."

He picked up the family picture from a table. "Who put this here?" He laughed. The photo had been taken at Kyle and Cassie's wedding, about a year after the Graysons adopted him.

"I think Hannah did. Hmm, you never lost your love of flannel shirts, did you?" She giggled.

"Hey now," he laughed. "At least I've ditched the ragged jeans. But flannel will always be my favorite."

He gazed at the photo. They all had dark hair, except him. His was blond and longer. They had dark eyes, but his were light. If he looked like any of them, it had to be Abbie with her

shoulder length brown hair. Hers was a few shades darker and curlier. None of that mattered though. They'd always made him feel like he belonged. And this party was further proof.

All these people who he hadn't met until five or six years ago showed up to celebrate. His grandparents, his mom and dad's friends, and his good friends too. With one exception.

"Here's to Sam!" His best friend and fellow graduate, Nate, shouted as he raised his glass of cola.

"To Sam!" Everyone yelled. They raised their glasses and cheered.

Sam beamed and thanked them.

"Speech," a couple friends shouted.

Sam shoved his hands in his pockets and laughed, but the calls for him to speak only grew. He wasn't going to get out of this. He set his glass down and held up both hands. "Okay, okay. Thanks for not putting me on the spot or anything."

The crowd laughed.

A long piece of hair had come loose from his man-bun, as Hannah called it, and he pushed the strand out of his face. "I want to thank my mom and dad first." He pointed to his parents, and the crowd clapped. "None of this would be possible without you two. I hate to think of where I'd be without you."

Just about everyone here grasped what he'd been through as a foster child. "My life honestly didn't start until I came to stay with the Graysons when I was sixteen, and I thank God for them daily. It's an honor to be your son, and your brother." He nodded toward his mom and dad, and Kyle, Cassie, and Hannah. "And your grandson." He waved at Ed and Sarah, his mom's parents.

"And to all my friends, well, I wouldn't be here without you either. Thanks for sticking with me through everything. It's been a long road for all of us, but we made it."

They clapped and cheered. Nate and Tara, his first friends from high school, were engaged now. Michael, his high-school friend who attended college with him at Belmont was here,

along with a handful of other friends from his time there. "I love you all." He exhaled. How had he survived this without shedding tears? "I don't know about everyone else, but I'm starving. Let's eat!"

Cheers erupted again as everyone rushed to congratulate him. Finally, he made his way to the outdoor kitchen where Abbie and her best friend Wendy had set up the food. Seeing Wendy made him think of his oldest and best friend, Lauren. She should've been here today.

He'd met her in middle school when he knew no one. The other kids avoided him because he was new and just the foster kid. But she ate lunch with him that first day, showed him around, and introduced him to others.

Lauren was popular in school. The cheerleader, the yearbook and newspaper editor, the student council and National Honor Society member. She knew everyone. Yet she chose him for her best friend.

Then she went away to New York City for college. *You should be here today, Lauren.*

He needed to shake off thoughts of her. Food and conversation would help. He made his way through the food line and grabbed a chicken salad croissant, pasta salad, and fruit, and then found a seat with Tara, Nate, and Michael.

"We're dying to know, how was your audition yesterday?" Michael asked.

Sam swallowed the first bite of his sandwich and shrugged. "I have no idea. I mean, I feel like it went well, but I couldn't get a read on them. There was a lot of whispering, but I don't know what that meant. They just thanked me, and that was it."

"We know you, Sam. You had to have blown them away." Nate popped the last bite of his sandwich into his mouth.

"I think you'll get it for sure," Tara added. "But we'll miss you at Franklin Community Church. They'll never find a high school worship leader as talented as you."

Sam laughed. "I think they'd be fine. But honestly, I don't

think I'm going anywhere. For one thing, Middle Tennessee Church is one of the biggest in the country. I can't imagine how many people they have to choose from." He picked up his sandwich and took another bite. His mom had fixed all his favorite food for the party.

"But how many people went to Belmont, studied music composition and theology, and can write songs *and* preach?" Tara shrugged. "And do they know other churches sing worship songs you've written? All because they've come here and heard you sing them and have taken them back to their home churches."

Sam's cheeks grew warm, and he focused on his sandwich. "That's only happened a couple of times."

His friends laughed. "You're hilarious. You have no idea how talented you are." Tara gazed at him and smiled, and asked if anyone needed anything from the food table. "I have to have more of that pasta salad."

Sam steered the conversation away from himself, and they discussed everyone's graduation plans. Michael graduated with an accounting degree from Belmont and planned to work for a firm in Nashville. Tara received her degree in website design and started her own business. And Nate was a budding musician like Sam. He played keyboard and guitar and even joined him in the church worship band. But Nate dreamed of being a studio musician in Nashville. He'd already had a couple of gigs.

Mom and Dad stopped at their table and listened to his friends talk about their plans.

He thanked God for the Graysons. *The Graysons*. He caught himself. Almost five years ago, they officially became his mom and dad. Over time, he'd stopped thinking of or referring to them as John and Abbie.

They'd supported his love of music since his seventeenth birthday when they gave him his first guitar. They wanted this job at Middle Tennessee Church for him as much as he did. With it, he could make a career out of writing and singing songs

that would connect people to God—his true calling. Plus, the church job was a paid position.

His parents had more faith in him than he did. He didn't want to get his hopes up. Why would the church give this job to someone like him when others had more talent? It was okay. When he was seventeen, he'd made a promise he would honor God in everything he did. And when the right thing came along, God would make it happen. He believed that with all his heart.