

BOOK TWO

F O R E V E R

F A I T H F U L



They found each
other again
that summer
Then everything
changed in...

A Moment *of* Weakness

KAREN
KINGSBURY

FROM READERS

"Your books are like cheesecake.... One is never enough."-C. W

"I have never had novels affect me as deeply as yours have."-L. B.

"I've been on a Karen Kingsbury reading binge ...I can't stop reading them!"

-P B.

"No other author has made me cry and laugh so much in one book."-L. L.

"I have never enjoyed reading quite so much. My friends ask me, 'What are you reading that moves you like that?'"-B. H.

"I am amazed at how addicted I have become to your books."-A. S. "What a marvelous and huge talent God has given you."-L. V

"You are my favorite author, and I do a lot of reading."-L. J.

"If there were more Christian novels like yours, this world would be a better place."-A. D.

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"When I think you can't top your last book, you go and do it again."-D. R.

NOVELS BY KAREN KINGSBURY Where Yesterday Lives

Waiting for Morning A Moment of Weakness When Joy Came to Stay

On Every Side A Time to Dance Halfway to Forever Redemption (with Gary Smalley)

KAREN KINGSBURY

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Dedicated to...

Donold, My love song, my heart's mirror image, my best friendWho once upon a yesterday looked to God alone during our own Moments of weakness...

And whose faith is today still my greatest strength... Life with you is good; it's all good.

And since I can't slow the passing of time I am doing my very best To savor it.

Kelsey, My sweet girl, my most priceless treasure... Your music is in my heart,

The voice of one whose love is the very definition Of pure and whole and right.

Little Norm, can it truly be that you've reached double-digits? And that your little-girl time with us...

Is more than half over?

Tyler... My handsome, lanky sunbeam... You continue to give me bouquets of Laughter and sunshine-filled memories... I love everything about you, Ty.

No matter how tall you grow you'll always be My little boy
0405060708-1098765

7 Austin... Who races and rolls and rough-houses through our home... Even the toughest athletes take timeouts...

And when you take yours and those sticky, baby arms make their way
Around my neck...

I think of the miracle you are...And I am grateful.

Grateful beyond words.

Whenever I wonder how much God loves me, I never have to
look further than you.

And to God Almighty, who has-for nowblessed me with these.

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PAKT I

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you."

JEREMIAH 29:11-12

11 one May 1977 THE OLD BIDDIES SAT IN A CIRCLE, THEIR TIGHTLY KNOTTED HEADS turning this way and that like vultures eyeing a kill. Only this time the carcass was the Conner family, and no one was quite dead yet. Hap Eastman watched from a corner of the Williamsburg Community Church fellowship hall. He'd done his part. Started the coffee, laid out the pastries, set up the chairs. It was something he did every Saturday morning for the Women's Aid Society, and every time it was the same. The old girls started with a list of needs and prayer requests and ended with a full blown gossip session. Hap's wife, Doris, was president, and at forty-five the youngest of the group. So Hap hung around tinkering with fix it jobs in the kitchen or perched on a cold metal folding chair in the corner, a cup of fresh brewed French Roast in one hand and a Louis L'Amour novel in the other. Four days a week he was a jurist laden with a heavy workload and weighty decision making. Saturdays were his day to relax. Hap had already heard the story from Doris and generally when the birds got going, he tried not to listen. But days like this it was nearly impossible. "I don't care what anyone says. We need to talk about it." Geraldine Rivers had the floor, and Hap eyed her suspiciously from a distance. Geraldine was a talker from way back and in charge of the social committee. Generally when the gossip got going, Doris and Geraldine fanned the fires and battled for position. Especially in the heated sessions, and Hap figured this was about as hot as they'd ever get.

"We haven't read the minutes yet." Louella tilted her face in Geraldine's direction. The minutes were still tucked in her unopened Bible, so her comment was more for appearances than anything else.

"Minutes mean nothing at a time like this!" Geraldine nodded toward Doris. "Tell us what you know, will you, Dorie? Several of the ladies here haven't heard what happened."

The vultures nodded in unison, and Doris took her cue. "It's really very tragic, very sundry. I almost hate to talk about it at church." She paused for effect, smoothing the wrinkles in her polyester dress. "You all know the Conner family, Angela and her husband, Buddy-

"Buddy's been drinking alcohol at the tavern lately Louella's husband saw his truck there last week, isn't that true?"

Geraldine knew this to be true but enjoyed her own voice too much to be silent for long.

Doris frowned. "Right. He's become a regular drunkard. Now, Angela... well, she's another story, A flirtatious type, not given to things of the Lord." She looked around the circle.

"Nearly everyone in Williamsburg has suspected her of cheating on Buddy"

The old birds nodded again.

"Well, yesterday I got a call from Betty Jean Stevens... you've probably noticed she's not here today" Doris's face bunched up like it did when Hap forgot to take out the trash. "Seems all those rumors were true. Betty Jean found out last week that her husband's been seeing Angela Conner on the side. And I don't mean at the Piggly Wiggly"

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A collective gasp rose from the circle, and six of the girls started talking at once.

"Bill Stevens and that loose woman?" "Why, that hypocrite!"

"A deacon at Williamsburg Community has committed adultery?"

"He'll need to make a public apology before I forgive him!" "I knew something was happening between those two!"

The cacophony of accusations grew until Geraldine rapped her fist on the table. "Quiet, all of you! Quiet!"

They had obviously forgotten about Hap and his novel, and he gazed at them over the top of his book. The biddies fell silent again, and Geraldine lowered her gaze, trying to look appropriately indignant. "There's more...."

Doris brought her hands together in a neat fold. "Yes." She drew a deep breath. "For the past few weeks Bill's been. . .taking a motel room with the Conner woman. Apparently she set about trying to seduce him for some

time. And... well..."

"There's a temptress in every town!" Geraldine obviously intended to maintain her presence even if it was Doris's story. "Betty Jean says Bill tried to ward off her advances. But last month. . .he gave in.,,

"I do declare, Angela Conner's a harlot. She's always been a whore!" Geraldine snapped at a lemon pastry and dabbed fiercely at the filling it left on her lips.

"Yes, I believe she is." Doris looked glad that Geraldine had said it first. Hap sighed. "But the worst part happened last night."

The birds were nodding their interest, waiting breathlessly for the rest of the story.

Doris sipped her coffee, and Hap knew she was enjoying the way she held her audience captive. "Last night... Bill

15 Stevens ran off with her. The two of them. Just like that, they up and left town."

Several of the women were on their feet firing questions.

"Where did they go?"

"Does anyone else know?"

Doris kept her back stiff, her nose in the air. Hap hated it when she got uppity, and this was one of those times. She answered their questions with all the condemnation she could muster.

"D.C." "The capital?"

"Yes. Betty Jean says Bill sat her down last night and told her they were through. Told her he's in love with Angela, and they're starting a new life in Washington, D.C."

"Dear heaven, how's Betty Jean handling it?"

"She's ashamed, broken. But she saw it coming. About a year ago, Bill began meeting with Angela to talk about a business venture."

"Business venture?"

"I guess we all know what type business-" Geraldine spat the word the way boys spit watermelon seeds on a summer day-"that was, don't we?"

Doris hesitated. "Betty Jean's just thankful the children are grown and out of the house."

"Angela Conner was bad blood from the get-go. Last year, I think she was seeing that attorney in town. You know, the divorce lawyer."

"I'm sure you're right. Everyone this side of Richmond knows the Conner woman and how she was always sniffing around for a man to bed."

Hap raised an eyebrow A man to bed?

"What about Buddy?" Again Geraldine was determined to keep the discussion alive.

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"Buddy's disgraced, as well he should be. Any man who can't keep his wife at home should be ashamed of himself." Doris looked at Geraldine for approval. "And I have it on good word that he won't be back to Williamsburg Community Church."

"I certainly hope not." Geraldine finished the pastry and wadded her napkin into a tight ball of crumbs and sticky paper. "The man's a drunkard."

There were several nods of approval, then one of the vultures gasped. "Oh, dear heaven. What's going to happen to little Jade?"

Jade. Hap felt his heart sink. He'd forgotten about the sweet ten-year-old, Buddy and Angela's only child.

Geraldine did nothing to hide her righteous indignation. "Isn't she the one who pals around with your Tanner?"

A deep crimson fanned across Doris's face. "The Conners live in our neighborhood, in Buddy's mother's house. Tanner is about the same age as the Conner girl, so it's only natural that the two play together. It doesn't happen often."

Doris wasn't telling the entire story, and Hap knew why The reason was an ugly one. He and Dorie had two boys: Harry was twenty and worked for the city dump-a detail Dorie never told the girls at the Women's Aid Society. Then there was Tanner. Even at twelve years old, Tanner was everything Harry hadn't been. He was

bright and handsome and the finest athlete in primary school. Doris thought he was going to be president of the United States one day. How would it look if he had already made the social mistake of befriending the child of a woman like Angela Conner?

Of course, there were other reasons Doris detested the children's friendship. More complicated reasons. But Hap didn't want to think about those on a sunny Saturday in May when 17 he was supposed to be relaxing. He shifted positions, but the biddies were too caught up to notice him.

"Didn't you say something about Buddy leaving town?"

Geraldine was working on another Danish.

Doris lowered her voice. "Buddy's moving. Taking the child and getting as far away from Virginia as he can."

"He must've been planning it," one of the girls chimed in.

"Certainly he saw it coming."

Doris nodded. "I assume. Either way, Angela and Bill are gone, and by next week, Buddy and the girl will be gone, too."

"I feel sorry for the child." Louella fingered the pages of her Bible and the minutes, which remained unread.

Doris huffed. "Daughter of a woman like that! I say good riddance to bad rubbish...."

Hap knew his wife was thinking about their son. He and Jade were more than casual neighborhood pals. They were best friends, and for the past year, Tanner had insisted he was going to marry Jade when they grew up.

Doris was wagging her finger. "You know what the Bible says. Bad company corrupts good character."

Geraldine raised an eyebrow "Tanner?"

Doris nodded, her cheeks flushed again. "My boy doesn't need a girl like Jade around to tempt him. He'll wind up a father before he's sixteen."

"Doris!" Louella seemed genuinely shocked.

"Well, it's true. I'm glad they're leaving. Especially after what they did to Betty Jean. She's my best friend, after all."

Geraldine clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "Doris is right. Williamsburg is a place filled with old money, old family ties, and old-fashioned values. The Conners are trouble, pure and simple. The girl is sweet now, but with a mother like hers we all know how she'll wind up. Where are they moving?"

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Doris cleared her throat. "Washington state somewhere.

Buddy has a brother in a small town.... Kelso, I think it is."

"Pity the good folks of Kelso, Washington, when a family like the Conners moves to town." Geraldine nodded her head decisively.

"Now, now..." Doris's tone was friendly again, and Hap saw she was making an effort to look the part of a righteous Christian leader. "Let's not be vicious. We need to concern ourselves with Betty Jean. After all, the Conners will be gone soon, out of our lives for good."

Hap knew Doris's last comment was more for his benefit than for anyone else's, and as she said it she looked right at him. None of the biddies knew the real reason Doris felt so strongly about Angela Conner, but Hap did. Her comment hit its mark, and Hap lowered his gaze back to his novel. What had happened between him and Angela Conner was decades old, but that didn't matter. No matter how many years passed, there was one thing Doris Eastman would never forget.

The sins of Angela Conner.

The children rode their bicycles into Tanner's driveway, laid them on the pavement and flopped down on a grassy spot in the center of his neatly manicured front lawn. The discussion had been going on for several minutes.

"I still don't get it. Where'd she go?" Tanner plucked a blade of grass and meticulously tore it into tiny sections. Jade shrugged and gazed across the street toward the twostory house where she had lived for the past three years. "Daddy says she's gonna meet us in Washington. That's all I know"

Tanner chewed on that for a moment. The whole thing

19 sounded fishy to him. Mamas didn't leave for no reason. And people didn't move without making plans first. "Do you think she's mad at you?"

"Of course she's not mad. She loves me. I know it." Jade tossed her dark head, and her eyes flashed light green. Tanner had never seen eyes like Jade's. Green like the water of Chesapeake Bay.

"Why doesn't she just come back? Then you wouldn't have to move."

"I told you, they already decided. We're moving to Washington. Mama went on ahead of us, and Daddy says she'll meet us there."

"In Washington?"

"Yes, Tanner. I told you she didn't leave me. She just needed some time alone."

Tanner plucked another piece of grass and twisted it between his thumb and forefinger. "But she didn't say goodbye, right?"

Jade sighed, and Tanner saw tears form in her eyes. "I told you, Tanner. She left early in the morning. Daddy said she probably knew I would be sad so she left before I woke up. 'Cause she loves me."

"Did she leave a note or anything?"

"Daddy said he didn't need a note." Jade swiped at a tear, and her voice was angrier than before. "He knows where she's going, and that's why we have to move. We need to get there so we can be with Mama again. She would never wanna be alone that long."

Tanner still didn't understand, but he saw that his questions were bothering Jade. He sat up and crossed his legs, studying her curiously. The only time he'd ever seen her cry was two years ago when she jumped a curb on her bike and flew over 18

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the handlebars. But that was different. Now Tanner wasn't sure what to do. He decided to change the subject. "How far away is Washington?"

"Daddy says"-she leaned back on her elbows and stared at the cloudless sky-"it's about as far away as heaven is from hell." Tanner thought about that for a moment. "But you're coming back, right?"

Jade nodded. "Of course. We'll meet up with Mama, and then Daddy's gotta do a job there. He said it could take all summer. After that we'll come home."

Tanner relaxed. That sounded all right. Even if the whole thing still seemed kind of weird.

"I gotta go." Jade rose and climbed back on her bike. "Daddy needs help packing."

Tanner stood and pushed his hands deep into the worn pockets of his jeans. "You leavin' tomorrow?"

She nodded and worked her toe in tiny circles on the pavement. For a moment Tanner thought she was going to hug him, then at the last second she pushed him in the arm like she always did when she didn't know what to say

Tanner pushed her back, but not hard enough to move her. "Hey, I'm still going to marry you."

Jade huffed. "Shut up, Tanner. You're a smelly old boy and I'm not going to marry anyone."

"One day you'll think I'm Prince Charming," Tanner teased. Jade couldn't keep a straight face, and she began giggling. "Oh, okay. Right. Sure... whatever you say" She shook her head dramatically "I would never marry you, Tanner. Sometimes I think you're crazy"

"Got you smiling, though, didn't I?"

They grinned at each other for a beat and then jade's smile faded. "I'll see ya later."

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Tanner kicked at a patch of grass and sighed. "You better come back when summer's over."

Jade's eyes got watery again. "I said I'll be back." She began pedaling down his driveway. Halfway home she turned once and waved. Tanner raised one of his palms toward her. He'd heard his parents whispering about Jade and her daddy the other day. Tanner didn't catch all the details, but it was obvious his mother didn't think the Conner family was ever coming back.

It was good to know she was wrong.

As Jade disappeared into her house, Tanner felt a subtle reassurance that somehow, someday soon, the two of them would be together again.

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Two

June, 1988

DORIS EASTMAN WATCHED THE 727 ANGLE ACROSS THE COLUMBIA River and make its final approach toward the runway. Seated somewhere inside the plane, Tanner would be waiting, excited to see her, anxious to be back in the Northwest.

The thought frustrated her. She would have done anything to keep him at Princeton where he belonged.

Hap must have been crazy to move here in the first place, and now that he was gone, Doris had every intention of getting back to Virginia. Poor old Hap. Retired from the bar two years earlier with dreams of being a lawyer again in Portland. For a tennis shoe company of all things. And despite his history of heart problems.

No matter how many times she thought about his decision, she'd never understand. They had had plenty of money in Virginia and a reputation Hap had earned after twenty years of serving as a superior court judge. Countless social invitations, the best seats at their favorite restaurants, season tickets to the opera ... they'd had everything they'd ever wanted. And of course, in Virginia they were closer to Tanner.

Hap hadn't been concerned with any of that. His buddy Mark Westfall, another attorney, had moved to Portland three years before. Mark had played professional basketball after college and eventually took a job in the legal department of the

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shoe company. It wasn't long until Mark had convinced Hap that Portland was the place to retire. No snow, no heat, no smog. Only beautiful greenery and endless opportunities.

Doris watched the plane taxi toward the gate and sighed. Good old Mark had forgotten that greenery comes at a price. The rain had been incessant and besides, what kind of retirement was it to take on a second career? And with Hap nearly sixty years old? She'd seen the heart attack coming, even if Hap hadn't. Too many fast-food lunches and too little exercise all

heaped on a workload that seemed to grow every month.

They'd moved to Portland in November-to beat the cold Virginia winter, Hap had said. That year Williamsburg hadn't had an inch of snow all season. Oregon, meanwhile, had record-breaking rain.

Even now, with June already here, the cursed Northwest was shrouded in clouds and drizzle. Who could jog or even walk in such a dreadful place? Hap tried it for a while, jogging in the rain. But that lasted only a month. His heart attack came just after Easter.

Now she was still in the process of settling the estate, handling Hap's affairs and packing up the condominium. She planned to be back in Williamsburg by fall, and if she'd had anything to do with it, Tanner could have waited and seen her then. For the life of her, Doris couldn't imagine why her son would want to spend a summer in the Northwest.

He'd explained it a dozen times. Some sort of internship program with the Kelso board of supervisors. If it were anywhere else, Doris would have been pleased with the assignment.

But Kelso? Of all the places in the world, her son had chosen to take an internship in Kelso, Washington?

Of course, Kelso was still big enough that the odds of them running into each other were slim. Even if they did,
Doris

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doubted they'd recognize each other. Jade had moved away
eleven years ago, after all.

Still... it worried her.

She remembered talking with Tanner about it last week. "Son, I don't understand. Why Kelso?" Doris was not
about to mention the fact that jade might still live there. Tanner hadn't brought up the girl's name in years;
certainly he had no idea that she had moved to Kelso way back when.

"I told you, Mom. I want to spend weekends with you, going through Dad's stuff, helping you pack for the
move. The board of supervisors had an internship available in Kelso. It's near Portland. I had all the
qualifications. Seemed like a perfect match to me."

Doris tried to detect anything false in her son's voice, but there was nothing. He didn't remember Jade; wouldn't
look her up. The whole thing was just a coincidence.

She moved closer to the window and wondered again why she was so worried. There were thousands of loose
girls prowling about for a man like Tanner-and Jade Conner would certainly be a loose girl. Just like her
dreadful mother. Poor Betty Jean had never been the same after Angela Conner ran off with Bill.

But Doris had her own reasons for hating the Conner woman. Reasons no one knew anything about. Doris felt
the sting of angry tears, and she banished the memories from her mind.

She would hate Angela Conner until the day she died.

Five years ago Doris got word from one of the women at the Aid's Society that Buddy and jade were still living
in Kelso. Someone knew someone whose brother maintained contact with the family. Apparently Buddy was an
unemployed drunkard, and jade ran the streets. If that were true-and Doris was

25 sure it was-then there was no need to worry about Tanner.

He'd never be interested in a girl who ran the streets, a girl who
probably slept around, a girl with a scandalous past.

A girl whose mother had very nearly ruined their lives.

The college girls Tanner dated were virginal types, clean-cut and wholesome. Even then there had never been
anyone serious. His faith wouldn't allow it.

That was another irksome thing. Tanner's incessant faith. She and Hap had brought him up in the church and
left it at that. A modest faith could have been an asset to his political future. Instead he'd taken to reading the
Bible and quoting Scripture. He attended some crazy nondenominational church on campus and talked about
God's will this and God's will that.

Doris hoped it was only a stage, something he'd outgrow. There was no room in public office for religious
fanaticism. Especially in one who leaned as heavily to the right as Tanner did.

His obsession with religion would pass, Doris was certain
about it. Just like his fascination with jade. For three years after
she moved he had asked about her and when she was coming
back. Doris remembered the time when Tanner was nearly fifteen
and he'd wandered into the backyard where she was
weeding.

"Mama, tell me the truth. Jade isn't coming back, is she? Not ever." Tanner was gangly in those days, all
knobby knees and giant blue eyes.

Doris had leaned back on her heels and shook the soil from her work gloves. "Why must you persist in asking
such questions, Tanner? What is it about jade? She's been gone nearly three years."

"I'm going to marry her one day, Mama. How can I marry her if she doesn't come back?"

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Doris remembered feeling lightheaded at the suggestion of
Tanner and jade wedded in matrimony. She had forced herself
to take deep breaths. The daughter of a harlot? Doris had to stifle
the anger that rose within her. "Son, you're too young to know
who you want to marry."

"I'm not too young, Mama. I know what I want, and I want to marry Jade Conner. I decided a long time ago."

Doris wanted to tell him the girl was worthless, trash. A weed in a garden chock full of roses. Instead she
smiled warmly at the boy before her. "Well, dear, first she'll have to move back to Virginia. And honestly I don't

see that happening." "I can't remember where she moved. Where was it, Mama? Was it Washington, D.C.? Maybe I can get her address and write to her."

Doris stopped herself before spurting out the city and state. "I'm not really sure, actually. Out west somewhere, I think." She had resumed her gardening, loosening a weed and then pulling it out from the root.

Tanner had crossed his arms angrily "I'm going to marry her one day, Mama. Even if I have to search the whole country and find her myself."

An attendant announced the arrival of Tanner's flight, and Doris blinked back her son's words, shuddering at the memory. If anything had been an act of God, it was the fact that jade Conner never came back to Williamsburg, Virginia.

Doris folded her hands and noticed her palms were sweaty. Her fears about the girl were irrational, weren't they? Tanner couldn't possibly know jade lived in Kelso. It was coincidence, pure and simple. What could go wrong when he would only be in town a single summer? The weeks would dissolve in an instant, and then he'd fly back to New Jersey, back to Princeton

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Karen Kingsbury where he could prepare for his senior year.

Doris didn't know what his first assignment would be when he graduated, but she knew it would be political in nature. He had been groomed for public office since he was a small boy. Every friendship, every activity, every article of clothing, every class, each student government office, even his role as an award-winning athlete was a line on what had become a stellar resume. She'd designed a packet on Tanner's accomplishments midway through his junior year and touted it to all the Ivy League schools. Scholarship offers had been plentiful.

He and Hap had complained for a while, thinking Tanner would be better off at a West Coast school where he could play sports. But finally she'd convinced them. A Princeton education would be priceless. Besides, the time had come to stop playing games. Tanner had a brilliant future at hand and not a moment to waste. Now he was nearly ready. He would graduate next summer, and the climb would begin, one rung at a time.

People were streaming through the gate with that bewildered look travelers wore. She moved closer, and there at the back of the pack she saw him. He was nearly a head taller than the masses, and he drew the stares of several women in the crowd. People had always noticed Tanner. He had a magnetic quality that couldn't be taught or trained. It was more of a birthright. As he drew closer, she saw his skin had lost the paleness of three months ago when he'd flown out for Hap's memorial service. He had some color now, and he was taking on a more pronounced jawline. Perfect. The public loves a goodlooking politician with a strong jawline.

He was going to look wonderful in the White House. "Mother, you look lovely as always." Tanner strode toward her, wrapped her in a hug, and grinned.

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They made small talk, and he kept one arm around her shoulders as they headed toward the baggage department.

After a few minutes, Tanner's tone grew serious. "How are you, Mom, really? Dad's been gone a while now I've been praying for you."

Doris squeezed him tighter. "Thanks, honey. I miss him. But we had a wonderful life. I'm glad he didn't suffer." "It's good you're moving back to Virginia. I think you've had about as much of the Northwest as you can stand." Tanner's eyes danced as he nodded toward a wall of windows and the thick, gray sky outside. "You'll feel better when you get back to sunny Virginia."

"Yes..." She paused. The sooner the better.

Tanner was telling her something about the internship and the projects at hand, but she wasn't really listening. She was wracked by thoughts of jade and Tanner and Kelso, Washington... and the memory of a fifteen-year-old boy with earnest eyes insisting that one day he'd marry the girl.

Even if he had to search the whole country and find her himself.

29 MIDDAY AT KELSO GENERAL HOSPITAL WAS TYPICALLY A QUIET time, especially in the children's unit. Most of the younger patients napped or watched afternoon cartoons; others were too sick to sit up, and they slept, usually until dinner. But that Monday, the fourth of June, Jade Conner was at the nurse's station reading a book for her science class at Kelso Junior College when she heard whimpering. She worked three afternoons a week as a nurse's assistant in the children's unit, and she could hardly wait to finish her education and begin nursing. The children needed her. They were frightened, unsure of why they were sick and wondering whether every thing was going to turn out all right. The whimpering grew louder. "Wanna check her, jade?" The head nurse was buried in paperwork, and jade nodded. She stood up, tucking a strand of short dark hair back behind her ear. "Coming, little one. I'm coming." She worked her way across the hallway to Room

403. Shaunie Ellersby Four years old. Recurrent kidney infections. Doctors were running tests, but there was a strong suspicion that the child's kidneys were failing. Shaunie had been in the hospital off and on for the past six months. This time she'd been in for more than a week, and her mother had finally taken to staying home between meals to tend to Shaunie's two younger sisters. "Sweetie, I'm here. What's wrong, baby doll?" Jade cozied 31 up next to the child and gently stroked her forehead. She knew she was Shaunie's favorite nurse, and the two had been fast friends since the girl first got sick.

"I miss my mommy" The little girl squeezed out the words between stifled sobs.

"Ah, it's okay, sweetie. She'll be here later, I promise." Jade kissed the child's forehead. "Want something to drink?" Shaunie nodded, and jade saw her sadness fade. "Apple juice."

"What's the magic word?" "Please?"

Jade smiled. "Okay Be back in a minute."

When she returned with the drink, she took her spot once more on the hospital bed beside the little girl. Shaunie took several long sips from the straw. After the third mouthful she smiled up at her. "Thanks, Jade."

"Sure, sweetie. Hey, what say we talk for a little bit?" Shaunie nodded. "Guess what? Mommy painted my bedroom." "She did?"

"Yep. Pink and white with little flowers."

"Oh, I wish I had a room like that. Your Mommy sure is nice."

Shaunie nodded and finished her juice. "Jade, do you live here?"

She grinned and tousled the child's hair. "Here? At the hospital? Of course not, silly"

"Then where do you live?" "At home, like everyone else?" "With your mommy and daddy?"

A twinge of sorrow seized jade. The answer never came easily. "No, sweetie. Just with my daddy"

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Shaunie's face scrunched up. "What about your Mommy?" Jade felt the sting of tears and blinked them back. "I don't have a mommy"

Shaunie's eyes grew wide. "Why not? Did she die?"

The child's innocent questions rattled around in her heart like pebbles in an empty tin can. "She lives far, far away, baby doll. We never see each other anymore."

Sadness filled the child's face. "That's too bad. How 'bout your daddy. Does he paint your room sometimes?"

Jade thought of her father, passed out in his easy chair, beer bottles littering the living room floor. "No, sweetie, he doesn't. But think what a lucky little girl you are to have a brand new room waiting for you when you get home."

Shaunie considered that for a minute, and jade ran her fingertips over the child's forehead. The little girl's skin had a yellow cast, and her eyes still looked tired from the infection that ravaged her body. The doctors had done more tests that week, and jade hoped they wouldn't find anything seriously wrong with her.

"My mommy and daddy don't live too far away from me, do they, jade?"

"Well, honey, no. But you don't live here, you live with your mommy and daddy."

"Sometimes I live here." Shaunie didn't seem distraught by the fact.

"That's true, I guess. But Mommy and Daddy are very, very close. They can visit all the time."

For now, anyway Unless the county voted to shut down the children's unit. A stab of fear set free a batch of butterflies in Jade's gut. There had been talk about closing the unit for months. Budget cuts were needed, and someone had designed a plan to eliminate the children's ward at Kelso General. If that

33 happened, sick children like Shaunie would have to go an hour south to Portland for care. An hour that meant the difference between a child getting to see her parents several times a day or being left alone in a hospital with infrequent visits at best.

The city was going to discuss the idea at a meeting that afternoon. The plan made jade furious.

"Yes, honey, you can see your mommy and daddy any time you want."

Shaunie nodded and wriggled about, an anxious look on her face. "I have to go potty"

Jade helped her out of bed, careful not to tangle her IV lines. When the ordeal was through, she eased the child back under the blankets.

"You're pretty" Shaunie yawned.

Jade smiled and kissed the little girl on the tip of her nose. "Thanks. You, too, princess."

"My mommy says you look like Meg Ryan with dark hair." "Does she now?" Jade laughed.

"Who's Meg Ryan?"

"Oh, she's someone in the movies."

"I think you're prettier than her." Shaunie laid her head back on the pillow and rubbed her eyes. "I need to take

a naptime now."

"Okay, baby doll. You do that. I won't be here when you wake up, but I'll see you tomorrow"

"Where will you go, Jade? Home to see your daddy?"

She hugged the little girl close. Only when I absolutely have to, honey. "No, sweetie. I have to go to a meeting."

"Okay" Shaunie yawned again and her eyelids fluttered. "Night-night, Jade."

"G'night, honey"

Rarely had anything mattered this much to jade. She slept

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A Moment of Wcokncss

in the house where her father lived, but the hospital was her home. She had volunteered in the children's unit since she was sixteen. Now that she worked there, she would fight the county with everything she had so Shaunie and Kelso's other sick kids would never have to be shuttled away to a hospital in Portland.

Jade returned to the nurse's station and glanced at the clock. It was nearly three. The meeting was at four and was expected to draw a hundred people.

Jade pushed aside her science book and began scribbling on the back of a blank admitting form. If she had a chance, she intended to talk about the kids at Kelso Hospital. Shaunie had given her an idea. She began putting her feelings on paper until she'd filled an entire page with notes.

The thought of Shaunie being separated from her parents made her throat constrict. Help me, God. Let them see how badly we need this place.

Jade was not religious-she didn't attend a church or read a Bible-but ever since she was a little girl she had talked to God, especially when she was alone. And she was alone often.

She thought about the townspeople who would attend the meeting and wondered whether they too, wanted to keep the unit open. Jade would know many of them, she was sure, and she hoped her words would persuade them to join the fight. While the people of Kelso who knew her did not go out of their way to be friendly to jade, most of them didn't seem to hold her father's alcoholism against her. Jade didn't care if they did. She didn't need anyone's approval. She didn't need anything at all.

Except the children's unit at Kelso General.

A unit whose fate was entirely in the hands of the county's board of supervisors.

35 II

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THE OFFICES OF THE COWLITZ COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS for the city of Kelso, Washington, were located above city hall and adjacent to an auditorium where town meetings had been held for the past fifty years. Tanner had spent the morning in meetings and used his lunch hour to unpack his files, reference books, and rearrange his office.

Tanner surveyed the worn-out cubicle that would serve as his workspace for the summer. His mother would have been appalled. Nothing but cherry wood and inlaid carpets for Tanner Eastman. A politician on the rise needed the right type of office even if it meant having his mother come down and make over the place herself.

He ambled toward the last of his things, a stack of legal books that would barely fit on his desk. These were treasured books, and whether he'd need them or not during the internship, he intended to read them: Religious Freedom Fading Fast, Whatever Happened to God in America?, One Nation Under God?

He stood the books where he could see them, wondering what his mother would say if she knew what really interested him. Hogwash, no doubt. A waste of time. Silly notions. Extremism. Tanner smiled. The books were a secret, but they were nothing compared with the secret he harbored in his heart. The secret of what he really wanted to do with his life.

Fred Lang, one of the younger supervisors, peered around the pressed board that made up the east wall of Tanner's new office. "You'bout ready?"

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"I think so." Tanner reached for a folder. "You did read the file we sent, correct?"

"Four times." He handed Lang the folder. "I put together a few pages in summary, stating the board's reasoning, highlighting the profit and loss statement for Kelso General's children's wing. It's all in there."

Lang took the folder and glanced through it. "Impressive."

He looked up at Tanner. "This is a hot one. Town's pretty riled up about it, what with a closure affecting sick kids and all." He

hesitated. "What would you think about presenting your summary at the public meeting today? Since the townspeople don't know you yet."

Tanner shrugged. "Fine with me."

Lang's shoulders relaxed and the lines on his forehead were replaced with a broad smile. "Okay, great. We'll introduce you, tell them you're working with the board for the summer. Then hand you the floor. We'll handle the questions when you're done."

Tanner shot a glance at his watch. "The meeting's at four, right?"

"Right. We need to be there half an hour early to compare notes."

"One question."

Lang leaned against the particleboard but straightened again when it threatened to topple. "Shoot."

"The file wasn't real clear on the alternatives, other ways the county could cut the budget besides closing the children's unit."

Lang sighed. "To tell you the truth, there really hasn't been time. Elections are coming up this fall, we've got the police staff about to go on strike. Budget cuts are a reality, and this was an easy choice."

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"Maybe not to the townsfolk." Tanner wasn't trying to be difficult, but if he was going to be on the front line, he needed to know how to respond to the fire.

"Don't worry, we'll take the heat. You just give 'em your presentation. Maybe then they'll stop thinking we have something against their kids."

"Small town syndrome?"

"Too small. Everyone on the board knows someone who's taking this thing personally. The town thinks we're a bunch of ogres who have it out for them."

Tanner wondered. "Nothing personal involved?"

"No. Just the simplest cut we could make. The one that took the least time to figure out and helped us make ends meet." Tanner nodded. "Is there a Plan B?"

"Plan B?"

"The town's coming out for the meeting, right? What if there's more outrage than you're counting on? It's election year, after all. You said so yourself. Maybe we should have a Plan B." "Such as?"

"Such as taking the summer and seeing if we can find somewhere else to cut the budget."

Lang gripped his chin with his thumb and forefinger and nodded slowly "Not a bad idea." He let his hand drop. "But don't tell the people that."

Tanner folded his arms. "First rule of sticky politics: Work like you have a Plan B, talk like you wouldn't consider it."

Lang smiled. "I like that. But it wouldn't be us finding somewhere else to cut the budget. It would be you."

Tanner chuckled. "I figured as much."

Lang patted Tanner roughly on the shoulder. "Welcome to summer internships, my friend. We'll keep you so busy you'll look forward to final exams."

40 "I don't doubt it."

Lang had lightened up considerably in the past five minutes and seemed ready to make small talk. Tanner didn't mind that he'd been made chief scapegoat on the issue. He didn't know a soul in the state of Washington, and it wouldn't hurt to have a friend in Lang.

The man shot a look around Tanner's cubicle. "Public office, right? That's the goal?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Princeton degree in poli-sci, political internships, get elected to councilman or congressman. Maybe the big time, state senator, or even the White House." Lang huffed and a grin appeared on his face. "I've worked with you dreamers before."

"Yep." Tanner studied the stack of books he'd unpacked moments earlier. He suddenly felt like a load of bricks

had been dumped on his shoulders. "That's always been the big dream. Public office. An elected servant of the people. It's something I've..." he searched for the right words, "known I'd do... as far back as I can remember."

The ten-member board of supervisors had finished its private meeting and now sat along a panel at the front of the auditorium. The room was filling fast, and Tanner could feel the tension. Scattered about were clusters of townspeople, whispering and gesturing and casting disdainful looks toward the board.

This wasn't going to be a discussion. It was going to be a lynching. They didn't want to lose the children's unit at Kelso General, and they appeared ready to demand the heads of the people who did.

Tanner scanned the room. Mostly older people, longtime residents, probably, and several serious-looking couples.

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Parents of sick kids, no doubt. He continued searching the room... and his breath caught in his throat.

She was in the back row, sitting by herself. She couldn't have been much more than twenty, slim and athletic looking with short, windblown hair the color of roasted walnuts. She was studying a pile of notes on her lap, and Tanner realized she was wearing a nurse's uniform. Great. Another voice against us. Despite the scowl on her face she was breathtaking. The girl glanced up and met his gaze, and for a moment a look of recognition flashed in her eyes. Then she looked quickly away.

For a moment, Tanner's political poise wavered, and he considered going to her. There was something familiar about her, though Tanner couldn't decide what it was. He watched her for another few seconds, then returned to his notes. The girl didn't matter.

If she worked with the children at Kelso General, then they were about to become enemies.

The meeting was underway, and several minor matters of business had been taken care of. Now Lang had the floor, and he was reading from Tanner's resume.

"We have a young intern with us for the summer. He's from Princeton University and-" he shot Tanner a look-"will probably become a household name one day in political circles. This afternoon he's going to brief all of you on the budget status and the intended closure of the children's unit at Kelso General Hospital." A chorus of grumblings began to build, and Lang was forced to raise his voice. "If you'll please give him your attention. Mr. Tanner Ghormsley"

Tanner hesitated for a moment. Ghormsley? Some great start he'd made in becoming a household name if his boss couldn't

41 even remember what to call him. He didn't bother making a correction. He stood and felt a sense of serenity. Crowds did not make him nervous.

"Ladies and gentlemen, first let me thank you for coming. I understand that many of you have serious concerns about the closure of the children's unit at Kelso General." He paused, guessing that nearly two hundred people had packed the auditorium.

Not one of them was smiling. His eyes found the girl in the back, but she was looking at her notes again.

He cleared his throat and began explaining in succinct detail the condition of the county's budget. When it was apparent how desperately cuts were in order, he began talking about the children's unit. The numbers told the story. Kelso General was owned by the county and simply was not making enough money to warrant a children's ward.

"Children's units are more costly because equipment must be adjusted on nearly every level. Smaller beds, smaller machinery, smaller needles and tubing and testing devices." He looked for a softening among the crowd and saw none.

He went on to tell them how other units at the hospital were essential and that children could still be treated in the emergency room once the children's unit was closed.

"Children who need hospitalization will be transported to Portland's Doernbecher Children's Hospital. Of course that facility is one of the finest in the nation."

Finally, Tanner dealt with the most difficult truth of all.

"The fact is, Kelso General is costing this county a lot of money

While none of you wants to see the children's unit closed, it would be far worse to see the entire hospital shut down."

He cited towns that had lost hospitals because of the drain on county funds. "The board of supervisors feels

very strongly that this town does need a hospital. Kelso General has a
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tremendous reputation in the medical community, and the staff there has played a part in saving the lives of hundreds of Kelso residents. You may know someone who is alive today because of Kelso General. Perhaps you, yourself, are here because you had the privilege of living near a top-notch medical facility"

Tanner scanned the faces before him, relieved to feel the tension easing. "We all want to keep the children's unit. But if it means the difference between losing Kelso General or keeping it up and running in this great town, is there any question what the board should do? Thank you."

So much for Plan B.

Tanner sat down and watched as the clusters of people who had been frowning and grumbling quietly considered what he'd said. He could almost read their minds. Children were wonderful and all, but no hospital? Nowhere to go when chest pains struck in the middle of the night? Longview's St. John's Hospital was ten miles away and a far cry from Kelso General. Several elderly citizens in the back of the room stood and headed for the exit.

Tanner turned and looked at Lang. There was relief in the man's eyes, and Tanner silently thanked God. There was no doubt about one thing: The Lord had given him a gift of persuasion. The children's unit was as good as gone. Maybe his mother was right after all. Maybe he would love being a politician. Lang stood up. "Are there any questions?" Another batch of townsfolk stood and headed for the door. "All right then, at this point we'd like to-

"Wait!" It was the girl from the back. She was on her feet staring at the people who were leaving. "Don't go! You can't give up that easily" She motioned toward Tanner. "He doesn't live here; it's not his hospital."

43 Lang coughed once. "Uhhh, Miss... Conner, is it? Do you have a comment you'd like to address to the board?"

The girl spun toward Lang. "Yes, sir, I do."

Tanner sensed that for some reason the crowd didn't like Miss Conner, whoever she was. Still, the citizens who had started for the door were turning around and making their way back to their seats.

"I believe we've already shared with you the fact that we don't want to cut the children's unit. We simply don't have a choice." Lang sighed impatiently "But go ahead. Make your comments known."

The girl clenched her fists tightly and stood straighter, her eyes blazing. As she met the eyes of her fellow townsfolk, the look on her face softened. "Don't be fooled by some... some stranger who doesn't know us. The board of supervisors would never close down Kelso General. Not in a million years. That hospital is a source of pride and strength in this town... every one of you knows that."

She glared at Tanner, and he was struck by the color of her eyes. There was something hauntingly familiar about her, like the strains of a long-ago song that had once played over and over in his mind. Have I seen her somewhere before? Do I know her? He banished the thought. It was impossible; he'd never been to Kelso before in his life. He glanced down at his notes, preferring them to the penetrating anger in the girl's eyes.

Her voice was ringing with sincerity. "The county budget covers hundreds of items. Certainly the board can make their cuts somewhere else. And if the hospital isn't making money-" she waved her hand toward the board members-"well, then, maybe we need a new board of supervisors. A facility like Kelso General should be making money, or there must be something wrong with the people responsible for it."

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A quick glance at the crowd told the story. Outrage was back in the people's eyes, and Tanner summoned his strength. Maybe Plan B wasn't dead after all.

The young woman reached down and picked up a snapshot of a blond child, four, maybe five, years old. "This is Shaunie. She has kidney disease." Her voice remained strong, but Tanner could see tears in the young

woman's eyes... those green, gorgeous eyes. "She's spent most of the past six months at Kelso General's children's unit." The girl paused. "Today, Shaunie said something to me that I want you to hear. She told me she was glad her mommy and daddy lived so close."

Tanner shifted his gaze and saw a few women in the crowd with tears running down their faces. Wonderful. Apparently everyone in town knew little Shaunie.

"I held her in my arms and told her that her parents lived with her, not close by somewhere else. But Shaunie shook her head and told me as sweetly as she could that sometimes she lived at the hospital. And when she did, she was glad her mommy and daddy were close."

Handkerchiefs were yanked from purses and several women dabbed at their eyes. The sound of stifled sniffles filled the auditorium, and the citizens strained to hear the young nurse. "Medical research has proven that children heal more quickly, more thoroughly when they are happy When they're not afraid."

She pointed to Tanner again, and he wished he could disappear. The girl was stunning, and he could feel the fight leaving him. What was he doing arguing with her, anyway? Its not my budget, lady. You can keep your children's unit... and anything else you want with eyes like "That... that man wants to move Shaunie to Portland, more than an hour away. How well do you think she'll recover from

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kidney disease when her mommy and daddy don't live close by"

Her attention was back on the people. "Please. Don't let them close the children's unit without a fight. We need to stick together and tell this board that we won't reelect them this fall if they don't find some other way to cut the budget."

Tanner caught several of the board members exchanging glances. Obviously "reelect" was the buzzword. He could almost feel them implementing Plan B. The beautiful nurse was finishing her plea. "Let's take a vote. Please. Everyone who wants to keep our children's unit open, raise your hand."

Hands filled the auditorium, and Tanner watched as his persuasive presentation dissolved like sand in a stormy ocean wave. If he wanted, he could take her on, go head-to-head with her in debate, sway the people back to his way of thinking. But then, he wasn't up for reelection this fall. Besides, he'd angered the nurse enough already

Lang looked to the other board members for approval, and Tanner saw several of them nodding. Leaning forward, Lang smiled politely at the townsfolk and spoke into the microphone.

"If there are no other comments, the board wants all of you to know we appreciate your interest in coming to the meeting today. We also want to thank our new intern for his presentation. Although he has done his homework and made a strong case for closing the children's unit, the board wants to assure you that this matter is far from decided."

Tanner grimaced. Nice. Make it sound like the whole thing had been his idea. He'd be lucky if he got out of the building alive.

Lang was rhapsodizing about being a servant of the people and doing only that which was best for everyone, but the crowd was growing tired and more frustrated. Eventually Lang

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caught on. He smiled in Tanner's direction. "We have therefore decided to postpone any decision on this matter until the first week of September."

Tanner wasn't surprised. That was long enough for him to spend the summer researching a better way to balance the budget and save the children's unit, and late enough that the supervisors could take credit for it. Ali, the life of a political intern.

The meeting was over, and the atmosphere had done a oneeighty. The clusters of townspeople stood in bunches, congratulating each other. They had a lofty air about them now, as though they were far superior to the board of supervisors.

Tanner watched as several of them approached the girl who had championed the children's unit so well. Again he had the feeling he'd seen her somewhere before. What had Lang called her? The citizens talked to her in a manner that seemed far friendlier than their earlier reception. She remained aloof, an ice queen. But still there was something about her...

Lang approached him. "Tanner, great job up there. We almost had 'em."

"Eastman." Tanner's eyes were trained on the girl. Lang's face went blank. "What?"

"My name. Tanner Eastman." A beat. "What did I call you?"

"Tanner Ghormsley As in Professor John Ghormsley The man who arranged my internship."

Lang shrugged. "Oh well, they don't know who you are." "Yeah, well, after what happened here today maybe I should thank you." Tanner collected his file, but his eyes still followed the girl. Every move she made reminded him of something he'd seen before, someone he'd known before.

Lang followed Tanner's gaze and huffed. "She sure did us in.

47 She's worked the children's unit for years. Obviously a bleeding heart-

"Wait a minute!" Tanner's eyes widened and his heart pounded in his chest. It couldn't be, but then. . .Where had she moved? Wasn't it somewhere out west? Maybe even somewhere in Washington? Tanner's mouth went dry as he stared at her, still standing there across the room. "What did you say her name was?"

"Who?" Lang looked around, trying to make sense of Tanner's question.

The young nurse was gathering her things, making her move to leave, and Tanner was filled with a frantic sense of urgency "The girl, the nurse. What's her name?"

Tanner knew he couldn't wait another moment. He had to know if he was right. He began pulling away, heading toward her, and for a single moment he focused his gaze on Lang, desperate for his answer. "Come on, what's her name? You said it earlier."

"Oh, her." Lang nodded toward the girl. "Conner. What's this all about? The meeting's over, Tanner."

"I have to talk to her. What's her first name?"

"Ummm, I'm not sure. Wait a minute, I'll think of it." Lang concentrated and then pursed his lips, tapping a single finger on his chin. "Let's see. Jean, was it? No, not Jean...."

Tanner thought his heart might burst. Lang was still concentrating.

'Jane ...no, that's not it.'

"Think, Lang. I have to know." The girl was leaving, and he absolutely had to know her name, had to find out if it could possibly be her after all these

Suddenly a knowing look crossed Lang's face. "I've got it.

Unusual name. Jade, I think it is." Lang nodded. "Yes, that's it.

Jade. Miss Jade Conner."

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Five

TANNER STARED AT LANG AND FELT THE BLOOD DRAIN FROM HIS face. For a moment he stood frozen in place. Jade Conner? The girl who'd fought so eloquently against him was jade Conner?

Tanner shoved his papers at Lang. "I'll see you at the office." Lang took the documents, a bewildered look on his face, as Tanner ran toward the door where he had last seen jade.

He scanned the area in both directions, and then he saw her, fitting a key into a newly washed Honda.

"Jade!" He wore Italian dress pants and a starched white button-down with the finest tie his mother's money could buy. But he dodged the mingling citizens like a wide receiver eluding tacklers. He was at her side in seconds.

She turned around and scowled at him. "What do you want?"

Tanner gulped. Where should he begin? His heart was pounding as he searched her face, her emerald eyes. It was Jade. Eyes as green as the water in Chesapeake Bay. No wonder she'd seemed familiar. "Yes, I...well, you're-

"How did you know my name?"

Her question caught him off guard, and when he hesitated she pounced. "Listen, I don't care who you are or where you're from or what lofty ivy League school you attend. You have no right coming to our town and trying to convince those people it's okay to close down the children's unit. That's our hospital, not yours, and personally I don't care if you have some kind of agenda to work out..."

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She railed on him for nearly a minute, which gave Tanner enough time to catch his breath. He relaxed and studied her.

She was beautiful. Much more so than his memory of her could have imagined. He watched her eyes flash the way they had back when they were children, and he felt himself smile.

Tanner soaked in the sight of her. Jade Conner. He'd actually found her after all these years.

She released a heavy sigh. "You know, you are an arrogant, wicked man." Her jaw was clenched, and Tanner felt a twinge of remorse for causing her such grief. "Kelso General is filled with sick children, children you care nothing about, and all you can do is walk in here, give your professional speech, and then stand there smiling at me. I wish you'd turn around and go back to wherever you came from." She spun around to her car and opened the door. "I have nothing more to say to you, Mr. Ghormsley"

Tanner paused. Don't you recognize me, Jade?

"Eastman..." He waited while the word hit its mark.

"Tanner Eastman."

It took her a few seconds. Then slowly she turned around and faced him once more, only this time she leaned against her car for support. Some of the color had faded from her face, and her voice trembled when she spoke. "Your name is Tanner Ghormsley"

"No." Tanner took a step closer. "Mr. Lang got it wrong."

They stood there for what felt like an eternity, searching each other's eyes. Tanner saw her expression soften and then fill with disbelief. Finally her eyes grew wet and she shook her head. "No. It can't be..."

"Jade, it's me. Tanner."

Tears spilled onto her cheeks, and he circled his arms around her, drawing her close as she did the same. All those

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A Moment of Weakness

years as childhood friends and they'd never hugged like this.

But now, with the evening traffic whizzing by and the last of the stragglers from the meeting still filing past them, it felt like the most natural thing Tanner had ever done.

He pulled back, his arms still around her waist. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and then pushed her fists into his chest like a petulant child. "So tell me, what do you have against our children's unit, huh?" Her tone was completely different now, almost teasing, but Tanner could tell she was bothered ... and wanting to understand.

His voice was little more than a whisper. "I have nothing against your hospital, Jade. I'm an intern. They sent me a file and I wrote a brief. When I reported in this morning, they told me I was in charge of the presentation." Jade released a shaky sigh and then, for the first time that afternoon, she gave a short laugh. "I should have known. Those snakes on the board used you as their scapegoat."

Tanner watched her, a dozen questions filling his mind. He ran a thumb along her cheek and allowed himself to

get lost in the memories her face evoked. As he did, he felt his eyes brimming with unshed tears. "You never came back."

Jade could manage only a slight shake of her head as her eyes grew watery again.

He thought back to that afternoon on his front lawn, the day Jade said good-bye. It was all coming clearer now. "You were going to meet your mama in Kelso." He was transfixed, trapped in her gaze, carried back to the spring of his twelfth year. "You were supposed to come back when summer ended."

A wall went up in Jade's eyes and she stiffened. "We ended up staying."

"But why? What happened?"

She stared at her hands, and he had the strong sense that

52 she was wrestling with something. Finally she sighed. "Mama never came back."

"She didn't?" Tanner frowned. "Where did she-"

"I don't know. Daddy still won't talk about it." Jade kept her eyes trained on her hands, and Tanner saw they were trembling. "I used to think she got killed in a car accident somewhere between Virginia and Washington."

"And now?"

"I found a letter from her a year after we moved, postmarked D.C." Jade's expression was hard and Tanner realized the years must have been difficult for her. "She told Daddy to tell me she was sorry. That kind of thing."

The truth about what she was saying hit Tanner like a truck. Jade's mother had walked out on her with no intention whatsoever of coming back. No wonder Jade never moved back to Virginia. His heart broke for her, and he pulled her close again, stroking the back of her head as if she were still the ten-year-old girl he had grown up with. "I'm sorry, Jade."

She remained stiff and although she allowed him to comfort her, Tanner could tell she wasn't crying.

"Have you heard from her since then?"

"No. It doesn't matter. She's dead as far as I'm concerned." Tanner got the point. The topic was closed. He pulled away again, this time completely. He had so much to tell her, so many years to make up for, but he didn't want her to feel like he was prying. He leaned back against her car so they were standing side by side.

"How old are you, anyway, Jade? Twenty, twenty-one?"

She smiled, and Tanner could see she was glad he'd changed the subject. "Twenty-one. And you're twenty-three." She studied him for a moment. "So...if you're an intern I guess you're staying in town?"

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A Moment of 1 edkness

"Rented an apartment for the summer. Furnished. And one of the supervisors lent me a car. The internship lasts through August."

Jade cocked her head. "Where's Princeton, anyway?" "New Jersey"

"Hmm." Jade hugged herself and looked away. "You like it?" "It's all right." Tanner didn't want to talk about Princeton and politics and his well-planned future. "So what's it been? Twelve years?"

"Eleven, I think. A lot's happened since then."

Tanner gazed at the treetops behind city hall for a moment then back at Jade. "I thought about you all the time after you left, wondering what happened to you."

Jade hugged herself tighter. "The minute I saw you I thought. . .I thought you looked like my old friend, Tanner. The way I imagined you might look grown up."

Tanner watched her, how she brushed her hair back from her face and tilted her head just so. He was mesmerized by her, taken aback by the fact that his long lost friend wasn't a little girl anymore. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever laid eyes on.

"Let's go somewhere. Talk, catch up." Tanner reached for her hand, but she pulled it back and again her eyes found something on the ground. He searched her face, but her troubled expression did nothing to explain her actions. Then it dawned on him..."I'm sorry ...I didn't even ask. Are you married, Jade? Is there someone waiting for you?"

She viewed him through cautious eyes. "No. I just... people will talk. I like to keep my distance."

Tanner hesitated. "Okay. Sorry about the hand thing."

A slight grin appeared, and some of the caution in Jade's eyes faded. "Forgiven." She stared at him a moment. "I'm sorry for overreacting."

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Karen Kingsbury

"No problem." Tanner was surprised at how he ached to take her in his arms and kiss her. From the time he was in high school he could have had his pick of beautiful women. They left notes on his car, messages at his dorm, and propositioned him to his face. He wasn't interested. He trusted God's plan for his life, and part of that plan was being sexually pure until he was married. Despite the women who sought after him, holding to that conviction had never been a struggle.

Yet none of them had ever made him feel the way he felt now, standing on a city sidewalk, jade Conner filling his senses.

Tanner had a feeling that whatever wounds jade's mother had inflicted on her daughter's heart, they had left her scarred. He would have to move slowly if they were going to be friends again. "Wanna get something to eat?"

She nodded. "I know a great hamburger place."

He patted her car. "You driving?"

Her eyes twinkled. "If you trust a girl who can beat you in a bike race."

Tanner didn't smile. The emotions she stirred in him were too deep to make light of. "The question isn't whether I trust you..." His voice was softer, his face less than a foot from hers. "It's whether you trust me."

Jade said nothing, just considered his statement, meeting his gaze while a dozen emotions danced in her eyes. Finally she caught his neck with the crook of her arm and hugged him close. His arms circled her again, and he clung to her the way a brother might cling to a long lost sister.

He held her that way for nearly a minute all the while praying that she wouldn't see the truth. How the feelings that assaulted him now were far from brotherly.

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SAX

IF TRAIN TRACKS HAD RUN THROUGH THE TOWN OF KELSO, THE house where jade and her father lived would have been on the wrong side.

Their two-bedroom rental was sandwiched between a cluster of miscellaneous mobile homes and a weed-infested trailer park on Stark Street. The city dump was within eyesight, and a bitter stench drifted down the roadway whenever a breeze kicked up. What with the rusted washing machines and brokendown automobiles cluttering the yards up and down Stark, it was difficult to tell where the dump ended and the neighborhood began.

Crime had never been much of an issue in Kelso. A sleepy town that survived on industry along the Columbia and Cowlitz rivers, most of the people who lived there had done so all their lives. Still, when there was a domestic incident or a drug bust, inevitably it was on or near Stark Street.

Jade was used to her neighborhood. That night when she pulled into her driveway and stepped around broken engine parts and a Mustang that had died five years earlier, she didn't give a second thought to the condition of her home.

She had found Tanner Eastman. After ten years of sorrow and struggle she had come face to face with the one who had been a single ray of light in an otherwise cavernously dark past. Somehow, someway, despite the years gone by, he had found her, and she desperately needed to talk to someone about what she was feeling.