

“Readers will be swept off their feet by Amanda Wen’s second installment of the Sedgwick County Chronicles. *The Songs That Could Have Been* takes readers on a stunning journey of loss, love, and yearning for the things that could have been. Within these pages, Wen masterfully handles difficult themes like addiction and racism with authenticity, grace, and hope. Past and present are deftly woven together in this dual-timeline narrative that will leave readers flying through the pages. *The Songs That Could Have Been* is the ‘can’t miss’ book of the year.”

—AMANDA COX, author of the 2021 Christy Book of the Year,
The Edge of Belonging

“Amanda Wen is a fresh new voice in the Christian fiction arena! Blending well-researched historical events with modern-day, relatable characters, she crafts tales within tales that are guaranteed to delight and inspire readers. I highly recommend this inspiring writer.”

—KIM VOGEL SAWYER, best-selling author of *Freedom’s Song*

“There are so many brilliant moments in *The Songs That Could Have Been*. Amanda Wen took risks that paid off with a treasure trove of themes which will resonate in my heart for a very long time. Peppered with struggle and yearning, the journeys of Carter and Lauren, Rosie and Ephraim, will ultimately fill you with deep hope and joy. Have tissues ready, but know they will be mostly for happy tears.”

—DEBORAH RANEY, author of *Bridges* and
the Chandler Sisters series

“As poignant as it is intricately crafted, *The Songs That Could Have Been* takes readers on a journey spanning decades and linking the stories of two couples who find themselves drawn together in unexpected and beautiful ways. This is a reading experience both heartfelt and heart-tugging, a timeless exploration of young and enduring love and the grace found in second chances. Amanda Wen is a rare and remarkable storyteller, and this is a novel I will not soon forget.”

—AMANDA BARRATT, Christy Award–winning author of
The White Rose Resists

the
SONGS
THAT COULD
HAVE BEEN

*Sedgwick County
Chronicles*

AMANDA WEN



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To the glory of God
in honor of the Lees, Millers, Petersons, and Wens.
Thank you for welcoming our marriage.





CHAPTER ONE

CARTER DOUGLAS HATED running out of makeup.

Nearly eight years in the broadcast business, eight years of coating his face with foundation before going on air, had taught him to always keep a backup bottle on hand. But July in Wichita meant summer vacations, screwed-up schedules, and squall lines that kept him watching radar in the weather center long past his usual bedtime. This combo platter of too much work and not enough shut-eye meant many things had fallen by the wayside. So here he sat, half an hour before the Saturday 6:00 p.m. newscast, tilting, tapping, and turning the little bottle, pleading with those last clinging drops of creamy beige to slide out onto the sponge and let him smear them on his skin.

“No luck, huh?” Melanie Powell, on set in the anchor’s chair, glanced up from her tablet. Like Carter, she routinely clocked in at three every weekday morning to help guide Kansans through school bus stops and rush-hour commutes. And, like Carter, she was pulling extra shifts to cover someone else’s summer travels. The thick coating of cosmetics she’d already applied didn’t quite hide the resulting blue-tinged bags beneath her eyes, but Carter knew better than to call attention to that.

Her observation forced him to face the truth. This bottle had nothing left. Zip. Zilch. Nada.

“Nope.” Pushing his rolling office chair back from the desk, he tossed the makeup bottle, free-throw style, toward the metal wastebasket on the opposite side of the weather center. It hit the empty can with a satisfying clang. *And the crowd goes wild.*

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“I’d let you use mine.” His colleague’s voice held a smile. “But I’m pretty sure you’d look like a vampire.”

Carter chuckled. Mel’s pale-as-a-bathroom-sink foundation combined with his deep-brown hair and slight widow’s peak . . . that might not be too far off. All he’d need was a cape and some fangs.

“Help me remember that for the Halloween show, all right?” Tossing her a grin, he rose from the chair and retrieved his wallet from the desk drawer. “I’m off for more spackle. Get you anything?”

Mel tucked a lock of platinum-blond hair behind her ear and looked up with a tired smile. “Coffee. Please. The stronger the better.”

“One extra-strength rocket fuel comin’ right up.” Carter slid his wallet into the pocket of his dress pants and pushed open the wooden door to the studio.

A moment later he stepped through the lobby’s double glass doors and into the waxy heat of the Channel Five parking lot. The contrast from freeze-dried indoor air to an outdoors as hot and damp as a dog’s breath never ceased to amaze him. In the arid southwestern corner of Kansas, that endless sweep of horizon where he’d grown up, humidity was a non-issue. But here, even a two-minute walk across the parking lot made him break a sweat.

At least it was a relatively easy forecast.

The glass doors of Dylan’s slid wide and beckoned Carter into the grocery store’s air-conditioned bliss. Its location next to the studio made it the source of countless last-minute grocery runs and quick carryout meals—disappointing Mexican, decent Chinese, a beer fridge he avoided at all cost—and coffee so strong it practically required a fork, a longtime Channel Five favorite. He’d grab Mel’s coffee just as soon as he picked up another bottle of foundation. He hung a quick left, strode down the cosmetics aisle to the section in the middle where his favorite brand could be found, and . . .

Well, crap.

The racks of foundation were nicely filled except the one that contained his perfect shade. The one he’d used for years. The only one that didn’t make him look like a spray-tan experiment gone horribly wrong. Teeth clenched, he pawed through the bottles, praying one had been misplaced

somehow, but no luck. His shade, the catchily named B385, was nowhere to be seen.

Guess he wasn't the only one who sometimes forgot to plan ahead.



Lauren Anderson welcomed the blast of cold air that awaited her on the other side of Dylan's sliding glass doors. Peeling damp strands of hair off her neck, she gave quiet voice to uncharitable thoughts about the couple who'd insisted on an outdoor wedding despite triple-digit temperatures and humidity that made it feel even worse. While outdoor weddings led to some of the most gorgeous photos she'd ever taken, if she ever walked down the aisle herself? Indoors all the way.

At least the reception was inside, providing Lauren a few minutes en route to restock her coconut water. But as heavenly as the chilled beverage sounded, she ducked first into the ladies' room to assess her appearance. Ugh. Like a moron, she'd forgotten to wear waterproof mascara, and two hours of snapping photos under the relentless sun made her look more than a little like a demented raccoon.

A wet paper towel undid some of the damage, but not enough. With a sigh, she tossed the paper towel into the trash and jetted out of the bathroom. This was a job for makeup remover.

At just before six on a Saturday evening, she hadn't expected to encounter anyone in the cosmetics aisle, but tonight a dark-haired man stood there in a crisp white dress shirt and black slacks, frowning at rows of foundation as though they contained the secret formula for turning Diet Coke into plutonium. She suppressed a laugh at the man's obvious confusion. Was he making an emergency date-night makeup run for a wife or girlfriend? Contemplating a future as a drag queen?

But then she caught a glimpse of his profile, and her smile slid off and crashed to the floor. That strong, straight nose. Square jaw. Eyelashes that went on for miles.

This wasn't just any man.

It was Carter Douglas. Right here. In the flesh.

Lauren tore her attention away as if burned and tried to calm her

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queasy stomach and racing heart. She'd known since last spring he was here in Wichita. And in case she could've forgotten, that enormous *Mornings with Carter and Mel* billboard beaming down on the expressway stood as a reminder of the face that had haunted her since high school.

He'd been lanky and teen-idol cute back then, with gleaming dark eyes and a devil-may-care grin. But now, now that broad shoulders filled out every inch of that dress shirt in the best possible way, now that faint smile lines bracketed his mouth and his formerly unruly hair was cut and styled to perfection . . . now, he was positively *smoldering*.

He glanced her way, and her cheeks heated despite the air-conditioning. She fixed her gaze forward on the fluorescently lit shelves, pretending to be deeply interested in . . .

Zit cream.

Great. Just when it couldn't get any more thirteen years ago.

"Excuse me." His tenor voice, deeper and more sonorous with age, jerked her attention to her right. A self-deprecating grin curved his lips, and deep-brown eyes held a touch of puppy-dog pleading.

Her stomach knotted. "Yes?"

"I'm not trying to be sexist, promise, so please don't take this the wrong way, but I go on air in a few minutes, and I could use another pair of eyes." He held up two bottles of foundation, one on each side of his face. "Which one's a better match? They're out of my usual."

Lauren stared. Not at the ludicrous sight of her ex-boyfriend trying to decide on makeup shades—although that would doubtless be funny later—but because he didn't recognize her. Not even a flicker of remembrance crossed those sculpted features.

How many times had she dreamed of this moment? Carter Douglas tumbling back into her life unexpectedly and not recognizing her because she was thin and gorgeous.

Okay. After an afternoon under the Kansas broiler, she wasn't gorgeous. Not right now.

But she was thin.

That, she'd made sure of.

Suppressing a smile of triumph, she glanced at the two bottles he held. Neither was ideal, but another brand one rack over held the perfect match.

“This one.” She grabbed it and held it out to him.

“You sure?” He shifted both bottles to his right hand and took the new one.

“Mm-hm. Those others are too warm for your undertones. They’ll make you look kinda orangey.”

“Thank you. Truly. You may have just saved my job.” Bottles clinked together as he returned the unwanted makeup to the rack. “So are you an artist of some kind? You sure seem to know a lot about undertones.”

Was he . . . flirting with her? The playfulness in his voice indicated he might be, and the suggestive wiggle of his eyebrows confirmed it. Then he flashed a smile, one almost bright enough to produce a cartoonlike *ping*.

He still had no idea. She could walk out of here right now and he’d never be the wiser. That would probably be the smart, responsible, adult-y thing to do.

But all those empty promises, those pretty but meaningless words, had left deep wounds. Wounds that had taken years to recover from. And her battle-scarred heart wouldn’t let her walk away without Carter Douglas knowing beyond a doubt just exactly who had picked out the perfect shade of makeup for him.

“I’m a photographer, yeah.” Stepping to her left, she reached for the makeup-remover wipes and grabbed two packages. She tucked one under her arm, then gently thumped the other one into the center of Carter’s chest. “That stuff’s waterproof, by the way. You’ll need these.”

He replaced her hand on the package, his expression bewildered. “Thanks.”

“Now you have everything.” Mic dropped to perfection, she walked past him, humming a song she and Carter had performed under those summer-theater spotlights here in Wichita all those years ago. She’d played Hodel, her blonde curls hidden beneath a dark wig and colorful kerchief, while Carter stood tall and proud, a beret on his head and a rakish grin on his lips, *Fiddler on the Roof*’s perfect Perchik. Her steps were slow enough, though, and quiet enough, to hear the shuffle of his shoes, the crinkle of the plastic package still cradled against his chest.

“Lauren?”

There it was.

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She stopped. Turned.

Carter stood in the middle of the aisle, makeup in one hand, package of wipes in the other. His mouth hung open, and a vertical line formed between furrowed dark brows.

The victorious smile she'd been fighting finally burst forth.

“Hello, Carter.”



CHAPTER TWO

LAUREN ANDERSON. AFTER all this time.

The stunning truth must've made him stare a beat too long, if her slightly raised eyebrow was any indication. And the smile tugging at her lips, the one that deepened an adorable dimple on the right side of her mouth, shot him back to that sweet summer. Ten magical weeks, too perfect to last.

"Wow, Lauren. It's great to see you." He didn't want to stare, but he couldn't help it. She looked so different. The round, apple-cheeked face he remembered now featured high cheekbones and a defined jaw. Delicate collarbones peeked from beneath the straps of her sundress, and one slender arm wrapped around a midsection much smaller than it used to be. Even her hair was different. A deeper, more golden hue than the bleached blonde she'd had in high school, and she'd ditched her tight, carefully curled ringlets for a riot of tousled waves atop her head. Sun-kissed, wind-blown strands escaped to dance around her long neck and freckled shoulders.

But her bottomless blue eyes, ringed with green in the center and fringed with long dark lashes . . . those hadn't changed. They'd peered at him with such love, those eyes had, and that image had haunted him for the last thirteen years. Served to remind him all that his train wreck of a life had cost them both.

Her tilted head told him he'd been staring again, and he summoned his best camera-ready smile. "Sorry. It's just . . . you look so different. The years have been good to you."

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She laughed. The same silvery Lauren laugh, but it held an edge he hadn't heard before. "Thank you."

Had he hit a nerve somehow? She'd been sensitive about her weight that summer. A couple thoughtless comments from the director had brought her near tears and burned his heart with rage on her behalf. Over and over he'd tried to help her see herself the way he saw her.

To him, she'd always been beautiful.

"So what brings you to Wichita?" Tucking the package of makeup-remover wipes beneath his arm, Carter dusted off the boxes in his memory bank. "Your grandparents live here, right?"

"Grandma does. Grandpa passed away a couple years back, right when Grandma's Alzheimer's started to get bad. I moved in with her to help, and it worked okay for a while, but . . ." She paused, the story she wasn't telling him filled in by the warbling of a country singer on the store's sound system. "We had to move her to a home last year. She likes it, though, and she still remembers me most of the time, so it could be worse."

His heart ached at the one-two punch Lauren had suffered. Warmed at her compassion. "I'm so sorry." Without thinking, he reached out and gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. The muscles beneath his fingertips tensed, but she didn't jerk away. He'd consider that a hopeful sign.

"What about you?" Her chin lifted, and the arm around her midsection tightened. "I mean, I guess you live here now too, what with Channel Five and all . . ."

"And all the perks that come with that." He jiggled the bottle of foundation. "But yeah. Been doing weather there a little over a year."

"Weather, huh?" She looked him up and down. "Last time I checked, you were dead set on the anchor's chair at CNN."

Carter stuffed his free hand into his pocket. "Yeah, well. Life has a way of not going quite the way you planned."

"If it's any comfort, my career ambition as the next Taylor Swift didn't exactly pan out either."

Moonlit memories swam to the surface. Memories of that little spot by the creek on her grandparents' farm. Of Lauren, her hair whispering against her cheek as she bent over the neck of that beat-up guitar.

That was the night that had changed everything.

He cleared his throat. "So you're a photographer now?"

"I am." Her shoulders lowered, and the grip of her arm around her midsection eased. "Weddings, newborns, my food blog . . ."

He blinked. "Food blog?"

A spark lit her eyes, albeit a guarded one. "Health food mostly."

That probably explained her weight loss.

"I do a lot of plant-based, organic, that kind of thing. I want people to know how delicious and fun it is to cook and eat the food God intended."

He grinned. "I'm mostly on the Drive-Thru Diet, so I'll have to take your word for it."

"You'd swear off that drive-thru junk if you made my Bananarama Pancakes." She poked her index finger at him. "Three ingredients, super easy, and way yummiier than a McFat-and-Calories Deluxe."

"I'll have to pop the batteries out of my smoke detector before I start, then."

Lauren's laugh made him feel like he'd just swished a three-pointer. "Seriously, anyone can make this." Bracelets clinked as she pawed through a colorful woven bag and pulled out a business card. "Here. The pancakes were last Thursday's post."

He took the card from her outstretched fingertips, but his eyes skated right over the web address to the little picture of her on the right. Graceful cupped hands overflowed with berries and leafy greens, loose golden waves tumbled over her shoulders, and her smile was the same one that had made his heart thump all those years ago.

It thumped now too.

He pretended not to notice.

"Listen, Carter, I've got to run. But it was good seeing you again." She paused, opened her mouth, then shut it with a slight shake of her head, whatever she'd been about to say destined to remain a mystery. "You take care, okay?"

"Yeah." His voice didn't sound like his own. "You too, Lauren."

She retreated down the cosmetics aisle, her sandals slapping softly against the tile floor in an odd rhythm with the final strains of the song.

A sharp buzz in his pocket jolted him, and he pulled out his phone.

Mel.

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“Let me guess. You want iced coffee, not hot?”

“Forget the coffee, dill weed.” Mel’s favorite insult knifed his left ear. “Did you forget you’ve got a show tonight? We’re on air in twelve minutes.”

His stomach dropped. As a matter of fact, he had forgotten.

Lauren Anderson had made him forget everything.

Just like she always did.



The next afternoon Lauren’s red Jeep responded with a cheerful horn chirp as she pressed the lock button, then slipped her keys into her purse and crossed the sunbaked parking lot to the entrance of Plaza de Paz for her traditional Sunday visit. Garrett had been right about this place, blast him. Though Rosie Spencer still had plenty of bad days as her Alzheimer’s proceeded down its predictably tragic path, the care and company of staff and residents alike meant that, more often than not, she was still the spunky, vibrant woman Lauren had always known. Even if she rarely remembered Lauren’s name.

It had taken Grandma wandering off during a tornado—one that passed within yards of the family farm—for Lauren to see what her brother had been trying to tell her for weeks: Grandma wasn’t safe in her home any longer. Goose bumps pricked along Lauren’s arms, despite triple-digit temperatures, at the memory of that close call last spring. The dissonant moan of the siren. The panicked desperation when she returned to the kitchen and found Grandma’s chair empty. And the meteorologist on TV, his voice strained with impassioned urgency. Her first glimpse of Carter in thirteen years. In fact, he’d—

“Lauren. Hey.”

Her brother’s greeting mercifully jerked her out of the past, and she glanced across the posh lobby to see him step off the elevator.

“Garrett.” She crossed the room for a quick embrace. “I didn’t know you were coming today.”

They started toward the reception desk, and Garrett’s dimple deepened. “Me neither, but Sloane’s been going through more boxes.”

Grinning, Lauren scribbled her name on the sign-in sheet, then handed

the pen to Garrett. “What’d she find this time?” Since purchasing the Spencers’ farmhouse and moving in last summer, her history-geek future sister-in-law had taken great joy in digging through a century-and-a-half’s worth of family artifacts.

“An old Bible. Black, with red trim on the pages and Grandma’s maiden name on the front.” He glanced over his shoulder at her. “I’d never seen it before. Does it ring any bells for you?”

“Don’t think so, no.”

Garrett turned back to the sign-out sheet. “Anyway, I thought I’d drop it by. See if she remembered it.”

“Did she?”

“Hard to say. She took it from me and looked through it, but I don’t know if it registered.” He stashed the pen and swiveled toward Lauren. “So how are you?”

“I’m good.” She tightened her grip on the strap of her purse. “I, uh . . . ran into Carter yesterday.”

“Yeah?” Garrett leaned against the reception desk. “Couldn’t avoid that forever, I suppose. How’d it go?”

“Okay, I think. He didn’t recognize me.” That moment still ranked as one of her life’s most unassailable triumphs. She’d pictured a thousand different versions of Stunned Carter, but even her wildest imaginings paled in comparison to the real thing.

“Well, you’ve grown up a lot, Lo.”

“So’s he.” And that was where the triumph ended. Because her heart—covered in the scars his knife had inflicted—had still done backflips at the sight of those depthless dark eyes. At that sweet tenor voice. At the warmth of his hand on her shoulder during that brief second of reassurance.

Garrett studied her with the same attention to detail he gave his clients’ investment portfolios. “So . . . are you all right?”

“Sure. Fine. I mean, it’s always a little awkward, seeing your ex. But we’re both adults. We exchanged hellos, caught up for a couple minutes, and went our separate ways. And it’s over now. Never have to see him again.” Except for that stupid billboard . . .

“Okay.” Garrett quirked a brow, his almost-infallible Sibling Crap Detector giving off a nearly audible beep.

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“Okay. I’m gonna go see Grandma.” Lauren pressed the elevator button, and it lit beneath her touch. “You and Sloane are still on for dinner tomorrow night, right?”

“Long as you make something with gluten in it, we’re golden.”

The ding of the elevator was perfectly timed with the raspberry she blew him, and he tossed a cheerful wave as she stepped between the sliding steel doors.



Moments later Lauren rounded the corner of a bright-blue hallway and arrived at her grandmother’s suite, an entrance decorated with columns and a white picket fence in an effort to make Plaza de Paz as homey as possible. A small touch, perhaps, but one Lauren appreciated.

“Grandma?” She tapped with the brass knocker. “It’s me, Lauren.”

The resulting silence wasn’t unusual, since Grandma sometimes napped during the day. Maybe the visit with Garrett had tuckered her out.

“I’m coming in, okay?” Lauren crept in, and sure enough, Grandma’s familiar snowy curls peeked up over the top of her much-loved blue recliner.

“Grandma?” Lauren peered around the chair.

The pale-blue eyes behind Grandma’s gilt-framed glasses were wide and filled with tears. Her thin lips trembled. Open on her lap was a softly worn Bible.

Lauren fell to her knees in front of Grandma’s chair and sought the unseeing gaze. “Grandma.” She laid a hand over the wrinkled one on the Bible. “Grandma, it’s okay. You’re safe. It’s me, Lauren. Barbara’s daughter. Your granddaughter.”

But a tear spilled down the weathered cheek. “I can’t . . . can’t . . .” With her free hand, she tapped the Bible.

Lauren glanced at the red-edged white pages in her grandmother’s lap. The print was smaller than the Bible Grandma usually read, the one that always sat on the little table beside the recliner. Her vision was still sharp, especially given her age, but that font was pretty small.

“Would you like me to read to you? Is that it?” Relieved at having uncovered the source of frustration, Lauren eased the Bible from her grandmother’s shaky grasp.

Genesis 48? Lauren’s forehead creased. Usually her grandmother found her comfort and encouragement in the Psalms or the letters of Paul.

“Grandma, is this where you want me to start? In Genesis?”

Taking her grandmother’s silence as assent, Lauren sank into the chair beside hers, the faithful companion recliner that had belonged to Grandpa. Orrin Spencer had been gone nearly two years now, but the plush blue velvet still gave off a faint comforting whiff of musky aftershave and pipe smoke.

She adjusted the Bible on her lap. “And it came to pass after these things, that one told Joseph, Behold, thy father is sick: and he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim—” A choked sob cut her off. Grandma held a wrinkled fist to trembling lips.

“Grandma?” Lauren leaned in. “Please tell me what’s wrong.”

“Ephraim,” came the guttural response. “He should’ve been here by now. We were supposed to meet . . . Can someone tell me please . . . what’s happened to Ephraim?”



CHAPTER THREE

“GRANDMA?” KNEELING, LAUREN sought her grandmother’s frantic gaze and tried to still the aged, trembling hands. “Who’s Ephraim?”

“He’s never this late.” Beneath Lauren’s gentle grasp, one cold hand clenched and loosed, clenched and loosed. “Where *is* he? Has something happened?”

Lauren grabbed the remote and switched off the TV. “Grandma, it’s all right. We’ll find Ephraim.” The unfamiliar name rolled around her tongue. “But . . . let’s get some help, okay?” Reaching for the speaker on the wall behind the couch, she yanked its cord and kept her voice as calm as she could. “Hello? Hi. Hi. Can we get some help please? Rosie Spencer, room 621.”

“I’ll have someone right there,” came the fuzzy reply.

“Thank you.” Lauren turned from the intercom to her grandmother. “Grandma, help’s on the way. Do you want me to call Garrett?”

Grandma stared at Lauren, jaw slack. “Who?”

Lauren could have face-palmed. The last year and a half or so, Grandma had mistaken Garrett for her late husband, whom Garrett strongly favored. “I meant Orrin. Could I call Orrin to come help you?”

Grandma drew back, shaking her head. “N-n-no, not . . . I don’t know any . . . I’m supposed to meet *Ephraim*.”

“Okay, okay.” Lauren placed her hands on the thin, stooped shoulders. “It’s okay. We’ll find—”

“Get your hands off me.” Grandma twisted free, venom in her eyes. “Don’t *touch* me.”

Lauren stood, eyes stinging, her own limbs trembling. Before Alzhei-

mer's, Rosie Spencer had been the perfect blend of sugar and spice. But her brain's ravenous, unwanted guest sometimes turned her into an entirely new person.

Lauren knew to expect it. But she never knew how to make it not hurt.

The door opened, and a heavyset blonde nurse clad in green scrubs walked in. *Marsha*, her name tag read. "You called for some help?"

"Thank you, Jesus," Lauren whispered, and dove for her phone to text Garrett.

Marsha took over, and after a few moments, Grandma was subdued but weeping quietly. Taking refuge in the bedroom, Lauren pressed a fist to her mouth to stifle her own sobs. Her heart broke over and over and over again at her grandmother's misery. At the relentless horror of this awful disease.

Garrett burst through the door. "I came back as quick as I could. What's going on?"

"Grandma was already upset when I got here, and I think I made it worse." Lauren yanked a tissue from the box on the nightstand. "She didn't know who I was or where she was. She just kept talking about someone named Ephraim."

Brow knit, Garrett looped his arm around Lauren's shoulders while she blew her nose.

"Ephraim?" he asked. "Does she even know someone named Ephraim?"

"I don't think so. She was reading that Bible you gave her, the part of Genesis where Jacob blesses Joseph's sons. One of them had that name." Lauren balled up the damp tissues and tossed them into the trash can, then sank onto the bed. "But I don't remember that story meaning anything special to her, and she kept looking around, saying Ephraim was supposed to meet her, and it wasn't like him to be this late." She glanced up, hoping against hope her know-it-all big brother would have a ready answer. "What in the world could that mean?"

But her confusion reflected on Garrett's face, and he spread his hands. "No idea."

A quiet knock came from the door, and Marsha beckoned them into the living room, stethoscope draped around her neck and laptop in her arms. "I think the worst of it is past. I went ahead and gave her the Namenda

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and a touch of Ativan to calm her down.” Blue, heavily lined eyes flitted from Lauren to Garrett and back again. “Do you two have any idea what might’ve upset her?”

“The only thing I can think of is that old Bible I brought earlier,” Garrett said. “We found it in some stuff from her old house.”

“And when I got here, she had it open and was crying and asking about someone named Ephraim.” Lauren twisted the ring she wore on her middle finger. “We’ve got no idea who that is.”

“Well, here’s the Bible.” Marsha retrieved it from where she’d placed it on Grandpa’s chair. “Maybe put it away for now, yeah?”

Nodding, Garrett took it and slid it onto a high bookshelf. “She had it open to a passage that referred to an Ephraim. Could that have triggered a memory?”

“It’s possible.” Marsha’s pager beeped. She pulled it from the pocket of her scrubs, gave it a glance, and replaced it. “Sometimes seemingly random things can remind them of another era of life, or even make them think they’re living in that era. Remember, these patients perceive time much differently than we do.”

“Right.” Lauren’s mind flitted back to after Grandpa had died, when Garrett wore suits for months because letting Grandma believe he was her husband seemed easier than breaking her heart every day with the news of his death. She didn’t make that mistake as often anymore, which was a comparative mercy. But beneath the mercy was sadness. She didn’t recognize Garrett much at all these days.

“In any case, it’s triggering something powerful. Something locked deep inside,” Marsha explained. “It’s surfacing—or trying to—but she can’t quite access it.”

Garrett tilted his head. “So she remembers enough to know she should remember, but not enough to actually remember.”

Marsha closed her laptop with a sad smile. “Basically, yeah.”

“So what now?” Lauren’s gaze traveled to Grandma.

“She should be fine.” Marsha started for the door. “But maybe try to find out who Ephraim is. And why he seems to mean so much to her.”



Where is it? Where's that book?

That handsome young man who visits often, the one who my heart knows but my mind can't remember, brought me a book today. And something about it upset me.

That's probably why I can't find it. The lady in green, who's always smiling and cheerful and gives me my medications every afternoon, probably told them to hide it from me so I wouldn't get upset.

They're so protective, all these people in green. Handsome is too, and the girl who looks just like him. They want to protect me from everything. Keep me safe. They love me. They say that often, and my heart knows it's true.

But sometimes all this protectiveness, all this thinking they know what's best for me, doesn't feel like love.

There it is. On that top shelf. Handsome put it up there. He's much taller than I, but if I stretch up . . . just a little more . . .

There. Got it.

Holy Bible.

The Bible's what got me all stirred up?

That can't be right. I've found such comfort in these pages over the years. Such encouragement. Such wisdom.

But this isn't the Bible I usually read. This one is small. Black cover. White pages. Red edges.

Black. White. Red.

Ephraim.

The name socks me a good one.

But that's all I can remember.

Not his face, or how I knew him, or anything other than his name . . . and that he was supposed to meet me.

Meet me . . . where? And why?

He's running late. Oh, that's not unusual, not for him, not with things being the way they are. But even he's never this late. Where is he? Did something happen? Something must've happened.

Could I answer these questions once upon a time? Have the shadows in my mind eaten them like they have so much else? Or have the answers always been a mystery?

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One thing I know for sure. He must've meant the world to me. I know that by the sting in my eyes. The ache in my heart.

But . . . who was he?

So much I don't remember.

And so much I'd give anything to be able to.



CHAPTER FOUR

CARTER TAPPED THE open doorframe of the news director's office moments after finishing the Monday noon newscast. "You wanted to see me?"

"Carter. Come in. Have a seat." Kathleen Weaver's fleshy fiftysomething face curved in a smile. Her beeringed hands motioned to the padded chair opposite the large oak desk. "Can I get you a drink?"

He sank into the chair and loosened his tie. "Water would be great."

"You sure?" Kathleen slid a small bottle of Crown from the top drawer of her desk. "You're off the clock, and we've got something to celebrate."

Carter offered a tight smile to cover the shock and tamped down the churning in his gut that started up every time he saw alcohol. Smelled it. Thought about it. What it had done to his dad. To him. To nearly everyone he cared about.

Lauren Anderson included.

"Still gotta drive home, though." He tried to keep his tone light. "So water it is."

"Suit yourself." She retrieved a Dasani from the little refrigerator behind her desk and handed it to him, then doctored her travel mug. His shoulders tightened as the sharp smell poked at the flimsy cover he kept over his memories and messy emotions.

"You said we're celebrating?" He focused his gaze on his boss's face and not her drink.

"That we are. The latest ratings." Kathleen squeezed behind her desk and turned her computer screen.

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Carter leaned in for a closer look. No, he wasn't seeing things. They really were a solid number two in the Wichita market for the first time since his arrival.

"Nice." He lifted his water bottle in a toast.

Kathleen clinked her coffee mug against it, cackling with glee. "Those cupcakes over at Channel Nine can choke on it."

They were still light-years behind Channel Fourteen, but Carter wasn't about to point that out.

Kathleen tore her gaze from the screen and feasted her eyes on him. "And it's all thanks to you."

Carter drew back. "Me?" Nearly a year and a half working the morning show, and he still couldn't believe they'd hired him. There he was, green as anything, attempting to convince the powers that be that his first job in weather should be in a place where lives would depend on his forecast. Even he didn't buy his sales pitch. Never in a million years would he have gone for it if not for the quiet yet relentless encouragement of his friend and mentor, Chief Meteorologist Jim Ford.

"Ratings are up across the board, but look where the highest jump is." Kathleen's long navy-blue fingernail pointed to a few lines in the report. "Monday through Friday mornings. Your shift."

Carter's eyes widened. "Really?"

"And it's not just TV either. Our YouTube channel gets thousands of hits, and our app use has tripled since you came on board."

"Wow. Thanks for telling me." His smile widened, and satisfaction filled his chest. Okay. So maybe he hadn't been immersed in weather since birth like most other meteorologists. Maybe he didn't have that bright, shiny University of Oklahoma meteorology degree beaming from the wall of the weather center like his colleagues did. Maybe his degree had come via online school instead, with study time stolen in fits and starts while holding down a job as a beat reporter in Alabama.

But maybe that didn't matter. Because it looked like he was finally getting the credit all his hard work deserved.

"It was a risk, hiring someone so inexperienced." Kathleen leaned back in her chair with a smile. "But it's paid off. We're attracting more viewers—*younger* viewers—than we have in years. Heck, even some older ones

can't get enough of you." Her gaze slid over his face. "Helps that you're so easy on the eyes."

His balloon of professional pride deflated, zooming around the small office with an almost audible *pbbbbttththththt*. So he was just eye candy to his boss. Even after all this, she still didn't take him seriously.

Ah, well. He knew why he was here. And Jim believed in him. That had to count for something.

He slapped on the smile Kathleen doubtless expected. "Happy to help. Always am."

She beamed. "That's the kind of can-do spirit we like here at K-KAN. And that's why I think you'll be *thrilled* with our new noon segment: 'In the Kitchen with Carter.'"

His brows shot up. "I'm sorry?"

"You're always joking about how you don't cook, so what better way to add some pizzazz to the noon show than to showcase some local chefs? Let them show off some recipes live on air, and let our resident non-cook learn how to slice and dice."

Cooking lessons.

On air.

All those all-nighters he'd pulled striving for that meteorology degree couldn't possibly have prepared him for this.

He juggled the half-empty water bottle. "So you're going to bring in real chefs, and they're giving me cooking lessons. On live TV."

"Precisely," Kathleen replied. "They'll get some exposure, a boost in business. You'll get more airtime . . ."

"And we'll get higher ratings."

"Gotta strike while the iron's hot, my friend."

Carter bought time with a hefty gulp of water. This whole thing reminded him of high school basketball, when he'd made varsity as a freshman but didn't get the minutes he wanted or the assignments he thought he deserved. "Just do your job, Douglas," was Coach Bell's only response.

It paid off, though. He did his job, his teammates did theirs, and they made the state playoffs all four years. They'd even taken home the state title when he was a junior.

So a cooking segment? Like it or not, it was his job. So he'd do it.

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He lowered the bottle. “Yeah. Sounds like fun.”

“Fantastic.” Kathleen clapped her hands, bracelets jingling. “We’re hoping to get this off the ground in time for sweeps. We’ve already got calls in to a bunch of local restaurants—Mottola’s, Patrick’s, the new vegan place on the east side . . .”

Kathleen prattled on in that throaty, chain-smoker voice of hers, but Carter’s focus had slid off the road and into the ditch.

Vegan place. Health food.

Lauren.

“What about a food blogger?” The question hopped out before he could consider its merit.

Kathleen paused, her mug halfway to her mouth. “Do you know one?”

“Yeah. She does a lot of gluten-free, plant-based, keto, all that.”

Kathleen’s eyes lit. “Hmm. I hadn’t considered that, but the gluten-free demographic is an important segment of the population.” She took a sip. “Think she’d be good on camera?”

Hmm. Lauren was doubtless good behind a camera, if she was a professional photographer. But in front of one? With him?

She’d always had great stage presence, though. And talking about her blog was the only time she’d let her guard down with him the other day. The only time those blue eyes had taken on even a hint of the sparkle that had once been a regular feature. And if it went well, it could boost her blog traffic. Be a good opportunity for her.

A good opportunity for him as well. To extend the olive branch and begin to atone for the sins of his past. He couldn’t hope a simple TV appearance could make up for everything he’d done.

But it was at least a start.

Leaning to one side, he retrieved his wallet, fished out her business card, and handed it to Kathleen. “I think she’d do great.”

“You’re brilliant, Carter. Brilliant.”

Brilliant wasn’t the term he’d use at this moment, now that Lauren’s thousand-watt smile and hands full of berries were in the talons of his boss. Completely idiotic might be more accurate.

But Jim had always counseled him that God had a plan, and even man’s stupidity couldn’t thwart that plan. So if it wasn’t meant to be, then

Lauren probably wouldn't be interested. A polite *thanks but no thanks* to the producer, and that would be that.

But an enthusiastic *are you kidding? I'd love to* also loomed as a distinct possibility.

And Carter had no idea which option terrified him most.



Lauren's thumbs danced over the screen of her phone as she tapped out a text in reply to her future sister-in-law, Sloane.

OK, thanks! Just let us know if you see the name Ephraim in any of Gma's stuff.

She added a few emojis, then hit Send. A moment later, her phone buzzed with the reply.

Will do. See you tomorrow.

Lauren pinged back a thumbs-up emoji, then set the phone on the counter and returned to the Mediterranean sea bass sizzling on the stove. The first fillet had been a touch too done for photography, but not for her two cats, Alton and Nigella, who crouched before their bowls, happily devouring the rejects. Thanks to her text-related distraction, this fillet might meet the same fate.

Sliding her spatula beneath the fish, she flipped it to reveal—*yes!*—a perfect golden brown and delicious sear. This was her winner. She pictured it piled high with crimson grape tomatoes, deep-green lacinato kale, and a slice of lemon. Both the image and the aroma made her mouth water.

Her ringtone jangled, and she slid the fillet onto a plate to rest, then grabbed the phone.

"Hi, is this Lauren Anderson from Dollop of Delicious?"

"Speaking."

"This is Morgan Segars from—"

The caller kept talking, but Alton, the three-legged orange tabby, chose that moment to leap onto the counter, perilously close to the fish. With a yelp, Lauren lunged for her cat.

"Everything all right?" Morgan asked.

"Sure. Fine. Just some minor cat problems." Lauren slid a hand beneath

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Alton's ample belly and deposited him onto the floor. He eyed her with cool disdain, then turned his attention to grooming his tail.

Morgan laughed. "I've got a pair of Siamese myself, so I get it, believe me. Anyway, I'm calling because your name came up for a new cooking segment we're doing on our noon newscast. I've taken a peek at your blog, and it looks incredible. I just went gluten-free a couple weeks ago, and I cannot *wait* to try those Bananarama Pancakes."

Her heart warmed at the praise. "Thank you."

"Our segment is looking for local food talent to appear on our show, cooking alongside one of our most popular news personalities. We'd like to schedule you for an appearance soon, if you're up for it."

Lauren gulped. Appearing on television wasn't exactly in her comfort zone. They always said the camera added a few pounds, but any time she saw herself on video, "a few" seemed a drastic understatement.

But that was Old Lauren. Fat, Insecure Lauren. This was New Lauren. Thin, Healthy, Confident Lauren. And every literary agent she'd queried in her efforts to secure a cookbook deal had told her she needed to boost her platform numbers. One had even suggested reaching out to local media and scheduling a TV appearance. And now here was the local media on the other end of the phone, offering a TV appearance, without her having had to lift a finger. Was this God's provision or what?

"Absolutely, Morgan, I'd love to, and I'm grateful for the opportunity." She glanced at the Van Gogh calendar on her wall. "When were you thinking?"

"How's next Thursday, the seventeenth? Around eleven, so we can get everything set up?"

"Perfect." She reached for a pencil. "I'm sorry—what station did you say you were with?"

"Channel Five."

She paused, pencil hovering over the calendar square and her stomach twisting into knots. Channel Five. That wasn't . . . was it?

"Can I ask how you found out about me?"

"Our news director had your card. She said she got it from our morning meteorologist. I guess you guys know each other? Anyway, he's the one you'll be cooking with. Our segment's called 'In the Kitchen with Carter.'"

In the kitchen.

With *Carter*.

Her pencil clattered to the floor.

“Are you still there, Lauren?”

She bent to retrieve the pencil. “Yeah. I’m still here.”

“Just to confirm, next Thursday the seventeenth. Does that work for you?”

No. It doesn’t. Because Carter Douglas was out of my life, and I liked it that way.

But she needed an opportunity like this. She’d been praying for one. So what if it came with a side dish of discomfort? She was over Carter. Had been for years. She was Thin, Healthy, Confident Lauren. She could handle this.

Couldn’t she?

“Yep, that works.” It would have to.

In the kitchen.

With *Carter*.

The scrawl of her pencil on the calendar square confirmed it.

What in the world had she just gotten herself into?