

RYAN'S CROSSING



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My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.

For the Lord gives wisdom, and from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.

Proverbs 2:1-6

CHAPTER 1



THE BLACK MUSTANG ROARED INTO TOWN, its small block 302 engine disturbing the peaceful January afternoon in Crossing, Oregon. Ryan Griffin looked out the windshield, taking in the picket fences. *Just another small Oregon town*, he thought.

Slowing as he entered the square, he looked for Micah's Hardware where he was supposed to meet his parents. As he parked in front of the blue, two-story building, he turned off the engine and sat quiet for a minute. *Rachel*, he thought. *After ten years, they actually found my sister.*

He opened his door and stepped out as a sheriff's truck pulled up behind him. A uniformed man got out, looking him and the Fastback over.

"Nice ride," the sheriff said.

"Thanks," said Ryan, taking in the neat uniform that wasn't starched and pressed to crisp seams. *Professional, but still casual.*

"What year?"

“Sixty-eight.”

“Working on restoring it?”

“Yeah.”

“Didn’t sound completely stock as you drove down McKillican Street back there.” The sheriff turned from inspecting the car to look directly at Ryan, his breath clearly visible in the chilly air.

“No, sir. I’ve upgraded it a bit here and there.”

The sheriff dipped his head a little. “As long as the upgrades keep within the legal speed limits, you’ll have no problem with me.”

Ryan nodded his dark head at the sheriff. “Yes, sir.”

The sheriff walked back around to his truck door and took one more look at Ryan’s car. “Really like that red pin striping down the side. Nice choice.”

“Thanks.”

Ryan watched the sheriff drive away before turning to Micah’s. He squared his shoulders and mentally prepared himself to greet his dad. *It’s only for a week*, he thought.

Just as he took his first steps toward the store, his younger brother Keith burst through the doors.

“Ryan!”

Ryan smiled. “Hey!”

Keith slammed into him, embracing him in a hug. *He’s done some growing since I last saw him*. Keith now stood almost even with Ryan’s five foot, nine inch height, although the skinniness of youth still encompassed his rib cage.

“Can we not wait six months between visits?” said Keith. “I missed you at Christmas!”

"I know," said Ryan. "It was really busy at work. I ended up working most of December."

"Come on, Mom's excited to see you!"

Keith led Ryan up the three steps and through the front door. Aisles of tools angled to lead people to the front counter lined the old wood floor. An older man was unpacking saw blades near the cash register.

"Hey, Mr. Micah! This is my brother, Ryan."

Micah looked up from the box. "So I see."

"Mom!" said Keith. "Mom, he's here!"

"You yell a bit louder there, boy, and I suspect Hood Village'll hear ya right good," said Micah.

Ryan stopped to look at the gruff man, his paramedic brain assessing Micah before considering the man's demeanor. *Tall, maybe 6 feet. Probably just barely 140 pounds. Older, maybe 65. Reminds me a lot of Clint Eastwood.*

"Ryan!" said his mom as she came from the back of the store. She gave him a hug, going up on her tiptoes so her chin fit comfortably over his shoulder.

"Hey, Mom. You look good." *She's put on a little weight! She's not all skin and bones any more.*

"Thanks."

Her smile took in her whole face, which had a bit more color than he remembered, and her short brown hair bounced. *Finding Rachel has been good for her.*

"I can't wait for you to see Amber!" said Keith. "She's really cool. And she remembers that old tire swing we found!"

"Amber?" said Ryan.

"Yes, your sister goes by Amber now," said his

mother. "I think bad memories made her switch to her middle name, but Peter is changing all that."

"Her fiancé, right?" said Ryan.

"Wait 'til you meet him!" said Keith. "He's really great with wood. He's going to teach me some. He knows all about the trees and stuff. Can tell you just about anything you want to know about the forest."

"You always this spastic around your brother, boy?" said Micah.

"Sorry," said Keith. "It's just there's so much to tell him!"

"No sense overwhelmin' him all at once. You'll scare him out of town just so's he can get a moment's peace! Now get on wit' ya. You still got work to do."

Ryan raised his eyebrows at Micah's treatment of Keith. His mother laid a hand on his arm.

"Don't mind him," she said softly. "He's all grizzly bear on the outside, but in truth, your brother has brought some life back into him. He just lost his wife last summer, and Allie says he was really struggling. They were married over forty years."

Ryan just nodded his head like he understood. "Allie?"

"His daughter-in-law," said Victoria. "She works just on the other side of the square and stops over almost every day to check on him."

"Dedicated girl," said Ryan. *Or controlling*, he thought.

"Come on," said Victoria. "Let's leave these men to their work. Would you like to wait for your dad or go meet Amber? I believe she's still in town."

"Where is Dad?" said Ryan.

"He's over at the newspaper sending off a couple stories. We're staying upstairs for now, and Micah doesn't have Internet access here."

His dad's ability to write from anywhere made chasing his daughter these last several years possible. As long as he made his deadlines with quality stories, editors from the various publications were happy to send the check to whatever location he dictated.

"If Dad's working, then don't bother him."

"Alright. Then let's go meet your sister. I think she said she'd be working with Allie all afternoon." Victoria walked to the back and grabbed her coat off a peg, swinging it around her shoulders. "We're going to see Amber, Micah."

"Don't you go fallin' on no ice patches," said Micah as he cut through the tape on the bottom of the box and laid it flat.

"I'll be careful," said Victoria with a tolerant smile.

Ryan held the door open for her then offered his arm as they walked down the block.

"She's just down here at the law office," said Victoria.

Ryan was shocked. "She's a lawyer?"

"No. You see, the town lawyer is Andy, Micah's son. And his wife, Allie, is the town accountant. Amber is thinking about going back to school, but in the meantime is taking some lessons from Allie so she can help out more at the logging office."

Ryan shook his head. "Town lawyer, son of town hardware store owner, married to town accountant

teaching my sister how to take over at the town logging office? You really know a lot about these people.”

Victoria laughed. “I suppose it does sound that way. Crossing is a small town, and most of these people have lived here their whole lives. Once you are accepted by one of them, the rest just kind of adopt you.”

“You’ve been adopted?”

“Yes, I suppose we have. Oh, Ryan, this town. These people.” She moved in closer to Ryan as a breeze swirled around them. “They are just incredible. Like a family. I cannot tell you what a blessing it is to live here among them in the Cascade Mountains.”

Ryan didn’t quite catch his Mom’s enthusiasm. “Live here? So you’re moving here now?” He looked around, raising his eyebrows at the old architecture in the town square. *They all seemed to be well maintained, but the newest building has to be circa 1950s.*

“Yes. We’re still working out all the details, but Micah’s letting us live above the store until we figure it all out. It’s not much right now because Micah’s been using the upstairs for storage for many years. But we’re getting it cleaned out.”

Ryan wasn’t sure what to say. *They are moving again. Maybe if Rachel’s here, it will be permanent this time. Wonder how long until Dad expects me to move here too?*

“Micah actually owns an old log cabin just outside of town that we may purchase from him. It needs some work—they stopped using it a couple years before his wife died. The walls are solid. It’s not that big, but

Keith is getting older. We won't need much after he moves out."

"Sounds like you've already decided."

"Perhaps." Victoria stopped outside a two-story frame building with a picture window in front. "Well, here we are," said Victoria, looking up with anticipation in her face. "Are you ready?"

"I guess." *Here goes nothing.*

CHAPTER 2



*R*YAN HELD THE DOOR OPEN FOR HIS MOM and then stepped in behind her. The small office included a receptionist's desk with a woman sitting behind it studying something on her computer screen. The room was also furnished with four chairs that lined the walls, and a small table with a coffee pot and a few mugs. Stairs tucked away in one corner of the office led to the second floor, and two open doors were before him, one to Ryan's left beside the receptionist's desk and the other slightly to his right. As the door closed behind him, a brown and white Australian shepherd came to stand in the doorway to his right.

"Hello, Rose," said Victoria to the woman at the desk. "How are you this Thursday afternoon?"

Ryan watched the hair on the dog's brown back raise slightly.

"Doing good. I'm just taking care of a few of the year-end things. Must get some of these older things filed away so I can make room for this year."

"Of course. Is Amber here? I thought I saw the Yagers' drop her off earlier."

A young woman came up behind the dog. "Mom?"

Short and skinny, five feet, two inches. 110-115 pounds. Mid-twenties...Rachel? Ryan paused in his assessment to look at the woman his sister had become. Her long, dark hair fashionably layered to frame her face, rich chocolate eyes full of life. *Wow.*

"Ryan?" said Amber. Her eyes seemed to be watering slightly, but she hung back with the dog.

"Guilty," said Ryan. *Now what? Is she waiting on me to make the first move?*

"Sass," said Amber, looking down at the dog beside her and laying her hand on top of the dog's head. "Friend, girl." The dog immediately sat, although Ryan noticed it didn't take its eyes off of him.

Amber crossed to where they were standing. She seemed unsure of herself, and Ryan wasn't sure what to do, either.

"It's good to see you," said Amber.

"Yeah," said Ryan. "You too."

A trim, curly-haired blonde woman just a couple inches taller than Amber appeared in the doorway near the dog.

"Hello, Allie," said Victoria. "Our son Ryan is finally here!"

"Hi, Mrs. Griffin." Allie walked forward to join the group near the reception desk. She held her hand out to Ryan. "It's nice to meet you."

Ryan returned the firm handshake. "Thanks."

Amber looked up at Ryan. "You grew tall!"

“You didn’t,” said Ryan.

“Thanks.” She smiled at him, shaking her head just a bit. “When’d you get into town?”

“About thirty minutes ago.”

“Still getting your bearings, huh?” Amber looked at her mom. “Do you guys have any plans for dinner yet?”

“No,” said Victoria. “Your dad is filing a couple stories, so he doesn’t even know Ryan’s here yet.”

“Okay. Well, you know, Mom, that Faye will want all of you over for dinner. She can’t wait to meet Ryan.”

“Who’s Faye?” said Ryan.

“Peter’s mother,” said Victoria.

Amber smiled at her brother. “She loves a party. And frequently uses any excuse she can think of to cook for an army and have people over to eat it. If you guys don’t come over tonight, then she’ll insist on this weekend.”

“I don’t think we have any plans tonight,” said Victoria, “but I really should check with your dad. Are you too tired from traveling, Ryan?”

“Mom, I can do whatever. McWilliam’s not that far of a drive, and I haven’t worked since Tuesday. I just need to find a place to stay.”

“That won’t be hard,” said Amber. “Crossing doesn’t really have any hotels, but Faye has an extra room if you don’t mind staying down the hall from me. Or Peter has space if you’d rather live bachelor-style with him.”

“We are planning to clean out space this weekend for you to stay with us,” said Victoria. “If you can

manage with Amber or Peter for a couple days, you can always stay with us after that."

"Whatever you're comfortable with," said Amber.

"Amber," said Allie, "why don't we call it a day so you can enjoy your family? We can get together again next week if you have any time."

"Sounds good, Allie. Thanks! Let me grab my coat, Mom, and we'll go find Dad."

The trio left the law office with the dog, Sassy, close behind and headed further around the square to the newspaper storefront.

"How long have you had the dog?" said Ryan.

Amber giggled. "She adopted me shortly after I got here in November."

"That's twice now I've heard that," said Ryan.

"What?" said Amber.

"Adopted," said Ryan.

"Well, she didn't give me much choice," said Amber. "She's really Peter's dog."

"Did you start giving her treats or something?" said Ryan.

"I didn't do anything," said Amber. "In fact, when I first got here, I was afraid of her. But it seemed the more I avoided her, the more she wanted to hang around me. Now she follows me pretty much everywhere."

"It appears that you've gotten over your fear," said Ryan.

"At least where Sassy's concerned, I guess," said Amber.

"If you two wait here," said Victoria, "I'll run inside and ask Owen if your dad is still here."

Without waiting for an answer, she disappeared through the doorway, leaving Ryan and Amber standing on the front walk mostly cleared of snow.

"So what do you do?" said Amber.

"Besides pick on annoying brunettes?"

"I was hoping you'd outgrown that."

Ryan grinned at her. "I'm a paramedic."

"Really! Did that require a lot of school?"

"Depends, I guess. Nothing like a doctor, but it's still hundreds of hours of training, ambulance calls, and clinicals."

"I'm impressed," said Amber, pushing her mitten-clad hands into her coat pockets.

"Thanks. How about you?"

"Not much. I never finished high school, which is pretty limiting on the job market. But, I'm thinking about taking some online accounting classes through Oregon State so I can help out more at the logging office. I have to get my GED first, but Allie says I'm picking up on what she's teaching me pretty quickly."

"Does that mean you're going to stay here?"

"Yeah. Peter plans to take over his dad's business. I don't see us moving anywhere."

"Ryan!" Thomas Griffin came out of the newspaper office, backpack slung over his shoulder, and hugged his son. His short-cropped grey hair was a bit disheveled, an indication that his editor had requested some quick revisions.

"Hey, Dad," said Ryan. "Get your stories filed?"

"Yes. Now my evening is free to spend with my three children!" He placed one hand on Ryan's shoulder and wrapped his other arm around Amber's waist.

"That sounds so nice," said Victoria.

"Yes, it does," said Thomas.

"You want to come out to dinner at Faye's, Dad?" said Amber.

"I would not turn down her cooking," said Thomas.

"Are you sure she won't mind, Amber?" said Victoria.

"Positive. I'll call her when we get to Micah's if it makes you feel better."

"Well then," said Thomas, "what are we waiting for?"

The group turned to make their way around the square.

"So how was the weather in McWilliam?" Thomas asked.

"About normal." Ryan shrugged. "We got a couple inches throughout December, but most of that was closer to Christmas."

"So you had a lot of accidents?"

Ryan's internal radar sensed this was leading to his not showing up for the holidays. *Keep your words in check*, he reminded himself. "Always do, Dad, but not always because of the snow. People also tend to do more social and emotional drinking around Christmas and New Year's."

As they approached Micah's, a dark grey Jeep

Grand Cherokee parked in front of the store. Ryan watched a man just a couple inches taller than himself get out. *165-170 pounds, late twenties. Muscular, maybe athletic.*

“Peter!” said Amber.

Ryan watched as his sister ran over and waited for him at the edge of the snow berm.

“Hey, my beautiful Ray,” said Peter. He took both Amber’s hands in his, kissing the top of one mitten-covered hand.

“Come meet Ryan,” said Amber.

Peter wrapped his left arm around Amber’s shoulder and turned to greet the others.

So this is the man who finally trapped my sister in one place.

“Ryan, this is Peter.”

Peter extended his hand to Ryan. “Nice to finally meet you.”

“Thanks,” said Ryan.

“Did you drive up in that?” said Peter, motioning to the Mustang.

“Yeah.”

Peter left Amber’s side to look more closely at the car, whistling in appreciation. “She’s incredible.”

“Thanks. It’s a bit of a hobby.”

“Do you prefer doing body work, or more the mechanics of it?” said Peter.

“Definitely mechanics. I looked around for a while until I found one with a decent body so I wouldn’t have to do too much to it.”

“Does she give you much trouble in the snow?”

"She doesn't really like the fresh stuff, but packed down isn't too bad. I keep good 245s on the back wheels and replace them with studless winter tires when the snow hits."

Peter looked in the driver's window. "Stick shift! Nice!"

"Yeah, I bought it as an automatic but changed it out to a five-speed."

"Really nice," said Peter. "I've always liked the running pony's interior."

Amber stepped up to Peter's side and touched his arm. "I was going to call your mom to see if she minded guests for dinner."

"Actually, that's part of my errand to come get you. When I left the office, Mom asked me to swing by here and see if everyone wanted to come out tonight. It's Mexican night, and she said she'd made far too much of the chicken mixture to make only one pan of enchiladas."

"Wonderful," said Thomas.

Ryan laughed at his dad. "She must be a good cook."

"The best," said Thomas. "Next to your mother, of course."

"She really is very good," said Amber.

"Are you sure it's not too much?" said Victoria.

"You have to stop worrying so much, Vic," said Thomas.

"Mom wouldn't ask if she didn't mean it," said Peter. "And she said to tell you that she already has dessert waiting to go in the oven."

“What more do we need to know?” said Thomas, looking at the others.

Victoria laughed. “All right. Let me get Keith before your stomach leaves us all standing here!”

CHAPTER 3



RYAN TOOK UP THE REAR POSITION OF THE caravan as they followed Peter to his parents' home. His mind was reeling with the bits of information he'd already gleaned from the short time he'd had with his family.

The family looks great! I don't remember the last time I've seen Mom so lively. And Dad has a bounce in his step. He didn't look nearly as tired as usual, and he actually ran up the steps to put his laptop away. I can't remember the last time he willingly put that computer down. He's always either writing a story or researching for hints of Rachel.

Keith clearly liked Peter. He thought for sure the boy would choose to ride with him in the Mustang, but he hopped in Peter's Jeep. *What was it he said? I need to ride with Amber. Interesting statement. What is he—their chaperone or something? Maybe I've stepped into a time warp.*

Ryan pulled into the driveway and took his first good look at where his sister had been living the last

couple of months. The beautiful log cabin sat peacefully on a small clearing surrounded by the forest. The windows shone brightly in the dimming light, and smoke curled out of the chimney. He turned off his engine and watched Sassy bound out of Peter's Jeep and into the garage with Keith right behind. *He feels at home here.*

Peter, Thomas, and Victoria followed Keith, but Amber stood waiting for him. "Ready to meet the in-laws?"

He smiled at her. "You're the one marrying into the family. I'm just tagging along for a bit. I can always leave if they're crazy."

She laughed. "They're definitely crazy. But in a good way. Consider yourself forewarned: Peter and his siblings are pranksters, taught by their grandfather." She turned to lead the way into the house.

"Does everyone still live in Crossing?"

"No, most of them live near Portland, but they come down a lot. His sister, Brittney, took off most of next week for the wedding, so you should meet her in a few days. Pops, the grandfather, normally travels down with her when she comes."

Amber opened the door into the mudroom, stomping her boots on the welcome mat. "You can hang your coat wherever you see space. And just put your boots on any of these shelves. Frank has a drain under this floor, so as the snow melts off of them, the water just drains back into the yard."

"Nice."

Sassy popped her head through the dog door and barked.

"We're coming, Sass."

Amber turned the knob and led Ryan into a casual dining area with French doors leading to a deck. His mom sat at a breakfast bar overlooking a spacious kitchen with his dad standing behind her. An older blonde woman hovered near the sink. *Five foot four, 160 pounds, mid-fifties. If the Pillsbury Doughboy were female....* Ryan grinned at his assessment.

Both women turned to smile at them.

"You must be Ryan," said Faye. "Let me dry my hands."

She wiped her hands on a towel and came over to greet him. "It's so nice to finally have your whole family together." She gave Ryan a hug before wrapping an arm around Amber.

"Yes, ma'am," said Ryan. "You have a beautiful home."

"Why thank you, dear. How long do you get to stay?"

"A while."

Ryan caught his dad's quick glance in his direction.

"He needs a place to stay for a couple days while Mom and Dad get another room at Micah's cleaned out," said Amber. "I told him we had room here."

"Oh, absolutely," said Faye with a nod. "It's Peter's old room, and truthfully it's not completely cleaned out yet. He's taken most of his stuff to his new house, but he's not been gone that long, and I just haven't taken

the time to clean it out properly. You are welcome to it if you'd like, though."

"Thank you."

"Don't let these women-folk push you into anything, young man."

An older man walked into the kitchen. *Just a bit taller than me, so five foot ten? His skin looks like he's used to working outside in the sun, and he's got some extra weight in the middle. What was the name of that '70s TV dad with all the kids where everyone said good night to everyone else?*

The man continued. "Sure enough, if you let them talk you into staying here, they'll fill you with good food all hours of the day and night. But this sister of yours'll roast you out of the living room stoking up the fire, and my wife'll have you tying up little satchels of good-smelling stuff for the wedding."

"Oh, Frank, really," said Faye, giggling.

Ryan watched his sister's smile grow. *She's happy here.*

"I'm Frank, by the way. Peter's dad." Frank extended his hand to Ryan.

"Nice to meet you, sir."

"So, when are y'all going to stop yammering around here and feed us?" said Frank to the women. "Lunch was a long time ago!"

"Just give us five more minutes," said Faye. "Amber, you go on in and show Ryan around while Victoria and I finish up the salad so we can eat."

Amber led Ryan into the living room where Keith and Peter sat over a chessboard.

"This is obviously the living room," said Amber. "And there's a library back here."

Ryan followed her behind a circular staircase to a small room covered in bookshelves. "That's an interesting picture."

Amber followed Ryan's gaze to a framed drawing of a maple tree sitting in front of a log cabin. In one top corner, a child's face smiled down on the scene.

"I drew that," said Amber.

"I remember you having a talent for drawing," said Ryan as he walked closer. "This is really good."

"Thanks."

"Is the child someone special?"

Amber looked at the child she'd sketched. "Her name is Jamie. She was Peter's older sister."

"Was?"

"She died when she was ten." She looked at her brother.

He looked back at her, a lump forming in his throat. Returning his eyes to the picture, he said, "Have you made peace?"

"You mean with Cassie's death?"

Ryan nodded. "You were a lot closer to her than I was. I don't really have many memories of my oldest sister."

"You were only six when the accident happened, Ryan."

He looked back at his sister. "I remember one conversation we had shortly before you left. You said that you tried not to think about her because it hurt too much."

She sighed deeply. "Part of me still hurts, but I'm not angry anymore. I told God that I would rather have grown up with her, but ultimately I choose to trust Him and His choices."

She trusts God? Ryan's mind was tumbling again.

"Hey, Ray, Ryan," said Peter, coming around the corner to join them. "Mom's got dinner ready."

Ryan followed them back to the dining room and looked at the feast laid before him. The light blue tablecloth was barely noticeable underneath the dishes piled around the place setting for eight. Fried rice, Mexican corn, guacamole, refried beans, tortilla chips, and a huge salad surrounded two large dishes full of steamy melted cheese. It looked like a Mexican-themed Thanksgiving!

"Come on, everyone, before the enchiladas get cold," said Faye.

"Don't have to call me twice," said Thomas as he took a seat beside Frank.

Ryan hung back to see where everyone sat, watching Peter hold out Amber's chair for her before sitting beside her.

"Ryan, come sit by your mother," said Faye with a smile and a pat on the back of the empty chair. Then she took her seat.

"Alright now," said Frank. "Let's say grace."

Ryan watched Peter and his sister grab hands as they bowed their heads. *It seems natural, not awkward.*

"Thank you, Father, for this food smelling so good before us and adding yet another friend to our table.

Let our conversation be good and keep us safe through the night. Amen.”

“Now everyone eat up, but save room for dessert,” said Faye. “I have caramel flan in the fridge for later.”

“What’s flan?” said Keith.

“It’s a Mexican dessert, mostly sugar and sweetened milk,” said Faye. “Peter, will you serve the enchiladas?”

“Sure,” said Peter. “Let me see your plate, Mom.”

As food began to be dished out, conversation began around the table as well.

“Your dad said you’re a paramedic, Ryan,” said Frank.

Ryan took the salad from his mom and added some to his bowl. “Yes, sir.”

“Where do you work?” said Peter, handing a plate back to his mom and reaching for Ryan’s.

“I’m down at McWilliam, just a couple hours west of here,” said Ryan.

“Well that’s not too far,” said Faye.

“Mom said you were really busy at Christmas,” said Amber.

“Yeah,” said Ryan. “Besides my EMT job at the firehouse, I was pulling a bunch of extra hours at the hospital.”

“Was that for a class you were taking?” Thomas asked, spooning some fried rice onto his plate.

“Kinda,” said Ryan. “I was working with a couple of the doctors on diagnosis.”

“Is that part of your training?” Peter asked as he added refried beans to his plate.

“Paramedics only have to have an associate’s degree

to get licensed. But I've been working toward getting my bachelor's."

"What are you going to do with that?" said Thomas.

Ryan clenched his jaw. "Not sure, Dad," said Ryan. He hated admitting that he wasn't sure what was driving him to complete more school, much less what he was going to do with it when he was done.

"Well, we're glad you're here now," said Faye.

Conversation turned to wedding planning and his dad's latest stories. Ryan relaxed a bit after the careful scrutiny on his job situation. *At least they didn't ask if I was considering moving again. I think I'll keep that to myself until I decide whether or not to move to a larger department in Portland.*

As the evening closed down, he knew he would have to make a decision about where he was sleeping. He'd rather just drive up the road toward Portland to find a hotel, but he didn't think that was going to fly.

His sister—maybe he would call her Rachel-Amber until he got used to using her middle name—slipped up to him and squeezed his arm. "I'd really like it if you'd stay here with us tonight, Ryan."

It seems a better option than Peter's. At least she is here, and I'm not forced into close quarters with the brother-in-law yet. "I guess the bride gets to decide," he said, smiling down at her. "I'll grab my bag."

CHAPTER 4



*R*YAN ROLLED OVER TO CHECK THE TIME. 8:24.
I suppose I should get up. Wonder what time they get moving around here.

He grabbed clean jeans and a long sleeved T-shirt and headed to the shower. Ten minutes later, he walked down the stairs to find Rachel-Amber curled up on a chair by the fire reading.

“Morning.”

“Morning, Ryan. Did you sleep okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Frank and Faye are already gone, but there’s fresh muffins in the kitchen if you’re hungry.”

“Got any coffee?”

“Let’s go see.” She sat her book aside and stood up, stretching her arms above her head before striking out for the kitchen. “Frank normally cleans it out before he leaves, but I can make some more.”

Ryan watched her move around the kitchen. “You’re really comfortable here.”

She smiled as she poured water into the coffee maker. “Yes. When I first got here, I was a mess, but God brought me here where they just...I don’t know. Enveloped me in love, I guess.” She emptied the coffee scoop into the filter and pushed the start button. “There, fresh coffee in just a few minutes.”

“You know, I was mad at you for a long time.” Ryan turned the basket of muffins around in his hands, focusing on the aroma wafting from the coffee maker rather than Rachel’s face.

“Because I left?”

Ryan sighed deeply. “Because you left *me*.”

“I’m sorry, Ryan.”

He looked into her eyes for a moment, clenching his jaw. She offered no excuses for her behavior, just a simple apology. He wondered the same question that had haunted him for years: *Would I have done anything different if I’d been the older one?*

“I don’t blame you, Rachel-Amber. It’s really the catalyst that changed everything.” Ryan paused, lost in thought. “Still, it was lonely without you.”

“Do you think we can make up for it? I’m enjoying having Mom and Dad here. But I’d love it if you were around as well.”

Ryan shrugged. “I don’t know if I’m cut out to live in Mayberry.”

She laughed. “I thought of Sheriff Taylor when I first got here too.”

She filled a mug and handed it to him. “Milk, sugar?”

“Black is fine.”

“Look, Ryan. I’m not asking you to *move* to Crossing. If you’re happy in McWilliam, that’s fine. It’s not so far. Whatever town is best for you is okay by me. I’m just asking if maybe we can plan to spend more time together, get together on holidays, acknowledge birthdays, that kind of thing.” Her voice trailed off as she waited for his response.

Ryan took a sip of coffee, thinking about all they had missed. *Not just the ten years she’s been gone, but all the years before that were filled with misery.* “Maybe so.”

He paused to look at her, squinting his left eye. “When’s your birthday again?”

He waited to see how she’d react. Pain briefly reflected in her eyes. Until he smiled. Then he ducked as the kitchen towel came flying towards his face.

RYAN COULDN’T REMEMBER A BETTER AFTERNOON. JUST relaxing with his sister and catching up on their lives soothed his spirit more than he’d thought possible. Now as they walked toward the logging office, memories came flooding back from a childhood summer camp.

“Remember that year Dad made us go to camp?”

Amber laughed. “The year they were infested with frogs?”

“We had to check the beds before we could go to sleep,” said Ryan.

Amber opened the door to the office, stomping snow off her feet before entering. “And you took one home in your backpack!”

“Took one what?” said Faye, looking up from the small pile of orders in front of her.

“A frog,” said Amber, giggling.

Ryan feigned innocence. “He was overcrowded in his home.”

“Do I need to check your room?” said Faye, utterly confused.

Ryan’s “No” met Amber’s “Maybe,” sending everyone laughing.

“Okay. I promise. No frogs,” said Ryan, hands raised in surrender.

“Any other critters I should be worrying about?” asked Faye with raised eyebrows.

“I seem to remember...” said Amber.

Just then, a young man burst into the office. “Ms. Faye, have you got a rag or anythin’ up here?”

Amber and Faye turned to see one of their employees, Chad Davis, holding his young son’s nose, blood dripping from between his fingers. Amber immediately went for the first aid kit. Faye grabbed a roll of paper towels. Ryan knelt at the boy’s side and tried to avoid the melting snow from his shoes.

“What happened?” asked Ryan.

“Nothin’ I know of,” said Chad. “It just started bleeding.”

“Let me see a couple paper towels,” said Ryan. He looked at the women. “Where can he sit?”

“Here.” Amber rolled a chair over to Ryan.

Ryan gently took the paper towels and pinched the boy’s nose right under his bridge. He placed his other

hand behind the boy's head and leaned it forward slightly.

"Why don't you sit in the chair while I hold your nose, okay?" said Ryan. He glanced at his watch. "What's your name?"

"Josh."

"Well, Josh, it's nice to meet you. I'm Ryan."

Ryan felt Josh tremble.

"Bloody noses can be scary, but normally they're nothing to worry about. Do you remember bumping your nose on anything, Josh?"

"No."

"How old are you?"

"Four."

Ryan looked at the boy sitting before him. *He's too calm.* "Has this ever happened before?"

Josh nodded his head. Ryan looked at the man who brought the boy here.

"Are you his father?"

"Yes. The name's Chad."

"How often does this happen?"

Chad spread his arms helplessly. "It started back a couple months ago when he had the flu. He just ain't been the same since."

"Anyone else in the house sick?"

"No. Well, not really. My wife's been sick, but she's pregnant and all, so it's not real sickness. Just because of the baby. And his brother Caleb never got sick a'tall."

"Ryan?" Concern was evident in Amber's voice.

He shook his head. "It's most likely nothing. Some-

times kids just get nosebleeds. Even the ones who tend to get them a lot also tend to grow out of them.”

He looked at young Josh. “I’m just going to hold on for about another minute, then we’ll see how it’s doing, okay?”

Josh tried to nod his head, which was difficult since Ryan had a grip on his nose.

Ryan turned his head and met Faye’s anxious gaze. “He might like something to drink. Sometimes a bit of the blood will go down the throat.”

Faye hurried to the small fridge they kept in the office.

“It don’t taste good,” said Josh, referring to the blood.

“No, it doesn’t,” Ryan agreed.

“If I remember...” said Faye. “Yes, I thought so.” She came back with a small popsicle. “I thought Frank had some of these things down here last fall.”

“Perfect,” said Ryan. “Rachel-Amber, can you wet down a couple of paper towels for me?”

Ryan looked at Josh. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to pull these paper towels on your nose away to see how we’re doing. If it looks okay, then we’ll use the wet ones to gently wipe around your nose. If it starts bleeding again, Mrs. Faye will have fresh paper towels ready for me, okay?”

Josh nodded his head. Faye grabbed a couple more paper towels off the roll as Amber walked up with some damp ones. Chad stood by his son, rubbing his back to comfort him.

Ryan put his free hand on Josh’s shoulder. “Now,

when you look down, you might see what looks like a lot of blood on these paper towels. Just remember that the body has lots of blood, and even though it looks like a lot on these towels, it's really not that bad, okay?"

Josh tried to nod again.

"Okay, let's take a look." Ryan gently pulled the towels away. "Looks good so far." After he dropped the bloody towels on the floor and grabbed the wet towels from Amber, Ryan gently began to clean the stained and crusted area around Josh's nose and mouth.

"There," said Ryan, sitting back on his heels and looking Josh in the eye. "That looks better. Ready for your popsicle?"

As he stood, he wrapped the bloody towels in the clean ones and turned to Chad. Speaking quietly, he said, "Why don't we go wash our hands?"

Chad looked at him for a moment and then looked down at his own blood-covered hands. "Oh. Yeah. Good idea."

As the women fussed over Josh, Chad and Ryan walked to the bathroom.

"Thank you," said Chad.

"Any time," said Ryan.

"You seem to know a lot about all that. You think it's serious?"

Ryan looked back toward the little boy; Josh was swinging his legs, totally content with his treat. "You said he hasn't been quite right since the flu a couple months ago. What else is different?"

"Well, he's been quieter than normal. Don't want to

go out so much like he used to. Then there's the nose-bleeds. Like I said. He seems to get 'em all the time."

"How many?"

"To be honest, I lost count. Seems like they come about every other day or so."

Ryan looked at Chad. "I'm no doctor, sir, just a paramedic. But I'd recommend a visit to his doctor. Just to be safe."

CHAPTER 5



AS CHAD AND LITTLE JOSH LEFT THE LOGGING office, two flaxen-haired men dressed in blue jeans and winter coats watched from the edge of the woods.

“Things are coming together nicely,” said Matthew.

“So far,” said Michael as a ruby-crowned kinglet landed on his shoulder.

“You still have doubts?”

The bird flicked its wings, and Michael reached up to take the bird in his hands. “What’s the saying? Don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched?”

“Yes, but this family has a strong influence.”

“True.”

A second kinglet lighted on the branch above Matthew, dropping bits of snow onto his curly head. He brushed it off absently with his bare hand. “But doubts remain?”

“Yes. Try not to underestimate the enemy,” said Michael. “He is very powerful. And motivated.”

CARRIE DAWS

“I still believe in this family.”

“Good. But don’t let your guard down.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

God rewrote Carrie's dreams from being a corporate accountant to an author. With a background writing devotions, a mentor encouraged her to think bigger. The writing monster she now barely keeps contained was born.

After ten years in the US Air Force, Carrie's husband medically retired, and they settled in North Carolina. With their three children figuring out what they want to do in life after school, Carrie stays busy keeping up with her family, loving on women, and reading as much as she can.

For more information about Carrie, please visit *CarrieDaws.com*.



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