

Chapter Eight

I needed to take a break from standing over Isabelle's bed and that need to step away from my daughter stirred up a thick batch of guilt inside of me. Guilt was a close friend of Fear's and he'd become an unwanted next-door neighbor to me. I was getting used to him lounging around on his front porch, smelly cigar in one hand and a beer in the other, watching my every move, waiting for the chance to waggle his finger at me and say, *Uh, uh, uh, a good mother wouldn't do that.*

I walked the hospital hallways in search of some sign of change that might have occurred in the last hour, but the rooms still housed the same patients, the nurses still poured over their charts, and a doctor buzzed through every now and then wearing the same hurried expression. I had secretly hoped during my ten, sometimes fifteen, minute breaks that I would round the corner of the ICU to Room No. 2 and there would be a flurry of activity around Isabelle's bed. Nurses would claim a miracle as they touched her tiny body, doctors with stethoscopes would shake their heads in blissful bewilderment, and someone would cheer, *The baby is awake! And there appears to be no signs of brain damage.*

Word had spread quickly about Isabelle, and I received dozens of e-mails on my Blackberry from my inner and outer circles. My two best friends, Jen and Marti, knew what a private person I was and they text messaged me every couple of hours for updates. I didn't have much to tell them, but I appreciated that they knew me well enough to know not to call. And they were respectful of the fact that I had asked security not to allow visitors into the ICU other than family members. The security request was a last minute grasp for control of something,

anything. But somehow they managed to screw that up. Maybe it was an oversight. Maybe it was a mistake. Later I would wonder if the visitor that came that day was sent to me as something more.

I made my way to the large family waiting area where there was a television, refrigerator, couches, chairs, and piles of outdated magazines. I had just found a spot in the corner, leaned up against a cream-colored wall, when Hilary, a woman I barely knew from the real estate office, entered through the double doors. She carried a giant wicker basket filled with crackers, cookies, and bottles of water. As Hilary approached, I felt a “POP!” and I knew that the protective bubble I’d spent the morning surrounding myself with was gone. So much for the imaginary shield that had allowed me for the last two days to totter along, partially absent, not fully seeing or comprehending the tragedy unfolding before me.

“Hi Amy,” she said, her voice soft but, thankfully, not pitying. She set the basket by my side. Hilary was a pretty girl with a short blonde bob, probably in her early thirties like me, and always wearing the most perfectly applied lipstick of anyone I knew. At that moment it annoyed me that she wore lipstick when I hadn’t even bothered to brush my hair in two days. Hilary was an acquaintance with whom I’d only exchanged a handful of words during the past two years. She worked in the title department, and every now and then when I had a closing, she was the facilitator.

I became aware of words coming from her: “. . .and I don’t know what to do in this situation. I’m afraid nothing I say will be of much comfort,” Hilary’s lips said to me, “but I’d like to pray with you. That’s all I know to do right now.”

Seriously? My mind snapped to attention. *Pray?* I looked into her green eyes and felt shock, embarrassment, anger, and a sense of surrealism rumble through me, the beginnings of an earthquake. Would this be a good time to tell her I despised God? I wanted to suggest that she pray to him by herself. He might listen to her. But the Minnesota Nice got the best of me and I rose to my feet, reluctantly taking her little hand. I wasn’t so upset that she’d somehow weaseled her way past security or that she’d brought the basket of treats. I was more peeved that she’d brought *Him* with her. As far as I was concerned, God had no place in the hospital or anywhere in my life again.

Chad materialized by my side and formed a circle with Hilary and me. My hands were sweaty as he took one palm and Hilary squeezed

the other. I glanced up to see Chad's head bowed slightly, so I bowed mine too. Hilary spoke loudly like she didn't care about anyone else in the room but the people she held hands with, and Isabelle, a baby she'd never even met. She said things like "Dear God," "Almighty Jesus," and "Precious Lord" with such emphasis and passion that I felt tremors roll through me.

I stared at the white, speckled linoleum floor tiles and watched as each tear hit the ground—from my eyes, from Chad's eyes, and from Hilary's eyes. Hilary prayed that God would make the doctors "especially keen" the next day when Isabelle was scheduled to have her MRI to determine the extent of her brain injuries. Hilary was a small girl with a sweet personality and an even sweeter smile, but there was nothing particularly soft-spoken about her prayer style. No, she was resolute and determined, like she really believed in this higher power, and when she practically shouted, "Lord, we know that in our weakness God's strength is made perfect," the words shook my very foundation, rattling my windows and banging my doors.

My eyes, which had closed sometime during her prayer, flickered open, and aftershocks rolled through my arms and legs as I repeated that sentence in my head: "In our weakness God's strength is made perfect?" *Really. Is it really? And how?* I tried to develop a mental picture of what *our weakness* and *God's strength* looked like, but images failed me. I felt it, though. I felt my weakness, and as my hand tightened around Hilary's, I felt the intensity of God's strength radiate through to the epicenter of my body. I recognized the feeling from the day in the Petco parking lot, when I had planned to end my life.

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