



Chapter One

Angie slipped into her Vera Wang gown and stood so Sarah, her assistant, could zip the deep blue creation. “Your shoes, Miss Ward.” Sarah retrieved a pair of stilettos and placed them in Angie’s hand.

“Thank you. Would you get my jewelry?” Angie slipped on the shoes and turned in front of a full-length mirror.

“This is your prettiest gown yet. You look like a million bucks.” She held out a diamond tennis bracelet and secured it on Angie’s wrist.

“Some see me as a spoiled debutante, Sarah. But I want people to look past the wrappings and see my heart.” Angie lifted her hair so Sara could fasten her tanzanite necklace.

“Don’t feel bad for receiving a blessing, even one that’s financial, from when your parents passed suddenly. After tonight’s gala, you can show the real Angelica Ward. Enjoy being honored. You’re at the Windsor Mansion, and Alexander Ward spent major bucks to present you to the business world. Try to relax and have a good time.” She gathered the dress bag, the shoe box, and the jewelry pouch.

“Thanks, Sarah, I’ll try—I wish Tanner were going to be

here. It would make it worth walking down the winding staircase in these stilettos.”

“Are you sure he won’t be here?” She opened the door of the suite for Angie.

“He didn’t RSVP. I don’t think he will come.” Angie sighed. She’d waited for his calls, checked for his emails. It slowly broke her heart. Like trying to grab smoke, he slowly faded from her life.

“Sorry, Zarello is quite the looker—but there’s always Mason Malone hovering near.” Sarah straightened Angie’s hair over her shoulder.

“He is handsome, isn’t he?” Angie faced her friend. Sometimes a man entered a woman’s life and captured her heart forever. Tanner had done that to her before he left for Africa. Sadly, the promises of a long-distance relationship fizzled as time and distance competed with his increasing work demands.

“If you doubt it, just ask him.” Sarah laughed at her joke.

“You make me smile.” Angie stepped through the door.

“They’re playing your song. That’s your cue. Knock ‘em dead, Miss Angie.”

When the vocalist began, Angie whispered a quick prayer. “Lord, please keep me steady on this new path, especially these steep stairs in front of me.”

She exhaled and walked to the top of the polished mahogany staircase. Her eyes scanned the crowd for a certain profile—black hair, dark chocolate eyes, and tan skin on a toned body. Disappointment weakened her resolve. She sighed, stepped forward, and pasted on a smile. The sturdy banister, steadfast and strong, sent a surge of strength through her even as she shivered in the chill of the air-conditioning.

When she looked toward the musicians, Harry Connick Jr. pointed in her direction and winked as he sang “The Way You

Look Tonight” in her honor. She smiled her approval and continued her gradual descent with the grandeur of royalty, posture perfect, not showing a hint of the nerves clenching her stomach. *Left foot, right foot, smile, and don’t forget to breathe.* Step by step, she drew closer to her audience. Pausing three steps from the floor, she scoped the gathering.

He didn’t come. Her heart wilted a little, but her smile remained. Hiding her pain had become routine.

Grand-Papa stood straight and tall on the platform at the base of the stairs—definitely the most handsome man in the room. His black hair with a touch of gray at the temples framed his chiseled features, which spoke of the authority he carried, while his smile portrayed the softness of his heart. He kissed Angie’s hand when she arrived to stand beside him, placing it in the crook of his elbow and facing their guests.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, friends and business associates. We’re elated you’ve chosen to spend this evening with us. It’s my distinct honor to present Miss Angelica Ward, an accomplished young woman who has earned a master’s degree in business with an international focus.”

Her eyes blinked as two photographers lit up the room.

“Angelica will lead us into the future with excellence.” He paused.

His eyes moistened as he faced her.

“Angelica, you’re an amazing young woman, but first and foremost, you’re my granddaughter. Watching you mature has resembled the blossoming of a rare rose. It’s my honor to present you to our guests formally.”

Applause electrified the atmosphere as photographers captured the moment. Angie smiled at the crowd as she graciously accepted the accolades.

Making his way through the throng, Mason Malone stepped forward with a gorgeous bouquet of long-stemmed

red roses. Angie traveled two additional steps to accept the bouquet. Mason turned to be photographed as he presented the blooms, the applause decrescendoing.

“Angelica, congratulations on your accomplishments. These distinguished guests have gathered to honor you, to celebrate you. I want to add another dimension to your happiness.”

Before she could thank him, he knelt on one knee and opened a black velvet ring box.

Silence electrified the moment. Angie stood frozen. *No! Not tonight. This can't be happening—how manipulative to propose in front of this crowd.*

“Angelica Ward, you know I love you. You’re beautiful, sensitive, and intelligent—truly one of a kind. We’re a great team. You’re the woman I want to spend my life with. Will you marry me?” He waited, statuesque, for her response.

She wanted to run. Mason was a nice guy, but he didn’t own her heart. She’d given it away a long time ago. The anticipation among their guests was palpable. The room hushed—one heartbeat passed, two passed, three—

Perspiration dotted her forehead as a knot tightened in her chest. She wanted a proposal, but from Tanner. She looked at her grandfather. He smiled, nodding his approval. She wanted him to be happy, but—scanning the crowd—she sought Tanner’s face.

He wasn’t there.

She forced her gaze to Mason, who awaited her answer.

He whispered. “He left you, but I’m here. I won’t desert you, Angelica. Please say you’ll marry me.”

Her mind raced through the facts. He was handsome, a bit overprotective, kind in a professional way, and quite successful. They came from the same world, Ward Enterprises. Grand-Papa would be pleased, and making him happy was

important. *But I don't love Mason. His one strong point is that he shows up—he doesn't leave me. Everyone I love leaves.* Would Tanner ever make her a priority and stick around like Mason did? Should she take a chance and hope it worked? In time, she could learn to love him. Couldn't she?

Lord, help me! What do you want me to do? She squeezed the bouquet. Thorns pricked her palm.

There was no voice from Heaven.

Sensing the pressure of the moment, she forced a tight smile.

Mason's brow furrowed. He tilted his head. "Angelica, is that a yes?"

She gathered her breath. Embarrassing him in front of this audience would be tragic, but she couldn't say 'yes.' "Mason—"

"Yes," Mason said as their audience erupted in cheers and applause. He stood and embraced her as his expensive cologne, which needed to be replaced, seeped into the pores of her skin. With practiced pageantry, he put a Harry Winston diamond on her finger. Harry Connick Jr. started singing "It Had to Be You" as her diamond's sparkle competed with the photographer's blinding flashes. A perfect beginning to a perfect evening, or it would have been—if she were ten thousand miles away with the man who held her heart.

Grand-Papa waited for the cheers to fade. "Please join us for dinner in the grand ballroom as we celebrate with Angelica on this momentous occasion. The future before her is bright indeed."

"You look radiant tonight, Angelica." Mason offered his elbow.

With light brown hair, hazel eyes, and a perfect build, he filled out a tux in grand fashion. She allowed him to escort her as the crowd parted.

“It’s a pleasure to have you on my arm, Angelica. Thank you for saying ‘yes.’ You won’t regret it.” He put his hand on hers, resting in the crook of his arm, and strutted with the confidence of an executive.

She leaned toward him and whispered, “But I didn’t say yes.”

“That’s a minor detail. You know we make sense.” Mason reached for her roses so she could greet their guests.

Leslie, one of Angie’s best friends, rushed to her side and whispered in Angie’s ear, “Tanner was here. He just left through the side door.”

Angie eyed Leslie. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. He could still be in the parking lot.”

Angie looked around, assessing the scene.

“What is it, Angelica?” Mason leaned close.

“Mason, allow everyone to be seated. I need a breath of air. I’ll be in soon. Just give me a minute.”

“Sure, I’ve overwhelmed you. Sorry.” Mason turned and began talking to their distinguished guests.



Angie greeted some of their friends and business acquaintances as she hurried to the front door. Stepping out into the late afternoon heat took her breath. Scanning the parking lot, she spied Tanner’s SUV coming down the aisle toward the exit. Stepping in front of his truck, she stood her ground until he stopped his forward movement.

Once his window lowered, she walked to his side of the vehicle. “Hello, Tanner.”

“Angie. Congratulations on your master’s degree.”

“You were there?”

“I promised I’d be there. Didn’t I?”

“Yes, but things have grown distant as of late. I thought maybe it had slipped your mind.”

“Nothing about you slips my mind, Ang—”

She stared at his handsome face, completely speechless.

“You look stunning. You always wear tanzanite blue so well, maybe because it matches your eyes perfectly.”

“Thank you. You’re leaving again? Why so soon?”

“After Mason’s proposal, I felt sick to my stomach. I need to leave, Angie.”

“You weren’t going to say ‘hello.’ Just going to ride into the sunset without a word.”

“Angie, I thought *we* were going to have a future together. Watching you get engaged was a kick in the gut. I’ve worked hard to prove myself worthy of you. But it seems you have other plans. So, tell me, how do I let go of a dream I’ve held on to for so long?” His eyes were teary.

“I didn’t say yes to his proposal, Tanner.”

“Then why is that rock on your finger? Look, Ang—you’ve got a crowd waiting on you. Go and enjoy your party. Be the belle of the ball. I wish you the best.” Tanner smiled, put up his window, and left her standing in the parking lot.



Sarah and Leslie were waiting for Angie when she returned to the gala.

“Angie, we have your makeup case. Let’s stop at the ladies’ room so you can freshen up a bit.” Sarah opened the ladies’ room door.

“Thanks, Sarah. I need that.” Angie wiped tears from her cheeks. “Leslie, thanks for the heads-up. I spoke with Tanner.” She worked on her makeup.

“And?” Leslie waited for her response.

Angie wiped a tear from her eye. “Could we talk about it later?”

Leslie squeezed Angie’s hand. “Absolutely. You dry those tears. People are waiting to celebrate you. This is your night. So, shake it off. Reapply more lipstick, and let’s get this show on the road.” Leslie grinned and clapped her hands.

“Good try, Les.” Angie smiled. “Okay, I’ll pull myself together. Go sit with Elise and Missy, and I’ll be out in a minute.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear. I’ll see you out there.” She blew Angie a kiss and left the ladies’ room.



Entering the ballroom, Angie came face-to-face with the Chairman of the Board of Ward Enterprises. “Good evening, Mr. Everest. Thank you so much for coming tonight. I hope you enjoy your dinner.”

“Congratulations, Miss Ward.”

Mason shook hands with Mr. Everest. He slipped his hand to Angie’s lower back and directed her to the head table.

As Angie took her seat, Mason pushed her chair forward.

“Thank you, I—”

“The elite of the business world are among our guests. It’s good for them to know us—I mean you, as Ward’s beautiful granddaughter, and me as his vice president in charge of the American holdings.” He waved at someone of importance as he pulled out his chair. “I told Ward this was a good idea.”

Is this about me, Mason, or about you? Scanning the magnificent venue, she eyed the gorgeous ice-sculptured centerpieces glistening as the melting process began, almost without notice. Beautiful today, but gone tomorrow—nothing

but puddles on the floor, similar to Tanner's presence in her life.

A parade of seven courses of culinary delicacies was presented to the guests, who were serenaded by a string quintet. Caviar led the procession.

"Angelica, try this." Mason put caviar in her mouth when she faced him. "It's plump and savory. Probably the best I've ever tasted."

Angie grabbed her napkin to rid her mouth of the horrid fish eggs. "Mason, you know I don't eat caviar."

"Sorry, but you must learn to tolerate it for appearance's sake." His stiff demeanor betrayed his fake smile.

She reached for a piece of imported cheese from the charcuterie board to remove the strong, salty taste lingering on her tongue. Tanner would never have done that. *He knows I hate caviar. He would slip me a petit four before they're all gone, or slip my favorite candy bar into my purse, or buy my favorite sodas from Kenya and surprise me.*

Sarah stepped forward to exchange Angie's napkin for a fresh one and handed her a glass of ice water. As she stepped away, the waiter presented Angie with a shrimp cocktail in crystal stemware, Angie's favorite.

Mason, being overly demonstrative in a conversation with the mayor, hit Angie's cocktail with his butter knife, breaking the glass. The waiter caught the cocktail sauce before it touched her gown, but not before a shrimp went airborne and landed on Mason's tux. Angie used her napkin to hide a grin.

"Incompetent waiter. Get me some soda water to get the stain out." Mason scrubbed the stain on his coat to keep the sauce from staining the fabric. "Can't get good help these days." He motioned for the waiter to bring him another linen napkin.

“That was a good catch.” Angie made light of the incident and took the focus off Mason’s bad behavior.

“Sorry. I’ll get you another cocktail right away.” The waiter hurried to retrieve her appetizer.

The cocktails were followed by lobster bisque. Tender filet mignon with roasted asparagus was served under silver domes, removed with flair. Sorbet to cleanse the palate prepared the taste buds for the petit fours, very apropos for this elegant evening.

Angie walked the ballroom perimeter, greeting guests until she reached her best friends. “I’m so glad you’re here!” She hugged Missy, Elise, and Leslie. “Thanks, friends,” Angie whispered.

“Anytime.”

“Angie, you look amazing. And this place is gorgeous.” Elise Kensington grabbed her hand to admire the ring. “It’s beautiful.”

“This place is amazing.” Missy Anderson, a feisty redhead, expressed her exuberance. The chandelier highlighted the orange tint of her bouncy locks. Her bronze lipstick matched the sprinkle of freckles dotting her nose.

Angie smiled. “Glad you like it.” Angie touched Missy’s shoulder. “I’m glad you three made it.”

“We wouldn’t have missed it. A master’s degree in business with an international flair is pretty impressive.” Missy imitated an announcer’s voice as she spat out Angie’s credentials.

“Yes, it is, and we promised to have each other’s backs, so here we are.” Leslie Morgan ducked behind her camera and clicked a candid shot. She checked the photo on her digital screen, then smiled. “You look amazing. The mermaid-style gown is elegant with a touch of sexy?”

Leslie leaned close. “Your ring is magnificent. Are you okay with this engagement?”

“Not exactly. I haven’t had time to process it yet. Can we talk later?”

“Sure, anytime.” Leslie squeezed her hand.

After coffee was served, speeches of congratulations preceded the presentation of exquisite gifts. Her Grand-Papa unveiled a leather-embossed desk set for her corporate desk and added a check for a quarter of a million dollars. Angie hugged him, pulled back, and wiped her eyes.

“I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. I’m so blessed you took me in when I was orphaned. I don’t take it for granted. You’re the best.” She kissed his cheek and then turned to their audience. “Isn’t he amazing?” Applause built once again.

“While I have the microphone, I want to share something that’s on my heart with you, my dearest friends and colleagues. During my travels to Kenya, I’ve seen thousands of orphans roaming the streets, eating garbage, and begging for handouts. Being orphaned myself, I have a soft spot for the two hundred and fifty thousand children who are cold, hungry, and afraid right now. It’s not their fault that their parents died of AIDS, typhoid, cholera, or malaria and left them to fend for themselves. I can’t adopt them all, but I want to build an orphanage in Kenya. It’s a big project requiring ongoing financial support. I’m going to need donors, so I will be hitting you up for some big donations.” She paused for their laughter. “I want to be your hand extended to these precious children. Together, we can make a difference.”

The guests applauded.

“You’ve won their hearts, Angie. They will support you all the way.” Grand-Papa squeezed her shoulder.

The thrill over the support for her orphans was short-lived. Her heart hurt from her moments with Tanner, and her growing irritation at Mason’s public proposal was gaining

traction, but as a professional, she had to shelve her emotions and finish the task at hand. Ignoring her pain, she enjoyed the time with her friends almost as much as Mason enjoyed the limelight as master of ceremonies. It put him in a position of power where he seemed to thrive.

“Are your guests enjoying their evening?” Grand-Papa leaned close.

“Yes, they are. This is quite lavish for their tastes, but they’re having fun.”

“I’m glad. Mason outdid himself by putting this gala together for you.” Grand-Papa whispered. “And he’s doing a great job tonight.”

“Yes, Mason’s leadership abilities are shining.” She sipped her latte, enjoying the touch of cinnamon, savoring the warmth of the cup. Her mind wandered to the leadership roles Tanner had excelled at in college and how he had exceeded Grand-Papa’s expectations. His integrity was impeccable.

“Mason loves you. He will keep you safe. That’s vitally important.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m a Ward, and I have your inner strength.” She hugged her grandfather, lightening the mood. Quickly pulling back, she searched his face. “Grand-Papa, you’re burning hot, and it’s freezing in here. Are you okay? You have a fever.”

“The leg’s been bothering me again. Maybe it’s a change in the weather. Doc Ellis ran some tests, so don’t worry, sweetheart. Enjoy your party. I’ll be fine.” He patted her hand. “Why don’t you go thank your guests and let’s bring this evening to a close?”

“Sure, you need to get home.” Angie stood, placed her napkin on the table, and stepped to the podium. “Dear friends, I’m honored you’ve spent this evening with us. I appreciate

your well-wishes and gifts. As I step into the business world, I'm blessed to have you as friends and—”

Alexander Ward grabbed his chest, closed his eyes, and gasped for air.

“Grand-Papa! No!” She dropped the microphone and rushed to his side. “Someone call nine-one-one!” Joseph, Ward’s personal assistant, rushed to his side. “Joseph, Grand-Papa needs you.” Angie knelt beside his chair. Their guests stood.

Mason made the 911 call and stepped to the podium. “Is there a doctor in the house?” He looked for a response but found none. “We appreciate your concern, but let’s not crowd too close. Give him room.” He motioned for some waiters to move the head table back, instructing them to keep the path clear, then strode to the entrance to bring in the EMTs.

Joseph removed Ward’s tuxedo jacket and loosened his tie as he moaned and grabbed his right arm. Joseph helped him lie down on the floor.

Angie stood frozen. “Grand-Papa, try to relax. Help will be here soon. I can hear sirens. We’re near the medical center.”

Leslie stepped close to Angie and put her arm around her shoulders.

“Clear a path. The ambulance is here.” Mason took control. “Tell your guys to bring a gurney and come this way.” He led them to his boss and stood near Angie. “How’s he doing, Angelica?”

“Not good, he’s in severe pain and very pale.”

The medical team wasted no time assessing Ward. Joseph rattled off Ward’s medical information as a tech started an IV, preparing to transport him to the hospital.

“Leslie, I can’t believe this is happening. He’s all I have. Everyone I love leaves.” Angie leaned toward her friend.

Leslie spoke softly, comforting Angie.



“Now, Angelica, he’s not all you have. What about me?” Mason grabbed her hand. “They’re taking good care of your grandfather. Try not to worry.” He led her a step away from the workers. “Why don’t you ride in the ambulance since the hospital is so close? I’ll stay and close things up here, then meet you there.”

“Right. Thanks, Mason. I have a change of clothes in the limousine.” Angie turned to Leslie. “Will you, Elise, and Missy take the gifts and roses to my residence at the estate? I’ll be there later.”

“Sure.”

“Angie, I’ve summoned your limo. It will pull up when the ambulance leaves.”

“Thanks.” She followed Grand-Papa’s gurney as EMTs rolled it out of the ballroom. At the door, she pivoted and faced their guests. “You’ve honored me with your presence. Thank you for coming tonight. Please say a prayer for my grandfather as you depart. Blessings to each of you.” She waved and disappeared through the entrance.

With the heat of the day gone, the night air cooled her, sending a chill down her spine. She stood under the Windsor Mansion’s canopy as her limo stopped. After sliding onto the leather seat, she released the sobs she’d been holding since Tanner left her standing in the parking lot. Grand-Papa wouldn’t leave her alone, too, would he? Panic gripped her at the thought.



Exhausted from his return trip and the emotional roller-coaster he had been on, Tanner let Paul, their Kenyan worker,

carry his suitcase to his upstairs suite/office. The palm trees swaying over the ocean at high tide usually gave him comfort, but not today. His world had imploded. Everything he had worked for was now out of reach. How had he messed everything up with Angie? Didn't absence make the heart grow fonder? *Can't prove it by him.*

When Paul passed him on the stairs, he requested hot tea and warm soup. He showered while it was being prepared, hoping the hot water would ease the pain in his chest that wouldn't let up.

"*Bwana* Tanner, I have your tray. I added some cake." Paul stood inside the door holding a wooden tray.

Tanner exited the restroom, rubbing his hair with a towel. "Thank you, Paul. You can put it on my desk." Tanner hung the towel around his neck and added sugar to the tea. "Is everything okay here at Paradise Inn?"

"Yes, *bwana*. Dylan and the team left yesterday for the mine. They will return on Thursday afternoon. Your mother called earlier today and left a message." He turned to leave but pivoted. "Are you okay, *bwana*? You do not look well."

"I haven't slept for several days. I'm exhausted. But I appreciate your concern. It was a rough trip." He sipped his brew. "I don't know how long I'll sleep, so don't make breakfast."

"*Ni sawa, bwana. Lala salama.* Okay, sir. Sleep well." With that, he was gone.

Tanner thumbed through a few pieces of mail accumulated in his brief absence. He enjoyed his oxtail soup and tea and stretched out on the bed. Rain pelted the tin roof above, providing a personal sound machine. Overwhelmed by his loss, he cried out for help. *Lord, I've been kicked in the gut. Please help me catch my breath.* After quoting scripture from *The Message Bible*, he wiped his eyes and drifted off to sleep.



“Hey, Boss, you’re back. Paul said you arrived at the beginning of the week. How did it go?” Dylan turned his ball cap backward and sat in the lounge chair beside Tanner.

Lifting his sunglasses, Tanner eyed his friend. “I don’t want to talk about it. It was a disaster.”

“Sorry, man. And you went all that way. I hate that. I’ll be around if you want to talk.” Dylan stood. “Put your sunglasses back on.”

Dylan walked toward the lobby, where the team brought in their things. “Tanner’s resting by the pool. Jet lag has taken its toll. We’ll see him at dinner, so either swim or take a shower because you guys smell.”

The group shared a laugh and went their separate ways, leaving Tanner to deal with his devastating heartbreak alone.



Swaying palms protected Tanner from the intense rays of Africa’s morning sun as his future lay at the bottom of a seventy-foot black hole.

He shoved his sunglasses to the top of his head and edged closer to the mine’s entrance, where the scent of the Indian Ocean’s salt water mingled with the smell of moist dirt. His worn leather boots crunched loose gravel unearthed by three years of hard work. His heart quickened as debris plummeted into the darkness, bouncing off the walls. Just like his thoughts, bouncing all over the place concerning the prima donna who wreaked havoc with his life.

But he had a job to do and couldn’t stop now. Too much was at stake. As the maid’s son, he’d received his education and landed this opportunity as head of this mining project for

Ward Enterprises, a perfect chance to prove himself worthy of Angie. He had to see this through. And his team depended on him and needed their payout. If they surpassed the boss's expectations, Tanner Zarello would return to Texas a success, more than a peon among the prestigious upper class.

The rainforest underbrush camouflaged their hidden location. Squawking drew Tanner's eyes heavenward to marabou storks circling overhead like vultures in search of a meal.

Waves splashing against boulders along the shore brought him back to reality. With a dangerous job to do, he had to keep his team safe until they completed this assignment. Tanner breathed a prayer, scanned the area, checked the position of their guards, and waved as his employees arrived. "All right, team, listen up." Tanner stepped on the weathered ten-foot by twelve-foot mining platform and eyed his motley crew, three Americans and four Kenyans, who stood patiently waiting his instructions.

"Great job, guys. We've pulled a lot of rock out of that hole. You've worked hard. The boss will be pleased. But we're not done, and we're burning daylight. Remember our safety protocols. You know your assignments, so get to it."

Dylan Calloway, Tanner's project manager and best friend, pulled out a pocket knife and fought the tight packaging of C batteries. "Don't worry, Boss. We'll get the work done, and you won't have to get your get-up dirty."

Tanner smirked at his jab. He put his clipboard under his arm, leaned on the banister attached to the decking, and listened to the melee among his team.

"If you're willing, you can make a shilling." Daniel Mwangi, one of the Kenyan miners, gathered his tools. His grin had a hole where a tooth used to be.

"If that's Kenyan humor, it's not working." Dylan brought

his lighted helmet and a stack of buckets to the mining platform as Vickie, their gemologist, invaded their space. “Hey, Ponytail, do all divas chew gum?”

“Only the really cool ones. What’s it to you?” She brushed a palm branch off her covered workstation at the end of the right side of the platform.

“Well, if you’d work your hands as fast as you chomp that gum, we’d get this job done in no time.” Dylan jerked his thumb over his shoulder to the males working on the team.

“Listen, you focus on your tan, big man, and you’ll be eating my dust within the hour.” Within minutes, using generator-powered tools, her sander sent fine particles into the air as she honed tanzanite, precious orbs of deep blue color valued in the diamond category. Vickie was obviously focused on her task. Her ponytail swayed, probably in sync with the music flowing through her earbuds.

Drew, the team’s professional miner, fired up the generator and started the process of getting cords to their equipment.

Tanner enjoyed his team. One of his favorite scriptures was, ‘A cheerful heart is good like a medicine,’ and their sparring was a healing balm to his soul. He needed that.

The waves on the Indian Ocean coast slapped the shore, drumming a rhythm into the day—a day where Tanner should be ten thousand miles away, meeting with Angie and attempting to salvage their relationship.

I’m nothing to her. He tossed his empty soft drink bottle.

“Hey, are you okay?” Dylan removed the batteries from his helmet lamp and pitched them.

“Yeah, I’m good.” Tanner removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve.

“We haven’t discussed your quick trip to the States.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. It’s over.” Tanner put his wide-brimmed fedora on his head. “I was kidding myself

thinking I could make a long-distance relationship work.” His hopes of a future with Angie diminished on the breeze.

“Since you haven’t clued me in about your quick trip, I cannot give you my widely sought-after, expert advice.” Dylan checked the new batteries.

“Now is not the time, but she is wearing another man’s ring.”

“Sorry, I’ve been down that road, and it hurts.” Dylan laid their tools out, preparing to get the day started.

From a makeshift desk connected to the mining platform, Tanner maintained his connection to the action while an ocean breeze made the heat bearable. He liked getting his hands dirty, but today, paperwork demanded his attention. He scanned the report, needing lists of expenses, and he would fax it to Ward Enterprises when he returned to Paradise Inn. The sound of work boots interrupted his focus.

“*Bwana*, it is your turn to go into the mine.” Daniel adjusted a lighted helmet on his balding head.

Tanner glanced up from his work, then returned to filling out the Ward Enterprises paperwork, while Daniel spoke.

“You are busy. I will go down first today. *Ni sawa?* Is it okay? It is cooler in the mine.” Daniel sported work pants too short for his stature, held up with a rope double-knotted for security. He’d slipped on an old flannel shirt over a worn T-shirt Dylan had given him some time ago. The mine offered a reprieve from the extreme heat of the East African coast.

“Okay, Daniel, work in the quadrant Dylan was chipping yesterday. The stones he sent up showed a deep blue-violet mix.”

“You got it, *bwana*.” He headed toward the hole in the ground.

“Dylan, anchor Daniel’s lines and send his equipment

down the shaft.” Tanner picked up another receipt and posted it in its proper slot.

“Sure, Boss. I’ll watch the ropes.” Dylan grabbed a bucket handle, tied a strong knot, and attached it to a hanging array of tools, clanging a haunting tune.

“Going down!” Daniel mounted the ladder attached to the opening of the mine. After he secured his ropes, Daniel gave Dylan a thumbs-up and grinned. “See you later, alligator.”

Dylan smiled and echoed through habit, “After a while, crocodile.” He handed him the rope holding his tools. “I need to teach you some new clichés. That one’s getting old.”

Tanner flipped through the week’s receipts, then focused on his monthly report. He had to make it shine to prove himself to Alexander Ward. He’d just posted an entry on the spreadsheet when a screech pierced the air. The pulley holding his worker spun out of control.

“No!” Daniel’s voice pierced the air. “Help!” Daniel’s cry, loud at first, diminished as he plummeted into the depths of the mine. His bucket and tools resounded, echoing in the darkness.

“Tanner, Daniel’s in trouble!” Dylan jerked on his rope, bracing his feet for Daniel’s weight. But the rope went slack in his hands.

“Grab the main line. Pull him up!” Tanner hurried to the entrance.

Daniel moaned when he reached the base of the mine and hit the water.

Dylan dropped to the platform, lay prostrate on the wood, splayed his fingers, and extended his arms, but grasped thin air.

“He’s seventy feet down.” Jerking his boots off, Tanner barked orders. “Dylan, hurry. Get the winch cables on the Land Cruiser.” He pulled on Dylan’s gloves. “Vickie, call an

ambulance.” He turned and mounted the ladder. “I’m going down.”

“Kick, Daniel, kick!” Dylan yelled as he raced to the truck.

“Daniel, can you hear me?” Tanner listened for a response as he waited for Dylan. Only palm trees rustled in the wind, and Tanner’s chest tightened. Daniel was more than a diligent miner. He’d become a friend. “I’m coming, Daniel. Hang on.”

“Take my helmet.” Dylan tossed it to Tanner before linking the winch cable around his chest, directly under his arms. He gave him another cable and a body sling. Tanner put his phone on the mining platform and started down the ladder.

Tanner locked eyes with Dylan. “Pray, man. Pray.”

Lord, we need a miracle ...