

*So cut below the surface and try hard not to notice
That I could be so foolish thinkin' I'm alright'*



July, 2004
Huerfano, New Mexico

Prologue

Nothing was better than a job well done. Dragging tired feet ... no, correction, tired *body* up the long dusty trail to her trailer, Karly Martin rejoiced in her life. It was rewarding spiritually, emotionally, and mentally. Finally, at long last, she felt that she had achieved balance and peace. It was a long time coming. Five years. *Five long, hard years.* Longer than that, should she really be honest with herself. She felt much older than her twenty - seven years, but then, age brought wisdom, right? Karly snorted to herself. She must be *very wise.*

Mentally, she ticked off what needed to be done before tomorrow morning. The summer school classes she'd spontaneously offered for the local Navajo children had turned out to be a rip - roaring success. Such a success that she was on the edge of being pleasantly overwhelmed at the response. She'd need to double her craft supplies for tomorrow and come up with some additional activities for the older boys who had come. She didn't have the heart to turn anyone away even though the classes were filled to capacity. The boys hadn't fooled her, simply arriving to cause harmless mischief and flirt with her. She was old but she still remembered what it was like to be fourteen. Maybe she'd put them to work helping with the younger ones? Somewhere in the boxes she'd brought with her was a great book that had all kinds of indoor and outdoor games for kids of various ages. Where was that? Maybe the big boys could be in charge of recreational play ...

Lost in thought, at first she didn't notice the silent figure watching her approach from the front steps of her trailer. Spotting him, she slowed, a vague sense of familiarity and unease prickling up her spine. He wasn't a teenager, that was for sure, and even from this distance she could tell he wasn't Navajo. Then he stood, slowly unfolding his massive frame, all 6'5" of it, and she knew exactly who it was. Dear God in heaven. Not now. Not here. Not in this sanctuary of peace that protected her from her bickering family and excruciatingly painful past. Not when her life was finally falling into the nice orderly framework she so craved.

"Hey, Kar," he said to her. He was wearing a Yankees baseball cap, mirrored sunglasses, jeans, and a faded tee shirt. He stood stock still, not approaching her. "You look as beautiful as I remember. I know this is a shock, me being here and all. I would have called but you probably know better than anyone that phone service isn't the most reliable out here." He tried to joke a bit, shrugging and saying, "I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by and say hello." He gave her a heart-stopping grin that tore her apart with its familiarity - even after all these years.

She continued to stand and stare, incapable of speech. Around her she felt all the carefully stored containers of unwanted memories popping open like sprung jack – in – the – boxes. A wave of anger washed over her. *How dare he come here to this place! He had no right.*

He thrust his hands in his pockets, awkward and unsure. Maybe even a bit frightened of her reception. *Good.* “Look, I can leave if this isn’t a good time, and come back later if you’d rather. I’ve had weeks to get up the courage to come here. I could at least give you the courtesy of a few hours.”

“A few hours won’t do it, Paul. I think I need about ten more years.” She walked towards him. God, he was bigger than she remembered. She strained her neck to look up at him and was rewarded with a double image of her pale, stricken face reflected in his sunglasses. “Excuse me. I need to get into my home.”

“We need to talk.”

“No, *you* need to talk. I feel no need whatsoever.” Karly stepped around him and climbed the three steps to her trailer door. It wasn’t locked. That would change *now*. She ripped open the door, stepped in, and slammed it shut. The lock turning could have been heard all the way to Tucson.

Leaning against the trailer door, she listened to the retreating crunch of footsteps walking down the hill.

“Paul,” she said in an anguished voice, “don’t do this to me again.”

*So we crossed the line and can't turn back
Happy endings never last
Cause there's always more to stories never told²*



June, 1999

Watchung, New Jersey

One: Good Christians Never Make Mistakes

The morning of her wedding dawned bright, brilliant, and beautiful. At 6:00 a.m. Karly hauled herself out of bed, pulling on shorts, tee shirt, and sneakers. It was no use trying to get more sleep. Was it possible to make yourself tired trying to fall asleep? She needed to get out of the house. She needed to get out of her life. These last two weeks she had suffered such profound insomnia that finally, in desperation, she had bought some over the counter sleep aides.

They hadn't worked.

She now felt like her body was gradually being filled with lead, making every movement slow and more difficult. Peering into the mirror, she felt a wave of hysteria hit her. She looked like absolute hell. Dark circles outlined her eyes, her skin had a dull, gray pallor, and her eyes were red and bloodshot. She had to pull herself together! Today was her wedding day for goodness sake! The single most important day of her life! Her shining opportunity to once and for all escape the clutches of her parents and join herself forever and always to the man that she had given *everything* to.

She sighed and went to get the dog's leash hanging on the back of the kitchen door. Reality was, thinking of Paul only caused her greater anxiety. No two people had looked more miserable and out of their depth than she and Paul had last night at the rehearsal dinner. Karly had caught a glimpse of the two of them in a mirror at the restaurant and they both looked ... haunted. Desperate. Lost. All around them was laughter and gaiety, joy and excitement, and the two of them looked like they were at their best friend's funeral.

But the biggest clue about how bad everything had all become was that even Karly's mother had begun to be nice to her.

What was going on? She refused to believe that this marriage was a mistake. *They loved each other. They had made a commitment*, with their hearts as well as with their bodies. Both of them had finished college, Paul had sent out over twenty resumes to neighboring towns in Kentucky looking

² "Where We Were Before" Blessid Union of Souls, By Eliot Sloan, Jeff Pence, 1997, Capitol Records

for a job as an accountant. Karly had literally done everything within her power to please and accommodate him. And yet Paul looked like the shell of the man he once had been. Where was that smiling, carefree young man with whom she had found safety and connection that first night she had met him at the frat house party? What had happened to the laughing, jovial, teasing young man who could charm her out of her most serious of pouts? Why did it feel that whenever she was with him she was slowly and surely sucking the life right out of him? *What else was she supposed to do?* She'd done everything she could.

She'd given him everything she had to give.

"Calm down, Max," she mumbled as she tried to catch hold of his collar. "You dumb dog, sit!" Hooking the leash on Max, she reverted to the same old litany she been singing to herself these past two months. *Once we're married and off on our own, everything will be fine. All of these concerns and stresses and strains will disappear. I'll make him happy. He'll never regret this marriage.* It was just the pressure of the wedding. It was just the uncertainty of their future. It was just the fear of venturing into uncharted territory. It had nothing to do with their relationship. *Their relationship was absolutely fine.* "Let's run off some of this excess tension, boy," she said as she opened the front door.

Karly tripped on her shoelace as she was fumbling out the front door. "Hold on you dumb dog! Let me tie my sneaker or I'll break my neck. What are you so excited about?" Something made her look up.

Standing on her front lawn was Paul, looking worse than he ever had in the last two months. A full growth of stubble covered his face and he wore the same clothes from last night's rehearsal dinner, now all wrinkled and mussed. He stood standing at the end of the front walkway, hands thrust in his pockets, looking for all the world like he had been standing there the whole night just waiting for her to step out the front door. "Oh. Hi Paul ..."

Karly made herself put on a dazzling, megawatt smile and walked down the pathway, stopping directly in front of him. "What are you doing here, Honey? Don't you know you're not supposed to see the bride before the ceremony?" She touched his shoulder and tried to draw him down for a kiss. It was like bending a hundred year oak tree in half and kissing a marble statue.

Suddenly she desperately needed to get away. She needed to walk the dog. She needed to get some air. *She needed to go ...*

"I can't do it, Karly." The voice that came out of his throat sounded like it hadn't been used in ten years.

Can't do it? Surely he didn't mean what she first thought. *Of course not.* He meant he can't stay away from her before the wedding. He's got cold feet. He needed to see her and get reassurance from her. How sweet. The evil twin in her head said, *"He doesn't look like he's being sweet."*

"Can't do what, Paul?"

"I can't marry you."

His words were like an unfamiliar foreign language. They just didn't process. Did he really say what she thought he said? *It was his idea of a bizarre joke.* They had both been under such tremendous pressure.

Okay. She'd be funny right back. No, not funny. She'd shift over to sarcasm. That worked better for her right at this moment. "What are you saying, Paul? Are you saying *now, today*, on the *day of our wedding*, after almost four years of dating and the *level of commitment* that we've shared, that you're changing your mind *now*?"

"Yeah. That's what I'm saying." Her head exploded. Like a minefield being triggered in one small corner that then set off a massive chain reaction of explosions, Karly's brain simply overloaded and shut down. *I'll think about all this tomorrow. Good-bye. I really need to go and walk the dog right now. See ya.* As she turned to walk away from him, Paul caught her arm roughly. "I mean it, Karly. Do you want me to come inside so we can talk to your parents together?"

Find me a gun. It was the first stunningly clear thought that entered her conscious mind. Then the words began to roll out, boiling out of her mouth like a spewing, angry kettle. She gripped his arm and felt her fingernails sink into his flesh. "*You can't do this*, Paul. Things are set. Done. Finished. Planned. I've given you *everything* I've had to give. You know who I am and what I am and what my hopes and dreams and plans are. We are in this together. *Two have been made one*, Paul. The vows maybe need to be spoken today, but this deal is already signed and sealed."

"I can't marry you, Karly. I don't love you." He had the temerity to look embarrassed.

She felt herself begin to physically shake and tremble. The rumble of a bodily earthquake, of a volcanic emotional eruption. "*You don't love me?*" She heard herself scream hysterically and the dog began to jump up at her and whine. *Hello? Is anyone home?*

"We're sleeping together!" Karly screamed at him. "We're considering a missionary call to Appalachia! We've got two hundred and fifty people getting dressed as we speak to come and see us officially become husband and wife in less than five hours! *AND YOU HAVE THE GALL TO STAND HERE AND TELL ME YOU DON'T LOVE ME??*"

All of a sudden her mother and father were there beside her, looks of concern carved across their faces. She felt her mother's hands on her shoulders trying to calm her. Bile rose up in her stomach and burned in her throat. Karly could not abide her mother's kindness *now*. Too little, way too late. *Get away, Mother.* Furiously she jerked herself away from her mother's grasp and turned to her father. "*DO YOU HEAR WHAT HE'S TELLING ME? DO YOU HEAR??*"

"Come inside, dear, and we'll talk," and she felt her mother grip her arm and forcibly propel her back towards the front door.

They got her as far as the front room before it hit her. She was never going to escape from here. She was going to stay here in this house and *die here*. She would never be a teacher or a missionary or a wife. She was trapped, mired, cemented, imprisoned ... Oh Dear God. Please. No.

"I'm sorry," Paul choked out to her, standing amidst the chaos of her life trying to ignore her mother and father's presence. "I never wanted to hurt you, Karly. You don't see it now, but I'd only make you more miserable if you married me. I'm sorry it took me so long to realize that."

Come on Babe, don't you love me?

Hey, you know we'll be together to the end, Love.

Don't hold back anything from me, Karly.

I'm giving you everything. It's just you and me.

This is what committed couples do, Babe. This isn't wrong. It can't be when we love each other so much.

She wanted to clamp her hands over her ears and never, ever hear another lying sound come out of his mouth. "GET OUT," she choked as the tears began to pour down her face. "I don't want to see your face or hear your voice. You are weak and cowardly, afraid to make a choice and take a stand! You're right, Paul, you would have made me miserable! You would have dragged me down into the depths where you seem so desperate to be! Get out! GET OUT!"

The rest of the day was a blur for Karly. She sat in a corner of the living room on the formal couch while hushed voices flitted around her. The phone rang constantly and even, for once, Michael, her little brother, was quiet and subdued. At one point he brought her a glass of water and set it by her on the coffee table. Hesitating for just a moment in contemplation, he finally plopped down on the sofa next to her, curled up against her and played his GameBoy.

She slept. *At last.* Completely and deeply, waking only to drink the glass of water that Michael kept fresh and filled for her on the table, and to stumble to the hallway bathroom when necessary. Vaguely she remembered someone trying to move her, but she put up such a fuss that they finally just left her alone. Someone brought her a bed pillow. Someone covered her with an afghan. Yes, she'd feel better after a nice long sleep ...

"Karly?" A warm, tentative hand was put on her bare thigh that hung out from beneath the cover. "Karly? You need to focus and listen to me."

"Go away. Can't you see that I'm trying to sleep?"

"Yeah, Karly. I see that. Everyone's tip toeing around you like you're an atomic bomb ready to detonate, but I don't think they've realized that you've already exploded, haven't you? Open your eyes and look at me, Karly."

For one brief second, Karly looked at the harbinger of sleep interruption. Tammy. *Reverend Tammy*, minister of youth and education at church. Minister second, though, best friend, first. The two of them had bonded over cups of tea and laughter and mutual interests.

"Go away, Tam. I'm tired. I want to sleep."

"I won't go away. I'm your friend and I love you and I'm worried about you. Your parents are on the phone *right now* with a hospital. A *psychiatric* hospital, Karly. Attempting to make suitable accommodations for you," Tammy said in a hushed but persistent voice. The hand on Karly's thigh gripped her leg tightly and shook her. "You've been sleeping on this couch for almost a *full week*, Karly. They don't know what to do with you and have decided maybe you need to be hospitalized for a while. Does that sound like a good plan to you? Or don't you care?"

A full week? She'd been asleep on this couch for a full week? God, her mother would kill her. No one was allowed in the formal living room but special company. But she was still so tired ... Just a few more hours of sleep ...

"Karly." The persistent voice and hand were there again; shaking her and intruding on her much needed nap. "*The reality is not going to go away.* I'm sorry about that. But I'm here and will be here. *I won't go away.* You've got to face it all sooner or later. Are you going to do it now, with me and those who love you, or in a hospital? Give me an answer one way or another." There was another persistent shake. "*NOW, Karly.*"

Karly was too tired even to cry. “I can’t ...” she moaned.

“Yeah, I know,” Tammy’s voice said with real compassion. “One step at a time, okay, Sweetie? Let’s start with a shower ...”

Karly was never aware of her parents, although later, in retrospect, she suspected that they had been there, hovering. Tammy stripped her and shoved her naked and numb into the stall shower and then leaned her back across the door. “You can wash or just stand there until the hot water runs out, Kar. Either way you’ll be cleaner than when you started. Remember, making no decision *is a decision.*” In the end Karly made a vague attempt to wash her hair and her body.

Tammy helped her into clean clothes and made her brush her teeth. Combing out her hair for her, Tammy said, “You can either trust me or your mother to pack for you. What do you want to do?”

“Am I going to the hospital?”

Tammy shrugged. “That’s still an option. I’d rather you went with me to my family’s cabin on the Outer Banks. I was planning on going soon for a few weeks’ vacation to refresh and renew. The church has let me rearrange my schedule and take time off now instead. I’d like you to come with me. We’ll just sit on the beach and relax.”

“It won’t be much of a vacation for you.”

Tammy made a dismissive sound in the back of her throat. “If all you do is sleep in a semi-catatonic state on the couch down there like you’ve been doing this past week I don’t see what difference it will make having you with me.”

Karly met Tammy’s gaze in the mirror over her bureau. “Outer Banks or the hospital,” Tammy said firmly to Karly’s pale face reflected in the mirror. “You decide. And remember: making no decision is a decision.” Karly picked the Outer Banks.

Tammy and her mother packed for her and her father walked her to the car. “You know we love you, right, Baby?” he said, and Karly saw tears in his eyes.

Karly’s eyes felt dry and tight. The tear bank was empty. “Yeah Dad, I know.”

“You tell me what you need. Anything. Just name it. If it’s within my power to do it, I’ll do it. I’m telling you this now, but you put it in your mental bank for when you feel up to processing it. I may not have always seemed like I was there for you, but I’m telling you now *I am.*” Her father gripped her hand and a tear slid down his cheek. “Do you believe me, Baby?”

Until this very moment, had she been forced to admit it, no, she wouldn’t have believed him. The man she knew as her father spent a majority of his home time trying to stay under his wife’s radar and out of range of her vicious tongue. But staring into her father’s tear filled blue eyes, she felt her heart skip a beat. “Yeah, Dad,” she took a deep, shaky breath and reached out to wipe away the tear, “I believe you.” He seemed to relax visibly at her assurance.

“Here, Kar. Dad says it’s a long drive to the Outer Banks. This will help pass the time.” Michael held out to her his brand new, too – precious – for – real - words GameBoy. “Super Mario Brothers,” he said by way of explanation as to what game was in it. “I’m on level five but can’t get past it. See if you can beat my score.”

Karly's heart skipped another beat. Tenderness and love from the little brother who delighted in causing mayhem and catastrophe wherever he went. The child who was a living example that negative attention was preferable over no attention at all. The brother who earned his nickname from putting a live snake in her bed because he wanted to hear her scream. "Thanks, Snake," she managed and curled her fingers around the game. "Are you sure?"

He shrugged, trying desperately to appear nonchalant and detached. "Yeah, I'm sure."

Then her mother was there. For the first time, Karly thought she looked old. *Haggard* came to mind. "It, it was nice of Pastor Tammy to offer this," she began. "I'm not good at kind, soothing words, Karly." Her mother made a face. "You know that." She reached out a tentative hand to touch Karly's cheek and Karly willed herself to not pull away. "*I'm sorry. I should have done a better job.*" She took a shaky breath and bit her lip. "Call us if you need us, okay? We'll come and get you if you want to come home sooner than Pastor Tammy does."

Come home sooner. Like that would ever happen. "Thanks, Mom."

Karly and Tammy drove for hours, spent a night in a low budget motel, and then drove for more hours. Late in the afternoon of the second day they stopped at a Foodmart and bought a pile of groceries. Not more than twenty minutes later, Tammy took a right onto a hidden, weed choked dirt and gravel road.

"Are we here?" Karly asked. It was the first thing she'd said that wasn't a necessary answer to a direct question from Tammy.

"Yup. Home sweet home. Rustic, but private. The place has been in the family for close to a hundred and fifty years. Always passes down to the oldest child in the family. One day it will be mine."

The private road went on and on it seemed until it finally stopped at a dead end. "We walk from here," Tammy said throwing the car in park and turning off the key. "Plan on making at least two trips. Just grab your suitcase to start." Hauling her case from the trunk, Tammy walked off onto a vaguely definable path into the woods.

It was a charming, two bedroom, honest to goodness log cabin, carved out of real trees that had been felled from the very forest they were walking in. Bare planked floors and a fieldstone fireplace were the dominating features inside. But it was the outside that drew Karly. The back of the house through which they had entered faced the forest that they had walked through. But the big wide windows at the front of the house faced the ocean. Bright sunlight bounced off the water and white sand, all of which was framed with wild flowers and greenery. "Ohhh ..." was all Karly could manage.

"Yeah," said Tammy behind her, her voice filled with pride and satisfaction. "This first view – no matter if it's night or day – always makes the long drive completely worth it." She walked forward and opened the front door. "Come on! Race you to the water!"

There was no phone. A generator had to be fed with gasoline every three days and the well water that was so cold it made your teeth ache. "We're not totally uncivilized though," Tammy said with a grin as she opened a door. A fancy flush chemical toilet and a stall shower greeted them. "A

solar heated water tank on the roof gives us warm water in all but the coldest times of the year so we can stay clean and happy.” She winked at Karly.

They spent blessed hours in companionable silence: sitting in the rocking chairs on the porch reading, swimming in the warm ocean water, or walking for miles along the sandy beaches that seemed to go on forever. Tammy seemed content with the silence, and Karly thought it was miraculous that she was managing to eat two meals a day and bathe herself.

“Paul’s father and mother, John and Hannah Williamson came and visited me about four weeks ago,” Tammy said casually one day towards the end of the first week as they waded in the gentle waves collecting shells. It was a casual statement in and of itself, however the fact that the two of them had barely spoken of *anything* other than ‘Are you hungry?’ or ‘Want to come swimming?’ made the choice of topic monstrous. And the implications of what the visit four weeks ago implied made the statement as volatile as an eighteen - wheeler full of nitroglycerin.

At Karly’s silence, Tammy continued. “They were worried sick about the two of you. Wanted to know my perception of things. Asked for advice as to what I thought they should do.”

It seemed to Tammy that Karly was never going to respond, but finally she said, “What did you tell them?”

Tammy shrugged. “Oh, all the proper stuff I’m supposed to say as a minister, like you were both adults, we need to keep you two in constant prayer, and that they should continue making themselves available to both of you whenever the need arose.” Tammy sighed. “I did finally share with them that I was greatly concerned, too.” Karly felt Tammy look at her but she stared straight ahead at the curving coastline. “You and Paul were like walking zombies those last weeks. It was horrible to watch. Anyone who was surprised at what happened had to be deaf, dumb, blind, and stupid.”

“I guess that sums me up then.”

Tammy grabbed Karly’s arm and dragged her over to sit in a shady spot on a huge fallen log. “You look me right in the eyes, Karly Martin, and tell me you had no clue anything was wrong,” she said rather fiercely.

Karly picked at her fingernail polish, remnants of the wedding manicure. She shook her head. She couldn’t do that. In an anguished voice she finally whispered, “*I gave him everything, Tammy. And he took it. Gladly. Willingly.*”

Tammy made a rude noise in the back of her throat. “Join the club.”

Karly looked up at her. “What do you mean?”

Tammy looked out towards the ocean and squinted at the brightness. She shrugged. “We’ve been really good friends for years but we never talked about sex stuff. Did you ever wonder why? We’re way past the whole “pastor” barrier, so why do you think?”

Karly frowned in thought. The two women had known each other for almost four years now. Tammy had just been hired to take the youth pastor position at Karly’s church as Karly was leaving to go off to college. It had been an immediate friendship, rooted in similar sense of humor and like - minded Godly goals.

Tammy didn't wait for her answer. "We both avoided it for our own reasons. I avoided it because I knew I couldn't lie to you. If you asked I would have had to say that I was stupid in college, fell in love with a fellow ministerial candidate, got stars in my eyes and mush in my brains, and gave up the farm – lock, stock, and virginity. Only to have him dump me for someone else who, I think his exact words were, 'Stayed closer to his spiritual and moral values'. I may be a minister, but I know what it's like to be young, hot, and in love." She looked at Karly. "Why did you avoid the topic?"

"I liked the image I thought you had of me. I so much wanted to be just like you: honorable, pure, dedicated, solid ... How could I talk to you about what I was struggling with? It never occurred to me that you'd know what I was going through."

Tammy looked at her incredulously. "Why's that?"

Karly looked at her with impatience. "You're a *good Christian!* You're a *minister!*" Karly said impassionedly. *Certainly that explained it all.*

Tammy looked at her like she'd grown two heads. "Karly, being a *good* Christian means you have an extra resource to rely on during the wild and crazy ride we call life: God. It doesn't mean things are easier, or things make better sense, or life takes on a constant rosy glow." Tammy shook her head. "It for *darn* sure doesn't mean that we are summarily good the moment we make a profession of faith, or that we don't sin and make horrendous mistakes even when we should know better." She grinned at Karly. "I'm a minister and a good Christian, but it doesn't mean I'm *dead!* I appreciate a handsome man just like the rest of you and dream of ..." she sighed in a dreamy far away fashion, "some handsome 6'2", blonde haired, green eyed," she looked at Karly and winked, "*Christian*, construction worker who has a heart of gold and a personality of the utmost patience, who sweeps me off my feet and drives me off into the sunset." Matter – of - fact she added, "Where we will establish a small country church – which he repairs and brings back to life with his wonderful God - given talents and skills – as I minister to the congregation." She looked out at the ocean again and said in a tone that implied Karly's complete foolishness, "Who says ministers don't have passion, huh?"

"I, I can't be what I thought I was going to be, Tammy. Look what I've done with my life already. I just don't have what it takes to go out and be a good Christian example, let alone a missionary."

Tammy squinted at her. "Describe a good Christian to me, Karly."

"Well, a good Christian knows God's plan for his or her life, a good Christian doesn't make huge mistakes like I do – I mean *big stuff* like sex or drinking or drugs, a good Christian is happy most of the time, good Christians have solid marriages and productive lives, good Chr -"

"I feel like I should be playing some smarmy movie sound track in the background while the camera shows shots of laughing loving couples and cooing babies and puppies romping in fields of flowers," Tammy said with a voice filled with disgust.

"What? You don't agree with me?"

"I don't agree with one single perception you have about good Christians. No," Tammy shook her head in emphasis, "no, I don't believe any of it."

Karly opened her mouth to say more but Tammy interrupted her. “So, let me get this straight then. This is what you’re telling me.” She stuck out her index finger, keeping tally, “Number one, someone like *me* who made a huge mistake while I was away at seminary by getting sexually involved with another student is not a good Christian.” Almost to herself, she added, “I’ll add King David, because he had the whole Bathsheba incident and everything. Number two,” the second finger came out to keep tally, “people like your parents who struggle regularly within the bounds of their marriage are not good Christians. We’ll have to add in the Samaritan woman because she had a number of failed marriages under her belt, and let’s not forget Jacob who ended up with four wives, two of them sisters.” She rolled her eyes, again seeming to mumble to herself, “What a mess ...” Karly went to open her mouth but Tammy held her hand up so she wouldn’t interrupt, her voice getting a bit louder with suppressed emotion. “Number three, people who genuinely love the Lord but struggle with alcohol and drug addictions are not good Christians.” Tammy was really working herself up into a real lather. “And I have an entire group of high school seniors in my youth group who have no idea what God wants them to do with their lives so I guess I should just give up on them because they’re certainly not good Christians either.”

Tammy looked intently at her friend. “Karly, are you listening to yourself? Do you really hear what you’re saying?” She gripped Karly’s arm. “*Do you really believe that?*”

Karly sat there in stunned silence with her mouth slightly open.

“Did you come up with all this yourself or did someone convince you of this?” Tammy asked quietly.

“How about no one ever proved me wrong?” Karly said as her powerful emotions rolled beneath the surface. “I’ve spent my whole life being dragged off to church, and everyone I saw there looked perfect to me! Everyone smiled and had hopes and plans and dreams and worked toward goals that with dedication became accomplished. You saw people who were capable and sure, calm and collect, purposeful and determined. Everyone was all cleaned up and spanking clean. No one was fighting or crying or moaning or yelling. There was no tension, no criticism, no anger ...”

“Like it was at home ...”

“Yeah, like it was at home,” Karly said with real fury. “Why wouldn’t I be drawn to something like that? Why wouldn’t I want to have a life like that, full of smiles and laughter and joy? I’ve been soaking this stuff in since I was tiny, Tammy, and as soon as I had it all figured out I was determined that this was what I was going to get for myself come heck or high water. I’ve been holding on, looking toward the eventual goal that I’d get out of the house and lead a good Christian life and *at last* find happiness and contentment.”

With her chin stuck out like she was ready to fight the world, Karly said, “And yeah, I don’t think my parents are good Christians! My mother hasn’t managed to say *one positive thing to me* my entire life. She’s probably one of the unhappiest people I know. Same with my father. He’s been miserable for as long as I can remember. You’re telling me *that’s* what being a Christian is all about?”

Tammy shook her head and looked grave. “Don’t judge. Unless you’ve walked in a person’s shoes, lived a person’s life, and know a person’s innermost heart, you *cannot* ever presume to know what they are all about. Only God has the ability to do that.” Tammy took Karly’s hand and

gripped it tightly, “Karly, this life we’re living is *hard*. There are sorrows and difficulties and pain and sickness that *destroy* us. *Kill* us. We’re a selfish, fickle, unfaithful lot, we human beings. We think we’re better than God! We think we have better answers and smarter solutions and despite reams and reams and reams of advice given to us, think we can make better choices on our own than with God’s guidance. *We are so unbelievably self - important!* Yet, God loves us anyway. Talk about unconditional love! He sent His Son to *die* for us, to take *all the blame* for all the *lousy, horrible, wicked* things we manage to do on a daily basis.” She leaned in to make sure that Karly was focusing on her and what she was saying. “And do you know the only thing we have to do to be *good Christians*, Karly? The only single, solitary thing we’ve got to do is *believe* in Him. We’ve got to believe that we’re sinners, believe that Christ is God’s son, believe that He died to take the blame for our sins and then was victorious over death, and believe that Jesus is the only way for us to get to heaven.

“That’s it. Nothing else. The Bible says we can’t be ‘good’ by doing lots of works, or by giving lots of money, or by speaking fancy, flowery words, or by smiling all the time. We just have to believe. Have you done that? Have you given over the control and destiny of your entire life to Christ? Or have you been trying to steer it? Have you really committed your life to Christ, or are you dealing with some artificial image of what you should and shouldn’t be and working toward that goal all on your own? You’ll never find contentment and never please God until you turn your life over to Him.”

Tammy gave Karly a huge grin. “And you know what? Once we believe, and we turn ourselves over to Him, we still have to deal with this *hard* life. We still get dragged down, we still make mistakes, we still cry, we still hurt, and we still disappoint God. But He never gives up on us. Like the most loving of parents, He is always there, always forgiving, always willing to give advice or support if we only ask for it. We are God’s children. He’s our loving mother *and* father. It is the only sure thing in this life, the only real example of unconditional love, the only safe haven when things are *really bad*.”

Tammy glared at Karly. “But don’t you dare judge yourself, *or me*, based on the load of garbage you just spouted about what a good Christian is. *Don’t you dare*. You’re doomed to failure before you even begin. Talk about a recipe for disaster! Good grief, Karly ...

“I don’t have any concrete proof, but I personally think that the bad parts of life sometimes become more alluring once you make that decision to walk in the light and not in the dark. But that just could be my own personal struggle.” Tammy gave Karly a wry smile.

Karly put her head on Tammy’s shoulder. “Thanks for all this.”

She felt Tammy shrug. “That’s what friends are for. It’s a corny saying but it’s very true. I couldn’t let you spend these two weeks we’ve got in silence without facing some important stuff. Let this make you stronger, better, wiser. Don’t let it destroy you. Don’t lose all the good things that God has given you.” She hesitated. “*I won’t let you, Karly*. You shine, you know. You’ve got beauty inside and out. *People are drawn to you*. You may not be aware of it, but when you walk into a room the entire room becomes different because of your presence. God has given you many, many gifts and I believe He has great plans for you.” Tammy laughed. “I’m not saying you have to rush right back into the land of the living, but I’m telling you that whatever you do, don’t you dare give up on

God. You stay focused. You spend time grieving. You work at healing all of these atrocious hurts that you have. You take a good hard look at your life and organize and take stock. But then you make sure that you continue on the path that God has set before you. To be a teacher. To be a missionary. To be a woman after God's own heart. Don't you dare let what happened between you and Paul convince you that you are not a 'good enough Christian' to continue on with your plans. There isn't *one* Biblical man or woman who was perfect and without sin. *Not one*. Jeeze! David was an adulterer! Rahab was a whore! Judah got his own daughter – in - law pregnant! Martha worried all the time!" She all of a sudden looked sheepish. "Sorry, you're getting a sermon here, aren't you?"

Karly gave her a small grin. "And I thought you didn't like to preach."

"One - on - one I'm okay."

"I get what you're saying."

"Do you?" Tammy said earnestly to her. "Really? Because, you see, that's what almost happened to me. I spent about six months just lost. In limbo. I convinced myself I was so obviously *not* minister material after that time that I didn't know what to do with myself. It's the worst feeling in the world to give up on your God - given dreams. Just stand up, brush yourself off, and say, 'Okay. *Well let's not make that mistake again!*' and move on.

"It would be a truly sinful loss if you decided not to be a missionary because of this, Karly. There is *nothing*, and I mean *nothing* that should keep you from that goal. You should be praying about all this stuff 24/7. Are you doing that? Do you spend time in prayer and thought regarding God and His purpose for you daily? *You must if you want to succeed. You must if you want to know what God wants for you and your life.*"

Tammy laughed a soft laugh, seeming to remember some private joke. "If you don't spend time in prayer, listening carefully to God's still small voice, He sometimes has other ways of getting your attention. Like letting you steer your life right into a brick wall. Dump all of this into God's lap, your problems, your shortcomings, your hopes, your dreams, your worries, your fears, and say, 'Here, I can't do it by myself. I'm all Yours, Lord. Every good and bad part. Use me, guide me, and change me to be the person You want me to be. I'll follow wherever You lead, just point the way.

"He loves you. He wants a relationship with you. That's all He requires of you. Just drag yourself over to Him and say, 'Help.'"

Karly spent the second week at Tammy's cabin on the beautiful Outer Banks of North Carolina almost as silently as the first week, but not as numb. She did a lot of thinking and forced herself to take a good hard look at the reality of her life. And the reality was that she had been in love with Paul but she knew, *bad known*, that he didn't return the same level of emotion back. How many times had she visited his family and watched the interplay between Paul's parents and *longed* for that same connection between her and Paul? *You only long for things that you didn't already have.*

The frantic desire she continually felt to make him happy, make him love her, *make him see* the way things were between them loomed up before her just like a glaring recipe for imminent *disaster*. Just why had she had to work so hard? For almost four years Karly had done everything in her power to be good enough, happy enough, loving enough for both herself and Paul. Good grief. Between trying to keep the perfect girlfriend plate spinning and the perfect good Christian plate

spinning it's a wonder she was still functioning at all! Why had it been necessary to turn herself inside out, compromise her values, justify her beliefs, battle to find the ever-illusory acceptable middle ground that could keep everyone satisfied? The truth of the matter was just what Paul had said to her years ago. *You're good enough for both of us, Babe. Keep up the great work.* And Karly had tried to love enough for both of them, too. And look where that had gotten her.

As their final week ended, Karly was able to have brief flashes of an emotion that had long escaped her: peace. Suddenly, the future that stretched out before her no longer seemed so frenetic. She fell asleep at night pondering the course of her next step rather than organizing battle strategies for upcoming skirmishes. Sitting in the rocking chair on the porch watching the sky dim into night, she found herself, for the first time in her life, seriously praying: asking forgiveness, appreciating all she had been blessed with and requesting continual guidance. Maybe, just maybe, she really was going to survive this ...

Karly's prayers were not big fancy impressive minister prayers, but quiet, hesitant, sometimes fumbling-for-words prayers. Sometimes her prayers almost had a conversational dialogue about them rather than the formality of the by rote, 'let me dazzle you with my eloquence' prayers she had grown up on. She found that her relationship with God took on a different perspective: it became more personal, more tangible, and more accessible. God no longer seemed to be the imposing and authoritative presence she always imagined Him to be when she attended church. He became a friend and confidante, someone who had created the beautiful flowers and the particularly odd sand crabs that she saw on the beach. Heck, if God loved her as much as Tammy said, *and He knew more about her shortcomings and abject failures than even her mother knew*, then He had to be unbelievably tolerant and forgiving. Didn't He?

The cabin had lots of traditions, Karly learned. (Tammy said 'traditions' sounded better than 'rules'.) As they began to prepare to leave, the traditions came out in force. It had to be left spotlessly clean, fully stocked (gas for the generator, water in the solar tank, chemicals in the toilet), beds stripped, and sheets and towels ready for the next person. Other less obvious traditions included the purchasing of new books for the next visitor, making sure non-perishable items such as coffee and tea and canned goods were readily available and the dusting of every corner and floorboard with baby powder (kept the mice away and the smell of mold down). "Hey, wouldn't you figure?" Tammy burst out onto the porch as Karly shook out the numerous throw rugs that were scattered throughout the cabin. "I just got my period three days early. Thought I'd have time to go get supplies before it hit. Do you have anything with you? I'm desperate -" Tammy stopped and looked intently at Karly. "Hey, what's wrong? Are you okay?" Tammy came to stand next to Karly and reached out to touch her bare arm. "What? *Talk to me ...*"

"I, I ... I haven't had my period in a while."

"No biggie. I'll just run into town then."

"I thought it was because of all the stress and strain surrounding the wedding ..."

"Yeah, that's probably it. You've been through major stuff these last few months."

"Tammy, we never used protection."

"WHAT?!"

“I was a good Christian girl, Tam. I didn’t need to think about birth control because I wasn’t going to need it.”

“And Paul ...?”

Karly shrugged. “We never discussed it. I know it’s stupid. I can’t tell you why.”

Tammy swallowed. “Got any symptoms?”

“My breasts are tender, but that often happens before I get my period. I’ve had cramps the last few days thinking my period was going to start any day now ...”

“Maybe I’ll pick up a home pregnancy test while I’m at the pharmacy, huh?” Tammy said quietly.

“Oh, God, Tammy ...”

“Don’t go catatonic on me yet. Let’s get the facts straight first. How late are you?”

Karly had to think and then was aghast at what she realized. “I’m at least five weeks late!” Her voice raised in panic.

Tammy grabbed her arm and dragged her back in and through the cabin. “Come for the ride with me. It’s better than sitting here by yourself slowly going nuts.”

They got home and sat on the front porch in the big rockers reading the detailed instructions on how to do a home pregnancy test. “It says first morning urine is optimal, but not required. What do you think?” Tammy asked.

“Let’s do it now. I don’t think I can wait until morning. There are two tests in the package anyway. If this one’s ... negative, well then I can always do the second one first thing in the morning.”

Fifteen minutes later the two of them stood side - by - side at the kitchen sink staring at the indicator strip on the test stick in absolute silence. Tammy reached over and took Karly’s hand and sighed. “Dear Lord,” she said out loud in a voice filled with firm resolve, “please be with Karly and this baby she’s carrying. Keep them both healthy and strong throughout this pregnancy and continue to guide Karly through this next difficult phase of her life. Help Karly to remain firmly within your protective embrace and trusting in You completely.”

A baby. *A baby.* Wasn’t her life in enough turmoil without this? Driving home, Karly stared at the window and felt bitterness rise up in her throat. What a joke. Wasn’t it just yesterday that she was thinking that she was finally beginning to feel at peace? Did she actually entertain the thought that her life was calm enough – at last – so she could begin to plan what she was going to do next?

Oh God. *Oh, God ...*

Karly must have moaned out loud, for Tammy said suddenly, “Don’t fall apart on me. My mother used to say, “The Lord never gives you more than you can handle.”” Karly looked at Tammy like she was absolutely insane. “Are you going to tell Paul?”

“No.”

“Why? It’s his responsibility, too. I’m not disagreeing with your answer, mind you. You’ve got some time to think, but eventually, like it or not, everyone will know about this. I know your head is all in a whirl right now – I can’t imagine it being anything else – but if you want to keep control of this whole situation, you better make sure your decisions are all based on sound, rational

reasons.” Tammy glanced at her for a moment and then looked back at the traffic in front of them. “I’m thinking of your parents mostly, your mother in particular.”

“Oh, God, my mother …” she put her face in her hands. “Just drop me off on the side of the road here. I can’t face her. *I can’t.*”

“Maybe they’ll surprise you.”

“Have you learned *anything* about me and my family over the course of our friendship?”

Tammy sighed. “Yeah. I have. I know for a fact that you being good and perfect hasn’t made your mother happy. Maybe being *human* and all the disasters and mistakes that comes along with that quality is something your mother can more easily deal with now.”

Karly shook her head. “You’re crazy. You have absolutely no clue.”

Tammy shrugged. “You’re probably right. What was I just saying a few days ago? Unless you walk in a person’s shoes and live her life you can’t presume to judge? No one knows better than you about your situation right now.”

“Now you’re being sarcastic.”

Tammy laughed. “No, no, really I’m not! I didn’t mean it to sound that way if it did. Honest.” After long moments of silence, she said, “I think you should tell your family sooner rather than later. No sense sitting on this time bomb and going insane over the stress of it.”

“What, I just show up and say, ‘Hi Mom, Hi Dad, I’m no longer catatonic, now I’m pregnant?’”

Karly’s good friend shrugged. “Works for me. They’re going to be on pins and needles waiting for us to show up tomorrow anyway, wondering what state you’re in. Got a better idea?”

“No. No, I don’t.”

For the rest of the ride Karly tried not to think. There was no topic she could safely venture towards that the baby and her current situation didn’t color with an unwelcome shade of imminent catastrophe.

Once again, the circumstances of her life overwhelmed her.

It was time to put a stop to that.