

ZONDERVAN

*Leaving*

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*Leaving*

# One

GOODBYES WERE ONE OF THE HARDEST THINGS ABOUT LIFE . . . one way or another people were always leaving. Always moving on. That was the point the pastor was making, and Bailey Flanagan blinked back tears as she shifted in the pew beside her family. *Like Cody Coleman*, she told herself. *Always leaving.*

“Life changes. People come and go, and seasons never last.” Pastor Mark Atteberry’s voice rang with passionate emotion. “Nothing stays the same. We can count on that. Good times come and go . . . finances are ever changing . . . our health will eventually fail us. And through death or decision, everyone we know will someday leave us.” He paused, his eyes searching the congregation. “All except for Jesus Christ. Jesus will never leave you nor forsake you. And because of that we have the strength to love with all our hearts . . . even unaware of what tomorrow brings.” He smiled. “That’s what I want you to take away from today’s service. Jesus stays.”

Pastor Mark asked them to turn their Bibles to the book of Deuteronomy. Bailey did as she was told, but the rest of the sermon she struggled to stay focused. Cody hadn’t talked to her since that day on her parents’ porch, the day he tried to convince her it was finally and absolutely time to move on. Now, two months later, the pain and silence of the passing time was just about killing her.

When the hour was almost over, Bailey’s mom, Jenny, turned

to her. “Powerful message.” Her voice was barely a whisper, only loud enough for Bailey.

Bailey nodded and managed a slight smile. She’d tell her mom later how much her heart hurt, how Pastor Mark’s talk about goodbyes stirred up all the missing she’d ever felt for Cody. Never mind the days when she seemed over him, when she didn’t look for a text every hour or catch the phone ringing at night and hope it was him. Today, even with her mom and dad and five brothers seated along the pew beside her, there was no way around her feelings.

She missed Cody with every aching breath.

The service ended with a song Bailey loved — a Chris Tomlin song called “Our God” that always stirred her love for the Lord and her belief in His promises. She stood next to her mom and glanced down the row at her family. How great that they could be here together, worshipping and praising God, and sharing everything they believed. How amazing to celebrate Sundays with them always. She smiled, ignoring the sting of fresh tears in her eyes. Wasn’t that the point Pastor Mark was making? This picture of the Flanigan family wouldn’t last either. They were all growing up. And some Sunday not far down the road they’d be spread out to other churches, other places where they would begin their own lives.

Because only Jesus stayed.

But God in all His goodness still allowed moments like this, and no matter how far they might someday be from each other, they would hold tight to the memory of this: what it felt like to be a family who loved each other deeply and cared for the people around the dining room table like they were each other’s best friends. The sort of family other people only dreamed about.

Bailey closed her eyes and let the music fill her soul. “Our God is greater . . . our God is stronger . . . God you are higher than any other . . .”

The beauty of the moment mixed with the sweet sadness of losing Cody, of not knowing where he was or what he was doing. The idea seemed outrageous, really. He hadn't felt this far away when he was fighting in Iraq. Now he was only an hour away in Indianapolis, but it seemed like he'd fallen off the planet. At least that was where she assumed he was — the place he'd been the last time they saw each other.

Pastor Mark dismissed them, and Bailey felt her mother give her a side hug. "You were thinking about him." She pressed her cheek against Bailey's.

Bailey had nothing to hide where her mom was concerned. She looked straight at her. "How could I not?"

"We'll talk later."

"Okay." Bailey returned the hug and they moved into the aisle with the rest of the family. The knowing in her mother's eyes made Bailey grateful. Bailey kept no secrets from her mom and, because of that, they would always be close.

Anyway, the conversation would have to come later. Ashley Baxter Blake and her husband, Landon, had invited them over for dinner, which meant a house full of people. It was a Baxter family tradition, and at least once a month the Baxters invited Bailey's family too. The more people the better — that was Ashley's theory. She and Landon bought the old farmhouse from John Baxter, Ashley's father. Bailey was sure she saw a wistfulness in John's eyes whenever they gathered for dinner. A longing for days gone by maybe. Days that hadn't lasted any more than the ones now would last for the Flanigan family.

Bailey couldn't imagine raising a family for decades in a house and then coming back only as a visitor. But it was better than having strangers live in the place. Especially with all the memories that still lived between the walls and windows.

On the drive to the Baxter house, Bailey caught herself more aware than usual that even this — all eight of them traveling

somewhere after church — wouldn't last. She was almost twenty-one, after all, in her third year at Indiana University. She leaned against the car door and listened to her brothers' conversations around her. Connor was seventeen and closest to Bailey in age. This was his junior year, and he was about to begin his final football season as starting quarterback — throwing for more than 200 yards a game, the way Cody had taught him.

Connor was class president and debating themes for the Spring Fling dance — an annual costume event at Clear Creek High. "I'm thinking 'Meant to Be.'" Connor glanced back at his brothers Shawn and Justin — both sophomores — and BJ, a freshman. "I mean, I kinda like it. What do you think? 'Meant to Be.'"

"Meant to be what?" Justin frowned.

In the seat beside Bailey, the youngest Flanigan boy — tow-headed twelve-year-old Ricky — giggled. "Like, you come as Batman, but you tell everyone you *meant to be* Robin?"

A round of laughter filled the Suburban. Bailey chuckled to herself and gave Connor a helpless look. The younger boys had a point.

Connor flashed a patient, crooked grin. "Not like that." He waited until he had their attention again. "Meant to be, like Batman and Cat Woman — two characters who were meant to be together."

"Or maybe just sort of 'Meant to *Bee*.'" Ricky let loose another few delightful bouts of laughter. "Like a bumblebee. Then everyone could dress in yellow and black."

"Yeah, or maybe Meant to *B*." Shawn's laugh was always louder than the others. "You know ... the letter *B*. That way everyone could dress as something that started with a *B*."

"Okay ... you're all comedians." Connor gave a mock surrender. "I'll ask the leadership class."

From the front passenger seat, their mom looked over her shoulder. "I like it." Her smile was kind, her eyes thoughtful. "A

cowboy and a cowgirl ... a doctor and a nurse ... that sort of thing.”

“Yeah, only if Justin goes with Kayla, he’ll have to be the nurse.” Shawn was working to keep his laughter down, but he was losing the battle. “Because she’s a whiz kid at science. She wants to be a surgeon.”

The conversation soothed the rough edges of Bailey’s soul, helping her find perspective after an hour of being flooded with memories of Cody. This was her reality now. And though Pastor Mark was right — this season wouldn’t last — for now it was exactly where she wanted to be.

“Have you heard from Brandon?” Her dad caught Bailey’s attention in the rearview mirror. “Since they pulled the movie?”

“He texted me yesterday.” The memory warmed her heart. “He’s so different from the guy he used to be. His faith means everything to him.”

“And the media knows it.” He looked happy about the fact. “I’m proud of that young man. Very proud.”

Bailey’s mom angled herself so she could see Bailey. “His manager knows it, too. That’s why they shelved the movie, I’m sure.”

“Of course ... I agree, definitely.”

The boys still chattered about the upcoming dance, but the family could easily hold more than one conversation at a time. Bailey slid forward so her parents could hear her. “Brandon knows that’s the reason. Everyone loved us in *Unlocked*, but his manager doesn’t want Brandon to seem soft to the Hollywood crowd.”

“Casting him in a movie about a NASCAR driver will definitely keep that from happening.” Her dad raised his brow. “And Brandon’s doing his own stunts, is that true?”

“It is.” Bailey wasn’t happy about that part. “I’m still trying to talk him out of it.”

“Next time you two chat, tell him we said hi.” Her dad kept his eyes on the road. “I pray for him every day.” He caught her eye one more time. “The same way I pray for Cody.” He hesitated. “Which reminds me ... Matt Keagan asked about you the other day. He figured out you were my daughter about a week after the season ended. Every time he stops in the weight room he doesn’t let up.”

Bailey laughed under her breath. “That’s nice dad.” She shared a look with her mom. “Matt Keagan has a million girls in love with him. I’ll pass.”

“He is cute, though.” Her mom’s eyes twinkled — proof that she was only having fun.

“Of course he’s cute.” Bailey shook her head, enjoying the lighthearted silliness of the discussion. “He’s the strongest Christian in sports, he wears a wristband with Philippians 4:13 on it, and he takes mission trips to Ethiopia whenever he has a spare weekend. He’s perfect.” She laughed, and the feeling lifted her heart. “I heard he’s dating the daughter of a pastor in South Africa.”

“Last week everyone on Facebook and Twitter said Matt’s hanging out with a finalist from *Dancing with the Stars*.”

“Exactly.” Bailey laughed. An icon like Matt Keagan? The line of girls would be longer than ten football fields. “I’m not interested.”

The three of them fell quiet again, leaving just the boys’ conversation the rest of the way to the Baxter house. Bailey stared out the window. The countryside in Bloomington, Indiana, the rolling snow-covered hills, and the crisp, blue sky that spread out forever around them spoke peace to her soul. February brought a mix of weather, but always snow clung to the ground somewhere. This year more than most.

Bailey thought about her life and the guys God had brought across her path. The last year was so crazy amazing she almost felt



like the whole thing had happened to someone else. Brandon Paul — the nation’s most popular young actor — had singled her out to star in his blockbuster movie *Unlocked*. The film was set to release in April, but it was still being edited. Bailey had never worked harder, and in the end she was satisfied with her performance.

But Bailey’s was nothing to Brandon’s. He played a teenager whose beautiful soul was locked in a prison of autism. She played his friend, the girl who believed she could draw him out and find a way for God to work a miracle in his life. She couldn’t wait to see what critics would say about the movie, about Brandon’s stunning portrayal of Holden Harris. The story was riveting — just like the bestselling novel by the same name.

Brandon had done the story justice, for sure. But, along the way, God had given him more than a key performance for his resume. During the shoot Bailey had talked to Brandon about the Lord, and the Bible, and God’s plan for him. Last New Year’s Eve Brandon came to the Flanigan house and had prayed to ask Jesus into his heart. Later that night, Bailey’s dad even baptized Brandon in their Jacuzzi.

Never mind that Brandon had a crush on Bailey. She didn’t see him that way — not with his past and the throngs of girls screaming his name. Brandon was a friend, nothing more. But in the wake of filming *Unlocked*, talk had immediately turned to the two of them starring in a love story.

“The chemistry between you is too strong to stop with *Unlocked*,” the producer told them. He wanted to film this spring. But in late January the movie was shelved so Brandon could focus on a NASCAR story about a guy living fast and dangerously, a guy in conflict with his racecar driver father. The story was called *Chasing Sunsets*, and Brandon had already signed on to play the part.

Bailey had been offered roles in other films, but nothing she would take. Agents and producers in Hollywood didn’t

understand. She didn't want to move to LA and spend her days auditioning. She was two years from finishing her theater degree at IU. After that, she still dreamed about performing on Broadway in New York City. But no matter where she did or didn't act in the future her friendship with Brandon Paul would remain — she was sure of that.

She blinked, and lifted her eyes to the sky over Bloomington. The boys were talking about basketball, how Justin would be the fastest guard in the league.

“Cody Coleman was the fastest guy ever at Clear Creek High — football or hoops,” Ricky made the pronouncement proudly. “But Justin, you never know . . . maybe you'll be faster.”

Cody Coleman. The boys' voices faded as Bailey pictured Cody and the way he'd looked the last time they saw each other. She had just wrapped up the shoot with Brandon, and Cody seemed distracted. Different. Maybe the movie had something to do with his distance. Or maybe he pulled away because of Bailey's closeness with Brandon Paul. A quiet sigh slipped from her throat.

Brandon could never be Cody Coleman.

She heard the slightest buzzing sound from her purse and realized she still had her phone on mute from church. She dug around, but by the time she found it the call was gone. She pressed a button at the top of the phone and a number flashed across the screen — one she didn't recognize. The area code was 212. New York City.

*Strange*, she thought. Tim Reed was the only person she knew living in New York. But she had his number programmed into her contacts, so unless he used a different phone, the call couldn't be from him. She was still staring at the number when her phone flashed that a voicemail had come in. At the same time, her dad pulled into the Baxters' driveway. The place looked beautiful, surrounded by snow and barren trees. A thin ribbon of smoke came

from the chimney, and already six cars packed the area adjacent to the garage.

“I can smell the barbecue sauce from here.” Ricky took a long whiff as they stepped out of the SUV. “Best barbecue in Bloomington.” He grinned at the others, but then his expression changed sharply as he caught a teasing look from their mother. “Except for yours, of course. Second best. That’s what I meant to say.”

The air was cold against Bailey’s cheeks as they walked across the cleared sidewalk and into the house. For the next two hours the warmth from the fire and the Baxters was enough to keep Bailey distracted. They heard about Ashley’s paintings being discovered by a new gallery in New York City — one much larger than any gallery that had ever carried her work — and about how well the Baxter grandkids were doing in school and sports.

Bailey sat near her dad and keyed into a conversation between him and Ryan Taylor, the head football coach at Clear Creek High. Ryan was married to the oldest Baxter daughter, Kari. Until this school year, Cody had always been connected to Clear Creek High. Like Ricky said, he was the fastest football player there when he was a student and then, after returning from the war, he coached at Clear Creek.

Her dad and Ryan talked about how off-season training was going, and then Ryan set down his fork. “You hear much from Cody Coleman?”

A shadow fell over her father’s expression. “No.” He shook his head and wiped a napkin across his mouth. “Not for a couple months. I’m a little worried about him.”

For a few seconds Ryan didn’t say anything. “Rumor has it he’s going for the assistant job at Lyle — that small Christian school outside Indianapolis.”

Bailey felt her heart slide into a strange and unrecognizable rhythm. Cody was going for a job? Already? He still had another

year of school left, two if he wanted a teaching credential. She looked at the food on her plate, but she wasn't hungry.

"Hmm. I didn't know." Her dad's expression remained flat, his tone even. "Maybe that's better for him."

"I'm not sure. Cody needs accountability." Ryan squinted, his concern obvious. "Your family has always meant so much to that kid." He hesitated. "I don't like that he hasn't called. We should pray . . . that he isn't drinking again."

Bailey had to keep herself from blurting out that of course Cody wasn't drinking. He wouldn't go back to that, even if he never contacted them again. But she kept quiet.

It wasn't until later as they were headed home along the dark country roads, and the Suburban was quiet, that Bailey remembered her father's expression when Ryan Taylor brought up Cody's name. He almost looked angry, and suddenly in the silence of the ride she understood. Cody might be someone they all cared for, and he might have been a part of their family for many years. But now his silence hurt Bailey. It hurt all of them. And for that, her dad would only have so much patience.

Which explained the way her father teased about Matt Keagan. He was ready for Bailey to let go of Cody and get on with life. With someone more like her — someone like Matt.

Bailey stifled a quiet laugh. *Matt Keagan*. As if that were even a possibility . . .

Not until they were home and she and her mom were in the kitchen making hot tea did Bailey remember the phone call from the 212 area code and the message she still hadn't heard. "Hey . . ." She ran lightly to the other side of the kitchen bar where her purse hung on one of the stools. "I got a call from New York."

"New York?"

"Yeah." She dug around her purse again and after half a minute finally found her phone. "Listen." She pushed a few buttons and put the phone on speaker so they could both hear.

“Hello, this is Francesca Tilly, producer for the Broadway production of *Hairspray*. I was given your name by a friend of mine, a producer with the show *Wicked*.” The woman’s Italian accent was thick. She talked very fast and sounded quite serious. “We’ve lost members of our cast for various reasons, so we’ll host a limited audition in three weeks. We know about your role in the Brandon Paul film, and we’d like you to attend.” Another pause.

*What in the world* Bailey locked eyes with her mom. She covered her mouth with her hand and kept listening.

“I apologize for calling you on a Sunday, but our schedule is crazy tomorrow. If you’re interested, contact me at my office number. You’ll be given details then. Thank you for your time. I hope to hear from you.”

The woman left her number twice, and the message came to an end. Bailey set her phone down and let out a brief scream. “Did you hear that?”

Her mom grinned big. “I knew it ...” She laughed out loud and reached for Bailey’s hands. “I knew someone would notice you after your last audition.”

Bailey danced her way closer and took hold of her mom’s fingers. “Can you believe it? *Hairspray*?” She screamed again. “That’s my all-time favorite show! And they want me to audition!!”

“What’s the commotion?” Her dad had been in the garage. He looked happy, but bewildered as he came closer. “Whatever it is, you’re sure smiling big.” He came to her and kissed the top of her head. “So I’m sure I’ll like it too.”

“I’m going back to New York!” Bailey’s heart was still grasping the reality of the voicemail. “This producer wants me to audition for *Hairspray*! Isn’t that the craziest thing?”

He smiled as he searched her eyes. “That surprises you?”

“Yes!” She squealed, dancing in place. “Of course it surprises me. I can’t believe I’m still standing!”

They laughed and for the next half hour they talked about the

songs Bailey could sing for the audition, and how she was more prepared now, and the fact that her dance lessons would definitely pay off because she was a better dancer than before.

Bailey thought about something Francesca Tilly had said on the message and for a moment her happiness dropped off. “You don’t think they only want me because of my role in *Unlocked*, do you?”

“Of course not.” Her mom’s answer was quick, her tone convincing. “You have to be more than well known to survive on Broadway.” She smiled. “They called you because of your skills, honey.”

She nodded slowly. “I hope so.” The last thing she would want was a role handed to her because of her visibility. On Broadway a person needed to earn their place — it was that simple. They talked more about the logistics of what lay ahead, and what the producers would look for during the upcoming audition. Bailey was exhausted in every possible way by the time she went to bed, and even then she wasn’t sure she could ever find her way to sleep. She thought about Cody and how tomorrow was Valentine’s Day. Not only would she go another February fourteenth alone, but he wasn’t even part of her life to share in the excitement that had just happened. She rolled onto her side and stared at the moonlight splashed across the wall.

She was going back to New York for another audition! She’d asked God for this every day since her last one, when the producers of *Wicked* had cut her and offered her former boyfriend Tim Reed a part in the show. Now . . . now it was finally her turn to show a different set of producers she had what it took to win a part.

She breathed out. *Calm down, Bailey . . . you need sleep.* She smiled in the darkness but as she did, she remembered Pastor Mark’s message from earlier. *Everyone says goodbye eventually . . . people come and go . . . nothing stays except for Jesus.* And sud-

denly amidst her very great joy came a flash of sadness. Grief, almost. Because if God allowed this, she might actually win a part on Broadway. All of which would mean one very certain thing. Despite everything she loved about Bloomington and her family and her classes at IU, this wouldn't be a time to think about Brandon Paul or to meet Matt Keagan or to wonder about Cody.

It would be her time to leave.

# Two

CODY STEPPED INSIDE HIS APARTMENT, FLIPPED ON A LIGHT, AND stomped the ice off his boots. His first real job interview was in two hours. He peeled off his jacket, dropped it over the back of the sofa, and headed to his room. His roommate wasn't home, which was just as well. He had too much on his mind to talk about any of it. Life had become a snowy, busy blur of routine, and for the most part Cody was comfortable in it. Better not to think about the passing of time or how every day put another calendar square between him and Bailey Flanigan. He took a full load of classes and worked a few times each week on his forty-page senior project titled "The Effects of Motor Skill Improvement on a Student's Ability to Learn." Cody loved the research. So far the evidence was compelling — the more active a child, the better he or she performed on academic tests. Sort of obvious, really.

Everything took time, and then on weekends he visited his mom in prison. Her current sentence had three more years, at least. Drug dealing penalties got worse with each conviction. His mother could attest to that. They would talk and pray and she would hold his hands — really hold them — like she might not survive after he let go and left the room. But he always left. He had no choice.

To fill the empty spaces, a couple times a month Cody had dinner at the house of his old war buddy Art Collins. Art didn't make it home from Iraq, and for the last year Art's mother, Tara, had taken to hosting Sunday dinners for her son's Army buddies.



“I own me a special place in my heart for you, Cody Coleman,” she told him whenever he stopped by. “God’s got Himself good plans for you, young man. You got any doubts, we’ll talk about it, you hear? I’ll change your mind!”

Tara was long on conversation and hospitality — her food rich and warm and homemade. Creamy sauces, soft fresh bread, and any number of cuts of beef. The woman was African American, with a hearty laugh and a loud voice, and her small house smelled of spices and laundry detergent. But, even so, she reminded Cody of Bailey’s mom, Jenny. Tara Collins filled a broken place in Cody’s heart. She helped him walk through the weekends without breaking down and calling Bailey.

Once in a while Tara invited Cheyenne Williams — the pretty girl who had once been engaged to Art. Cody had no delusions about Tara’s intentions where Cheyenne was concerned. Tara was trying to set them up. But Cody kept his distance. Other than an occasional text message, he didn’t talk to Cheyenne outside Tara’s house. He had no intention of doing so. Bailey had taken his heart a long time ago — no matter how he tried to convince himself otherwise.

Combined, his schedule left his heart little room for feeling or missing or wondering what might have been if he hadn’t let stubborn pride stand in the way when he saw Bailey outside his mother’s prison last New Year’s Day. He’d watched her pull away without showing himself, without saying a word. Never mind that she was like a drug, an addiction he couldn’t overcome. He saw her face in his dreams and heard her voice in a crowded room. Even when she might as well have been a million miles away, Bailey was there.

Always she was there.

He stopped on the way to his room. There on the wall was a photograph he couldn’t just walk past, a picture he stopped and looked at every day without fail. In it, he was twenty, maybe

twenty-one, at Lake Monroe surrounded by the Flanigans. All of them. Jenny and Jim, and their six kids. The five boys — Connor, Shawn, Justin, BJ, and Ricky. And there beside him, her eyes bright from the light inside her, stood Bailey. The photo drew him in, made him feel even for a minute that he was there again. The Indiana sunshine on his shoulders, a football tucked under his arm, the family he loved around him . . . and Bailey.

Breathing the same air as him.

A draft from the nearby window sent a chill down his arms. He blinked and the warmth of that summer day faded. The interview. He had to focus on the interview. He pulled off the thermal he'd worn to class that morning and slipped into a white T-shirt. A smile tugged at his lips. Okay, maybe not the biggest job interview ever. But the biggest interview he'd had so far. A school forty minutes east of Indianapolis needed a PE teacher and an assistant football coach. He had a pizza delivery job most nights and weekends, but it didn't pay much. The interview at Lyle High School was at least a step in the right direction.

One of his professors at IU had told him about the position. "They'll grant you an emergency credential," the man told him. "It's a small school. But since this is your career field, I think you should at least talk to the principal."

The professor made arrangements for the interview and Cody stopped by the registrar's office early this morning. If he was given the job, he could switch his two morning classes to the evening, and since his others were already at night, he would be free to take the job. He was set to graduate from IU this May, and after that he would take an accelerated course of classes to earn his master's degree in education. The fit was perfect.

Cody peered into his cramped closet. He owned two dress shirts — a solid white and a pale blue. He chose the white one. It was a little wrinkled and maybe a shade grayer than a year ago. But it was the best he had, and it would do for today. He slipped

it on, buttoned it up, grabbed a blue tie, and perfectly knotted it in place. After living with the Flanigans, he would never struggle with a tie. Bailey's father, Jim, had seen to that.

Snow was forecast for later that day, but for now his old pickup could get him forty-five minutes east for the interview. Getting home might be another matter. He grabbed his portfolio — a few copies of his resume and some newspaper clippings from Clear Creek High football, the team he'd helped coach in Bloomington. He was meeting with the principal, and then the athletic director and football coach. Might as well bring everything he had to convince them.

The drive took longer than he thought. Or maybe it only seemed that way because every radio station was playing another love song. Halfway there the reason finally hit him: It was Valentine's Day. Of course they were playing love songs. He narrowed his eyes against the glare of the setting sun on the snow-covered fields. So what was he doing driving to an interview halfway to Ohio? Bailey loved her, right? That's what she had told him outside her parents' house the last time they talked, right. He exhaled hard. Why was he so stubborn?

He clenched his jaw and kept his attention on the road. The reason hadn't changed. Bailey Flanigan settling for a guy whose only family was a frail, sad woman doing time for dealing drugs? Risking the possibility that the paparazzi would figure out the details and drag both their names through the mud? And there were other reasons. For the last six months he'd lived with the threat from his mom's abusive drug supplier. The man said he'd kill Cody or anyone Cody was with if his mom turned him in — which she did. Until the guy was caught recently, Cody's life was like some crazy crime movie. Cody wouldn't expose Bailey to that no matter how he felt about her.

*God, I can't mix my life with hers . . . You know that. He tightened his grip on the wheel. But I can't get her out of my heart,*

*either. Help me move on. You can see how I am. I can't leave her behind without Your help.*

A response came then, brushing like a whisper against his soul: *Son . . . I have loved you with an everlasting love . . . commit your plans to me and they will succeed.*

Cody relaxed back into his seat. *Is that You, God?* He waited, but nothing . . . no more whispers. The verse was something his mom had shared with him last weekend. She was in Bible studies just about every day. “It’s the only way I stay sane,” she told him. “After what I’ve done to you . . . to my chances at ever being a real mom.”

“You’ll always be my mom.” He took her hands in his. “We’ll get through this.”

She blinked back tears, but she agreed. And that’s when she gave him a slip of paper. Scribbled on it was Proverbs 16:3. *Commit your plans to the Lord and they will succeed.* But why would God bring that to mind now? Was it about the plans he had for teaching at Lyle? Was that why the Spirit would whisper the verse to him here? That must be it. This was a big interview, after all. So maybe God didn’t want him thinking about Bailey but about the task ahead of him: winning the job.

He switched the radio station. Sports talk. That’s what he needed. Get his mind off Bailey. Focus on something left-brained: The Lakers or the Heat — which team was stronger heading into the NBA All-Star weekend. Pro baseball’s spring training. Who was moving up in the ratings for April’s NFL draft.

Anything but Bailey.

The trick worked, and for the next thirty minutes he listened to a host take callers either raving about or tearing apart LeBron James. Cody exited off the main highway and took a two-lane country road through ten miles of farmland. Barren corn and soybean fields and orchards of empty-armed apple trees. Endless ranches and herds of cattle as far as he could see. The longer he

drove the more he figured he was lost. Maybe he missed a turn off. What sort of school could be this far out in the sticks? He was about to pull over and check his MapQuest directions, when up ahead he saw a cluster of homes and small buildings — the tallest, a red brick church with a white steeple that pierced the cloudy sky.

As he approached, a sign came into view: “Welcome to Lyle, Home of the Buckaroos.” The next one made him smile: “25 M.P.H. Thank you kindly for observing our speed limit.” Polite people. Cody liked that. He slowed his pickup and looked for signs of life. A weathered, oversized American flag fanned in the breeze from the corner of a low-slung nineteenth century trading post-type building — Al’s Hardware, according to the sign. Two guys in overalls sat on a bench outside the front door. Waiting for customers, no doubt.

A gas station with rusted pumps, Ali’s Coffee Can, Shirley’s Curl and Cut ... Cody felt like he was driving through a movie set. Small-town America. Up ahead a slightly tattered banner stretched across Main Street: *World Famous Lyle Rodeo*. The rodeo was the only reason Cody had ever heard of the little town. Same as most anyone in Indiana. A few of Cody’s buddies from Clear Creek High made a trek of it every year, last weekend in June. One of them even competed. Saddle broncs. Crazy stuff.

Suddenly an image flashed in his mind. An Iraqi interrogation room. A view through the bars of a four-foot cage. Shouting, and slamming doors, and the butt of a rifle ramming him into a corner. The face of an Iraqi soldier opening the cage and ...

Cody blinked and the images disappeared. He pulled over to the side of the road and hung his head. His heart pounded, and his breaths came in shaky short gasps. A layer of perspiration beaded up across his forehead and on his forearms. He hated this, the way images from war took over his mind without warning. Especially lately. *I can’t do this, God. Make them go away. That time in my life is over. Please ... make it stop.*

Gradually, a peace that passed understanding put its arms around his shoulders and he felt his body relax, felt his breathing and heart rate return to normal. *Thank You . . . thank You, Lord. I feel You here.* He drew a slow deep breath.

Okay, maybe riding broncs wasn't the craziest thing.

He wiped the back of his hand over his forehead. Twenty minutes until his interview, but he might as well get to the school. Three blocks east and another north and there it was. Square in the middle of another massive field, surrounded by maple trees — a two-story brick structure with an old-fashioned marquis out front announcing: *Cake Walk and Carnival, February 19.*

Cody drove around back and there was the football field: Barely a hundred yards of snow and grass with a few rickety wooden bleachers. Weeds poked their way up through the asphalt track that bordered the end zone. In the distance, against a darkening sky, an army green water tank boasted the obvious. *Lyle Buckaroos — Class of '11* painted in blue on one side.

Another survey of the field.

The stands would hold maybe a hundred people. This couldn't be where they played their varsity games, right? He checked his watch. Ten minutes until the interview. He drove around to the front of the school and pulled the folded piece of paper from his pocket, the one his mom had given him. *Commit your plans to the Lord and they will succeed.* He had long since memorized it, but somehow reading it in his mom's handwriting made him feel more normal. Like his mom was waiting at home making dinner, encouraging him. Cheering him on.

"Here goes," he whispered. Once more he folded the piece of paper and returned it to his pocket. He shut and locked the door, straightened his tie, and made his way inside the school.

Three women were talking over one computer when he walked in the room. They stopped and looked at him. "Hello." The youngest of the ladies took a step closer. "Can I help you?"

“Yes.” He stood a little taller. “I’m Cody Coleman. I’m here to meet Ms. Baker.”

The woman smiled. “That’s me.” She glanced at the clock on the wall. “You’re early.” Her eyes were kind as she shook his hand. “I like that.” She motioned for him to follow her, and he did. They went through the workspace to a private office at the back corner. She left the door open, took the seat behind the desk, and offered him the one on the other side.

“You come highly recommended by your professor.” Ms. Baker picked up a portfolio on her desk and thumbed through it. “I’m impressed, Mr. Coleman.”

*Mr. Coleman . . . so old-sounding.* Cody swallowed his nerves. “Thank you, ma’am.”

She leaned back, relaxed. No way she was a day over thirty. “Tell me about yourself. Why do you want to teach at Lyle?”

“I was an athlete in high school.” He talked easily about his time at Clear Creek and his service in Iraq. Then he shifted in his seat and searched for the right words. “To be honest, I didn’t know about the opening at Lyle until this week. I want to teach because . . . because the people who’ve made the most impact in my life have been teachers. Coaches.” He paused, and he could hear Jim Flanigan’s voice. *You can do anything, Cody . . . God has great plans for you. Never let anything stop you from your dreams . . .*

He looked at Ms. Baker. “I was nearly killed in Iraq, ma’am. With this second chance, I want to make a difference. The way a few teachers and coaches made a difference for me.”

She nodded slowly. “I respect that.” Another glance through the folder in her hands. “You’re aware you would be taking this position on an emergency credential basis.” Her eyes lifted to his. “It’s a temporary position, Mr. Coleman. We couldn’t offer you a full-time job until you complete the credentialing process — after you graduate.”

“I understand.”

The interview lasted another fifteen minutes while they talked about teaching styles and the importance of hard work and family and faith to the kids of Lyle. "It's a public school, yes. But this is a community that lives and dies by the success of the crops that surround us. The people of Lyle understand hard work and they're early to church every Sunday."

"Yes, ma'am." Cody felt the light in his eyes. "I can relate."

Ms. Baker's expression softened. "I thought so."

A few more minutes and the principal led Cody to the school's gym. Inside, a class of maybe thirty guys was counting off jumping jacks while the coach barked out orders. "Faster! Louder! Come on guys. This is February. Champions are made in the off-season!"

Cody wondered if he'd like the man. Some coaches could yell and still get their point across, still show love and concern for their players. Others were mostly a lot of hot air. They stepped inside, and Ms. Baker waited until the coach spotted her. He blew his whistle. "Take five. Get some water. We'll try it again after that." The man's scowl remained as he walked over. "Ms. Baker," he nodded, terse, serious.

"Coach Oliver, this is Cody Coleman. The candidate sent over by the university."

"Right." The man gave Cody a quick once-over. "The kid on the emergency credential."

A slight look of irritation came over Ms. Baker's face, but only for a moment. "I'm prepared to offer him the position if he'll take it." Her approval of Cody was clear. "But he'll be your assistant. I'd like the two of you to talk for a few minutes, and then include Mr. Coleman in your practice this afternoon. So he can know if he'd like to be a part of our program."

"Got it." Coach Oliver's surly attitude remained. "Thank you, Ms. Baker."



She nodded and smiled again at Cody. "Talk to me before you leave. I'll be in my office."

"Yes, ma'am." Cody wasn't sure what was going on, but clearly there was tension between the coach and principal. It was easy to pick sides.

Ms. Baker left and Coach Oliver stared at him. "Notice she didn't say, 'Winning program.'" He sneered. "I've been coaching here for two years, and we haven't won a game." He took a step closer. "Know why?"

"No, sir." Cody crossed his arms.

"Because of Coach John Brown."

Cody could imagine how baffled he must've looked. "I'm ... sorry, coach. I don't know John Brown."

The man raised his eyebrows. "I thought you were from Bloomington."

"Yes, sir."

"Boy ... everyone in the state knows John Brown. He's a legend. Won a state title with Lyle for the 1A division six years in a row." He tossed his hand. "Retired two years ago when the talent dried up." He lowered his voice and leaned closer. "Even John Brown couldn't make a winning season out of this sorry group a' kids."

Cody nodded. He glanced at the guys, huddled in clusters around the drinking fountain. A couple of them were big — six-four, six-five maybe. Nothing about the group looked especially inept.

"Sure." The coach shrugged. "I need an assistant. I need an offense and a defense, for that matter. You can at least help me coach. Give the parents someone else to be angry at."

Cody crossed his arms. If this was Coach Oliver's sales pitch for Lyle, it was falling flat. He nodded absently, not sure if he was supposed to respond.

Without warning, the man turned to the kids and blew his whistle. "Time's up. Back in formation."

*Interview over*, Cody thought. He could already picture himself telling Ms. Baker no thanks. He didn't want to drive out here every day, and he had no desire to take heat from parents because of the defeated mind-set of Coach Oliver. A few minutes later — when the coach was finished with calisthenics — he led the team outside to the bitter cold field. Cody didn't want to be rude, so he followed.

The temperature had dropped and the clouds were dark and building fast. Forget a light snowfall . . . a blizzard was about to break loose. Cody anchored himself on the sidelines and watched. The outdoor practice was more of the same: Coach Oliver barking and snapping while the kids walked through a series of passing drills. By the time the coach blew the whistle for the last time, Cody was ready to chock up the entire afternoon to nothing more than experience. A lesson in what he didn't want to do and where he didn't want to work.

"There you go, kid." The coach shrugged again. "Take it or leave it. That's Lyle." He walked off with his clipboard and whistle before Cody could respond.

*That's that*, he thought. He was about to find Ms. Baker and decline the offer when he spotted a player headed toward the opposite end zone. The guy stopped at the forty-yard line — or what looked like roughly the forty. He froze in a receiver's ready position and sprinted across the field. Once he crossed into the end zone, he turned around, jogged to the other forty, and did the same sort of sprint across that part of the field.

A couple stragglers stopped and one of them shouted. "Smitty, you're crazy! Ain't no runnin' gonna help you catch the ball." The player was a short redhead. He laughed out loud. "You don't get it."

His buddy chuckled too, and then both of them walked to the

locker room. As they passed Cody, they gave him a curious look and a distant kind of nod. The kind players might give each other when they want to look tough.

“Gentlemen,” Cody said. He made eye contact with the guys, but only for a moment. Then he turned his attention back to the kid on the field. The player was running another sixty-yard burst, and this time when he reached the end zone he dropped to one knee. He planted his elbow on the other and bowed his head.

Cody narrowed his eyes. Who was the kid, and why was he on the freezing wet ground? He watched as the guy stayed there for a minute, stood and jogged back toward the building, toward Cody. He was about to pass when he slowed up and squinted. “You the new assistant?”

“Uh ...” A strange guilt flooded Cody’s heart. He hesitated. “I’m ... I’m thinking about it.” A second or two passed, but Cody didn’t want the kid to leave. Not yet. He nodded to the field. “You do that ... after every practice?”

“Yes, sir.” The kid crossed his arms. He was black, maybe an inch shorter than Cody, with arms that proved time in the weight room. Something about him reminded Cody of himself, the way he might’ve been in high school if he’d had the grasp of faith he had now. The player stared at the end zone. “I’m dedicating the season to God. Every game ... every drive. Every play. Every practice. Trusting God for what’s ahead.”

Compassion for the kid came over Cody. He nodded slowly. “You were praying?”

“Yes, sir.” He let loose a lighthearted laugh and gave a shake of his head. “I’m a junior. If you know anything about Lyle, we need a lot of prayer.”

“I hear.” Cody liked the kid. His leadership and determination. The way he didn’t care about his teammates laughing at him. “What’s your name?”

“DeMetri Smith.” He smiled. “Guys call me Smitty.”

“Coach Coleman.” Cody reached out and shook DeMetri’s hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.” DeMetri grinned, gave a quick wave and jogged off.

He wasn’t too far away when Cody called after him, “DeMetri.”

The player stopped and turned. “Sir?”

“What were you praying for today?”

DeMetri’s smile filled his face. “You’re here because of the job, right?”

“Yes.” Cody paused, but only briefly. “Yes, I am.”

“Then that’s easy.” He started jogging again, his eyes still on Cody. “I was praying for you.” One last grin and he turned and finished the trek to the locker room.

Cody stood there, unable to move. In a moment’s time, he remembered a message from one of the Campus Crusade meetings. The group leader had talked about service to Christ and the purpose of life. The guy’s voice rang in Cody’s mind again: *God never said life would be easy. The purpose in living isn’t about our personal happiness . . . it’s about serving God. When it comes to our relationship with the Creator, we should always . . . always have our yes on the table. If God asks us to do something, we do it. Our yes is a given.*

If Cody had wondered whether God was calling him to Lyle High, he had no doubts now. None whatsoever. DeMetri Smith had given him all the answer he needed. He began the walk to Ms. Baker’s office. Now he would give the principal the answer she needed. Cody would take the job.

His yes was on the table.

He signed papers and promised to start the following day teaching five PE classes and helping out with the Lyle football program. Twenty minutes later Cody was ten miles into the drive home when snow began to fall. It didn’t flutter slowly or take its time deciding whether it meant business. The clouds simply opened up and dumped. Cody slowed and focused on the road.

His lights were on, but they did little to shed visibility on the road ahead.

He drove that way — not more than twenty miles an hour — until the storm let up. The whole way, he couldn't help but think of Bailey: what she was doing right now on Valentine's Day, what her family was doing, and whether she ever thought about him. The storm was a lot like his life. He could focus all his attention on the road, stare through the blizzard as intently as possible, but that didn't mean he could see what was ahead. No, the future was as much a whiteout as the afternoon. He — like DeMetri Smith — had to trust God for what lay ahead. With the drive home. With Lyle High. And with Bailey Flanigan.

With Bailey most of all.