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KAREN KINGSBURY



a novel

TRULY,
MADLY,
DEEPLY



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1



Walking barefoot in the silky white sand of Karon Beach on the island of Phuket in the Andaman Sea, Tommy Baxter felt a million miles away from reality. Beside him was the only girl he had ever loved, a girl he had met his freshman year at Northside High School. The one who had his whole heart.

Annalee Miller.

“I’ll remember this as long as I live.” Tommy slid his fingers between hers, their pace slow and easy. “Every detail.”

Her pale blond hair danced over her bare shoulders in the Indian Ocean breeze. “When I write the story of my life”—she smiled up at him—“this page—being half a world away from home with you—will always be my favorite.”

And Tommy could barely breathe. Those green eyes had captured him the first time he saw her and they held his heart still. They always would.

The start of their senior year at Northside High was weeks away, but they still had a few days left on Phuket. Visiting the western beaches of Thailand with Annalee’s family was something they had looked forward to since May.

“The fishing boat leaves in two hours.” Annalee looked out at the water. “God gave us the perfect day.” She slowed a bit. “Let’s go back. I’m a little tired.”

Concern washed over Tommy the way it had yesterday when she mentioned needing more rest. “How did you sleep?”

“Good.” Annalee looked at him. “Don’t worry, Tommy. It’s the time change. That’s all.”

Yes, that made sense. After all they were eleven hours ahead of Indiana. But hadn’t they been here long enough to be used to the change? Everyone else in the group was rested by now.

Tommy held her hand a little tighter. “Maybe you should get to sleep earlier tonight.”

“Okay.” She didn’t look troubled. “Good idea.”

They took their time on the way back. Tommy surveyed the string of five-star hotels that marked the beach, the same beautiful stretch of shoreline that had been devastated by the tsunami of 2004. But there was no sign of that now. The beaches of Phuket had made a resounding comeback. Tourism was at an all-time high.

Vacation wasn’t the reason Annalee’s family was here this week, though. The Millers had come to the mountainous rain-forest island for work. Annalee’s parents ran Each One International, a ministry with offices across the world. The goal of Each One was to reach the least and lost in various cities, care for their physical needs and provide safety, and to tell them about the love of God.

Here at Karon Beach, Annalee’s parents had been

taking meetings with local Each One leaders. Tommy was bunking with her younger brother, Austin, and Annalee shared a room with her parents. The rooms had been comped by the hotel manager, who was familiar with the work Annalee's parents were doing. The stay wasn't just a vacation. Annalee's parents were being briefed on the work ahead.

According to Annalee, so far they had received very valuable information.

Tommy filled his lungs with the sweet salty air. The days here on the shore had seemed like they'd last forever. But the hard part of the visit would happen tomorrow. That's when the group would head to Phuket City and Patong's seedy Bangla Road. Annalee's parents had warned them that the day would likely involve rescue work.

"Let's sit for a while." Tommy searched her face. Annalee's freckled cheeks were tan from the days on the beach. But her beautiful eyes didn't look right. "Or maybe you should take a nap. Before the fishing trip."

Annalee shook her head. "I'm okay." She nodded up at the beach to their chairs. "This is good."

They sat and stretched their legs. Annalee took a deep breath. "Senior year. How can it be?"

"The days flew." The sun cast a thousand diamonds across the water. Tommy turned to her. "You're sure about Indiana?"

"I think so." She linked her pinkie finger with his. "I like NYU. But I'd rather be close to family."

They had both applied early to Indiana University in

Bloomington, an hour from home. All Tommy's aunts and uncles lived there, along with his papa John Baxter. Tommy was deciding between Indiana, Harvard, Duke and North Carolina.

But there were days Tommy wasn't sure about any of them. "I still think about the military. I could graduate in May and head to the recruiters' office." He raked his hand through his short blond hair. "Someone has to do it."

"True." They'd had this conversation before. Annalee wanted him to go wherever God was calling him. She understood the military would mean they'd be apart. Maybe for years. "If you become a soldier, you'll be the best they ever had."

Tommy ran his thumb over her fingers. This was one more reason why he loved her. She had no designs on his life, no ulterior motives. Not like his parents did. He glanced at her. "Of course, I could still be a doctor." He winked at Annalee. "Which would make my mother happy."

"We don't have to have all the answers." She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. "I feel God's Spirit here. In the touch of the wind and the soft of the sand."

"Mmm." He couldn't look away, couldn't take his eyes off her. "I feel Him here, too."

RAIN FELL EVERY other day in July in this part of Asia, but not that afternoon. Sunshine drenched the beach as Tommy helped Annalee onto the fishing boat. Her

parents and brother and two fishing guides were already on board.

Tommy slipped as he stepped inside, and Annalee caught him. "Whoa!" He found his balance.

"Good thing I feel better." She laughed. "You're not easy to catch."

"True." At six-foot-three, Tommy was easily nine inches taller than Annalee. People often mistook him for a college athlete. He gave Annalee a side hug. "Just testing you."

Dan and Donna Miller sat at the front of the boat with the guides. The goal was to catch a marlin for dinner. Austin stayed at the back with Tommy and Annalee.

They were a few hundred yards offshore when they spotted the first dolphin. Five more surfaced nearby. About the same time their captain and guide, Hans, cut the engines. "Dolphins know what's about to happen." Hans was a veteran fisherman. Backward baseball cap, soggy unlit cigar between his sun-scarred lips. He pointed to the choppy water near the boat. "Lots going on here."

"Can I jump in?" Austin ripped off his shirt and jumped onto one of the bench seats. "I've always wanted to swim with dolphins."

"Not on my watch!" Hans motioned to Austin. "We're chumming the water, boy. Dolphins aren't the only animals we'll attract."

Austin looked over the edge of the boat. "I hadn't thought about that." He took a step back. "Reef sharks, right? But I read that they don't bite."

"A man lost a foot to one a few years ago." Hans raised his weathered brow. "Stay in the boat."

The guide outfitted everyone with a rod and reel. Even Annalee. Which was a good sign. She had said she wouldn't fish if she wasn't feeling strong. *Finally*, Tommy thought to himself. *She's past the jet lag.*

An hour later, Austin caught a yellowfin but it broke free from his line. Then minutes before they returned to shore, Tommy felt a sudden strong tug on his reel. "Hey! I got one!" The fish doubled his fight, and Tommy dug his heels against the inside of the boat and bent his knees. "Someone help!"

Mr. Miller rushed over. He grabbed Tommy by the waist and the two of them fought the fish with all their strength.

"It's a marlin!" Annalee's father was first to see the spikes along the upper part of the fish. "This is the one!"

"Reel it in slowly, gentlemen." Hans was at their side. "There you go . . . that's it!"

Ocean spray whipped their faces, but Tommy and Annalee's father held on until the monster fish was up and over the boat railing. The two high-fived, both of them out of breath.

"I can't believe it!" Annalee put her hand on Tommy's shoulder. "It's the size of a shark!"

She wasn't far off. Tommy had seen pictures of marlin, but nothing had prepared him for the behemoth catch. Hans helped Tommy and Mr. Miller hoist the fish up for a picture. Then they dropped it into an oversized tub of ice.

Tommy was still breathing hard as he turned to Mr. Miller. "Thanks for the help!" Tommy wiped the seawater from his face. "That was crazy!"

"Teamwork." Mr. Miller put his arms around his wife and Austin. "That is one massive catch."

"Congratulations!" Hans measured the fish and faced them. "Biggest marlin of the year!" He grinned. "Most tourists come back with nothing. You're a sporty group!"

Back on the beach Hans prepared the fish and cooked it over an open flame. What they didn't eat, he would take to a nearby restaurant, where people from the village would line up for free fish.

When Hans was gone, Tommy sat with Annalee and her family at a table near the water and Mr. Miller prayed over the meal. "This day in the sun was a dividing line, Lord. I can feel it. Today we see what life is like with Your grace and goodness." He paused. "Tomorrow we will see what it is like for the lost children of Phuket."

The man's words were sobering. Tommy was aware they would be working tomorrow, but until now he hadn't thought of exactly what that meant. He looked at Annalee's father. "You remember last summer my family and I took that trip to Africa. We painted orphanages and made bracelets with the kids." He hesitated. "Will it be like that?"

Mr. Miller shook his head. "We do oversee an orphanage in Phuket." His tone grew heavier. "I'm afraid another issue has taken precedence for this trip."

“The rise in tourism has brought an increase in sex trafficking.” Mrs. Miller took her husband’s hand. “Twenty minutes from here, there’s an open-air beach market where children are sold.” She explained how Each One was working with local law enforcement officials to close down trafficking rings. “In the meantime kids from all over Asia are still brought here as slaves. We rescue them, but sometimes the young ones don’t even know where they’re from.”

Tommy thought about his younger sister. Malin was twelve now. If someone kidnapped her and forced her into . . . He couldn’t finish the thought. He’d do anything to protect her. “So . . . you rescue these kids, and then . . . where do they go?”

Annalee’s dad explained that Each One had recently opened a safe house. It had forty rooms and as many trained volunteers. The goal was to get the victimized children safe and fed and then to reunite them with their families. If their families could be found.

“What if the kids don’t have anyone?” Annalee’s shoulder brushed against Tommy’s. “I guess . . . I didn’t know how bad things had gotten here.”

Austin anchored his elbows on the wooden table. “I talked to Dad about this before we left. I asked the same thing.” He looked at his father. “What if the kids don’t have anyone?”

“That happens sometimes.” Mr. Miller was quiet for a moment. “An orphaned child is most vulnerable for this wicked business.”

“So sad.” Tommy couldn’t get his mind around it. “What happens next? At the safe house?”

Mr. Miller crossed his arms. “Some kids stay until we can find them a home. A safe place where they can have something they are desperate for.” He hesitated. “A family.”

When dinner was over, Annalee and Tommy moved to the same pair of chairs they’d sat in earlier. The sun was setting, casting streaks of pink and yellow across the vast blue sky.

For a while they didn’t talk. The sounds of the gentle waves on the beach and the wind in the palm trees nearby was enough. In the distance, the cry of a macaw echoed through the hills.

Tommy took Annalee’s fingers and brought them to his lips. The two of them had made a deal when they started dating. They could hold hands and hug, they could kiss. But nothing more. Not till they were older. Not till the time was right.

But there were times when keeping their promise was all but impossible. Last year at prom when Tommy took Annalee home, and her parents had been gone. They had stood on her front porch and he had taken her face in his hands. Their kiss had stirred feelings in him that stayed with him still. God alone had kept him from crossing lines with her that night.

Here on this beach, Tommy felt the same familiar draw. She turned to him. “You’re going to be mad.”

“At what?” He slid his chair a little closer, so his bare knee was touching hers. “Never at you, Annalee.”

“Not me.” She stared out at the ocean. “Tomorrow. The monsters trafficking children.” Concern tinged her voice. “You can’t fight them, Tommy. They’ll arrest you.”

His heart warmed as he studied her. “You know me.”

“Yes.” She looked at him again. “Promise me.”

Now it was his turn to look at the water. If he had his way they would round up every trafficker in Phuket, put them on a boat and set them adrift in the Indian Ocean. But God’s ways were higher. He wouldn’t do any good by taking the law into his own hands. Especially here in Thailand. “I’ll follow your dad’s lead.” He kissed her hand again. “I have this strange sense I’ll know about my future after tomorrow. . . . You ever feel that way?”

“At times.” She stood and stretched. “Maybe we’ll both live here and work for Each One someday.” A smile lifted her pretty lips. “Then I could walk this beach with you whenever I wanted.”

The sunset was hitting its peak, the sky a canvas of colors that took Tommy’s breath. He stood and put his arm around her shoulders. “How do you feel?”

“Perfect.” She faced him, careful to keep a few inches between them. Thailand didn’t approve of public displays of affection. Tourists weren’t held to the same standard, but even hugging could be considered rude. She touched his cheek and the sensation lingered. She smiled. “Walk with me?”

“Yes.” He clenched the muscles in his jaw and hesitated. “I don’t want the sun to set.”

She smiled. “Me, either.”

They walked at the water's edge, slower than before. "I wish we were older." Tommy kept his gaze straight ahead. "Finished with college and sure of what we want to do." They were out of view of the public now, alone on the most secluded stretch of sand. There wasn't another person in sight.

"Mmm." She waited. "Sounds wonderful."

"And I wish this wasn't a mission trip." Tommy slowed to a stop and faced her. "But our honeymoon."

Annalee looked at him, straight through him. "I wish that, too."

They had talked of growing up and getting married before. Just not on an empty stretch of sand half a world away from home. Tommy moved closer. One inch at a time. The electricity between them was so strong, he couldn't stop himself. Even when he knew he shouldn't kiss her here.

"This day, being with you here . . . it was perfect." His words were a desperate whisper against the sound of the surf. "You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen, Annalee." He took hold of her other hand and his body moved closer still. "Your eyes . . . your heart."

"Hold me?" Annalee looked over her shoulder. "No one can see us."

She didn't have to ask twice. He eased her into his arms. *This is heaven*, he thought. And he could only imagine what it would be like . . . if this were their honeymoon. His cheek brushed against hers, his lips a breath away from hers. "Annalee . . . I want you."

"I wanna kiss you." She searched his eyes. "We're alone out here."

Tommy ran his fingers through her hair and framed her face with his hands. "Me, too . . . I want that more than my next breath." His lips were so close to hers he could smell her sweet breath.

Son . . . be careful.

The words blew across Tommy's soul and made him catch his breath. He took a half step back and exhaled hard. He didn't have to ask if the voice was God's. The Lord spoke to Tommy often. He was familiar with His tone and timing. *Yes, Lord . . . I hear You. I will obey.*

Tommy put his hands on Annalee's shoulders. "Can you imagine? Getting picked up by the police for kissing in public." He laughed, trying to keep the moment light. "I don't think your parents would like that." He ached for a way around the local rule, but there was none.

She took a step closer and rested her head on his chest. The warmth of her through his thin white T-shirt almost made him kiss her anyway. Her arms came around his waist. "You're right." She breathed deep in his arms, and the sensation was more than Tommy could take. She lifted her face to his. "Maybe tonight. When it's dark."

With a strength not his own, Tommy separated himself from her. "Really?"

"Yes." Annalee's eyes sparkled. "When everyone's asleep."

Tommy wanted nothing more. But no matter how

great the idea seemed, he wouldn't allow it to happen. He couldn't disrespect her parents like that.

They turned around and walked back toward the hotel, slower than before. Soon enough the sun would slip below the water and darkness would cover Phuket. Tommy would meet up with Austin in their room and they would talk pro basketball and players the Pacers were looking to trade or the starting lineup in the coming season.

But for now there remained the warm feel of sand on their toes and the touch of salty beach air on their faces. And Annalee Miller's hand in his.

That most of all.

2



Annalee felt sick even before she stepped out of bed. But it wasn't jet lag. This time the work ahead of them weighed on her. Not until yesterday did she fully grasp what they'd be dealing with on the streets of Phuket today.

Once she and Tommy parted ways for the evening, the reality of what was happening on this island hit her hard. She had barely been able to sleep. Girls and boys in their early teens and younger being sold in the open marketplace. Twenty minutes from here.

It'll be okay, she told herself. God will lead us where we need to go. She stood and looked around the room until she found what she wanted. Three vitamin B capsules and two bottles of water. A few minutes later Annalee felt stronger. She grabbed her Bible and stepped outside onto the balcony. Her parents were already in the lobby, meeting with the local Each One coordinator about the work ahead. Annalee still had thirty minutes before the group was set to meet for breakfast.

The air smelled of fresh jasmine. Annalee stretched her legs on the chaise lounge and opened her Bible to

Philippians, chapter four. God's Word was her companion and best friend. The voice of the Father spoke to her from the pages of a book that transcended time.

But of all the verses in all the chapters in all the books of the Bible, this part in Philippians was her favorite. She had the fourth chapter nearly memorized, but today more than ever she needed to see the words. Soak them into the depth of her soul.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

With every word, Annalee felt peace come over her. The passage filled the cracks in her heart and convinced her she would survive this day. Whatever terrible realities they saw.

Annalee knew a little about sex trafficking. They had talked about it at school. How to avoid being trafficked. Don't talk to strangers. Don't chat with unknown people online. Don't hang out at the mall alone. That sort of thing. But today she would see helpless kids being sold and abused for the sake of someone else's greed. Bought for a sickening selfishness.

Her eyes found the words again. *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything . . .*

She closed her Bible and set it on the nearby table,

but even still the Scripture stayed with her. . . . *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds . . .*

A gentle breeze blew off Andaman Bay this morning. Annalee stood and breathed deep. She stretched her arms over her head and for the next ten minutes she ran through a series of stretches. As she did, she remembered last night and the boy who lived permanently in her heart.

Tommy Baxter.

Nothing about Tommy was ordinary. He'd been the star basketball player on the Northside varsity team since their freshman year. Apparently, Tommy played the game just like his father had once played it. Mr. Baxter was a lawyer now, but back in his high school days, Luke Baxter had been first-team all-state.

No surprise that Tommy played like his dad. He looked like him, too. One of Annalee's greatest joys was watching Tommy run up and down the court, driving to the hoop. Northside fans had come to expect twenty points a game from Tommy Baxter. But they didn't expect the way he lived his life off the court. If Tommy had been like every other popular jock at school, he wouldn't be with her family here in Thailand.

In fact, they wouldn't have dated at all.

ANNALEE'S DAD WAITED till after they were done eating before turning the breakfast conversation over to Niran, their guide for the day. Niran and his wife ran the newly

opened safe house near Phuket City and today he would take them to Bangla Road near Patong—the beach not far from where they were staying.

“You will see things today that will stay.” Niran tapped his temple. “Here. In your mind and soul.” Niran was maybe in his sixties. He told them how when his children had grown and gone, he and his wife felt a driving desire to help.

“So many children.” Niran’s eyes narrowed. “Those lost little ones, they are our family now.”

Tommy stayed by Austin as they walked to Niran’s van. Annalee walked with her parents. There would be no hand-holding for them today. As they set out, Annalee studied the architecture. This was her first time to Thailand, and the pastel buildings and Chinese accents surprised her. This developed city wasn’t the sleepy place she had expected.

Niran pointed out highlights as they made their way to Patong. “Everyone lost someone in the tsunami. It doesn’t matter how many years go by, we remember.” He slowed the van and pointed to a park just ahead. A battered boat sat on a cement platform. “That police vessel saved eighteen adults from the waters that day.” He nodded. “There are many tributes.”

As they drove into Patong, the building fronts changed. The signs and displays looked seedier. Cheaper. Same with the hotels. Niran pointed again. “Hotel rooms here are a mere fraction of what they cost at the beaches of Karon and Kata.” He set his jaw. “Many rent by the hour.”

They parked in a big lot at the beginning of a long stretch of road where outdoor market vendors lined the sidewalks. They stepped out of the vehicle. Niran gathered them close, as if the passersby might hear them. "This is Bangla Road." He stared down the roadway. "Here we rescue children every week."

A bad chill ran down Annalee's arms.

"What are we going to do?" Austin was only sixteen, but he had a heart for their parents' ministry. He always had.

"We will walk." Niran pointed toward the busier parts of the street. "Make eye contact with the children and you will see. They know who I am. If they are afraid, they will look away."

"These children are property," Annalee's father added. "They are owned by dangerous people, men in most cases."

Niran nodded. "You will take my lead."

Annalee looked at Tommy and for a few seconds their eyes held. The reality of this was clearly more than either of them could believe. She walked between her parents and Tommy stayed by Austin.

Their pace was slower than Annalee expected.

Not four buildings down Bangla Road, she spotted a pair of young teens walking toward them. The girls wore skimpy short skirts, bikini tops and high heels. Nothing like the typical beach attire worn by most women on the street.

Annalee felt her heart skip a beat . . . something was

wrong with these girls. The situation was obvious, like Niran had told them. Annalee's dad stopped and she and her mother did the same thing. But Niran hurried on. That's when Annalee saw the men.

One trailed the girls. The other leaned on a nearby tree with a cell phone. Before Niran could say something, two white men in bold Hawaiian print shirts walked up to the girls. The guys looked like tourists.

The distance between them was too great for Annalee and her family to hear what was being said. But in seconds the man with the cell phone was at the girls' sides. The two white tourists passed what looked like a handful of cash to the man with the phone.

And just like that, the girls took a hard turn toward a hotel, the tourists close beside them. A few doors down they disappeared through the doorway of a building. In English, the sign read, MESSAGE PARLOR.

Annalee felt sick to her stomach. *Did that really just happen?* The man with the cell phone met up with the guy who had been trailing the girls, and again money seemed to be exchanged.

Niran looked heartsick, but he kept walking. The others caught up to him. They had missed the chance to help the two girls. Annalee had a feeling there would be more.

Bangla Road bustled with an ethnically diverse mass of tourists. Most of them seemed to be looking for a kind of fun that was illegal in other countries. Niran had told them the nights were worse. The things that could be bought and sold would hurt their hearts. He kept the

details to himself. He didn't have to say anything. Here in the Phuket sunshine, the sex slave industry was in plain sight.

Five more buildings and Annalee spotted a thin girl in the crowd ahead. She was walking toward them, and like the two others, this one wore high heels and heavy makeup. But as they got closer, Annalee gasped and covered her mouth. The child couldn't have been more than ten years old. Dirt streaked her see-through shorts and top, and her hair was teased to twice its normal size.

Suddenly a Thai man, maybe fifty years old, came alongside her and shoved her. Hard.

The girl fell to the ground and scrambled to her feet. Blood trickled from one knee and terror screamed from her eyes, but she didn't cry out. The man grabbed her little chin and forced her to look into his face. He barked something at her, then he dropped back into the crowd behind her.

"They are beaten if they don't make eye contact with potential clients." Niran spoke softly as they walked.

They were close enough now to see the girl was crying. She seemed desperate to avoid the eyes of passersby. Too terrified, too hurting to look up. Even if it meant a beating, apparently.

Annalee caught a determination in Niran's eyes. He took a few running steps through the crowd and put his hand on the girl's shoulder. Annalee and her family were just a couple feet behind, but they stopped. This was Niran's territory.

Whatever Niran said, the child nodded. Tears trickled down her cheeks. And like that the angry Thai man was there at the girl's side. He shouted something at Niran and then Niran whipped out his wallet. The police had given him a badge, a way of identifying himself as an informant.

Anything could happen at this point, Niran had told them. But a trafficker would rather lose a child slave than lose his freedom. And Thailand's government was very hard on convicted sex traffickers.

It only took a few seconds for the Thai man to understand what was about to happen. Niran already had his cell phone out. Like a seasoned athlete, the perpetrator turned and ran for his life. He was halfway down the block when Niran stooped and talked again to the little girl.

She was still crying, her black eyeliner running down her face. Niran turned to Annalee's parents. "We need to get her to safety. The child told me she's been that man's slave for three weeks. He said he'd kill her if she got away."

Before they took the girl back to the van, Niran directed her to the nearest bench. When she was seated, the child's feet didn't even reach the ground. Annalee looked around. No one seemed to notice the scene playing out here. Tourists, too busy bartering for a better priced T-shirt to see a child sex slave being rescued. Too busy to notice other trafficked children mixed in with the summer crowd.

Annalee and the group formed a shelter around Niran as he worked. He said something to the girl and

she ran her hands over her cheeks and nodded. Niran removed the heels from her young feet and slipped them into his backpack. From inside one of the pockets he pulled out a pair of sandals and gave them to her.

Her hands shook as she slid them on.

And in that single act, the child no longer looked like a sex slave. She was a girl in need of safety and shelter and family. With the change of shoes, the child looked like she might be Niran's daughter. Niran motioned to Annalee. "Hold her hand, please."

Annalee took the child's hand and at the same time, the girl looked up. Her eyes welled with fresh tears and then she did something Annalee hadn't expected.

The girl smiled.

"It's okay." Annalee figured the child didn't speak English. But she had to try. The girl clung to Annalee's hand. As if her life depended on it.

The group hurried down the street with Niran in the lead. Even still Annalee wasn't sure what would happen once they reached Niran's van. Would the child really go with them? She was young and thin and scared, but she didn't know them. Annalee and her family were clearly not from Thailand, and Niran was a complete stranger.

Still, the child didn't hesitate.

Niran helped her into the van and forty minutes later they drove through a set of double gates to a sprawling compound. Part of that time, Niran talked on the phone, no doubt preparing his team for the arrival of the girl. Behind the chain link and razor wire was a large white

brick building. The place wasn't glamorous but clearly this was the safe house. More like a safe hotel. They parked and a woman met them as they got out of the van.

"That's Som, his wife," Annalee's father explained to the others.

The woman took the girl and gave Annalee's group a traditional greeting. Hands together and a slight bow. As she left with the child, Niran turned to them. "She looks forward to meeting you later."

They walked toward the front door. Annalee still couldn't believe it. "How . . . old is she?"

Niran gritted his teeth. "Eight years."

Like someone had kicked her in the gut, Annalee reeled toward her mother. The child was barely more than a baby. How could this happen? She stole a look at Tommy.

His eyes flashed with rage. "Mr. Niran . . . can I ask you a question?"

"Of course." Niran's eyes were teary.

"Where were the police?" Tommy clenched his jaw. "If we could see those girls so easily, why couldn't they? Someone in authority should be rescuing these kids."

Annalee agreed, of course. They all did. Ending the problem of sex trafficking in Phuket seemed simple enough. Arrest the guys with the children, lock them up and throw away the key. That would stop traffickers from thinking they could steal boys and girls and sell them on Bangla Road.

Niran shook his head. "They are smart, these men."

He looked disgusted. "They say they are Grandpa or Uncle. The kids usually agree."

"Why?" The question was out before Annalee could stop herself. "Don't they want to be rescued?"

"It's complicated." Niran crossed his arms. "Traffickers confuse the brains of these children. They threaten to kill their parents or families. It's very precise how they treat their victims, like a science. Captors know how to keep their slaves."

"Of course, it's not just here." Annalee's father looked at each of them. "The United States has the same thing. Even Indianapolis. It's just harder to see."

Niran nodded. "I'm afraid so." He looked toward the front door of the safe house. "We cannot help every child. But today, we thank God for saving that little one."

Yes, Annalee thought. She closed her eyes for a few seconds. *Lord, restore this child of Yours. Give her new life here. And help Niran and his wife save more boys and girls.*

And suddenly she had a glimpse of the future. She could see herself working with rescued girls, giving them a safe place to live and heal, saving them from their wretched existence. Right in her own city.

In the vision she didn't see only herself working with broken children. She saw someone else. But his face wasn't that of a stranger. It was the face of the only boy she had ever loved.

Tommy Baxter.

3



Basketball practice let out early that September afternoon, and Tommy was thankful. He had agreed to take Annalee to a doctor's appointment, a checkup. Just to see why she was still tired. Everyone figured she had mononucleosis. Something she might have gotten when they were traveling, and the virus was still lingering.

Her parents were out of town so today it would be just the two of them.

Routine, he told himself. *No big deal*.

They were a month into their senior year at Northside and all of life lay stretched ahead of them. Today wasn't going to change that. She'd get the official diagnosis for mono, follow the doctor's orders and get better. After talking to God about Annalee, Tommy had a sense everything would be okay. Annalee wasn't dealing with anything serious.

She couldn't be.

He took another five three-point shots and swished them all. His routine to end every practice.

Across the court Coach Anders entered the gym

from the locker room and walked toward him. "Got another call from a scout. University of Michigan." Coach was a veteran. He'd worked at Northside for nearly two decades. "You telling your parents about these offers?"

Tommy smiled. "They know." Not for a minute did he want to play college basketball. He'd made that decision a year ago. He wasn't tall enough for the NBA and college hoops would take too much time. He didn't need the scholarship. His grades would take care of that.

Coach had a basketball under his arm. "We're talking full ride. Division I programs."

"No thanks." Tommy led the way to the locker room. "Someone else out there wants it more than me. You know that."

"True." Coach Anders shook his head. "I'll never understand you, Baxter."

That was okay. Lately, even Tommy's parents struggled to understand him. "You could at least try a season of college ball," his dad had said to him a few days ago. Tommy listened, patient. But his decision never wavered.

He bid goodbye to his coach. Then he showered, grabbed his backpack and walked across campus toward the library. Annalee would be waiting for him there.

He saw her before she saw him. Did she look thinner? More frail? She wore a white button-up sweater and her shoulders looked practically bony. Weight loss was a symptom of mono. She should've gone to the doctor before this. But what if . . .

No. Annalee was fine. Her weight loss was just a part

of the virus. Or maybe she hadn't lost weight. Maybe it was just the way she wore the sweater. Yes, that was it.

They walked to the parking lot and he helped her into his black Jeep. Before they reached the road, she turned to him. "Tommy . . . you aren't afraid, right?"

"Me?" A strange panic welled up inside him, but he hid it. *Don't be worried*, he told himself. He forced a laugh. "Of course not. This is just a checkup." He reached for her hand. It felt colder than usual.

She nodded and settled into her seat. After a minute she checked the time on her phone. "We're early. My appointment got moved back an hour."

"Well then . . . I have an idea." He turned at the next light and headed to Benson's Bakery on Main Street. Oldest Indianapolis creamery around, and Annalee's favorite.

A smile lifted her lips. "You're not taking me for—"

"An iced vanilla latte?" He kept one hand on the wheel, his eyes on the road. "Yes, Annalee, I am. After what happened last time . . . I think it's only right."

She laughed and the sound was music in the air. That, combined with the wind in the trees and the bright blue sky, made Tommy relax. Everything was going to be fine. Annalee would receive her mono diagnosis, get better and move on with life.

"By the way." Annalee shifted in her seat and stared at him. "I forgive you for last time."

"Good." He grinned at her. "I told you I'd make it up to you." The store was just ahead. *This was good. Her favorite coffee and funny stories.* Everything was going to be fine.

Annalee's eyes danced. "I mean . . . what was your excuse again? Lack of balance?"

"Like I said . . . I was reaching for your door." He raised his brow. "Trying to be a gentleman."

"I'm just teasing." Her laughter remained. "It was an accident."

"But who does that?" Tommy parked in the lot adjacent to Benson's. "I reach for your door and hit your iced latte. Straight into your face."

"It was fun explaining it to my parents." She took a deep breath. "I laugh every time I think about it."

As he stepped out of the Jeep, Tommy did an exaggerated bow. He eased her into his arms and his eyes held hers for a long beat. "Happy to keep you entertained."

For a moment, all he wanted was to kiss her. But if she had mono, he'd better not. They'd been refraining just in case. He worked his hand through her silky hair, his voice a whisper. "Just don't replace me, okay."

Annalee stifled a laugh. She looked like she wanted to kiss him, as badly as he wanted to kiss her. But it couldn't happen now. Not until her diagnosis.

Finally he stepped back and she took his hand. "Don't worry, Tommy Baxter." She smiled at him. *Those green eyes.* "I won't replace you."

"Same." He didn't look away. "Not now or ever."

It's just a checkup. Mononucleosis. Nothing more.

He bought a large drink for her and a small iced tea for himself. They were almost back to the Jeep, talking

about his basketball team and her chemistry class, when it happened.

A deafening screech came from the nearest intersection. Tommy turned and saw a gray sedan jolt to a halt, but the driver didn't stand a chance. A new model pickup blazed through the red light without braking. The truck barreled into the side of the sedan and somehow kept going.

"Tommy!" Annalee dropped her coffee and took a few steps toward the intersection. "The driver!"

Already smoke poured from the sedan's engine and the hint of a flame curled up from under the hood. Several cars stopped, but no one got out. Tommy threw his drink and took off. He looked over his shoulder at Annalee. "Call 9-1-1!"

He rushed toward the car even as the fire grew. Other cars pulled up to the intersection and skidded to a stop. One guy opened his car door and stood, but he didn't move, didn't run toward the flaming sedan.

Only Tommy did that.

Everything shifted into slow motion. He couldn't see anything but the car and now something else. A woman frantically struggling inside the twisted wreckage. She looked like she was trying to free herself.

Tommy reached the sedan and grabbed the driver's door handle. It wouldn't budge. The heat was intense and getting hotter. Flames moved over the front of the car toward the windshield. *It's going to blow*, Tommy thought to himself. *God, help me, please. It's going to blow!*

With a strength greater than his own, Tommy finally jerked the door open. "Come on!" He took hold of the woman's arm. She was older, maybe in her late seventies. "You have to get out!"

Sirens sounded in the distance, but it didn't matter. Tommy didn't have time for fire trucks or ambulances. A half a minute or so was all he had to get the lady out. Seconds, even.

"Help me!" the woman screamed. "I . . . I can't get my seatbelt off!"

Smoke was filling the car, the heat suffocating both of them. Tommy held his breath and reached over the woman. *God, please . . .* Tommy pushed the seatbelt button again and again. "Come on . . . please." And suddenly . . . it released.

The smoke and heat were definitely getting to the woman. She choked and gasped, struggling to breathe. There was just one way Tommy was going to get her out of the car alive. He hooked his arms beneath hers and pulled with everything he had.

With a supernatural speed and strength, Tommy dragged the woman across the intersection to the nearest curb. At the same time an explosion ripped through the vehicle and shot it ten feet off the ground.

Hovering over the woman, Tommy watched, horrified. *God, you saved us. Thank You.* He had no words, just gratitude. A fire truck pulled up and an ambulance behind it. The scene unfolded in a rush of motion. People running about, passersby and drivers

crowding to the intersection. Paramedics hurried up to the woman and took over. One man asked Tommy to step back.

Which he did.

All the way back to the spot near Benson's where Annalee stood pinned to a brick wall. Her face pale, her whole body trembling. "Tommy."

He took her in his arms and held on. No one seemed to notice them. The flaming car had everyone's attention now—not the guy who had pulled the woman from danger. Tommy didn't care. The driver was safe now, that was all that mattered.

The woman was safe.

"You . . . you could've been killed." Annalee pressed her forehead to his chest. "You're crazy."

"Someone had to help her." Tommy was shaking now, too. The adrenaline catching up to him. "She . . . she wouldn't have made it."

Annalee looked up at him. "You had seconds. That's all."

Everyone should've run to her, Tommy wanted to say. "She needed help." He cradled her head in his hands. "It's okay." He breathed the words into her beautiful blond hair. "God was with me."

A police officer walked up and took a report. What happened and who hit who. "You dragged her from the car? Before the explosion?"

"Yes, sir." Tommy slid his hands into his jeans pockets. "I did."

The officer studied him. "You're a rare breed, son." He

patted Tommy's shoulder. "Kind, compassionate. Selfless." His eyes softened. "We could use a few more like you."

"Thanks." Tommy wanted to say it was no big deal. Running toward the burning car wasn't something he took time to consider. "Anyone would've helped her."

But he was the only one who did.

The police officer finished taking notes, while across the street the ambulance pulled off with the woman inside. A tow truck moved what was left of the sedan. He looked up from his notepad. "She's breathing well." He narrowed his eyes. "She'll be okay . . . because of you."

When the officer was gone, Annalee took Tommy's hand and stared at him. "Anyone would *not* have helped." She looked over her shoulder at the intersection, and turned to Tommy again. "Only you."

"Anyway . . ." He'd had enough of the conversation. He forced a smile. "You lost your coffee again."

"Seems to be a theme." She linked arms with him and pointed at the gutter. Their empty plastic cups still lay there. She picked them up and tossed them into a nearby trashcan. "Looks like we need to come back. Maybe after the doctor."

He laughed and held the door as she climbed into his Jeep. That's what they would do. After the doctor figured out her mono and sent them on their way, they could come back here and pretend like he hadn't rescued a woman from a burning car and she hadn't had to go get her fatigue checked out.

Because by then everything would be fine.

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THE DOCTOR WAS an internist. A specialist in internal medicine. Tommy read that on the man's door as they entered his office. Annalee checked in and sat beside him in the waiting area. Tommy took her hand. "You worried?"

"Not at all." A few swipes and she opened her texts. "Look." She smiled and held the phone up so he could see it. "My mom asked the same thing."

Tommy studied her. She didn't look as tired today. Her cheeks were pink, her green eyes bright with life. He watched her texting her mom back. "What're you telling her?"

"Same thing." She slipped her phone in her purse and leaned back. "I'm sure it's mono, Tommy. Plus, doctors like to rule out things. That's all."

That sounded right. Of course her primary doctor had suggested this specialist. Annalee had been tired since the trip to Thailand two months ago. And she had a cough she couldn't shake. Sometimes—if Tommy was honest—Annalee seemed out of breath from nothing more than crossing the street. He tapped his foot and looked around the office.

Framed beach art hung on every wall. One painting looked like Phuket. He gave her hand a soft squeeze. "Seems like yesterday, walking Karon Beach."

"Mmm. Yes." She breathed deep. "I feel better today. So, that's good."

"It is." Tommy gripped the arms of his chair. Why was he so anxious? "Open gym went well."

"I can't believe it's your last season." She didn't look away, didn't blink. "I'm glad I get to watch you play. One more year."

Something inside him relaxed. They had so much ahead. The rest of the fall semester and then Christmas break and the games would start. Tommy loved having Annalee in the stands. She and her parents sitting next to his family.

"Annalee Miller?" A heavysset nurse stood at the doorway. She had kind eyes.

Annalee stood and gave him one last glance. "I'll be right back."

This is routine, he told himself. His eyes landed on the beach painting again. Otherwise her parents would be here. His phone buzzed and he checked it. His cousin Cole Baxter Blake texted him a few times a week. This time about a girl he was seeing at school. The conversation helped Tommy pass the time.

Seven minutes later, Annalee walked through the door holding a piece of paper. Tommy stood to meet her and immediately two things troubled him. First, the appointment hadn't taken nearly long enough. Even the most basic exam should at least take twenty minutes. The other thing was more obvious.

Annalee looked scared to death.

When they were out in the hall, she stopped and faced him. "I need a scan. It's two floors down in the

hospital wing." She held up the piece of paper. "They want me to do it now."

Tommy's mind began to spin. "A . . . a scan?" He shook his head. "For what?"

"My lungs and chest." Annalee looked up. "The doctor drew blood to check for mono. But he heard something, when he listened to me breathe." Her smile didn't reach her eyes. "It's probably all part of the virus."

The floor didn't feel solid anymore, and Tommy couldn't find his voice. As they entered the elevator, he focused on the place where Annalee held tight to his elbow. Standing next to him. Where she'd been as far back as freshman year.

At the imaging department, he held the door for her. They were barely inside when a tech stepped into the waiting area. "Annalee? We're ready for you."

She turned a weak smile toward Tommy and waved.

"It could take an hour," the woman told him. "If you'd like to have a seat."

Annalee moved through the door with the tech and Tommy was alone in the room. This one had nothing on the walls.

He sat down and clasped his hands. Why was it going to take an hour? He squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to think about it. But the questions came anyway. How far away had they taken her? And what about her parents? Should he call them and tell them or had the doctor done that already?

It's just routine, he told himself. She's probably had

mono for months. Which can't be good. But her grades were still amazing and she still laughed at his jokes. So she wasn't that tired. Not too sick, like something more serious.

But what if . . . ?

No way he could finish the question, so he let it dangle against the backdrop of his pounding heart. And in the sterile cold of the waiting area, Tommy Baxter did the only thing he could think to do.

He dropped to his knees.