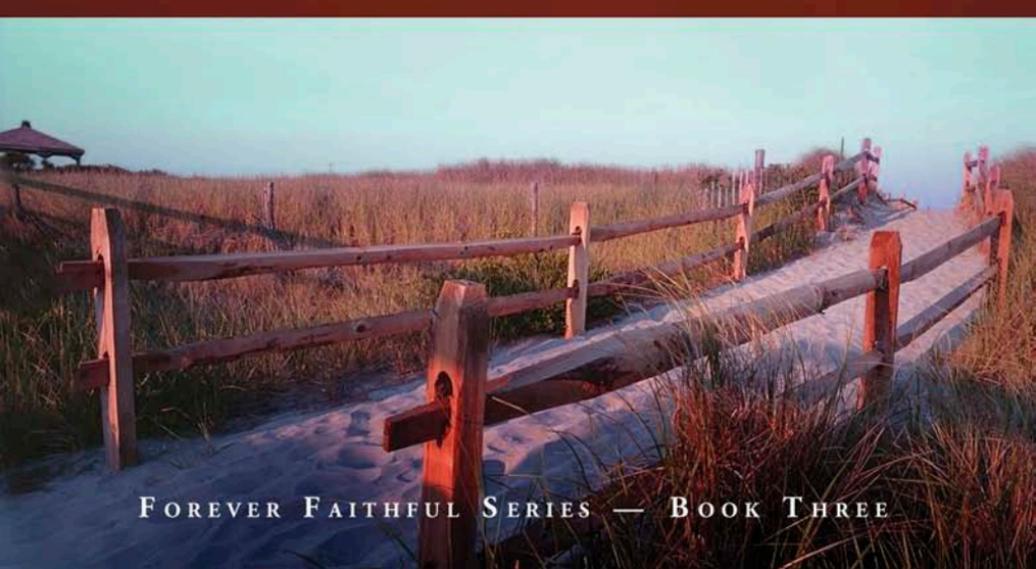




A story of
heartache and hope.

KAREN NEW YORK TIMES
BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
KINGSBURY

HALFWAY *to* FOREVER



FOREVER FAITHFUL SERIES — BOOK THREE

BOOK THREE
FOREVER FAITHFUL

Halfway
to Forever

KAREN
KINGSBURY

Multnomah® Publishers Sisters, Oregon

This book is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

HALFWAY TO FOREVER

Published by Multnomah Books

A division of Random House, Inc.

© 2002 by Karen Kingsbury

Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc.

7680 Goddard St., Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920

International Standard Book Number: 978-1-57673-899-3

Cover images by Getty Images

Cover design by The DesignWorks Group

Excerpts from the hymn GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS by Thomas O. Chisholm © 1923, Ren. 1951 Hope Publishing Company, Carol Stream, IL 60188.

All rights reserved. International copyright secured. Used by Permission.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from:

The Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV)

© 1973, 1984 by International Bible Society,

used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House

Multnomah and its mountain colophon are registered trademarks
of Random House Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission.

For information:

MULTNOMAH BOOKS • 12265 ORACLE BOULEVARD, SUITE 200
COLORADO SPRINGS, CO 80921

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kingsbury, Karen.

Halfway to forever / Karen Kingsbury.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-57673-899-X (pbk.)

1. Adoption—Fiction. 2. Pregnant women—Fiction. 3. Brain—Cancer—Patients—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3561.14873 H35 2002

813'.54—dc21

2001007865

Dedicated to...

DONALD, MY KNIGHT in shining armor, my one true love. Can this really be our fourteenth anniversary? Years slip by like hours in a day, but I cherish every one. With you by my side the best keeps getting better, and I thank God that you are such an example to me, to our children, to your students and athletes. Thank you for being my best friend and for believing in forever. Aren't we having a blast? Year after year after year after year... I love you so.

Kelsey, my sweet little "Norm" who has long since shed her little-girl image and traded it in for the look of a young teen on the brink of everything new and wonderful and exciting. You're busy these days, sweetheart, but it does my mother-heart good to know you still remember who you are: a child of God, a daughter, a sister, a student, a friend. I cherish the times we have together even more now that you are in middle school, because in the distant corridors of time I see you, not too very far from here, in a cap and gown. I can't slow the ride, but I can be grateful for every minute, knowing full well that God's plans for you will be nothing less than amazing. I am so proud of you, honey. Always remember that I love you, Kelsey.

Tyler, my handsome, budding young writer. I love when you tell me you're going to act and sing when you grow up—but in your spare time you might write for fun. I guess that's all writing is, after all: fun. The way God intended His gifts to be. I will long remember your "one voice" ringing out across the school's Veteran's Day assembly. May God lead you to always be that one voice ringing out for Him, and may His plans for your life become more evident with each passing year. I love you, Ty.

Austin (or Michael Jordan, depending on the moment). This

past year I have watched you take giant steps away from babyhood and into the strong, strapping young boy you are becoming. I will never forget sitting on the edge of your bed that September evening before your fourth birthday, singing with you, kissing you goodnight, and saying good-bye to my three-year-old. You're not my baby anymore, but you are still my miracle boy. The heart that beats within you is fully devoted—whether slamming a basketball through a net or singing songs for Jesus. Keep that, honey, as God's spectacular plans for your life unfold. Keep it always. I love you, Austin.

EJ, our youngest Haitian son. Adopting you has blessed us beyond words. We have watched you grow from a shy, insecure little boy to a confident, goal-kicking, letter-sounding, smiling child with no limits to your potential. God definitely brought you into our lives for a reason, and I am grateful every day. I can't wait to see what He has planned for you. I love you, EJ.

Sean, our half-angel boy. When we brought you home from Haiti you made an instant place in our hearts for one reason—you were constantly praying to Jesus. Even now, when we give you a present, you drop to your knees and thank God for the giver. When we give you a meal, you won't take a bite—no matter how hungry you are—until proper thanks has been given. And when you finish eating you look to the heavens and say, "Thank you, Jesus." You told me recently that you would grow up and get a good job one day so you could give me and Daddy some money because we'd helped you so much. With teary eyes I told you that wasn't necessary, just love Jesus all your life, Sean. And as God reveals His plan for you, I am convinced that will always be the best advice I could give you. I love you, Sean.

Joshua, chosen by God for our family. When I went to Haiti to adopt your two best friends, I didn't know about you. But you worked your way into my heart in minutes with your sweet songs

for Jesus and your sad little smile. How wonderful God is to bring you into our family this past September. You are brilliant at everything you do, from reading, to those soccer foot skills that would make any teenager envious. At six years old you clearly have a great desire to do things right, a determined spirit that will take you far, and a compassion for others that makes you a natural leader. Always remember where your gifts come from...and that God has very special plans for you. I love you, Joshua.

And to God Almighty, my Lord and Savior, the Author of Life, who has—for now—blessed me with these.

Acknowledgments

SO MUCH GOES into the writing of any single book. I couldn't possibly move on to my next project without stopping to thank the people who have made this one possible. First, and foremost, it is my great pleasure to thank God who has given me the gift of writing. I am amazed at the letters pouring in from my readers, letters that prove God is changing lives with the gift of story—just as He did when Jesus walked this Earth. I pray I always use His gift in a way that touches hearts and glorifies God.

Also, thanks to my wonderful husband and children, who understand when life goes on hold because Mommy has a deadline. Donald, you have the most uncanny ability to pick up where I leave off when I need a little extra help. “Thanks” doesn't come close. In addition, thanks to my extended family, many of whom tirelessly continue to spread the word about my novels. I am grateful for each of you.

Beyond family, there are those friends who have prayed for me, supported me, and listened to me discuss story ideas. In that light, a special thanks to Sylvia Wallgren and Ann Hudson, my personal prayer warriors, without whom none of this would ever happen. And to those special friends and sisters in Christ who have made such a faithful impact on my life. You know who you are.

A sincere thanks to Amber Santiago, my dear friend and personal assistant. You have a golden voice, the best I've ever heard. You could be performing for all the world, yet instead you spend each day taking care of my sweet Austin and overseeing dozens of other tasks that make my writing possible. May God bless you for your servant-heart. And to Jenna Hiller who stepped in and helped with our six children during crunch time.

When researching a novel, I often call on experts. For this book and several others I want to thank Bryce Cleary, M.D., and Attorney Stan Kaputska for their valuable insight. Also my father, Ted Kingsbury, who often takes an hour from his morning to brainstorm ideas with me.

Once a novel is written, there are still many people who take it to the next level—the place where you, the reader, receive it. For that reason, a special thanks goes to my agent Greg Johnson and the folks at Alive Communications. I am continually awestruck by your talent, Greg, and humbly blessed that I have the chance to partner with you in bringing these books into being.

Also, thanks to my editor, Karen Ball. Each time you edit a book it's like taking a class from the very best in fiction writing. You are so good at what you do, Karen. Thanks for rubbing a little of your incredible talent on my books. And thanks to Julee Schwarzburg, Chad Hicks, Steve Curley, and Lisa Bowden, who champion my work with the great people at Multnomah Publishers. All of you at Multnomah are like family to me, and always will be. Thanks for taking a chance on me four years ago. In addition, thanks to Joan Westfall, who always does an amazing job on my final edit. I'm blessed to have your help.

A huge thanks to Kirk DouPonce, the brilliantly gifted man who designs my covers. I can only pray that people *do* judge my books by my covers, and that in the end the story measures up. Thank you for offering your best work on behalf of mine.

Finally, thanks to the Skyview Basketball team, you hustling, runnin', gunnin' guys—for giving me a reason to cheer, even on deadline.

Hannah Bronzan rarely visited the cemetery. The grassy knolls and quiet, sad whispers were not necessary for her to remember Tom and Alicia, because they did not live in the confines of a garden of stone, but in Hannah's heart.

Where they would always live.

But on this day, Hannah climbed out of the car, slipped on her sunglasses, and gazed across a sea of cold, gray tombstones. Her heart ached as she drew a slow, shaky breath.

Much as she didn't want to be here, it was time. Despite the emotions warring within her, Hannah knew she had no choice. She needed to come now, just as she'd needed to come two years ago when Matt Bronzan asked her to be his wife.

By then she had grieved the loss of her first husband, and with a strength that was not her own, she'd survived. Enough to tell Matt yes, to believe there was indeed a new life for her and young Jenny on the other side of a darkness and pain that had nearly destroyed them both.

Coming here had been difficult back then too, but it had given her a chance to say good-bye to Tom, to thank him for all they'd shared, and to release him. To let die a flame she thought would burn forever. Hannah set her gaze in the direction of their tombstones and pulled her sweater tighter.

Her eyes welled up. Now it was time to let go of Alicia.

This was a private moment—one she needed to share with

Tom and Alicia alone. Regardless of shaded grounds, the glasses would stay. She walked amidst the markers, her fingers brushing against an occasional cold stone as she made her way across the cemetery to the place where their markers lay, side by side.

Her eyes drifted from one to the other. *Dr. Thomas J. Ryan...Alicia Marie Ryan.* The birth dates were different, but the date of death was the same: *August 28, 1998.*

A lump formed in Hannah's throat, and she swallowed hard as she knelt down, sitting back on her heels. She wiped an errant tear from her cheek... Alicia would have been nineteen, finished with high school and making her way through college. In love, perhaps, or dreaming of a career.

Alicia. I miss you, baby...

It was harder to picture them now, harder to see the crisp definition in her mind's scrapbook...how Tom's eyes sparkled when she was in his arms, or the way Alicia's smile lit up a room...

They'd lost so much in one terrible moment. A drunk driver, an awful collision...and the life she and Tom had spent years building was shattered.

Hannah exhaled, and the sound mingled with the breeze. *You can do this.* She squeezed her eyes shut, searching for the strength to move ahead. She and Matt had worked out the plans for more than a year. It was the right thing, she was sure of that much. Even now, with sadness covering her heart like a blanket, she could feel the excitement welling within her, convincing her that somehow, sometime soon, it would happen.

She would be a mother again.

"Hi..." She set her fingertips on Alicia's tombstone and dusted off a layer of dirt. "I have something to tell you."

A crow sounded in the distance. This visit was for peace of mind and nothing more. Hannah's precious oldest daughter would never have questioned her intentions, never have doubted her

place in Hannah's heart. Her fingers stopped moving and settled over Alicia's name.

"Matt and I have decided to...to adopt a little girl." Her voice broke, and from behind her sunglasses tears trickled down her face and dripped off her chin.

She waited until she could find her voice. "After...after the accident I couldn't imagine ever loving another man," Hannah wiped the back of her hand across her wet chin. "Or another daughter." A sound that was part laugh, part sob slipped from her lips. "But here I am, happy, married, and...convinced God has another daughter for me somewhere out there."

The traffic hummed from the road behind her. "You understand, right, Alicia? I'm not trying to...to replace you, honey." She sniffed. "The bond you and I shared, the one you and Jenny shared, that's something none of us will ever have again. Not like it was."

Hannah paused and gazed up, willing herself to see beyond the blue to the place where Tom and Alicia now lived and loved and laughed.

Gradually her eyes shifted back to the tombstones. "I saw a documentary last night about kids in America, kids waiting for someone to love them, and...I don't know...something inside me snapped." She shrugged and managed a smile despite the fresh tears on her cheeks. "I can't have more babies. We've known that since Jenny was born. But adoption?" She sniffed. "I wasn't sure I could do it...until last night. Then, all of a sudden, I knew. I *could* open my heart to another little girl."

The background noise faded. Hannah traced the A in Alicia's name, pushing away the dirt that had gathered there. "We'll adopt a toddler, someone who needs a second chance at life." She blinked, and two more tears slid off the tip of her nose onto Alicia's stone. "I don't know where she is...or who she is. But I

know she's out there somewhere. And I wanted you to know bec—

There was a catch in Hannah's voice, and she held the sobs at bay. "Because she'll be your sister."

Hannah closed her eyes again and waited. The image of her oldest daughter grew clear in her mind once more. "Alicia..."

There she was. The smile, the honey blonde hair, the warmth in her eyes...it was all as close and real as if she were standing there in person.

There were no words, but a distinct sense of approval pierced the darkness. The feeling swelled, and Hannah had no doubts. God wanted her to know Alicia would have supported this decision with her whole being.

Hannah ached to reach out and pull the image of her daughter close, but the lines began to blur. As they did, peace oozed between the cracks in Hannah's heart. It was okay to let her daughter's memory fade for now. The visit had reminded her once more that she no longer needed to feel the pain of Alicia's and Tom's deaths with every excruciating breath, but only as a sad truth that simply was and could not be changed.

Hope wrapped its arms around her as she opened her eyes. It was time to go home, time to let Matt and Jenny know what she'd decided. Of course, Jade and Tanner Eastman would want to know, too. The couple had become their best friends these past years. They'd been there while Matt and Hannah walked through a year of collecting documents and filling out adoption forms, gathering letters and completing a dossier.

The Eastmans understood. They were desperate to have a baby, but so far hadn't been able.

Despite Hannah's tears, a smile tugged at her lips. Yes, Jade and Tanner would be thrilled that Hannah was finally ready to move forward.

She let her eyes settle on Tom's tombstone. "Pray for us, Tom." Two tears landed near his name, and she wiped her cheeks with her fingertips. "Pray for the little girl...whoever she is."

Once more she looked back at the stone, at Alicia's name carved in it. "One more thing, honey. When we bring her home and...and people ask me how many girls I have..." Hannah wiped at her tears again. "I'll always tell them three. Two who live here with me...and one who lives in heaven."

Two

The day had been nothing but salty sea breeze and endless blue skies. Matt and Hannah were gathered on the back deck of their beach home, their picnic with the Eastmans in full swing. They sat there, eating, overlooking the surf and a blazing sunset, and Matt reached for Hannah's hand. He set his burger down on the paper plate and looked around the picnic table at the others—their own precious eighteen-year-old Jenny, and Jade and Tanner Eastman and their thirteen-year-old son, Ty.

"We have something to tell you." He smiled at Hannah, and his presence soothed her soul the way it had since the first day they met. She leaned against him. They had already told Jenny their plans, and Hannah thought her response had been positive. Guarded maybe, but good all the same.

Matt went on. "We contacted our social worker yesterday...and gave her the green light."

Jade's eyes lit up and she clasped her hands together as she caught Hannah's gaze. "Are you serious? You've decided to—"

"Yes." Hannah smiled, and the accomplishment in that one single word hung like a gold medal around her neck. How far she'd come since that awful August day four years ago, how greatly God had blessed them. And suddenly—surrounded by the people she loved, enjoying a barbecue on the deck of the beachside home she and Matt and Jenny shared—the sum of all they'd been and all they were...all they were about to be...was almost overwhelming. "Yes," she said again. "We're ready to adopt."

Tanner's face broke into a grin and he reached across the table to shake Matt's hand. "Congratulations."

There was a brief flicker of sadness in Tanner's eyes, and Hannah understood. Tanner and Jade wanted more children, but since marrying more than a year ago, Jade had miscarried once and been unable to get pregnant since then. Hannah's heart went out to her friends, and though neither of them mentioned their own situation, she knew what they had to be feeling.

Tanner swung his arm over Jade's shoulders. "So, the world's best business partner is going to have a little one running around, huh?" He leaned back in his chair. "Okay, don't keep us waiting..." He took a bite of his burger, and a blob of ketchup landed squarely on his khaki button-down shirt. "Give us the—"

Hannah and Jade exchanged a look, and they both giggled.

Tanner finished chewing. "What?" He looked around the table.

Matt smothered a grin with his hand, and Jenny and Ty laughed into their napkins.

Jade was the first to rescue her husband. She pointed to his shirt, and Tanner glanced down. He chuckled and shook his head. "That settles it. Someone else will have to teach the Bronzans' new little girl how to eat."

Hannah and Jade locked eyes again and burst out laughing. How often had their good-looking, powerful husbands spilled a drink or stained a shirt or broken a chair at their legendary get-togethers? Matt and Tanner might run the nation's most powerful religious freedom law firm, but at home they were often little more than oversized boys.

Matt loosed his grip on Hannah's hand, and his dimpled grin lit up Hannah's heart. "Well, Tanner, I, for one, am appalled at your manners."

Tanner nodded, his expression playful. "That's what I get for hanging out with you."

Amid the laughter, Jade dabbed a wet napkin at Tanner's shirt, giggling so hard her shoulders shook.

Hannah studied her friends through smiling eyes. It was good to see Jade laugh. She'd been dragging for several weeks lately, tired, achy. Jade blamed it on a lingering cold, but after all she and Tanner had been through, Hannah hated to see her sick.

The conversation shifted back to Matt and Hannah's adoption plans. As the evening wore on, Jenny took Ty to a movie with her friends, and the men congregated on the deck around Matt's old guitar. Hannah and Jade took a walk down the beach.

It was mid-March, and though the temperatures were cool, there had been no fog for days. As the sun set, the Pacific Ocean stretched out like a blanket of liquid blue beneath a canopy of crimson and gold. A hundred yards down the beach, Hannah stopped and stared out to sea, breathing in the damp, salty air. "I never get tired of it."

Jade drew up beside her. "It's breathtaking."

"Like a living masterpiece direct from God."

The picnic that day was one of their monthly get-togethers, their way of staying connected and supporting each other. Jade and Tanner lived in a spacious house in Thousand Oaks, twenty minutes away, on two acres of rolling hillside. They had four bedrooms and a bonus room, a monument to Jade and Tanner's dream of having a houseful of children one day.

The women started walking again and Hannah turned to Jade. "You look better, not so pale."

Jade nodded and something in her eyes grew distant. "I felt good today, being with you and Tanner, laughing a little."

Something caught in Hannah's heart. "Things are okay at home, right?"

"We're fine." A smile tried to climb up Jade's cheeks, but fell short. "Just wondering about God's plan."

“Babies?”

“Babies.” Jade sighed and her eyes grew wet. “We love Ty so much, but he’s thirteen. At this rate, he’ll be busy with his own life by the time we give him a brother or sister.”

Hannah walked a few steps and stopped. “How does Tanner feel?”

“He doesn’t get it.” Jade brushed her dark bangs off her face and shook her head. “He missed so much of Ty’s growing up years...all he wants is a baby in every room, a chance to be the type of father he couldn’t be to Ty.”

The cool, damp sand filled in the places between Hannah’s toes. “Ty was eleven before Tanner found out about him, right?”

“Right.” Jade stared at the sun as it dropped below the horizon. “You’d never know it; the two of them are inseparable. Tanner is such a good dad. Still...sometimes I think the whole baby thing is taking a toll.”

“Meaning...?” The soothing sound of a lone seagull punctuated their conversation.

“He’s been burying himself at work, staying later, going in earlier. There’s always a pressing case...” Jade hugged her arms close to her body. “Lately it’s like he could work day and night and it wouldn’t be enough.” She was quiet, but after a moment a soft huff crossed her lips. “No one believes in his cause more than I do... I’m the one who talked him into it fifteen years ago. But sometimes it feels like he’s pushing me away, closing down his emotions.”

Hannah nodded and fell in step alongside Jade. “Matt gets that way sometimes. There were times when we’d talk about adoption for three weeks straight, until I needed a break. A day or two to sort out my feelings. Those would end up being the same days he’d work late.”

Jade bent down and picked up a broken piece of a sand dollar.

“Then there’s my health.” She brushed a sprinkling of sand off the shell, and Hannah had the clear impression Jade was refusing to make eye contact with her.

A knot formed in Hannah’s gut—a knot made from strings of fear she could no longer ignore. Bad things didn’t happen just to other people anymore. They happened. It was that simple. She stopped, and Jade turned to look at her. “The headaches?”

Hannah saw a heaviness in Jade’s eyes. She was thirty-five and usually looked ten years younger. But the past couple months...

“The headaches only come once in a while. Nothing to worry about.” Jade slipped the broken sand dollar into the pocket of her windbreaker and shrugged. “I’m tired all the time. After a shift at the hospital and Ty’s baseball game, I’m wiped. No wonder Tanner has his mind on work.”

Hannah swallowed and considered her words. Jade was a trained nurse, after all. Surely if she were worried, she’d go in for tests. “Have you thought about seeing a doctor?”

Jade smiled. “Now you sound like Tanner.” She faced the ocean and seemed to stare at something unseen and far away. “You know what I think it is?”

“What?” Hannah took a few slow steps back toward the house, and Jade kept up beside her.

“Depression.” A sigh slipped from Jade’s lips and blended with the ocean breeze. “Isn’t that crazy?”

“Of course not.” The knot relaxed. Depression was better than other possibilities. “Lots of people get depressed.”

“But me?” Jade stretched her hands over her head and took a slow breath. “I wasn’t depressed when my life was falling apart. But now that I’m living my dream, married to a man I’ve loved since I was a little girl...*now* I get depressed? It doesn’t make sense.”

Hannah remembered the miscarriage Jade had eight months

earlier. “It makes perfect sense. It hasn’t even been a year since you lost the baby.”

Quiet fell between them, and Jade wiped at a stray tear. “I think about that child every day. Sometimes it seems like everyone else has forgotten there ever was a baby.”

“Even Tanner?” Their steps were slow and easy, the beach empty but for the two of them.

Jade shook her head. “No. Tanner talks about her.”

“Her?”

“Yes.” Jade sniffed and ran her fingers through her hair. “All my life I’ve wanted a daughter and...yes. The baby was a girl. She’d be two months old if she’d lived.”

Hannah gazed across the watery horizon. “Losing a child isn’t something that ever goes away, Jade. Whether that child was miscarried—” she thought about her visit to the cemetery the week before—“or killed in a car accident.”

Jade’s teary eyes locked onto Hannah’s. “I don’t know how to let her go. I want a baby so badly.” Jade hung her head and gentle weeping overtook her.

Hannah pulled her close, hugging her the way a mother hugs her lost child. Hannah knew Jade’s story well. Her mother had abandoned her when she was a child and left her to be raised by an alcoholic father. Jade had no siblings, so though Hannah was only four years older, she sometimes was the next best thing to a mother—or maybe an older sister.

“It’s okay.” She ran her hand along Jade’s shoulder. “You should have said something sooner.”

Jade nodded and after a while she pulled back. Her face was wet with tears. “I keep telling myself I’m supposed to let it go. People miscarry all the time, right?”

“But it still hurts. If you don’t talk about that kind of pain it’ll eat you alive, Jade.”

Jade sucked in a deep breath and started walking again. “Maybe that explains my health.”

“Exactly.” Hannah kept her steps slow, giving Jade a chance to sort through her feelings.

They walked in silence until Jade turned, her eyes searching Hannah’s as though looking for an unfathomable secret. “How did you do it, Hannah? How did you learn to live again?”

Hannah knew the answer as surely as she knew her name. “God carried me.” She slowed her pace, and after a few more steps stopped and faced her friend. “He’ll carry you, too.”

She nodded, fresh tears in her eyes. “I know. I feel like this...this depression is keeping me from getting pregnant. Like I’m too tense to conceive.”

Hannah angled her head and smiled. “You’ll have more children one day, Jade. I believe that with all my heart.” She sat down on the sand, pulling her knees to her chest, then patted the spot beside her. “Wanna pray?”

Jade dropped beside her, every motion slow and weary, as though she lacked all hope. They bowed their heads, and Hannah prayed for Jade’s broken heart and empty arms. She asked that God bring healing and joy and health to Jade and a deeper understanding to Tanner.

“And please, Lord, one day soon...bring Jade another baby.”

Matt drew his guitar close and kicked his feet up on the deck railing. “What else?”

Tanner grinned from a nearby lounge chair and stretched out his legs. He hadn’t wanted to come tonight, but like always, time with the Bronzans was medicine to his soul. “Eagles. ‘Desperado.’”

Matt plucked at a few chords and began to play. The music filled Tanner’s senses, and he closed his eyes, singing along despite

the fact that neither of them was exactly on key. They sang about losing all their highs and lows, about getting down from the fences before it was too late... The surf provided percussion in the distance.

When the song ended, Matt studied the fingers on his left hand and winced. "They're shot." He set the guitar down beside him. "I need to play more."

"We need to play more."

Matt cast him a lazy grin. "We?"

Tanner tossed his hands in the air in mock indignation. "I'm vocals, you're guitar. A few more nights like this, and we can forget about law. Take this act on the road."

They both chuckled at the thought, but as their laughter faded Tanner crooked one elbow behind his head and uttered a sigh that felt like it came from his feet. He stared at the canopy of stars above, then looked at Matt. "I'm worried about Jade."

Matt nodded once, his voice slow, thoughtful. "She looks tired."

He gazed at the sky again. "She's always tired."

"Maybe she should see a doctor."

"Yeah, maybe..." Tanner could hear Jade trying to reassure him. She was a nurse. She knew enough about medicine to know when she needed a doctor, and she didn't think she did. He'd tried to change her mind, but for now it was a closed subject unless some other symptom came up. Tanner let the worry fade. Whatever was wrong with his wife, it wasn't the Bronzans' problem. And tonight was supposed to be a celebration. Matt had been talking about adoption almost from the first day he started working at the firm. It was Hannah who couldn't make up her mind. In fact, just four weeks ago at lunch Matt had been more discouraged than Tanner remembered ever seeing before. He said he didn't think Hannah would ever make a decision and he wanted

to prepare himself for the fact that they might never raise a child together.

He looked back at Matt. “What made Hannah decide?”

Matt crossed his arms, his eyebrows lowered. “It was the strangest thing. We were watching this documentary on TV about kids in the social services system—thousands of them waiting for a permanent home. All of a sudden she started to cry.”

Tanner leveled his gaze at Matt. “Because of the show?”

“Because one of the kids—a little girl—really touched her.” Matt shrugged. “I put my arm around her and asked her if she was okay, but she shook her head like she didn’t want to talk. Then she told me she loved me.”

Tanner gestured his approval. “That’s always a good sign.”

“Yeah. Except after a minute she was crying so hard she went upstairs to bed. I thought it was a setback on the whole idea of adoption. But the next morning she woke up and told me she’d made her decision.” Matt’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “Now it’s just a matter of finding our little girl.”

“And Jenny?”

“She’s been great. Helps us find web sites with kids up for adoption, made copies of the dossier for us. Nothing but happy about it. Besides, she’ll be in college in the fall. UCLA.”

“Premed, right?”

Matt smiled. “Just like her dad.”

Tanner studied his friend, amazed. “Doesn’t it ever hurt? How much she still misses him?”

There was a softening in Matt’s eyes. “Jenny loves me; I’ll never doubt that as long as I live. I’m her protector, provider, confidante, and safe place. But I’m not her daddy.” Matt cocked his head. “I’m okay with that.”

Tanner stared at Matt for a moment and then back at the moonlit water. He couldn’t imagine raising someone else’s child.

Watching Matt, seeing his face light up when he talked about adopting... He shook his head. "I don't think I could do it."

Matt picked up his guitar. One string at a time, he strummed a chord that soothed the anxious places in Tanner's soul. "Do what?"

"Adopt. Raise someone else's child." He clenched his fists and relaxed them again. "I missed watching Ty grow up. Doesn't God know we want another baby?"

"I'm sure He does." Matt gazed up at the moon. "More than any of us will ever know."

Tanner exhaled hard. "I know. I hate when I doubt." He uttered a single laugh, one that was more frustration than humor. "Look at me. Fighting religious freedom battles in front of the entire nation and doubting whether God can bring us a child."

Again Matt moved his fingers over the guitar strings. "Doubts are normal. But don't stop praying, Tanner. God has a plan; He always does."

As they fell into silence, Tanner realized how much lighter his heart felt. His problems hadn't been solved. Jade would still be tired when they left the Bronzans' that night, and the empty longing for a baby would still be as real as the air they breathed. But somehow the time spent relaxing with Matt had given him hope again. His friend's enthusiasm about adopting was contagious. It left Tanner believing that one day—maybe one day soon—they'd be celebrating their own good news.

"So, what's the next step?"

Matt let his hands rest on the edge of the guitar, and Tanner was struck by the calm in his friend's face. A calm that was only possible by walking through the fire and coming out refined on the other side. "We've already talked to our social worker and she's looking for an available child."

"A girl, right?"

Matt nodded. “Hannah and I both want a little girl. Three or four years old, doesn’t matter what ethnic background. We would have a better choice of children if we were interested in the foster-adopt program. We’re licensed for it, but neither of us wants to risk getting a child and having her taken away.”

“So you want one who’s already legally available?”

“Right. Our social worker doesn’t think it’ll take long.”

Again Tanner was struck by Matt and Hannah’s faith. So much could go wrong with a child abandoned to the social services system. Drug abuse, bonding issues, or worse. Watching Hannah and Matt go through the adoption process was like watching a living illustration of faith. “What about that Haitian agency?”

“Heart of God? Great group of people. We filled out the paperwork and paid the program fee, but they didn’t know how long it would take until they had a girl that age. Right now, their older children are almost all boys.”

“And now Hannah wants to adopt from the U.S.?”

“At first she was afraid to. That’s why we looked at Haiti. The statistics are...” Matt’s voice drifted and he clenched his jaw. “More than ninety percent of the U.S. kids legally free for adoption have been abused. Some of them so bad it would take a miracle to make a difference.”

Tanner narrowed his eyes, barely making out a sailboat on the darkened horizon. “You’re taking a big risk.”

“Yep.” Matt didn’t sound worried, only accepting, confident. “There’s always a risk.”

An easy silence fell between them again, comfortable, meaningful, and Matt moved his fingers over the strings, blending his music with the sounds of the sea.

Muffled voices broke the reverie—Jade and Hannah were back—and Tanner looked at his watch. He swung his legs over the side of the lounge chair and patted Matt on the shoulder.

“Well, friend, I guess we’re both in need of the same thing then.”
Matt set his guitar down, stood and stretched. “What’s that?”
“A miracle. Nothing short of a miracle.”