

## fifteen

Annalisa heard Tim coming down the hallway long before she saw him.

He burst through the swinging kitchen door. “Annalisa!” He threw his arms around her waist as if he hadn’t seen her just last night.

“Tim, you look like you slept well.” She squeezed the boy tightly.

Aunt Gertie entered the room at a calmer pace. “He slept like a log. Not sure I’d have agreed to share a room with him last night, though, if y’all had told me how he snored.”

Tim jerked away from Annalisa and stared at the elderly woman with wide eyes. Annalisa stifled a giggle when Aunt Gertie gave the boy a broad wink.

His endearing grin quickly reappeared. “You’re teasing me.”

“So I am.”

“Where’s Mr. Cade?”

Tim’s question was a natural one, but Annalisa hadn’t thought it through. She glanced at Aunt Gertie and silently pleaded with her to offer a plausible explanation.

The older woman placed her hand on Tim’s head. “He had to run to Little Rock this morning, but he left me in charge of you. He said you’d help me in the garden.”

George and Marta walked in the back door as Gertie was speaking, followed by Matthew and Juan.

“I didn’t know Cade was going to Little Rock today,” George said.

Annalisa nodded. Cade had told her to explain the situation to the Winemillers, but she'd wait until after breakfast when the children weren't around.

The subject quickly lost appeal as both George and Marta greeted Tim warmly. After they were satisfied he was okay, he ran to hug Matthew, who returned the embrace with a relieved smile. Tim started to throw his arms around Juan, but the teen stepped back and held up his hand instead. He grinned at Tim's enthusiastic high-five, though.

After George thanked God for the food, everyone but Annalisa and Aunt Gertie tore into the biscuits and eggs with abandon. Annalisa looked at the clock and caught Aunt Gertie's understanding gaze. It was time for Cade's appointment right now.

*Dear God, whatever it takes. . . please don't let Cade lose Tim. She hesitated. Unless it's your will for Tim's life, Lord. In Jesus' name, amen.*

"—and anyway, I didn't think a dumb old pillow would hurt you. And neither did Matthew." Juan's words were belligerent but his tone was apologetic. "You did start it, Tim."

"It wasn't cause y'all hit me with pillows, anyway, Juan. It was an asthma attack. I used to have them at home." Tim's words faded away as he obviously thought of unhappy times.

"You're right about one thing, Juan." George's stern voice was tempered with love. "You boys shouldn't have been playing with Marta's new pillows. She went to a lot of trouble making those."

*She hand-stuffed them with feathers herself.* George's words from an hour or so before Tim's first attack resounded in Annalisa's head.

"Were you pillow-fighting when you began having trouble breathing, Tim?" Annalisa asked the question casually.

His mouth full of eggs, he nodded.

George started talking about the horses. Annalisa laid her fork down and quietly excused herself from the table.



“Good morning, Mr. McFadden. I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.”

Waiting? She’d had him cooling his heels for an hour, after he’d risen with the chickens in order to be here at her appointed time.

He forced a polite nod. He couldn’t afford to allow his irritation to show.

“As you know I asked you here because of the phone call I received from the Randolph County Emergency Room last night. When we approved your contract for the boys’ ranch, I had serious doubts and now. . .”

Cade’s cell phone rang. He froze. A quick glance at the caller ID told him it was the ranch. They wouldn’t call right now unless it was an emergency.

“Can you excuse me for one minute? I have to take this.” Cade offered a conciliatory smile and backed out of the room, clutching his phone. As soon as he was in the hallway, he answered, “Hello?”

“Cade, it’s me. Guess what Tim and the boys were doing right before the asthma attack?”

“Annalisa, I’m in the middle of the meeting.”

“I know! This is important.”

“They were grooming the horses and feeding them hay. We’ve been over this.”

“Yeah, well, Tim left out one little detail. What they were doing right before the attack was fighting with Marta’s new pillows. Her feather-stuffed pillows.”

“Feather pillows?” Cade knew he sounded boggled, but

this information was astonishing. Here was the element Dr. Johannsen had been looking for.

“And that’s not all. Marta had just done her decorating the day before Tim’s first attack at the ranch.”

“Perfect, Annalisa. I’ll call you later.”

Cade walked back into the meeting with a much better attitude. “I have some news concerning Tim’s asthma attack yesterday.”

As he explained about the pillow fight, the stern-faced woman nodded. “I had asthma myself when I was young. I used to have an attack every time I spent the night with Aunt Betty. We finally figured out that while our pillows were foam, hers were stuffed with feathers. It made all the difference.” With a stiff nod, she stood and extended her hand. “I’m sorry to have taken up your time. You may as well know I felt I had no choice but to take Tim out of your care. I still think that ranch of yours is a risky proposition, but it looks like this time you’re off the hook.”

Cade shook her hand and left the office quickly. When he stepped out into the bright sunshine, he decided to walk to Holt’s office.

At the first street corner, there was a display of brochures for the upcoming State Fair. He picked up a flyer and thought of how excited the boys would be if he could take them. How wonderful to be going home to all three boys, including Tim. He’d been so afraid he was going to lose the child. . . first at the hospital, then this morning in that meeting. Was that how Annalisa had been feeling for seven years?

He yanked up his cell phone and quickly dialed. “Ronnie? Remember that case I mentioned to you?”

“You mean the one that was seven years old?”

“Yes, that would be it.”

Cade held his breath. If Ronnie had found nothing, he would be under no obligation to Annalisa.

“You’re always trying to stump me, Boss. But you’ll have to try again.”

“You found her?”

“Easy as pie. That little girl’s still in the system.”

“She’s never been adopted?” Cade stopped walking and sank down on a corner bench.

“Not yet, but almost. Seems the father had been on again, off again in the girl’s life, but he died a few months ago. The same family has had her from the time the state took her. They’re about to make the adoption final.”

Cade felt like his chest had been encased in concrete, making it impossible for him to breathe. Amy hadn’t been adopted. Annalisa could probably claim her. But at what price? “You have the foster parents’ info?”

“Sure thing. Hang on.” As he heard the rustling papers through the phone line, Cade grimaced at the memory of Ronnie’s cluttered desk. In spite of his employee’s disorganization, the PI certainly knew his business. “Here it is.”

Cade plucked a pen from his shirt pocket and turned the fair brochure over. He quickly jotted down the name and address in the margin.

He said good-bye, closed the little phone, and slipped it in his pocket. Lost in thought, he hardly noticed the gold-domed capitol building until he was almost past it. If Holt hadn’t been expecting him, he’d have turned around and walked back to his vehicle.

When he reached his brother’s office, Holt was on the phone. The senator waved his oldest brother into a chair and grinned. “Good to see you,” he mouthed.

Cade nodded, but as Holt discussed Senate business with a

concerned constituent, Cade's mind drifted back to Annalisa and Amy. There was no easy answer.

"I said, you look like you've got the weight of the world on your shoulders."

Cade realized with a start that Holt had ended his phone conversation and was addressing him. "I'm sorry."

"You've got it bad, don't you?" Holt grinned.

"Yes, I probably do." Cade grimaced. "But that's not what's wrong."

"She doesn't feel the same way."

"I don't know." He realized that wasn't true. "Yes, I think she does. But there's more to it than that."

He gave Holt a condensed version of Annalisa's past and his current dilemma.

All traces of amusement vanished from Holt's face. "That's tough, Bro."

"Yeah." Cade brushed his hand across his face.

"Don't you think Annalisa would see that Amy is better off with the family she's known when it came down to it?"

"You've never seen such determination."

"Hmm. . . That's saying a lot coming from a McFadden."

"She makes us look like a bunch of quitters, Holt."

"What are you going to do?"

His brother's question lingered in the air. He didn't know the answer. "Pray."

"So will I."

"Thanks."

"Are you going to go see the foster parents?"

"Yes. I'm going to go this afternoon."

"Let me buy you lunch first?"

"You sure you've got time for a poor old cowboy like me?"

Holt glared at his brother. "Get real."

In spite of his bad mood, Cade smiled. He knew Holt despised it when his family insinuated he'd sold out to the glamorous world of politics. And, of course, they never could resist ribbing him about it.

Instead, he and Holt spent lunch talking and laughing about the antics of Cade's "boys" and Holt's colleagues. They studiously avoided the topic of Annalisa's sister. But all too soon, lunch was over.

Cade left Holt at the capitol steps and walked back to his car. He slid into the driver's seat and his troubled heart cried out for help to the only One who could give it.

*Lord, please show me Your will in this. I'm confused and helpless. Guide my steps in Your way, please. In Jesus' name, amen.*