

DO YOU SEE
WHAT I SEE?



SARAH HAMAKER

*For it is good to be children sometimes,
and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty
Founder was a child himself.*

—CHARLES DICKENS

CHAPTER 1



Friday, December 20

OAKLEIGH WRIGHT PULLED the rice-filled wrap from the microwave and positioned it around her neck. Then she surveyed the meager contents of her fridge. The tension headache from excited seventh graders eager to start winter break had nixed the idea of stopping at the store. Some ibuprofen had extinguished her headache, and the warm wrap should dispel the lingering knots in her neck.

Scrambled eggs and toast for dinner. Another solitary meal. When would she have that special someone to share the holidays with? Instead of a noisy family surrounding her, she was picking at her meal in the silence of her tiny apartment while reading a Cara Putman thriller.

Her phone buzzed, the screen showing an incoming call from an unknown number. The urge to hear another person's voice—even if it was a scam caller—made her swipe to answer.

“Hello?”

“Oakleigh? Is that really you?”

A sobbing female voice.

“It's Gabriella.”

Oakleigh gasped at hearing her former foster sister's name. She hadn't seen or heard from Gabriella in years despite Oakleigh's efforts to keep in touch through Gabriella's aunt in Tennessee. Oakleigh and Gabriella had been placed in the same foster home when they were teens, with the sixteen-year-old Gabriella taking fourteen-year-old

Oakleigh under her wing. During the two tumultuous years they'd lived together, a friendship stronger than blood sisters had developed.

"Oakleigh?"

Gabriella's query snapped Oakleigh out of the past. "I'm here. I can't believe it's really you. How have you been?"

"I need a favor." Gabriella muffled her voice as if not wanting anyone to overhear their conversation. "Could you come to the bus station in Springfield?"

"Now?" Oakleigh picked up on the uncharacteristic tension in Gabriella's tone. Her foster sister had been unflappable even in the most trying of circumstances.

"Yes. Please come. I don't know who else I can trust to help me."

"I'll be there." Oakleigh swallowed her questions and searched for the Greyhound bus station on a map app. "Looks like it will take me about twenty minutes." Then she groaned, recalling she had dropped off her vehicle at the dealer's for scheduled maintenance on her way home from work. "I have to order a ride share, so make that half an hour."

"That will be in time. Thank you. I knew I could count on you."

Gabriella ended the call, leaving Oakleigh with more questions and a growing sense of unease about why Gabriella had contacted her after years of silence.

Forty minutes later, rain pounded the roof of the bus station as Oakleigh paced inside and checked the time on the wall clock once more. 10:04 p.m. Red-and-green Christmas lights did little to brighten the dingy waiting area, while a scraggly fake tree attempted to proclaim the holiday spirit. The instrumental holiday music played at a low volume under the chatter of dozens of people milling about or sitting in plastic chairs.

Where was Gabriella Ruggiero?

From the desperation and fear in Gabriella's voice, Oakleigh expected to find her foster sister waiting for her at the station, but there was no sign of her. And she wasn't answering Oakleigh's texts and calls. *Why would she ask to meet me if she wasn't going to show?* The Gabriella she'd known always kept her promises. Had something—or someone—kept her from coming?

Dropping into a seat, Oakleigh checked her phone. No missed texts or calls from Gabriella. Worry nibbled at her like a mouse with a bit of cheese.

“Attention, passengers,” an announcer intoned over the station’s intercom system. “Bus 8923 to Johnson City, Tennessee—with Virginia stops in Richmond, Wytheville, and Bristol—departs in fifteen minutes. Ticketed passengers needing extra assistance and those traveling with small children may board now. General boarding will begin shortly.”

“Oakleigh!”

Her shoulders sagged when she spotted Gabriella a few feet away, an infant carrier hooked over one arm. At her side, a small girl dressed in a bright pink tulle skirt over purple leggings hugged a stuffed tiger.

Oakleigh rushed to embrace Gabriella, noting the other woman’s fading bruise on her left cheek. Oakleigh had seen enough domestic violence during her time in foster care and group homes to know the signs, but when she met Gabriella’s eyes, the other woman shook her head. “We’ll have time to catch up on the bus.”

“Bus?” Oakleigh had nothing but her phone and crossbody bag with her.

“I got you a ticket. Now, let me introduce you to my kids.” Gabriella placed her hand on the shoulder of the child. “This is Desi, she’s five, and this”—she hefted the carrier—“is Chale. He was born four days ago.”

What? “Should you be traveling so soon after giving birth?” Oakleigh’s alarm increased by the second, as well as her determination to help her friend. Maybe Gabriella was leaving the abusive father of her baby—why else would she put herself or her kids at risk by taking a newborn to a busy bus terminal during the height of flu and cold season?

“I’ll explain everything once we board.” Gabriella moved toward the doors, leaving Oakleigh no choice but to follow. Gabriella wore a backpack, as did Desi.

Once they’d settled into the trio of seats at the very back of the bus, next to the toilet, Gabriella sighed, but her shoulders didn’t touch the

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faded fabric of the seat back. “You were the only one I could call on such short notice.”

Oakleigh squeezed her friend’s hand. “Of course I would come.”

“I’m glad you kept sending those Christmas cards to my aunt with your number. I always meant to call, but . . .”

In Gabriella’s eyes, Oakleigh read the familiar story of love and heartache and pain. “Oh, Gabriella. I’m so sorry.”

“All that matters is keeping my kids safe.” Gabriella had the fierceness of a mountain lion protecting her cubs in her tone and posture, leaving no doubt she was done with the man who had hurt her. “I will not let them be put in danger like I was.”

Her words triggered a memory of the promise made in their youth. The two of them had crept onto the first-floor roof of the group home’s back porch one summer night to stargaze. Lying on their backs on the still-warm shingles, Oakleigh and Gabriella had committed to helping the other escape any situation like the ones that had landed each in foster care. Now Oakleigh could make good on that promise—and pay back the foster sister to whom she owed so much. She swallowed her questions about what led Gabriella to flee and focused on what she could do instead.

“Where are we going?” Oakleigh smiled at the quiet Desi, who had scooted into her seat without a word. Dark curls framed her pixie face, but her brown eyes remained alert.

“My aunt’s in Tennessee.” Gabriella never stopped moving, tucking the blanket closer around the sleeping infant, touching her daughter’s hair, and checking the contents of the diaper backpack.

Oakleigh wanted to capture Gabriella’s hands in hers but didn’t because the constant movements had been how her friend channeled her nervous energy. Leaving an abusive partner—she didn’t see a wedding ring on Gabriella’s hand—was a scary decision.

“You know how to take care of an infant, right?”

At the question, Oakleigh’s breath came faster, setting off her inner alarm. Surely Gabriella wouldn’t leave her kids with Oakleigh and return to her abuser. “Yes, but I don’t—”

Gabriella leaned closer, dropping her voice. "Please take the kids to my aunt. Her name and address are in the diaper bag in case you don't have them in your phone, along with feeding instructions for Chale. I'm sorry. I thought I'd have more time to explain."

The alarm pulsating through her clanged. She couldn't believe Gabriella would do this. "What are you saying?"

"You're on winter break, right?"

"Yes." Oakleigh had no specific plans for the two-week holiday from teaching.

"That night on the roof, you told me you'd do anything for me, no questions asked, remember?"

Oakleigh nodded, then blinked to focus on what Gabriella was saying.

"I know the kids will be safe with you. Promise me?"

"I promise." Oakleigh glanced at Desi, then Chale in the carrier.

"And Oakleigh, you have to pretend you're their mother." Her eyes bore into Oakleigh's, despair and fear mingled in their dark depths. Oakleigh opened her mouth to respond, but Gabriella grabbed her hand. "They'll be in danger if you don't."

"What are you afraid of?" Oakleigh whispered the question, but Gabriella shook her head. So many questions circled in her brain, foremost how could she protect the kids if she didn't know who or what could be dangerous?

"I have to go." Gabriella ruffled Desi's hair. "Be good and don't forget to call Aunt Oakleigh *Mama* until I come get you."

The little girl sniffed, but nodded. Then her mother ran a finger down the cheek of the baby and fled off the bus without looking back.

Oakleigh moved to follow, but Desi latched on to her hand. Meeting the girl's frightened gaze, she retook her seat with a sigh.

"All aboard!" The bus driver, a paunchy middle-aged man, closed the doors. "You're on bus 8923 to Johnson City, Tennessee, with Virginia stops in Richmond, Wytheville, and Bristol."

Oakleigh settled against the seat, her hand still in Desi's. Without answers to the questions about Gabriella's actions, she turned to the

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one thing that would provide the most peace and protection. *Lord, please keep Gabriella safe. Help me to fulfill my promise to her and deliver these precious children safely to their aunt. Amen.*



Saturday, December 21

Joseph Talbot gripped the steering wheel and tried to ignore the ringing phone.

Great.

Middle-of-the-night calls never brought good news. A quick glance at the truck's console screen showed "Unknown Caller" as the ringing continued. Scammers rarely called this late, but who else could it be?

He checked the highway behind and ahead. No other vehicles. Not surprising. Everyone else had the good sense to stay home in this storm. The Shenandoah Valley specialized in pounding rain with high wind gusts.

A deep sigh escaped. His weather app had accurately predicted this rotten forecast, but he hadn't wanted to believe the storm would be that bad. His former college roommate, Andy, had encouraged him to stay the night as planned rather than head back from Atlanta immediately. Andy had been correct that the drive would be taxing enough without the skies dumping all this water down. Right now, Joseph would rather be sleeping and thinking about their college she-nanigans than battling the wind, rain, and potholes on this stretch of highway. But after hearing about the burst pipe at the Beanery, Joseph simply had no choice but to brace the storm.

His headlights illuminated a road sign up ahead. He eased his grip on the steering wheel. Thank goodness he would be home in little over an hour.

The phone rang again. He hit Accept on the truck's entertainment console, a snappy reply to the spammer's opening line on his lips.

“Hello? Joseph?”

His hands slipped on the steering wheel at the female voice. Surely it wasn’t—

But it was. That voice was as familiar to him as his coffee shop. “Oakleigh?”

Good grief. He sounded like one of those teens who got a positive answer to their will-you-go-to-prom question. Nothing like telling the ex-girlfriend who dumped you without explanation you still miss her after seven years.

“I didn’t know who else to call.” The rain almost drowned her soft words.

“I’m in my truck and it’s pouring rain—could you speak a little louder?”

“I’ll try, but I don’t want to draw attention to us.”

Us. She wasn’t alone. Then the rest of her words penetrated his mind. This wasn’t a call from an old friend—this was a call for help. His heart clenched. “What’s wrong?”

“Some men are watching the bus, and I can’t get back on with the kids.”

Bus, *kids*? What on earth? “Where are you?”

“At the Staunton Truck Stop, in the women’s bathroom.” The sound of a baby crying filled the cab, then Oakleigh’s voice shushing the infant.

His headlights picked up the city limit sign for Staunton. Had God pushed him to leave so he could help Oakleigh? “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Thank you. I’ve got to change the baby’s diaper. Text me when you’re here.” She disconnected, leaving “I’ll be Home for Christmas” blaring from the radio as he hit the gas. He thumbed the volume down from the steering wheel controls. No sense pouring salt into the wound Oakleigh’s voice had reopened. Not when he’d once thought *his* home would be with her.

A Greyhound bus passed him, heading south, then the bright lights of the Staunton Truck Stop flickered in the distance. Soon he

pulled into the quarter-full parking lot, snagging an empty spot near the front door of the restaurant. He texted Oakleigh about his arrival, then dashed through the rain as thunder boomed.

Inside, he shook off droplets from his jacket. A quick glance around the restaurant showed a single customer—a woman in a booth that hugged the back wall, sitting with her back to him.

Had to be Oakleigh.

As he started toward her, three men entered from the convenience store attached to the diner, moving fast toward the booth. Had the trouble Oakleigh alluded to arrived?

The trio moved as one toward the occupied booth.

One of the men grabbed the woman's arm and yanked her out of the booth, giving Joseph a clear view of her face—Oakleigh. A young girl squirmed on the opposite bench seat, with a baby in a car seat nestled beside her.

Oakleigh's eyes widened, filled with panic and fear.

Joseph sprinted toward her.

"Hey! Let her go!"

A man pivoted toward Joseph, then punched him in the stomach. The blow doubled Joseph over, almost bringing him to his knees. A kick sent him sprawling to the sticky floor. He struggled to breathe as pain spread across his middle.

Oakleigh whimpered as the man holding her shook her so hard her head flopped back and forth. "Please, I don't know what you're talking about."

Joseph lay still, getting his breath back. Plans on how to help Oakleigh filled his mind. He would not allow the men to beat him. Not when Oakleigh and her kids were in danger.

His attacker stood less than a foot away from him. The man's companion searched through Oakleigh's bags.

What could she have that these men were after?

"Why didn't you get back on the bus?" the man growled.

"The baby busted out of his diaper. By the time I changed him and his outfit, the bus had departed."

Joseph angled his neck to keep a close eye on their movements. The

third man dumped the contents of a backpack onto the table, raining diapers, bottles, and other infant paraphernalia down on the fake wood surface. “It’s not here.”

The jawline of the man holding Oakleigh tightened.

Time to act.

Joseph shot a prayer heavenward, then kicked the back of his attacker’s knee. The man went down with a cry. Joseph gained his feet and executed a roundhouse kick to the next closest man’s jaw.

Only one man remained standing. He held Oakleigh, pressing a switchblade against her throat. A trickle of blood ran down Oakleigh’s neck. Her eyes met Joseph’s. In the brown depths, the pain and fear warring for dominance hurt more than the gut punch.

Sirens pierced the air. For a split second, everyone froze. Then the man shoved Oakleigh into Joseph’s arms before yelling a torrent of rapid Spanish. He and his companions darted out the door into the still-pouring rain. Cradling Oakleigh, Joseph watched the parking lot, not relaxing until he saw the taillights of what he assumed was their vehicle drive away. A couple of seconds later, an SUV roared into the lot, lights flashing and sirens wailing.

Joseph drew a deep breath. *Thank you, Lord, for keeping Oakleigh and her kids safe.* A glance at Oakleigh’s neck showed the knife wound bled very little, indicating the cut wasn’t deep. The little girl trembled in her seat, and Oakleigh extracted herself from his embrace to slip onto the bench seat beside her. The baby cooed as if he’d enjoyed a performance, but the older child’s eyes radiated terror.

Joseph turned away. He couldn’t handle seeing Oakleigh comfort her daughter. He’d had such dreams of starting a family with her—

Stop. Now wasn’t the time to think about his regrets. Oakleigh needed his help in getting her and her kids to where they needed to be and that would be that.

Joseph ignored the voice whispering that her out-of-the-blue appearance heralded the beginning of a Christmas miracle, one that promised to heal his broken heart and restore his faith in love.

DO YOU HEAR
WHAT I HEAR?



JAYNA BREIGH

*For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a
lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing
comes in the morning.*

—PSALM 30:5 NIV

CHAPTER 1



December 21

“YOUR VACATION IS CANCELED.”

Elise Sinclair clutched fistfuls of her hair and pulled. At six o'clock in the evening, days before Christmas, all her vacation arrangements for the Cayman Islands—*kaboom!* Blown to smithereens.

She tapped the voicemail message icon to relisten to the diatribe from her boss, Geoffrey Langston, who, unlike her, was on his way to a vacation. If only Christmas magic could change the message from bad news to good.

Geoffrey always spoke at a Gandalf-like “you shall not pass” volume. His voice cut off a gate-change announcement squawking in the background. How nice that *he* was on his way to laze on the beach and enjoy refreshing ocean waves.

“You’ve got to pull a rabbit out of the hat. Judge O’Brien called out Mendax for slow-walking the discovery process, granted our *ex parte* Motion to Compel, and ordered Mendax to produce the documents they’ve been withholding. Find something in the docs so we can beat Mendax’s Motion for Summary Judgment. The whole case gets tossed if you can’t.”

The voicemail went silent for a moment, then transitioned into scratching sounds.

“We’re getting ready to board,” Geoffrey said. “Your mom has the snacks. Ask her. Where was I . . . Oh, right. Ixodel is dangerous, and

our case is strong on Mendax's duty to produce a safe drug and its breach of that duty. We also have everything we need to show the ataxia and muscle tremors our client suffers from because of Ixodel. What we don't have and still need is evidence that Mendax knew or should have known of the dangers of the drug, and hence we can't prove they breached failure to warn. Finish drafting our opposition to their MSJ tonight so I have time to review it. Dig into the docs tomorrow and find anything you can on the drug's risks and Mendax's failure to warn so you can attach what you find as Exhibits. The firm will reimburse you for your cruise. I'm back at the office December twenty-sixth."

Elise rubbed her temples with her fingers, and her gaze drifted to her wall calendar. The box for December 22 was shaded in green and had a sailboat sticker on it. What judge in his right mind put off ruling on a Motion to Compel until Christmas week? O'Brien could have delivered his order days ago, giving her plenty of time to review the documents. She looked at the square for December 29, outlined in blood red. With her scheduled cruise return date being December 26, she would still have had ample time to work on the opposition to the MSJ after the cruise.

Weeks of dreaming about her vacation had buoyed her spirits so high that she'd gotten a hot-pink pedicure. She'd also treated herself to some beach-tolerant two-strand twists in her hair. She blew out her breath and dropped her shoulders from their tight clench. Geoffrey was right. Their case was listing in the water like a rudderless boat, and despite her best efforts, she hadn't found the slam-dunk evidence to keep it alive. Now her fancy pink toenails had nothing to look forward to except encasement in her Christmas socks.

She surveyed her office. Basic, inexpensive furniture, but at least she wasn't in a cubicle like she had been out in LA. Plus, at this time of year she could see the sparkly Christmas lights decorating downtown Asheville. She hoisted her peppermint mocha latte to her lips and took a sip. The red thermal cup from the local coffee shop read "Jingle and Java." The chocolaty concoction warmed her insides while a picture of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer taunted her from underneath the slogan.

She logged on to e-Courts to read Judge O'Brien's order to Mendax so she'd know the parameters. A zing shot through her. He'd ordered Mendax to turn over *everything* about Ixodel. Informed consent forms, comparative effectiveness research, clinical trial data about the treatment of tick- and flea-borne illnesses in humans. Her eyes widened. There was what she wanted. He'd included adverse event reports. If Mendax had been sitting on adverse event reports but only now produced them, her client's case might survive all the way to trial and not go down in flames before a verdict was reached. She prayed such reports existed. She sent up another prayer that Mendax wouldn't pull a document dump and swamp her. If they did, could she find what she needed in time?

She switched tabs and pulled up her draft of the Plaintiff's Opposition to Mendax's Motion for Summary Judgment. Half her brain drifted away as she typed, making tweaks and modifications to the draft in anticipation of—*please, please, please*—quickly and easily finding something in the documents tomorrow that would keep the case alive.

A sigh escaped. She'd chosen the life of a trial lawyer, and emergencies popped up. She couldn't complain too much. Practicing law in Asheville beat practicing in LA, hands down. She rarely missed California. No wildfires blocking the freeway. No earthquakes. Her commute during nice weather was a mere ten-minute stroll down the block. Plus, Nana lived in town.

Since Elise's return to Asheville, she'd been a loyal associate to Geoffrey. Dragging herself in during cold and flu season. Late hours. He owed her big-time. What could she buy with the fat bonus she'd lobby for? She forced out of her mind the thought of scoring some mad money and set her fingers back on the keyboard, typing like a robot.



Elise trudged up the stoop to the front door of the two-story brick-fronted condo she shared with her best friend, Ashley Grant. Unlike Elise, Ashley's vacation plans had not sailed off without her. Ashley

right now was enjoying the Arc de Triomphe and the Eiffel Tower in Paris with her mom and stepdad. Her thoughts flitted to Ashley's brother, Jack. Elise hadn't spoken to him for thirteen months. Her heart twisted. Another Christmas without the man she thought she'd marry.

She'd been through all the stages of grief mourning the loss of her engagement, but the hurt swept in anew. Should she wish mosquito bites and a fungal infection on him while he was roughing it in the Outback, pursuing his dream? Best not to think about him at all. Otherwise, the longing would return, and what use was that?

She toed off her shoes in the entryway and clicked on the light. Hot, stinging tears filled her eyes. She blinked them away. Since neither she nor Ashley had planned to be in the condo for Christmas, they hadn't put up any decorations. Not that their place lacked appeal. Thanks to Ashley's boho-chic style of clean lines, neutrals, and live houseplants, Elise had traded in her budget-conscious IKEA furniture and graduated to Pottery Barn.

She made her way past the glass-topped coffee table and the rust-brown leather couch festooned with fuzzy pillows to the one jarring element in the room. The habitat for her box turtle, Bernard.

"Hey, fella. Tough day?" She leaned in closer to his terrarium, which rested on a compact console, and double-checked the timers on his heat lamp. Bernard inched from the back end of his rectangular enclosure toward her. He'd been the steadiest, most dependable man in her life for more than a decade. The golden-and-khaki-colored markings on his back always reminded her of the pattern and coloring of African kente cloth. "Sorry to report you won't be getting that souvenir from the Cayman Turtle Centre that I promised you." She stroked his head with an index finger and walked to the kitchen. Her shoulders sagged. No need to top off Bernard's water and food, since she was going nowhere for Christmas.

How many documents would arrive in tomorrow's tranche? Five boxes' worth? Fifty? A knot tightened in her midsection, then loosened. Tonight, she'd take a respite and watch *It's a Wonderful Life*. She pulled a heat-and-eat meal from the freezer, popped it in the

oven, and set the timer for thirty minutes. Frozen ham and sweet potato soufflé would have to stand in for a holiday-themed dinner.

After Elise ate dinner, she went upstairs to get ready for bed. A thought buzzed around her brain like an annoying fly, reminding her about all the fun she, Jack, and Ashley used to have during the holidays. A short jaunt an hour east to the town of Forest City for a carriage ride down streets decorated with lights. Candlelight Christmas evenings at the Biltmore Estate. Skiing in the Blue Ridge Mountains. She hadn't done any of these things since her engagement imploded.

Her vacation had been an effort to make new, wonderful memories. No reimbursement from Geoffrey could make up for the fruity mocktails and rich chocolate desserts she wouldn't get to enjoy on the Aft Terrace while gazing at the wake trailing behind the ship . . .

No. Stop it. No pain spiral allowed. Okay, she'd need more than a movie to boost her mood tonight. There was a pint of Moose Tracks ice cream in the freezer, which would do the trick. She'd add fudge drizzle, along with red and green sprinkles, to the mix.

Soon she snuggled in her bed while the flavor of sweet vanilla and the salty bite of peanut butter cups helped soothe her jangled nerves. Her eyes drifted closed and sprang open again. On her TV screen, young George Bailey stood in the pharmacy, trembling as he informed Mr. Gower he hadn't delivered the poisoned medicine capsules to Mrs. Blaine's house. Her chest tightened at the scene, like it always did. Mr. Gower didn't ask for forgiveness, yet George promised never to tell anyone what Mr. Gower had done. Well, in real life, things didn't always work out like in the movies. People should earn forgiveness, not expect it to be handed over.

Her conscience twinged. Her third-grade Sunday school teacher might have something to say about that. She shoved the thoughts away. Awaiting her at eight o'clock would be hundreds, maybe thousands, of documents she'd have to review. She'd finish the movie, but was she destined to be an old spinster like Mary Hatch? Gray-haired, lonely. Childless. And deserted by the man she loved?

DO YOU KNOW
WHAT I KNOW?



KIMBERLEY WOODHOUSE

This novella is lovingly dedicated to

Asheritah Ciuciu—

Beloved friend, author, prayer partner, and lover of words.

Thank you for your friendship.

Thank you for coffee mugs, crazy trips to airports in the wee hours, castle visits, brainstorming sessions, Bible study, laughter, and diving deep.

What a joy to have you in my life.

Thank you for living out your delight in Jesus each and every day.

I'm so grateful for you.

And to

Katia Rougeau

*I'll never forget the day we met. You were a young teen
coming for piano lessons.*

I was pregnant, and morning sickness had become my way of life.

For almost thirty-two years, you've been a part of our family.

I love you so much.

Here's to our Louisiana roots, girlfriend.

Laissez les bons temps rouler.

PROLOGUE



Los Angeles, California—August 6

GLANCING AROUND THE Crave Food Channel studio, Faith Thibodeaux took a long, calming inhale. The other contestants' hearts were surely pounding as hard as her own. No way anyone could be in a competition—and not just any competition, but one on television, no less—and not be nervous, excited, or about to throw up. In a few moments, the TV cameras would be on, and the countdown would begin for the next round.

Growing up in south Louisiana, she'd dreamed of becoming a chef. But no one could have prepared her for the tough reality of adulthood even if she attained her dream. Transplanting her life to Alaska and running a popular food truck had been born out of grief and betrayal, but it brought her joy. And now? The opportunity to be on TV with the shot of gaining her own show might bring about even more change. Was she ready for that? Where would life take her next?

She closed her eyes for a brief moment and tamped down her excitement. Comfort foods. Focus.

That was the upcoming round. Comfort foods. Something—as a Southerner—she could do in her sleep. Well, almost. But she could do it with one hand tied behind her back. Her biggest competition was the guy at the station next to her. Randy. Also from the Deep South, the guy could cook. All the contestants could, but the two

of them had been neck and neck in the previous round. One of the producers had even joked with them about how the best food on the show always came from people who either lived in the South or were trained there.

The director's voice cut through the hum in the room and cued them to get ready. With a hand in the air and a shout to all the crew and contestants, he looked down at his iPad.

"Here we go." Her whispered words were barely audible even to her own ears. *Lord, help me. Please. Let this be for Your glory and not my own.* Blowing out a whoosh of air, she wiped her sweaty palms on her apron just as the timer started.

The noise in the studio escalated as everyone scrambled to get each dish for their meal prepped and started. A mere foot separated each station side to side with only enough room for the camera crew in front of them. Having the cameras and competitors so close had taken some getting used to, but Faith kept breathing and praying her way through.

The hour deadline was tight, but she'd planned accordingly. Her comfort food choices were simple. Shrimp and grits with buttermilk biscuits.

The contestant who asked to be called Ruby—because she always wore ruby-red lipstick—smiled, then fluttered her eyelashes as she told the cameraman she was making meatloaf with mashed potatoes and gravy. Dressed like she was straight from a diner in the 1950s, she tilted her head as she plunged both gloved hands into a large bowl of ground beef. "I'm from Michigan and this was my grandparents' and my father's favorite comfort food." Her voice oozed so much charm it was like she'd rehearsed hundreds of times in front of the mirror. "So of course it's my favorite as well."

Faith focused back on her own tasks and forced herself not to get distracted. The niggling thought that she wouldn't sound so composed or capture the audience's attention made a lump form in her throat.

No. She wouldn't go there. Focus.

But then the next contestant was speaking. Trevor's voice was deep

and resonant. It echoed throughout the studio when the camera turned to him. “If I want comfort food, I go for steak and potatoes. Ribeyes to be exact and garlic-onion roasted potatoes.”

Her mouth watered. She couldn’t help it. She did love a good steak and potatoes.

With a mental shake of her head, she focused on the grits. Her stock, milk, and salt were coming to a boil. Perfect time to add the grits and allow them to simmer. When they had absorbed all the liquid, she’d add the sharp cheddar and let the flavors meld. She moved to another portion of her station to remove the heads from, peel, and devein the large Gulf shrimp.

Randy’s voice broke through the noise next. “Chicken and dumplings with buttermilk fried corn and biscuits.”

Faith winced. While it would be difficult to develop depth of flavor in his main dish in that short amount of time, the buttermilk fried corn could easily steal the show. It was one of her favorites. Hopefully her biscuits could hold their own against his. Every Southerner who loved to cook could throw down with biscuits.

Nope. Not gonna go there. It wouldn’t do her any good to compare or worry about what everyone else was doing. She needed to block everything out, keep her attention on her own meal, and make it the best she could.

The cameraman headed her direction. He grinned at her and wiggled his eyebrows. At least she had a bit of encouragement. He always came back for seconds of her food. She took that moment to wash her hands and then gave them a quick dry on her apron. With a sidestep to the right, she uncovered the grits and gave them a good stir, making sure nothing was sticking to the bottom of the pot. Her interview began, and she did her best to look up and smile once. The rest of the time, she gazed at her dishes and kept moving down her checklist as she explained her favorite comfort food. The other contestants had done a lot of pandering to the camera, lots of joking and smiling. But she’d learned after the first day of the competition that she couldn’t allow the camera and the show to distract her. She’d lost too much time in previous rounds. That would not happen today.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT I KNOW?

Next up was cooking the bacon and rendering down a bit of her favorite Cajun sausage. It added amazing flavor to her sauce for the shrimp. She'd sauté the veggies in the fat and then put it all together, throw in the shrimp for a quick cook, and it would be incredible. She literally had made this dish blindfolded for a fundraiser before.

Checking her list as the camera moved on, it was time to switch gears to the biscuit dough. She glanced at the clock. Perfect timing.

Everything was going off without a hitch. Praise God. Now, she just had to make it to the finish line.

Randy was mumbling all kinds of things in the station next to her. It sounded like he was in some kind of distress. She wanted to offer her help, but that wasn't allowed. In fact, the TV team had voiced over and over again that they preferred more of a competitive spirit. This was a competition after all, but she'd watched too many other shows where the participants tore each other down. She wasn't about to go there.

With a glance over at him, she frowned. The gas burner was cranked up too high under his pot of oil, in her opinion. When the corn hit that oil, it wouldn't be good. Especially since it had been soaked in buttermilk before being coated in the flour mixture.

Should she say something?

Right as she opened her mouth, Randy went over and checked the thermometer he'd attached to the side.

The cameraman shifted to him.

Randy smiled at the camera. "Perfect. I'll give the corn a quick fry when there are five minutes left."

If he wasn't worried about it, then she shouldn't either. Mention of the timer made Faith scurry to finish her own food. All she needed to do now was pull the fluffy biscuits from the oven in just a couple of minutes. Then she could plate up everything for the judges.

A smile lifted her lips. She'd done it. And as she tasted her dish, she couldn't help but let the smile broaden. It was the best she'd made. With a sigh, she relaxed her tense shoulders.

At the five-minute mark, Randy dumped the battered corn into the pot all at once—and the popping and sizzling at his station grew to a roar.

Oil and corn exploded as the pot overflowed like Mount Vesuvius.
Faith turned her face away and tried to duck—

Oh, God! Help me! The left side of her body screamed as the oil seeped through her clothes and burned her skin. Heat seared her arm as bright spots formed behind her eyelids and tears gushed out without her consent.

No.

This couldn't be happening!