

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

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Love Inspired™

Picture Perfect Family

Renee Andrews



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Picture Perfect Family
Серия «Mills & Boon Love Inspired»

Аннотация

“I MADE A PROMISE.” Intending to keep her vow to raise her orphaned nephew, photographer Mandy Carter is concerned when the boy’s uncle appears in town. Handsome youth minister Daniel Brantley is determined to take over little Kaden’s upbringing. Once upon a time Mandy was in love with Daniel, but he left her behind to do mission work overseas. Now he’s back—and seems to think she’s the same girl she once was, with big dreams a small town and motherhood can’t fill. Turns out marriage and motherhood are all Mandy wants. It’ll take winning Daniel’s heart, though, to make this family complete.

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Why did the sight of Daniel Brantley still cause her knees to sway, even when he'd upset her?

She took a deep breath and told him exactly what was on her mind. "I'm not going anywhere, Daniel. I'm staying right here in Claremont with our nephew."

"Me, too."

"Then we need to come up with how this is going to work, because I promised my sister I'd take care of Kaden, and I'm not about to break that promise. I love Kaden."

"I know." He pulled out a chair from the table and sat down as though he totally belonged here in the middle of her home and in the middle of her life. Suddenly Mandy realized that if he was determined to help raise Kaden, too, then that's where he'd be, in the middle of her life from now on.

Mandy and Daniel, working together to raise a child, forever.
Dear Reader,

When Jacob and Mia died, Mandy Carter's world was upended, her dreams were thrown out the window and she had to put another person's needs—her nephew, Kaden's—above her own.

This is the kind of challenge that everyone wants to believe they could handle. That this-is-what-my-life-is-now moment, where a person sees that they've been tossed onto a different path than they anticipated, and they accept that test and excel. Mandy grew emotionally and spiritually because of the hardship, and she

became Kaden's princess, the one who took care of him when his mother couldn't, much like Pharaoh's daughter took care of Moses.

I enjoy mixing facts and fiction in my novels, and you'll learn about some of the truths hidden within the story on my website, www.reneeandrews.com. You can enter a contest on my site to win a painting by Gina Brown, the artist mentioned in the book and the person to whom this book is dedicated.

Additionally, my site includes alternate beginnings for some of my novels and deleted scenes that didn't make the final cut. If you have prayer requests, there's a place to let me know on my site. I will lift your request up to the Lord in prayer. I love to hear from readers, so please write to me at renee@reneeandrews.com.

Blessings in Christ,

Renee Andrews

Picture Perfect Family

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Whoever welcomes a little child like this
in my name welcomes me.

—*Matthew 18:5*



This novel is dedicated to Gina Bowers Brown,
my amazing and beautiful sister.

“A sister is a little bit of childhood
that can never be lost.”

—Marion C. Garretty

Chapter One



“So I guess Kaden’s excited that Daniel Brantley is back in town, huh?”

Mandy Carter couldn’t control the natural flinch that Jessica Martin’s question provoked. Consequently, the perfect photograph she’d been about to take turned into a distorted mess when her normally steady hand jerked the camera. Instead of capturing Nathan and Lainey Martin giggling atop two bales of hay by the pond at Hydrangea Park, she got a blurred picture of the grass around her feet.

“Wait, hold on, let’s try that again,” she coaxed the kids, but the two-year-old had turned her attention from her brother to the buckles at the top of her pink overalls, and a group of bicyclists passing by had piqued Nathan’s interest.

“Oh, sorry,” Jessica apologized. “I should have known better than to talk to you while you were photographing the kids.”

“It’s okay, really.” Normally Mandy wasn’t affected at all by conversation while she worked. There was plenty of background noise at the park, and none of that disturbed her concentration. But Jessica’s statement had been far from typical conversation.

“Oh, no,” Lainey said, her tiny brows furrowing when she accidentally unhooked one of her buckles.

Nathan turned back toward his little sister. “Here, Lainey, I’ll help you.” He guided her small hand through the process of fastening the strap while she watched in awe.

“Thanks, Bubba,” she said, giving him a full baby-teeth smile.

Mandy snapped away, capturing the precious gesture and getting even better photographs than she’d planned.

“Oh, wasn’t that adorable? Did you get that?” Jessica asked.

“I sure did,” she said, grinning.

“Chad’s going to love photos of the kids for his birthday present.”

“I certainly hope so,” Mandy said, while a tiny poke in her back told her Kaden’s patience had run out.

“Hey, Aunt Mandy, are you done yet?” Sky-blue eyes—Brantley blue eyes—squinted up at her in the sun.

“I am now,” she said, packing up her camera. “Thank you for being so good while I took the pictures.” She ran a hand over his sandy waves.

“So we can go play now?”

“Sure.”

Kaden pumped a fist in the air. “Yes!” He ran toward Nathan. “You want to slide or swing?”

“We’ll slide first, and then we’ll swing,” Nathan said.

“Okay!”

Nathan, at seven, was three years older than Kaden and

therefore “major cool” in her nephew’s eyes. Mandy loved seeing him so excited, so happy. Nine months ago she’d worried that she’d never see that sweet smile again, but there it was, stretching from cheek to cheek as he ran after his new friend toward the wide red slide. Maybe she was getting a better handle on this parenthood thing than she thought.

Jessica scooped up Lainey from Mandy’s hay props and kissed her soft blond curls. “I’m so glad you brought Kaden along today so he and Nathan can play.”

“Me, too,” Mandy said. It wasn’t as if she really had a choice, since he was with her 24/7, but she didn’t mind.

“Kaden looks like he’s doing well.” Jessica didn’t add, “considering all that he’s been through,” but it was definitely implied.

“He is. It took a little time for him to get adjusted. He was quiet for a while, and he still asks a few questions about his mom and dad every now and then, but I really think he’s going to be okay.” Mandy wasn’t so sure about herself, but she was determined that one way or another, Kaden would be fine. That was her main mission in life now, keeping her promise to Mia and making sure Kaden was okay.

“He sure enjoys playing with Nathan.” Jessica pointed to him as he flew down the slide headfirst with his new friend cheering him on. “Nathan likes being the big boy. He’s really good with younger kids and a great big brother for Lainey.”

“I’m glad Kaden’s getting a chance to play with another boy.

Most of his time is spent with me.” And soon Kaden’s time would be split between Mandy and Daniel Brantley, if Daniel had his way and sent her packing.

Not happening.

“Hey, we have a great four-year-old class at the day-care if you ever want to bring him in and let him try it out. He wouldn’t have to go full time, you know. There’s a Mommy’s Day Out program on Wednesday morning that you could put him in. It’d be good for him, social interaction and all.”

Mandy blinked past the automatic response to the mommy reference. She wasn’t Kaden’s mommy. In fact, she missed his mommy, probably as much as Kaden. Mia had been more than a sister. She’d been Mandy’s best friend and confidante. They’d been through so much together. Mia was truly the only person who not only knew Mandy’s history but had experienced it, too.

“Sorry,” Jessica said, obviously noticing the change in Mandy’s disposition. “I’m sure you want to keep him close by with everything he’s gone through. It’s a reflex, telling people about the daycare, since I work there. But I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s fine.” Mandy was glad so many people in town were interested in Kaden’s well-being, a sign of how much Mia and Jacob had been loved and a promise that Mandy wasn’t completely on her own raising her nephew. Claremont, Alabama, was small enough that everyone knew everybody’s business and looked out for each other. Growing up, Mandy had hated that. Now, though, with Kaden to watch after, it didn’t seem like such a

bad thing. “From the looks of the way he and Nathan are playing, Kaden might enjoy spending time with other kids. I’ll think about the Wednesday morning option.”

“Well, I have it on good authority that the teacher for that four-year-old class would absolutely adore him.”

“I’m guessing that teacher would be you?” Mandy asked.

“You’d guess right,” Jessica said with a laugh.

“I swing, Mommy?” Lainey pointed toward the swing set beside the big slide where Nathan and Kaden were playing.

“Please?”

“Sure.”

They walked toward the swings chatting, and Jessica slowly worked her way into a topic that had come up way too often in Mandy’s conversations around town over the past nine months.

“So, Chad told me about a new support group at the community college for people who have been affected by drunk drivers, specifically those who have lost someone due to an accident caused by drunk driving.” Jessica gazed at her friend, concern evident in her eyes. “I was thinking that maybe you could give it a try.”

Mandy bit her lower lip and focused on Kaden, instantly orphaned when a drunk guy climbed behind the wheel, drove the wrong way and crashed head-on into Jacob and Mia’s car. She swallowed past her emotion and said, “I don’t need a support group.”

“It might help,” Jessica said. “I can tell you’re coping okay,

but I also can tell that you aren't as involved around town as you used to be. We've missed you at the church, you know. And I—well, everyone, really—wants to see you happy again.”

“I'm happy with Kaden,” she said truthfully, which was why she wasn't about to let Daniel take her nephew.

“I believe that, but you need to find happiness with life again. Most people can't relate to what you went through, but this group can. That's what they are there for.”

Mandy pictured Mia, squeezing her hand as her life slipped away that night. Jacob had died at the scene, and the guy driving the other car died en route to the hospital, but Mia had held on until Mandy and Kaden made it to the hospital. Long enough for Mandy to get there and make that promise.

She kept her emotions in check as she glanced at Jessica, who was only trying to help. “I appreciate what you're trying to do, but I'm not ready to meet a group of people who've been through the same experience. It hurts to even think that someone else has had to suffer that much.” She shook her head and added, “I don't think I'll ever be ready for a support group.”

Jessica was undeterred. “Chad plans on talking to Daniel about going to the meetings also. Maybe it would be easier for you if y'all went together, especially since you were both affected by the same accident.” She pushed Lainey in the toddler swing and waited for Mandy to respond.

Mandy was glad the boys were so involved with sliding that they weren't listening to this part of their conversation. She did

her best to keep Kaden focused on the positive memories of his parents when they were alive, instead of the negative memory of their death.

“What do you think?” Jessica asked.

Mandy wasn't about to give her friend false hope. If Daniel was going, she sure wouldn't be a part of the group. He was only returning to Claremont to take Kaden, and she wasn't spending any more time with him than necessary. So she sat on a nearby swing, avoided the question and asked another one that would turn the subject back to what she most needed to know. “Did you say Daniel is already back?”

Jessica didn't press the issue, but instead nodded while Lainey pumped her feet and squealed with each push. “Yeah, I thought so, but I guess if you haven't seen him yet, he may not have made it back to Claremont, huh? I mean, I'm sure he'll make a beeline to come see Kaden, don't you think?”

Daniel would make a beeline to Kaden, not to Mandy. Miraculously, Mandy managed a smile. “Yes, I'm sure he will.”

All of a sudden, Jessica slapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh, dear, maybe he was going to surprise you and Kaden, and I just blew it.”

“No, really. It's fine.” Mandy's shoes dug deeper in the dirt. “When I see him, I'll act surprised. Don't worry about it.” But Mandy was definitely worried. Daniel could take Kaden away from her, or try to take him away. She loved that little boy as if he were her own. Why couldn't Daniel see that?

Because of that email, her mind whispered.

“Well, that’s what the church bulletin said on Sunday, that he was moving back this week and would begin working with the youth at the church as soon as he returned. I have to tell you, Chad and I were thrilled to hear he’d taken the youth minister job.” Jessica smiled warmly. “It’ll be nice seeing Nathan and Lainey become more involved with the youth group as they get older, especially if Daniel is leading the way.”

“He’s always been good with kids,” Mandy mumbled, more to herself than to Jessica. Daniel worked directly with children in his missions; she’d seen the photos. Children beaming. Daniel laughing. If those photos were shown in court, a judge would probably decide that he’d be a better parent than Mandy. Her heart sputtered in her chest.

“There was a photo of Daniel in the church bulletin beside the announcement,” Jessica continued. “It’s always a bit of a jolt to see him and realize Jacob is gone. They looked so much alike, didn’t they?”

Daniel’s eyes were a brighter blue, in Mandy’s opinion, but she didn’t say so now. She simply nodded then glanced at Kaden, whose eyes were the exact same Caribbean shade. As a photographer, she prayed for that exact color of sky when she took photos outdoors. Bright, clear and beautiful. Breathtaking.

Kaden looked at her with those exquisite eyes and grinned. “Did you see me that time, Aunt Mandy? I went fast, didn’t I?” She swallowed. “Yes, you did.”

He nodded. “Yep, I did.” Then he ran back to the ladder to give the slide another go.

“You know, Chad and Daniel were really close in high school, back when they played baseball together. And Chad always thought the world of Daniel.”

“I remember.” Everyone thought the world of Daniel, even Mandy. In fact, she’d thought enough of him to propose to him when she was seventeen. She nodded absently while Jessica continued talking, and while her mind processed the facts. Daniel Brantley, Kaden’s uncle, had taken the youth minister job. She’d told him when he came back home for that interview at the church that he didn’t need to leave his mission work because of her impulsive email. She’d insisted that she never should have sent the thing and that she regretted hitting the *send* button the minute she clicked the mouse. But he’d pronounced he was coming back. No discussion. Riding in to save the day ... and save Kaden from Mandy.

“And it’ll really be something for him to tell the kids all about his mission work, especially about everything in Africa,” Jessica continued. “You should have seen the slideshow they did last year when we had the annual appeal for the churches he started in Malawi and Tanzania. Seeing those people holding hands and moving into that water to be baptized, it touched my heart.”

“Oh, I remember that! I liked the elephants,” Nathan said, following Kaden down the slide.

Instead of running around to slide again, Kaden stopped,

dusted off the knees of his jeans and peered at Nathan. “Uncle Daniel’s elephants?” he asked.

Nathan shrugged. “I don’t know. Is your uncle the guy from church who showed us the pictures of Africa and the elephants?”

Kaden looked to Mandy. “Is he talking about Uncle Daniel?”

“Yes, he is,” Mandy said, still forcing a smile.

“Wow, *he’s* your uncle? He’s *so* cool!” Nathan said.

Kaden beamed. “Thanks!”

Yeah, thanks, Mandy thought dryly. The appeal Jessica referred to had been held the weekend of Kaden’s fourth birthday last year. Daniel came home for his nephew’s party and did a slideshow of his African missions at the church while he was in town. He didn’t come home often and hadn’t planned to return again for another year, but he’d ended up coming back two weeks later for Jacob’s and Mia’s funerals.

For the entire time that they remained at the park, Jessica talked nonstop, singing Daniel’s praises and exclaiming about all of the wonderful advantages to having him back in town. Nathan joined in whenever he could, and Kaden automatically agreed with everything his older friend said. Mandy, on the other hand, spent her time wondering how quickly she could get him to leave. And exactly how long she had before she looked into another set of Brantley blue eyes, those belonging to the guy who broke her heart.

Chapter Two



Daniel Brantley never failed to appreciate the beauty of his hometown. No matter how many astounding landscapes he'd seen in his travels around the world, no matter the marvelous sights, smells and sounds of God's creation that he'd witnessed during his seven years in the mission field, Claremont always took his breath away.

Maybe it was the memory of being a kid and running these streets with Jacob, Chad, Mitch and the other guys from Claremont High ... or maybe it was simply the picturesque beauty of the town nestled perfectly at the foot of Lookout Mountain in north Alabama. Daniel had no idea why, but he knew that in all of his twenty-eight years, in spite of how often he'd felt close to God in his travels, there was something about being home that made God even closer, close enough to touch.

He cranked the window down and inhaled the scents of early spring, flowers blooming, trees budding. Honeysuckle and gardenia mixed and mingled, their sweet scents lingering on the air and showcasing the fact that he was no longer in Africa.

He was home.

Nearing the road leading to the high school, he saw two rows of Bradford pear trees covered in stark white blooms lining the path to the school's entrance. Those blooms used to fall like snow all over this old red truck every spring a decade ago.

Glancing toward the brick buildings, he saw a bounty of teenagers' cars parked in the gravel lots on both sides. He and Jacob parked out there back in the day. They'd ridden to Claremont High together every morning, stayed after school for football practice in the fall, basketball practice in the winter and finally baseball, which had been the favorite sport for both Brantley boys, every spring.

The Brantley boys. The Brantley twins. The Brantley brood. They'd been dubbed lots of things back then, but no matter how the townsfolk referred to them, it'd never been individually. They'd always been a pair, and in spite of their differences, they'd liked it that way.

Daniel sighed. Would he ever get used to the fact that Jacob was gone? And didn't it seem odd that he'd been the one to venture out into more than his share of dangerous circumstances in his attempt to follow their missionary parents into the world and preach the Gospel, and yet the son that stayed home lost his life?

He pondered that irony as he drove through town. After Brother Henry told him to take his first day back to "get acquainted with Claremont," Daniel had headed directly to the photography studio in the town square to find Mandy Carter and

see Kaden. Yes, he loved his hometown, but he'd have never returned this soon if it hadn't been for his nephew. Unfortunately, he hadn't found Mandy or Kaden at Carter Photography. Instead, he found a hand-painted sign on the door.

On a photo shoot. Be back later.

And wasn't that just like Mandy? Be back later. No promises, nothing definite. Expecting the entire world to cater to her plans, her desires, the same way she had so many years ago. Some things never changed.

But Daniel wasn't going to simply sit outside her door and wait for her to show. Instead, he drove through town enjoying the gorgeous day and taking in the scenery while thinking about Kaden. A little boy needed a man in his life. In truth, a little boy needed a *dad* in his life.

Daniel had originally thought it was fine to stay in the mission field and let Mandy Carter raise his nephew. Daniel's parents had also agreed that Mandy was perfect for raising their grandson. Their commitment to the mission work in India kept them away, and while they loved the country there, they didn't think they should move Kaden away from the only home he'd ever known right after losing both of his parents. And they all agreed that Mandy adored Kaden and wanted to take care of her nephew.

"I love Claremont, and I love Kaden. Let him stay here with me, please. It's what Mia wanted."

Maybe because he'd been so upset over losing Jacob, Daniel had agreed. He couldn't wait to get back to Malawi to pray, to

work and to grieve. After a few months, however, he realized that he couldn't get his nephew off his mind. And when he prayed to God to help him know what he should do about Kaden, he'd received that email from Mandy.

After reading what she'd written, he realized that Mandy was still the spoiled little princess she was way back then. Why he'd believed her when she said she wanted to make a life in Claremont and raise Kaden was beyond him. If Kaden was going to have the life Jacob and Mia had planned for him, it'd be Daniel who provided it. Certainly not Mandy Carter.

He continued driving toward the edge of town so he could see the new neighborhoods everyone was talking about, but before he reached the entrances to the subdivisions that had replaced the cotton fields, something caught his eye. Or rather, *someone* caught his eye.

A woman stood beside a blue pickup truck waving her hands in the air. Her sleeveless pink shirt was tied in a knot at her waist, and a turquoise scarf had been threaded through the belt loops of rolled up jeans. The ends of the scarf were tipped in sparkling stones that appeared to match the bejeweled sandals on her feet. She looked like a modern princess Jasmine, waiting for Aladdin to scoop her up on a magic carpet and whisk her away from this "horrid little town," as she'd dubbed Claremont so many years ago.

While she waved him down, a thick ponytail of shiny, chocolate-brown hair whipped across her face in the March

breeze. But regardless of the mass of hair that made her face play peekaboo with Daniel as he approached, he had no doubt to the identity of the woman.

“Have mercy, Lord. Do You have to let her keep getting prettier?” His heart bumped solidly in his chest, the way it always did when he encountered the beauty that was Mandy Carter.

Daniel slowed the car as he neared and watched as one hand moved to shield her eyes from her hair, and her mouth formed a silent “Oh.” Which was quickly followed by “No.” Her wide smile slid into a flat line and she looked at him the same way she had practically every time he’d seen her in the past seven years, since that night he’d turned her down and walked away.

“You have anyone else in that old truck?” Mandy asked. “Someone who might actually be interested in helping me, perhaps?”

Here we go again. He grinned. “Afraid not.”

He heard her grumble something and was pretty sure it included, “Should’ve recognized that truck,” and “Why don’t you drive away, you always do.” But before he could respond, another voice joined in.

“Uncle Daniel?” Kaden called from her truck.

Daniel’s heart leaped at the sound, and his smile widened. “That you in there, slugger?”

“Uncle Daniel! Hey, you’re back!”

Oh, how he loved that boy. “Yes, I am, and I’m so glad I found you,” Daniel said, leaning his head out the window as he spoke.

“Let me pull the truck over, and I’ll help you and Aunt Mandy.” He was still in the middle of the street, and even though there wasn’t a sign of another car around, he figured he should probably be safe.

He parked, then climbed out of the truck and walked to Kaden’s side of the vehicle. He was anxious to hug his nephew, and he could do that while figuring out Mandy’s problem with the truck.

“Uncle Daniel, my new friend Nathan said you’re cool. He was talking about you and the elephants and stuff,” Kaden said, climbing from his car seat and jumping into Daniel’s arms.

“Nathan?” Daniel asked, holding his nephew tight.

“Chad and Jessica Martin’s son.” Mandy didn’t look at Daniel as she spoke. Instead, she peered down the road as though she could will another car into existence.

“Right, I remember him. And he has a little sister, too, doesn’t he?” Daniel asked Kaden, since he seemed to be the only one interested in conversing.

“Uh-huh, Lainey. She’s little, only two.”

Mandy cleared her throat. “I did a photo shoot at Hydrangea Park of Chad and Jessica’s kids, and after the shoot, we stayed awhile to let Kaden play with Nathan.” She’d apparently given up on anyone else coming to her rescue and was now more interested in the dirt around her feet than looking at Daniel.

“And then we got in the truck to go back home but we ran out of gas,” Kaden said.

“Out of gas?” Daniel asked, smiling down at his nephew.

Mandy’s head snapped up. “Yes, out of gas.” Then she moved to the back of her truck, climbed into the bed and stepped around bales of hay and potted plants, searching for something. “I used the truck today because I needed some props, and I hardly ever drive granddaddy’s old truck, so I forgot to check the tank,” she said, shoving a hay bale aside. “Apparently, it was close to empty.”

“Apparently,” Daniel said, watching her push a few boxes, a shovel, an old-fashioned tricycle and some other odd, colorful objects around before withdrawing a small orange gas can.

“There,” she said, pushing dark bangs out of her eyes as she worked her way through the maze of objects to reach the back of the truck. Then she jumped down with the orange can in hand. “We need a ride to the gas station, if you don’t mind.”

“And you’ll need a ride back to your truck,” Daniel said, uncertain why he found it so much fun to push her buttons.

“Yes, that, too. I thought someone from town would probably drive by soon and give us a ride, but if you could do it, that will work.”

“I *am* from town,” he reminded, “and it isn’t a problem.” He put Kaden on the ground beside him and ruffled his hair. “Come on, we’ll move your car seat over to my truck.”

“He likes to call it a booster seat,” Mandy said. “Car seats are for babies, according to Kaden.”

Kaden gave her a toothy grin then smiled even bigger for

Daniel. "I guess it's both."

Mandy's face dropped. Daniel noticed, but had the wherewithal not to mention it. He really didn't want to participate in a contest of who Kaden liked better. He wanted Kaden happy. Period.

Within minutes, he'd moved the booster seat over and buckled Kaden into the extended cab, then opened the passenger door for Mandy.

She maintained her distance as she climbed in, but the breeze still sent a hint of her peach shampoo, or perfume, across Daniel's senses. He hadn't smelled anything quite like it in a long time, especially not in Malawi or Tanzania, that's for sure.

"When'd you get back from Africa?" Kaden asked.

"Late last night," Daniel said, closing Mandy's door and then walking around to his side of the truck and climbing in. "But I'm back to stay this time."

"Yes!" Kaden's excited yell from the backseat sent Daniel's spirits soaring. He'd made the right decision to come back home. *Thanks, God, for steering me once more.*

Mandy huffed out an exasperated breath.

And if You don't mind, Lord. Steer me again in how to handle Mandy.

"So we can spend time together whenever you want," Daniel continued, then glanced at Mandy. "I'm assuming that will be okay with you." Mandy had obtained custody after Mia and Jacob's accident. At the time she'd promised Daniel could see his

nephew as often as he wanted, but she'd also thought he didn't plan on coming to Claremont more than twice a year at the max. "That is okay with you, isn't it, Mandy?" Daniel repeated.

Instead of answering, she reached over and flipped on the radio, which Daniel naturally had programmed to the contemporary Christian station. "Avalanche" by Manifest belted from the speakers, and Kaden immediately started tapping his hands against the booster seat with the upbeat sound.

Mandy looked at Kaden and verified that he was absorbed in the music then she leaned toward Daniel. "I asked you not to come back," she whispered.

"Yes, you did," he acknowledged, starting the truck.

"But you came, anyway."

"Yep, I did." He headed toward Bo Taylor's gas station a couple of miles toward town.

"Why?"

Daniel glanced in the rearview mirror at Kaden, now bobbing his head to the beat and attempting to sing along. Then he lowered his voice to match hers. "Because you also told me that I was out gallivanting across the globe and enjoying myself while you were left home to raise my nephew. You said that you were tired of having the weight of the world on your shoulders, so I came home to take that tiny weight off your hands and let you do what you want, Mandy." He nodded, sent a smile to Kaden via the rearview mirror. "We'll get everything settled with the court for custody and all, and then you can leave. It'll be the same as

before, but in reverse. You can see the world yourself, and let me raise Kaden. Of course, you can come home and visit Kaden whenever you like. I promise to take very good care of him, the way Mia and Jacob would've wanted."

"I told you I shouldn't have sent that email. Do you have any idea what I had been through at that point?"

Daniel noticed Kaden's head had tilted and that he peered toward the front seat.

"Do you like this song, too, Uncle Daniel?"

"I sure do," Daniel said, smiling back and tapping his hands against the steering wheel with the beat. Then he glanced at Mandy. "We'll talk about this later."

"Fine."

He pulled into the station and saw Bo and Maura Taylor inside the store. He'd known Bo for years, but had just met Maura when he'd come to town for the interview with Brother Henry. She was talking to a customer at the register inside, but Bo walked out of the station and greeted them, and again Daniel sensed that familiarity of being back home, where everyone knows you and everyone cares. It was similar to the friendships he had with the tiny church groups he'd started in Malawi and Tanzania, but different because the people of Claremont had known him and his family for years. And they knew about him losing Jacob, not only his twin brother but unquestionably his best friend.

"Daniel, good to see you! I heard on Sunday that you took the job at the church. Sure is great to have you back," Bo said.

“It’s good to be back.”

“Need a fill up?”

“Sure, but I can get it,” Daniel said, climbing out.

“This is full service, you know,” Bo said. “And I enjoy doing my job.”

“Okay, then, it’s all yours,” he said, sliding his seat forward so he could reach through and unbuckle Kaden. “You want to go get a snack and a drink inside?”

“Definitely!” Kaden scurried across the seat and climbed out.

“How about you, Mandy? Want anything?”

“No.” She was still pouting, and Daniel let her, not that he really had a choice. But he hadn’t told her anything that wasn’t the truth about what she’d said in that email, and he knew that was her true feelings coming out. She felt trapped here, and he was going to set her free.

“I’ve got a can in the back that needs filling, too,” he said to Bo.

“We ran out of gas,” Kaden said, and Daniel caught Mandy’s arms folding tightly against her chest with his proclamation.

“Who did?” Bo asked then peered into the truck. “Well, hey, Mandy. Didn’t recognize you at first. Your hair’s longer than I remember. It’s been awhile.”

“Hello, Mr. Taylor. Good to see you.” She was polite but reserved, not the feisty, bubbly Mandy Carter that Daniel remembered, but then again, she was peeved.

The other customer left, and Maura came out of the gas station

to visit, as well.

“You’ve met my wife, Maura, haven’t you?” Bo asked.

“Yes,” Daniel said. “Nice to see you again.”

“Likewise,” she said, smiling as Bo draped an arm around his wife. “I remember meeting you at the dinner on the grounds, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And now you’re going to be working at the church, I understand?”

“Yes, ma’am, with the youth.”

“Well, that’s great,” she said. “Autumn, our granddaughter, is seven now and starting to get involved in the youth activities at the church. I’m glad to know you’ll be working with that great group of kids.”

“Maura and I married a month ago,” Bo said. “Didn’t know if you knew that.”

“Brother Henry has been emailing the church bulletins to me each week while I’ve been gone, so I’ve stayed aware of my church family here,” Daniel said. “Congratulations on the wedding.”

“And who is this?” Maura asked, smiling at Kaden.

“This is my nephew, Kaden Brantley.”

Bo glanced at Maura and gave her a slight nod, then a sympathetic smile toward Kaden, and Daniel knew that Bo had apparently told her about Mia and Jacob. Or she could have heard it from someone at church. It was pretty big news in a small town

when anyone died, but in this case even more because Mia and Jacob were so young and had so much to live for, particularly Kaden.

Maura's mouth tightened, and she blinked a couple of times then squatted down to eye level with Kaden. "You know what, I made some cookies earlier to sell inside, but I haven't had anyone here to taste them and let me know if they're okay. Would you want to do that for me?"

"Would I! Yes, ma'am!"

Maura held out a hand, and Kaden took it. Then she turned toward Daniel's door, still open, to see Mandy sitting inside. "Would you like to come in, too?"

"We're going to try cookies, Aunt Mandy," Kaden said. "Come on. You love cookies!"

"They're fresh baked," Maura tempted.

Mandy smiled—something Daniel certainly hadn't seen since his arrival—and then climbed out of the passenger side. "I can't imagine turning down fresh-baked cookies."

"Aunt Mandy really likes cookies. We make them itchy."

"Itchy?" Maura asked.

Mandy laughed, and Daniel was absorbed in the fullness of the sound, rolling out effortlessly, as though she liked nothing better than to set it free. Daniel was grateful that Kaden had undoubtedly been witness to it, because he laughed along with her now.

"Wh-what?" Kaden giggled. "What'd I say?"

“We make them from scratch,” Mandy told him, rubbing her hand over his head affectionately. “We don’t make them itchy.”

Bo, Maura and Daniel all chuckled along.

“But that was close,” Mandy finally said.

Kaden grinned. “Thanks!”

When their laughter subsided, Maura nodded toward Mandy. “Okay, let’s go test some of those cookies.” They turned and started toward the small gas station. Maura wiped a couple of laugh tears from her cheeks and then directed her attention on Mandy. “I don’t believe we’ve met, have we?”

“I don’t think so. I’m Mandy Carter, Kaden’s aunt. I own the photography store in the town square. Well, I do now. It belonged to my grandparents and then my sister.” Her voice trailed off. “Now just me.”

“And me. I help,” Kaden said. “And we live there, at the top of the store.”

“Yes, Kaden definitely helps,” Mandy said.

Daniel waited until they entered the station. “I’m a little surprised that Maura has never met Mandy.”

“I’m trying to introduce her to everyone in town, but I suppose our paths haven’t crossed with Mandy’s too much. We do go to the town square a bit. Autumn enjoys going to the toy shop and Nelson’s five-and-dime, but we haven’t been in the photography shop.” He smiled broadly. “Need to get over there. Maura and I don’t have a lot of photos of us together, other than the wedding, you know.”

“I’m guessing you’d have seen Mandy if she’d been at church?”

Bo frowned. “You know the answer to that. Everyone sees everyone at church. But no, she hasn’t been there, not since Mia and Jacob’s accident. And truthfully, Mandy never was much for church, from what I remember. She was in the same grade as my daughter Hannah, you know, but seems like when Hannah got more involved in church during those later teen years, Mandy kind of pulled away.”

Daniel remembered that time in Mandy’s life, and now he wished he’d have done something to bring her back to God.

Bo’s eyes lifted. “But I will invite her today. Don’t know why I didn’t think about that sooner. I went years away from God, you know, and it’s not a fun place to be, away from Him.” He paused. “Maura, too, after she lost her daughter. I think that’s why she’s probably going to bond pretty well with that little Kaden. Our granddaughter, Autumn, lost her mother. But Autumn is doing great now. She’s a little older than Kaden, but I’m sure they’d get along real well. Maybe if you can get Mandy to bring him to church, he and Autumn can meet there.”

“Kaden will come to church with me,” Daniel said. There was no question that he’d take his nephew back to church, but if he had his way, he’d bring Mandy back to God, too. If she was going off to see the world, and Daniel was determined to let her go, he wanted to know she had God along for the trip.

“Well, it’ll be good for Kaden to have both of you in his life,” Bo said. “A child needs that, people who care and are working

together for his or her best interest. Family. People who love each other.”

Daniel couldn't offer all of that, not when it came to him and Mandy, but they did both care about Kaden. He glanced up to see Maura, Mandy and Kaden exit the store. Kaden had a chocolate chip cookie in one hand and a carton of milk in the other. Mandy's hands were filled with the same, and so were Maura's.

“You didn't bring us any?” Bo teased.

“Our hands were full,” Kaden said, using his tongue to grab a bit of stray chocolate from his lip, “but yours are waiting for you on the counter.”

Mandy grinned and licked the chocolate from her fingers. She looked so different when she smiled, actually sweet, like someone Daniel could actually connect with. And Daniel suddenly noticed that he'd just seen that same smile on Kaden. He looked to his nephew, then back to Mandy. Kaden had Mandy's smile.

“You okay, Uncle Daniel?” Kaden asked, and Daniel wondered if his thoughts were that obvious.

Kaden had *his* eyes and *Mandy's* smile. That was so noticeable now, and Daniel wondered why. *God, what are you telling me?*

“Uncle Daniel?” Kaden repeated.

Daniel cleared his throat. “I'm fine,” he answered.

“He's wanting some of those cookies,” Bo said to Kaden.

Daniel grinned. “I sure do. Here you go,” he handed over several bills to Bo, “for the gas, the milk and the cookies.”

"I'll bring your change for the gas. The milk and cookies are on the house. We'll consider it your welcome home treat. And I'll grab your cookies when I come back out with your change," Bo said, walking toward the station.

"Can I have another cookie please?" Kaden asked.

"Sure," Maura said. "Come on, I'll take you to get one."

She and Kaden followed Bo, and Daniel found himself alone with Mandy. She'd finished her cookie and held tightly to her small carton of milk while she leaned against the truck and avoided looking in Daniel's direction. He took a deep breath and decided he might as well get everything out in the open while he had the chance.

"I want you to give me custody," he said. "After the funerals, it seemed like a good idea for you to raise Kaden, but I didn't consider the fact that you want to see the world. And I'm good with that. I've had my chance to travel. Now I want to work here with the church, and I want to raise Kaden."

She shifted, turned dark eyes toward Daniel. "Listen, I wish you'd believe me. I didn't mean what I said in that email. Kaden had been throwing up for three days straight and was burning up with fever. I was tired from puke patrol and was catching that wretched bug myself." She sighed heavily. "When I sent the email, I already had a fever and had gotten sick twice myself. It was a weak moment, and I sent you a second email the next morning to let you know I didn't mean it."

"But I'd already emailed Brother Henry asking for a job."

“So you could have told him you changed your mind.”

“But I didn’t.” He put the gas can in the back of the truck. “Mandy, I’m the same guy who heard you say nearly those exact words seven years ago, that you would do anything to leave this horrid little town.”

“I can’t believe you’d bring that up now. Do you really think I meant it? That I would have *married you* just to get away from here?”

“Yes, Mandy, I do.”

She opened her mouth and then snapped it shut when Kaden ran out of the store in front of Bo and Maura.

“Here’s yours,” he said, handing Daniel a carton of milk and a small brown bag. “Mrs. Maura gave you three cookies, ‘cause she said men eat more than boys. But then she gave me another one, so I got three, too.”

“Guess you’re a man,” Daniel said, patting Kaden’s back.

“Yep,” Kaden said, shimmying into the backseat. “Guess so.”

“Well, I suppose we’ll see you again in a few minutes,” Bo said to Mandy. “You’ll need gas in your car, right?”

“That’s right,” she said. “Thank you for the cookies and milk.”

“You’re welcome.” He grinned. “And Mandy, we’d love to have you back at church, you know.”

She returned the smile, but this time it didn’t reach her eyes. “I know. Thank you.” Then she got in the passenger seat and buckled up.

“Aunt Mandy?”

“Yes?”

“Can I stay in this truck till we get home?”

Daniel paused climbing in to see what she'd say.

Mandy swallowed then turned warm eyes toward Kaden. “If you want to, that's fine. You haven't seen Uncle Daniel in a while. You probably want to visit and ask him about those elephants, don't you?”

Kaden took a sip of milk from his carton, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Yeah, maybe. But I mainly want to stay in this truck because it was Daddy's. We always went riding in this truck, before Mommy and Daddy went to heaven.”

Chapter Three



After getting Mandy's truck running again, Daniel followed her back to the gas station. Bo saw them and walked out of the station looking glad. Daniel had planned to wait until she filled up and then follow her home, but Mandy got out of her truck and walked back to his with a keychain dangling from her hand. Daniel noticed a rectangular photo suspended from the silver ring, and as she got closer the image came into focus and displayed Mandy and Mia on Mia's wedding day.

She neared his open window and handed him the keychain. The close proximity sent another sweet fragrance of peaches teasing Daniel's senses, and he swallowed past the urge to inhale deeper.

"Here's the key to the shop. You can go on ahead and spend a little time with Kaden until I get there." She peeked toward the backseat and displayed another beautiful smile that wasn't at all intended for Daniel's enjoyment.

But he enjoyed it, anyway.

"Kaden, maybe you can show Uncle Daniel that house we built last night. That sound good to you?"

“Sure!”

“Lincoln Logs,” she said to Daniel. Her words were still short toward him, but he was growing used to it. She’d been perfecting her stoicism around him for seven years, after all.

“Those were mine and Jacob’s favorite toys growing up,” Daniel said quietly.

A look passed over her face, and he figured she was trying to decide whether to respond or simply walk away. Then her mouth slid to the side, and she blinked a couple of times before whispering softly enough for Kaden not to hear, “I remembered Mia had planned to get him some for Christmas so I asked Mr. Tolleson at Nelson’s if he could order a set. They came in yesterday.” She swallowed. “We played with them last night until we were both ready for bed, but I’m guessing he would probably like a guy to help with the building. I do my best, but I’m still learning.”

Daniel noticed that her eyes glistened. Undoubtedly she’d been crying during the short drive from where they’d picked up her car to the station. And Daniel understood. Kaden’s comment about “before Mommy and Daddy went to heaven,” was a sharp reminder that his nephew’s life had been forever altered by a distinctive barrier. In fact, all three of their lives had been altered by that same barrier. The time before Mia and Jacob died, and the time after.

Mandy exhaled thickly and said to Kaden, “I’ll see you back at home, okay?”

“Okay,” he said, rummaging through the brown bag Maura had given him earlier and pulling out another cookie.

“Hey, don’t eat too many. You’ll ruin your dinner,” she warned. “I made that taco soup you wanted.”

“I’ve just got this one left,” Kaden said, taking a bite. “And I’ve only had three, same as Uncle Daniel.”

“Okay. I will see both of you at home, then.” She turned and walked toward Bo.

Daniel drove to the town square thinking about Mandy, the way she spoke to him and more importantly the way she spoke to Kaden. There had been an intimacy there that he hadn’t anticipated, a maternal aspect to her tone and to her words.

By the time they arrived at the photo shop, Kaden had told Daniel about how he and Mandy built the big house out of logs, how they had picnics at the park and how she was trying to help him ride a big boy bike, but she hadn’t let go of the back yet, even though he really *really* wanted her to.

“She keeps running behind me ‘cause she don’t want me to fall,” Kaden said, standing beside Daniel as he turned the key in the lock of the shop’s door.

“She’s just trying to keep you from getting hurt,” Daniel explained.

“But how’m I gonna ride by myself if she won’t let go?”

“Maybe she’ll let me help you learn,” Daniel offered.

“You’re gonna let go?”

“Yes,” Daniel promised. Undoubtedly Kaden would take a few

falls, probably the exact reason Mandy didn't want to let go. He'd been hurt enough, and she didn't want it to happen again in any way, shape or form. Neither did Daniel. But Kaden had a point; how would he learn, how would he grow, if everyone didn't "let go" every now and then?

Kaden pointed to the hand-painted sign on the door. "We're open for business now that we're back, so we have to flip it over."

Daniel's laugh came easy. "You really are Aunt Mandy's helper, aren't you?"

"Yep," Kaden said, leading the way through the gallery portion of the store. "She needs me. She says so all the time."

Something about the simple statement resonated with Daniel, but he didn't stop to analyze why. Instead, he followed his nephew through the abundance of photos covering the walls and easels inside Carter Photography. Striking pictures of babies, children, couples and families. There were still life photos, as well, stargazer lilies, an antique sewing machine, a bowl of peaches. But regardless of the subjects portrayed in each photograph, Mandy's work was incredible. He'd known her family was big into photography, but until this moment he hadn't realized that Mandy had inherited the talent.

"Come on and I'll show you our house we built last night," Kaden said, moving down a hallway and past two studio rooms with backdrops and props stuffed into every corner.

The hall was filled with senior portraits of kids from Claremont High, some in formal wear and others outdoors. Each

photo captured the personality of the teen, whether a boy in his baseball or football uniform, or a girl in an evening gown. It wasn't what they were wearing but the way they looked that made the teens stand out, as though Mandy had depicted their very essence in the shot.

"Stunning," he said.

"It's upstairs," Kaden called, not hearing Daniel's comment and passing through the kitchen where a Crock-Pot held something that Daniel assumed was taco soup. The seasonings filled the air and caused his stomach to growl.

Kaden evidently heard. "Hey, you hungry?"

"It just smells good," Daniel said.

"Aunt Mandy cooks great," he said. "You staying to eat with us?"

Daniel inhaled another spicy whiff. "I certainly hope so," he said without thinking, then realized that Mandy would probably toss him out the door as soon as she returned. Or throw a little extra Tabasco in his bowl.

"Cool!" Kaden continued through the kitchen to start up a stairway lined with landscape photos.

Daniel surveyed these with equal interest. Several featured the heart-shaped pond at Hydrangea Park in the midst of the annual Valentine's display, pink lights and roses covering gazebos, the arched entrance and silhouettes of couples throughout. The Smoky Mountains, their dark heights capped with stark white snow and garnished with the pale gray clouds that earned their

name. Again, beautiful and breathtaking. The last photo was a white sandy beach at dusk, a red-gold sun dipping in the distance and a little boy putting the finishing touches on an elaborate sandcastle complete with turrets, a moat and a bridge that appeared to be made out of Popsicle sticks.

Daniel stepped closer, because that little boy looked very familiar. “Kaden?”

Kaden had already topped the stairs, but started back down. “Yeah?”

“Is that you?” He pointed to the photo.

“Yep. Aunt Mandy took me to the beach and helped me build the best sandcastle in the world.” He grinned, his pride shining through. “Then she took my picture for her contests.”

“Her contests?”

“Yep. If she wins, she’ll get in the big glammeries. That’s her dream. Aunt Mandy says everybody’s got dreams that they want, and she wants the glammeries. Not a little glammery, like hers, but really big glammeries.”

“Glammeries?”

“Where they show her pictures for lots and lots of people,” Kaden explained.

Daniel kept his laugh in check. “Galleries?”

“Yep, that’s it,” Kaden said, then turned, obviously anxious to get upstairs. “That’s Aunt Mandy’s dream. My dream is a secret, and Aunt Mandy says that’s okay. I can keep it a secret if I want to.”

Daniel instantly wondered what dream Kaden had, but he didn't ask. Instead, he answered, "Yes, you can." With each passing minute, he grew more and more touched by Kaden's relationship with Mandy. Why wouldn't she be content to raise this amazing kid? But he'd read that email, and even if it wasn't how she was feeling today, he believed that deep inside she still felt that Kaden was something of a burden. Daniel was certain that the email hadn't been a misinterpretation of her feelings. Not entirely, anyway.

"Come on, and I'll show you our house we made."

Growing up, Daniel had known that Mia and Mandy lived above the photo shop with their grandparents, but he'd never seen the upstairs portion until now. It was small but neat and filled with antique furniture and an abundance of photos.

Some of the pictures were older, obviously taken by Mandy's grandfather, the town's only photographer when Daniel had been younger. But when they entered Kaden's room, he found that his nephew's walls were filled with photos that had undoubtedly been taken by Mandy. Pictures of Mia and Jacob snuggling a baby Kaden. Mia kneeling behind Kaden as he learned to walk, his chubby arms reaching out toward Jacob and his excited grin stretching across his little face. Daniel viewed several more photos of the happy family at various stages of Jacob and Mia's four short years with Kaden, and then one more photo that caused Daniel pause.

Daniel and Jacob stood in the hospital hallway after Kaden's

birth. Beside the nursery door, they draped arms around each other and punched opposite fists in the air as they cheered for the arrival of Jacob and Mia's beautiful baby boy. There were many pictures of the Brantley twins celebrating. Some were taken in end zones, others at home plate and others at center court. But none meant more to Daniel than this particular event.

He'd been so happy when Jacob had rushed from the delivery room to yell the news. A beautiful, healthy baby boy had joined the Brantley family. Daniel had looked forward to the day when Jacob would celebrate the birth of Daniel's firstborn in the same manner.

Now that would never happen.

His heart clenched in his chest. He remembered that moment when the photo had been taken like it was yesterday. Before now, he'd thought he only had the memory. He had no idea Mandy had captured it on film.

"That's you and Daddy," Kaden said. "You were happy."

He swallowed. "Yes, we sure were, because you were just born."

"I know," Kaden said matter-of-factly. "Aunt Mandy told me." He pointed to the other side of the room. "There it is. Cool, huh?"

Daniel turned to follow his finger and saw a table covered from one edge to the other with the most elaborate log cabin he'd ever seen. With three full levels, it took up the entire table.

"It's called a wilderness lodge," Kaden said. "That's what Aunt

Mandy said. We found it in there.” He pointed to a thick book in a wooden chair nearby.

Daniel picked up the book. “Building Dream Homes with Lincoln Logs,” he read aloud.

“Yep,” Kaden said. “Look, we’ve got a gate over here and a place for our animals, but we haven’t bought animals yet. We were gonna make a barn for the animals, too, but we ran out of room, so Aunt Mandy has gotta get another table. Just a little one, since we’re already using a bunch of space in here and this is where I like to play.”

“I see.” Daniel did see. There was only one wall in Kaden’s room that wasn’t graced with family photos, and that wall instead housed bookshelves that were the width and height of the entire wall.

And the shelves weren’t empty. On the contrary, they were filled with all kinds of books on parenting; raising little boys; building sandcastles; playing baseball; learning to ride a bicycle; how to safely catch and raise frogs, turtles and lizards, and every other subject that might be appealing to a woman trying to raise a four-year-old boy. The bottom two shelves were filled with books for said boy, great bedtime stories. Daniel was thrilled to see that several of those books were Bible stories. *David and Goliath*, *Jonah and the Whale*, *Moses and the Ten Commandments*.

“Do you know where we can get the animals for the barn?” Kaden asked. “Aunt Mandy was going to take me to the store today after we went to the park, but then we ran out of gas. Do

you know where to buy toy animals?”

“I’m not sure.” Daniel assumed the Tiny Tots Treasure Box was still the place to go for toys on the square, but he wasn’t certain whether Mr. Feazell carried the kind of animals Kaden would want for his wilderness lodge.

“That’s okay. Aunt Mandy will know.”

“Well, if she doesn’t, I’m sure she’ll find out,” he said, still surprised at the amount of effort she was obviously putting into raising Kaden.

A bell echoed through the home, and Kaden took off toward the stairs. “Customers,” he said. “Come on.”

Daniel followed him as he barreled down the stairs, through the kitchen and then through the studio-lined hallway to reach the main store.

“Oh, hey!” Kaden yelled.

“Well, hello,” a woman’s voice said.

Daniel caught up and rounded the corner to see Jessica Martin and her two children in the gallery. Her son stood by her side and her little girl slept sweetly on Jessica’s shoulder with her thumb hanging from her mouth.

“Well, hey, Daniel. I asked Mandy earlier if you were back in town yet. I saw in the church bulletin on Sunday that you took the job as youth minister. Can’t tell you how excited Chad and I were to see that.”

“Thanks. I’m pretty excited myself. Glad to be back home, especially with Kaden here.” He squeezed Kaden’s shoulders.

Jessica glanced around the shop. “So, is Mandy here?”

“No, we ran out of gas, and Uncle Daniel helped us, but now she’s getting the gas in the truck so she can come back here,” Kaden said, visibly trying to sound like the knowledgeable “big boy” in front of Nathan, who nodded as though he were the only one needing an explanation.

“Well, I’m glad you were able to help.” Jessica opened her purse and pulled out a card. “I remembered after we left that I didn’t think to give Mandy my cell number. Since the photos are a surprise for Chad’s birthday, I wanted to drop by and give it to her. Can you pass this on to her?”

“Sure,” Daniel said, taking the card.

“You want to go see my log house?” Kaden asked Nathan. “Aunt Mandy got this book to show us how to make it. It’s called a wilderness lodge, cause if it was real, it’d be in the wilderness. That’s what Aunt Mandy said.”

“Oh, that’s so nice of you to ask, Kaden,” Jessica said. “But I was about to head over to Scraps and Crafts to pick up a few things for the daycare. Maybe I can bring Nathan back sometime when he can play with you awhile, or maybe you could come over to our house and play sometime.”

“Okay,” Kaden said, his disappointment evident.

Jessica looked thoughtful. “You know, I’m going to be busy looking at things for the daycare, but Nathan will probably want to check out some of the toys she keeps at the back of the store. Would you like to come look at those with him?”

“Do you think they have farm animals? I need some for my wilderness lodge,” Kaden said.

“I don’t know, but you could check and see,” Jessica said.

Kaden turned to Daniel. “Can I go? Please?”

Daniel was taken aback at first that Kaden would ask his permission. He wasn’t his parent or guardian. But he wanted to be, very much. And he couldn’t deny that it felt good to have even a semblance of what that role would entail. “I think that’d be fine,” he said.

“Cool!”

“We’ll be back soon,” Jessica said. “Twenty minutes tops.”

“Sounds great,” Daniel said, then caught Kaden’s attention before he headed out the door. “Hey, Kaden, come here a minute.”

Kaden darted back to Daniel with a questioning gaze. “Yes, sir?”

Have mercy, he was a sweet kid. “Here you go, in case you find some animals that will work for your lodge.” He withdrew his wallet and pulled out a five.

“Wow, Uncle Daniel!” Kaden said, grinning. “Thanks!” Then he turned and joined Nathan near the door.

“We won’t be long,” Jessica repeated. “I still have to cook supper.”

“Take your time,” Daniel said, and moved to open the door so she could pass through with Lainey now softly snoring on her shoulder.

He watched them walk away, started back through the shop and heard a commotion in the back that he could only assume was the store's owner. Daniel calmly passed through the hall and beyond the two studios to the rear entrance behind the kitchen where, sure enough, Mandy threw her keys on a counter, dropped her purse and blew long dark bangs from her eyes. She looked up and announced, "I'm not leaving, Daniel."

Have mercy, she was even prettier when she was mad. "Well, fancy that, Mandy. Neither am I."

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