

Chapter 2



Leesa glanced in her beat-up Mustang's rearview mirror and rolled her tight shoulders. Expecting to see her parents following them was ridiculous.

"How come you're so nervous?" Vanessa poked Leesa's arm from the passenger seat. "Chill. We're free as birds now."

Letting her muscles relax, Leesa peeked at her best friend. "Where do you wanna eat?"

"How 'bout the mall food court? Then we can shop for clothes."

"That's the first place they'll look for us." She tapped the steering wheel. "We better go to the downtown mall. How much money do you have?"

Vanessa removed her wallet from her overstuffed purse and thumbed through some bills. "Three hundred and eighty-four dollars." She flicked a plastic card between her fingers. "But I have this."

Leesa's eyebrows inched upward. "Did you steal that?"

Vanessa waved her off. "Mom lets me use it."

"You know they can track us through purchases, right?"

"We'll be long gone before that happens. What are they

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gonna do, anyway? Chase us down and drag us home? We're eighteen."

"I keep forgetting I don't have to answer to my parents anymore. But they'll still come after me."

Vanessa snorted. "Only if they know where we are."

With one hand gripping the wheel, Leesa grabbed her cell from the door pocket and held it out to Vanessa. "Shut off location services and the *Find My* app."

Vanessa tapped the device's screen several times. "That'll slow them down at least." She pulled out her phone. "Better turn mine off too."

Mom and Dad would freak when they realized she wasn't coming home. She fingered the silver cross dangling from a chain around her neck. Should she do this? "Maybe we shouldn't go."

"Oh, come on." Vanessa groaned. "For months you've complained about your mom and dad shoving crazy Christian beliefs on you. I sure don't miss all the hypocrites and outdated rules since I quit church. Don't you want to make your own decisions?"

"Yeah." What teenager didn't?

"Then stop changing your mind. Grow up. Live your life."

Her parents' unreasonable expectations paraded through Leesa's brain. Eleven o'clock curfew. Keep a spotless bedroom. Attend church every week. And that was just the beginning. Man, they really were *extra*. "You're right. No more second-guessing."

"Whoop, whoop." Vanessa pumped a fist in the air. "That's what I'm talkin' about."

Leesa flipped on the left turn signal and zipped around a slow-moving van. "After we finish shopping, we can swing by the restaurant for my check, then stop at the ATM and withdraw my savings."

“Cool.”

“I can’t wait to see Isaac tonight.” She licked her dry lips. “And I won’t have to leave at ten-thirty to meet a stupid curfew.”

Vanessa laughed. “That’s how it feels to be free.”

Leesa hadn’t seen Vanessa with such a wide grin in a long time. She smiled back. “I could get used to this.”

Vanessa yelled out her open window into the wind. “Freedom.” She faced Leesa. “This is the beginning of our lives.”

Ignoring gray storm clouds and a rumble of thunder in the distance, Leesa followed Vanessa’s lead and lowered her window. Balmy air whooshed in, the strong breeze sending Leesa’s long hair dancing about her face.

A fresh start. Time to prove she could make it without her parents and their dumb rules.

She envisioned Mom and Dad’s crushed expressions, and her chest pinched. But if they didn’t have such impossibly high expectations, she wouldn’t be forced to leave like this.

Leesa pressed the accelerator and cranked the volume on a hard rock station. As she bopped her head to the familiar tune, lightness took over, sending her reservations into the turbulent summer sky.

Waves rolled onto the nearby shore, and a warm breeze ruffled Beth’s hair. Sunshine peeked through a patch of dark clouds, reflecting off the majestic Atlantic Ocean. She breathed in the salty air and let the heavy tension float into the wind. Reaching across the cafe table, she squeezed Kevin’s hand. “Lunch on the boardwalk is the perfect way to destress after the blowup with Leesa this morning. Thank you.”

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He stroked her knuckles. “Figured we could both use the reprieve.”

“Since Leesa met that boy last month, or should I say *man*, her behavior has been worse than ever. I’m worried about her.”

“Me too.”

Beth took a sip of Diet Coke. “I texted her about discussing this morning’s argument over dinner, but she hasn’t replied yet. We need to get a handle on what’s going on with her.”

“What about a game night? She might share more while doing something fun.”

As the professed expert, why hadn’t she thought of that? “You should become a parenting coach, too, and join me in ministry. We’d make a great team.”

“God called *you* to that role. Don’t let that self-doubt creep in.” He took a big bite of hamburger, then sipped his soda. “Besides, I’ve got enough to juggle at church over the Doug situation.”

Beth’s phone vibrated in her purse. She reached for it and stopped. Her advice to others to put away screens and focus on the person you’re with also applied to her. “Did the board decide whether to let Doug continue leading the students?” She speared a strawberry in her salad, eyeing the fattening crinkle fries on her husband’s plate. Boy, could she relate to Leesa’s frustration over metabolism.

Kevin leaned in, lowering his voice. “Pornography addiction means automatic removal from working with minors. Doug and Skye are meeting with a counselor, so that’s encouraging.” He rubbed his chin. “This morning, Sammy assigned me to oversee the youth until we hire another staff member.”

Her pulse ticked up. “Not teen ministry again. Can’t someone else step in?”

“Nobody has the experience.” He munched on a few fries.

“I understand why this news doesn’t thrill you, but I don’t have a choice.”

She rolled a blueberry around the salad bowl with her fork and smashed it against the white ceramic. “We know how demanding student ministry is, especially this time of year. As a youth pastor, you were gone almost as much as during your Navy stint. I don’t want a repeat of those lonely years.”

Kevin’s forehead wrinkled. “Don’t worry. *You’re* my priority, as you should’ve been then.”

A seagull flew past the restaurant’s awning and landed on the sidewalk. The bird’s beak stabbed a piece of popcorn. Beth clenched the linen napkin in her lap. Kevin being deployed during Tyler’s near-fatal accident had almost wrecked her. If she had confessed her sin to him then, their marriage wouldn’t have survived.

Hurting Kevin was the last thing she wanted. Then *and* now. She’d made the right decision to keep the past in the past.

The gull deserted the corn kernel and spread its wings in flight, soaring through the sky as though unencumbered by worries. Beth should follow the bird’s example and not wallow in that long-ago mess. No longer immature newlyweds, she and Kevin now walked with God and had learned to balance career and family. What happened then would never happen again. Everything would be fine. *She* would be fine. “It’s only temporary, right? You’ll return to stress-free associate pastor duties in no time.”

Kevin’s laugh soothed her inner turmoil. “From your lips to God’s ears.”

She finished her salad and grabbed her purse. “Be back in a few minutes.”

“Okay.” Kevin’s cell rang, and he picked it up from the table, frowning. “Carol Alexander. I’ll take it while you’re gone.”

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Why would Vanessa's mom contact Kevin? On the way to the bathroom, she checked her cell. Hmm, the ignored call was Carol. Since her husband left last year, the woman had dealt with one emergency after another, most of which revolved around Vanessa. Beth's heart grieved for her. The news of Gary's infidelity was a tremendous blow to Carol. Of course, that revelation would devastate anyone.

Inside the restroom, she ducked into a stall. *Stop thinking about past mistakes.* Their family was thriving now. Megan was excelling in school and cheerleading, and just last month, Tyler led his college campus praise service. Such a proud mom moment, even if she only experienced it via video. She could hardly wait for him to wrap up his job in Lynchburg next week and return home for the summer. All three children together under one roof would never grow old.

After washing her hands and checking her makeup, she weaved around the indoor diners and returned to the outside patio. Kevin sat motionless at their table, face in his palms. She quickened her pace and claimed her seat. "What's wrong?"

He raised his head and stared toward the ocean.

She gripped his arm. "You're scaring me, Kevin. Is this about Carol's call?"

Scraping a hand through his blond waves, he faced her. "Vanessa and Leesa are gone."

"What do you mean, gone?"

"When Carol went to ask if the girls wanted pizza, they weren't there, and Vanessa had cleared out her clothes and personal items."

"That's crazy." Beth's response came out breathy, a shaky, disbelieving laugh slipping out on its heels.

"Carol said Vanessa couldn't have left without Leesa driving her."

What on earth ... "Did she contact the police?"

“She wanted to talk to us first. See if Leesa’s stuff is missing too.”

Beth rubbed her damp palms on her jeans. “I’ll get to the bottom of this.” Plucking her cell from her bag, she called Leesa.

After four rings, her middle child’s sweet voice echoed through the line. “Hi, it’s Leesa. Leave a message. Remember, Jesus loves you.”

Their daughter wore her phone like an extra limb. As a consummate daddy’s girl, Leesa was probably ignoring her again. “You try.”

He made the call, then shook his head. “Voicemail.”

Beth opened the *Find My* app. “She’s not sharing her location anymore.”

Kevin threw his napkin onto his plate. “Let’s drive to the house and see if she’s there.” After paying the bill, they dashed out of the restaurant.

Inside Kevin’s Camry, she clutched the armrest. *God, please let Leesa be at home.*

Without warning, her mother’s accusing voice nudged its way into Beth’s mind. *Colossal failure. You and Kevin better quit forcing religion on your kids. They’ll rebel one of these days. Mark my words.*

She pinched her eyelids shut, the burn in her throat expanding. This had to be a mistake.

Reaching across the console, she entwined her fingers with Kevin’s.

Leesa would never do this.

Would she?

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Flashes of lightning lit the downstairs living space through the open blinds. Rain hammered the windows, matching the pounding in Kevin's chest. Where could Leesa be?

He collapsed onto their family room's leather sofa next to Beth. A clap of thunder boomed, and he flinched. *Pull it together, man.* As a pastor, people relied on his strength and counsel during turbulent times. Expected him to be a fixer. But in the three hours since Carol's call, he'd done nothing but hit dead ends. Despite the knot growing in his stomach, he had to comfort his wife. He never wanted to let her down the way he had years ago.

Straightening, he grasped Beth's hand and massaged it. "Everything will be okay." The assurance sounded hollow, considering none of Leesa's friends had heard from her. Not even Jackson Donahue, one of her closest buddies throughout childhood.

"I can't believe there's nothing the police can do." Beth's eyes, raw and rimmed with red, flicked to his. He didn't need to ask how she was holding up—she'd been crying for hours. "If Leesa hadn't turned eighteen last month, the authorities would comb the area for her. Three lousy weeks shouldn't matter when a child runs off without a word. This is just as devastating as it would be if Megan ran away at sixteen."

"I agree with you, but we can't change the law. Besides, since Leesa didn't take any of her things, there's a chance she'll walk through the door any minute."

"True." Another round of tears spilled down her cheeks. She released his hand. "Leesa might be helping Vanessa deal with issues about her dad. Gary's affair wasn't easy on their family, but the abandonment hit Vanessa hard."

"I hate it for her and Carol." He couldn't fathom cheating on Beth or leaving her and the kids. "Only a person who

neglects their relationship with God would do something like that.”

“Or someone who doesn’t have one.” Beth’s eyes held a faraway look.

She must have a jumble of wild thoughts going through her mind, just as he did. “When everything fell apart between the Alexanders, I should’ve helped them deal with the trauma more.”

“Once Gary made up his mind to leave the marriage, he had no interest in accepting advice,” Beth said.

“I could’ve at least researched other counselors and made recommendations, since theirs wasn’t helping.” He scrubbed his face with his hands, holding back a groan. Beth’s increased ministry opportunities, along with his church responsibilities, had stretched him so thin he hadn’t invested extra time in the Alexander family like he should have. Had he made them a priority, Leesa might not have taken off with Vanessa today.

Beth stared at her phone screen. “I don’t understand why Leesa won’t respond.”

The pressure in his chest settled deeper. “We’ve taught her well. Let’s hang on to that and to God.”

Words meant to comfort fell flat, as an uneasiness suggested a nasty spiritual storm loomed ahead. One that would test their faith—and him—in ways nothing ever had. According to the Bible, a man who failed to manage his own household was unfit to take care of God’s people.

If the church fired him, how would he support his wife and children? Surely it wouldn’t come to that, but he might not advance to the senior pastor position he’d worked toward for the last three years. He’d planned to use the extra income from the promotion to help the kids pay their college tuition.

“What if Leesa ran away, Kevin? Horrific images of a predator hurting her or drawing her into trafficking keep

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running through my head.” Beth tapped her screen again, hands trembling. “We have to find her. Convince her to come home.”

His gut twisted. “Let’s not assume the worst. She and Vanessa are together, and there’s safety in numbers. They’ll be okay.”

“I pray you’re right.”

Beth’s prayers for the kids were constant, intense—like she believed every word had power to protect them from harm and keep them on the right path. Failure wasn’t a viable option in her opinion—for the kids or herself. A trait her mother had ingrained in her over many years.

He took her hand in his again. “God knows where Leesa is and what should happen. Let’s ask for His help.”

Beth nodded.

For the next few minutes, he poured out his heart, placing every concern in the Almighty’s hands. “We’re trusting You with our daughter, Lord. You love her even more than we do. Please lead her back—”

His cell rang, and they both jumped. “Hello?”

“Hey, Vinnie here. You asked me to let you know if I heard from Leesa.”

Kevin’s body tensed, and he put Leesa’s boss on speaker. “Did she call you?”

“No, but she’s here, picking up her check. Told me she wouldn’t be coming back to work. She’s saying bye to her co-workers, but I doubt she’ll be here long.”

He patted his pocket, ensuring he had his keys. “Try to keep her there. We’re on our way.”