

Chapter 3



Beth burst through Reginella Ristorante’s entrance, with Kevin right behind her. The scent of garlic and marinara hung heavy in the air. She rushed toward a young lady at the hostess podium. “Is Leesa Holbrook still here?”

The teenager backed up a step. “I-I don’t think so. Do you want to speak to Vinnie?”

“Yes, please.”

The girl hurried away.

Beth pulled her raincoat’s hood from her head. “Would’ve been nice for God to hold off the downpour and clear traffic for us.”

“But He protected us from that nasty fender-bender.”

Vinnie strode through the kitchen’s swinging door, wiping his hands on a once-white apron. He stopped in front of them. “Sorry, I tried to stall Leesa, but she wouldn’t listen. Left about ten minutes ago.”

The hope that had surged on the drive over evaporated. How could they have missed her?

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“Thanks for the effort,” Kevin said. “Did she mention where she was going?”

“No. Only that she was leaving town.” Vinnie’s forehead creased. “She was fine last night. Was this a sudden decision?”

Beth nodded. “We believe so, but she won’t talk to us, so we don’t know what she’s thinking.”

“Doesn’t sound like Leesa.”

“Exactly.” Kevin shook the man’s hand. “Please call if you or any of your employees hear from her again.”

“Will do. Hope you all figure things out. Leesa’s an awesome kid. And a hard worker. We’ll miss her around here.” He offered a small smile. “I told her she has a job if she comes back.”

Had Beth not argued with Leesa that morning, this wouldn’t be happening. It was all her fault. When would she learn to keep her mouth shut?

Before tears gushed like the deluge outside, she dashed out the exit to the covered porch. She drew a few deep breaths, willing herself to pull it together. Freaking out wouldn’t help matters.

A minute later, Kevin joined her. “Why don’t we drive around and look for her? She can’t be far from here.”

“Good idea.” As they settled inside Kevin’s car, an urgency overtook her. Without another thought, she called her best friend. “Teresa, we need prayer.”

“What’s wrong?” Concern tinged Teresa’s voice.

“I can’t explain right now. Just ask God to intervene in a desperate situation.”

“I’ll do it as soon as we hang up.”

Beth exhaled. “Thank you.” If anyone possessed a direct connection to the Lord, Teresa did.

As she ended the call, her phone rang. With a glance at the

screen, her stomach tightened. Mom. Just what she needed ... confirmation of her inadequacy as a parent.

She threw her cell into her purse and turned to Kevin. "Let's go find our daughter."

Dressed in pajama pants and a tank top, Beth padded into the kitchen. After two hours of searching for Leesa, she and Kevin had returned home dejected. While Kevin walked Domino, their Shih Tzu-terrier mix, she'd soaked in the tub, lifting Leesa up to the Lord. The hot, sudsy bath had relaxed her body, but not her mind.

Sleep would be a stranger tonight. Might as well enjoy her favorite salted caramel beverage. She measured coffee grounds into the pot's filter. While liquid dripped into the glass carafe, she whisked heavy cream and caramel sauce together, appreciating the soothing aroma. Setting that portion aside, she frothed the milk, then plucked an energy bar from the snack basket on the counter.

The front door slammed, and Megan sailed into the kitchen, blonde curls bouncing with every step. "Hey, what's for din—" Her brow furrowed. "Why are you in pajamas at six-thirty?"

"After a soak in the tub, I decided to wear something comfortable." Kevin would want to break the news about Leesa together, so she'd keep her daughter's questions at bay until he returned. "How was the movie?" She poured a mug of the steaming brew and stirred in the prepared ingredients, topping the drink off with a generous drizzle of caramel sauce and an extra sprinkle of salt.

"Meh. Not worth the money." Her Caribbean-blue eyes—

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so like Kevin's—scanned the kitchen. "Where's Dad and Leesa? Aren't we eating soon?"

"I didn't cook. Dad took Domino for a walk, and Leesa's not here." She slid onto a barstool, resting her forearms on the cool quartz.

"Where is she?"

"With Vanessa."

Megan crossed her arms. "She's supposed to give me feedback on my cheer routine tonight. When will she be home?"

"I'm not sure." Beth clenched and unclenched her jaw. "Can you please stop asking questions?"

Megan darted a glance toward her. "You don't have to bite my head off."

"Sorry." Another round of tears slid past her defenses, betraying her. "Make a sandwich if you're hungry." She dragged the back of her hand across her face.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." The standard church answer rolled off her tongue without effort.

The door leading to the garage opened. *Thank you, Lord.*

Domino's nails clicked on the tile as he trotted to his water bowl, tongue lolling. Kevin trudged inside, his sweat-slicked face as red as Megan's T-shirt. His gaze landed on their youngest daughter, and a wide smile shifted his whole demeanor. "Hey, Peanut." With Megan's middle name being Marie, he'd dubbed her *Peanut* after the M&M's candy he loved so much. He flipped her curls, then tugged paper towels from the roll and mopped his forehead. "How's my girl?"

Beth searched her husband's eyes. Maybe the ability to hide heartache behind a cheerful facade came from sixteen years in ministry. If only she held the power to pretend everything was peachy while not knowing if their middle child would sleep under their roof tonight.

Megan's brow crinkled. "What's going on, Dad?"

Beth and Kevin exchanged a glance. With a nod, he gestured for their daughter to sit at the island across from Beth. He sat beside Megan and kneaded his neck. "Leesa may have run away."

Megan looked back and forth between them. "What?"

Beth gripped her cup. "Carol Alexander said Vanessa left home with all her stuff. Since Vanessa doesn't have a car, Carol believes your sister is with her."

"Leesa wouldn't do that." Megan withdrew her cell from her jeans pocket. "I'm gonna call her."

"We've tried, Meggie," Kevin said. "She's not answering."

"She'll talk to me." Megan dashed upstairs.

Kevin stood. "I'll go after her."

"Let's give her a minute." She forced a sad smile. "Those two are so close, Leesa might answer."

He opened the fridge and grabbed a water bottle. "Did you sense any direction about what to do next?"

"No. Did you?"

"Not really. But God will lead us." Kevin sat back down. "You believe that, right?"

"Of course." She sipped her drink and looked away. Strong faith was more vital than ever right now, yet she couldn't deny the internal tug-of-war over why the Lord didn't stop this nightmare before it began. It took every ounce of self-control not to unleash the doubts attacking her mind.

They each sat in silence until their youngest daughter rushed in, waving her phone in the air. "Leesa replied to my text!"

Hope swept through Beth. "What'd she say?"

"They're headed to Louisville."

"What?" Her heart pounded. "Why would they drive to Kentucky?"

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Kevin abandoned his seat and strode to Megan. "Let me see your phone, please."

Megan handed it over, then pulled a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter from the pantry.

Beth joined him and peered around his shoulder, only getting a partial view of the screen.

He scrolled through the text conversation between their daughters. "They plan to live with a friend of Vanessa's dad and find jobs."

"That's insane. Vanessa doesn't even see her father, and his friend will let them stay at his house?" The hairs on Beth's neck lifted. "The guy may be a pervert preying on beautiful young—"

"Honey." Kevin shook his head.

Kevin was right. She shouldn't say such things in front of Megan. "Sorry. This is making me crazy. It makes no sense."

Megan smeared a glob of peanut butter on a bread slice, then looked up. "She's felt suffocated for a while."

"What do you mean?" Kevin asked.

"She complained a lot her senior year about how strict you guys are, but even more since she turned eighteen." Megan plucked the blackberry jam from the refrigerator and swirled a spoonful of the fruity spread over the peanut butter. "But even if Leesa's mad at y'all, it's lame to leave without a word to anybody. And plain stupid." She slapped the bread slices together as she declared her sixteen-year-old bit of wisdom.

Kevin handed Megan's phone to her. "What else has she said?"

"That she hates all the harping about cleaning her room." She returned the jar to the refrigerator and took out a soda. "We all know you're a neat freak, Mom, but everyone doesn't care about the house being spotless."

Beth sighed. Same old argument. "I'm trying to raise you

kids to become responsible adults.” She stared into her mug. Effective ministry, including her role as a parenting expert, required leading by example. If she failed at raising children who respected her, then why would anyone listen to anything she had to say? There would be no point in finishing her book because sales would be nonexistent.

What was wrong with her, considering her career at a time like this? *Forgive me, God.*

“Dad asked. I’m only answering.” Megan took a bite of her sandwich.

Kevin sat beside Beth, settling a palm on her arm—his sweet way of bolstering her. “I doubt keeping a clean room is the reason she left. Any other ideas?”

“Might be the curfew. She said having to be home by eleven is ridiculous.” Megan sipped her soda. “I agree with that one.”

Beth gulped a mouthful of coffee. No sense explaining the many dangers lurking in the late-night hours, deep ditches she and Kevin vowed to protect their children from falling into.

“Thanks for the info,” Kevin said. “Please tell us if you hear anything more.”

“Sure.” Megan collected her meal and retreated up the stairs. Domino trailed behind her.

“At least now we know where Leesa and Vanessa are going.” Kevin’s fingers drummed the countertop—his thinking-mode gesture. “After church tomorrow, we’ll drive to Louisville and track them down.”

Another flicker of hope ignited inside Beth, then smoldered. “With no address or the guy’s name where they’re planning to stay, we won’t know where to search.”

“Let’s see if Carol can find out from Gary.”

“Great idea.” This new information might lead them to

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Leesa. “But why wait until after the service when we can head out first thing in the morning?”

“I have to teach the youth tomorrow. I can’t leave Sammy in a lurch when he already has so much to juggle.”

No matter how many times they discussed putting family first, the church still nudged its way into that spot. “Isn’t finding our child more important than teaching Sunday School?”

“Of course.” Kevin’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “But Carol will need time to hear from Gary. We don’t want to take off half-cocked.”

He had a valid point. “Fine.”

Innumerable unknowns invaded her thoughts, but she forced herself to focus on the one positive. They had a plan.