BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROBERT WHITLOW

WITNESS PROTECTION

A NOVEL

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"A rich and compelling story of family, faith, and friendship with just the right dose of legal thriller, *Relative Justice* is a winner."

—*SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW*

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—KELLY IRVIN, AUTHOR OF *TRUST ME*

"*Promised Land* is a book about coming home. Of becoming settled in your spirit and your relationships. With layers of intensity, thanks to international intrigue, moments of legal wrangling, and pages of sweet relationships, this book is rich and complex. A wonderful read."

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"This tense legal thriller from Whitlow boasts intriguing characters . . . One gripping chapter leads to the next . . . Readers will have a hard time putting this one down."

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* ON *CHOSEN PEOPLE*

"If you're looking for a book with unexpected twists and turns that delves into the cultures of Palestine, Israel, and their peoples, you must check out this engaging novel."

—BOOKREPORTER.COM ON *CHOSEN PEOPLE*

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"A legal thriller written from a contemporary evangelical Christian worldview, *Chosen People* presents intriguing, well-rounded characters, thought-provoking moral dilemmas, tense drama, and several surprising plot twists."

—*MYSTERY SCENE*

"My verdict for Robert Whitlow's *Chosen People*: compelling, realistic, and inspiring. Robert combines the intensity of a legal battle against terrorists with a poignant depiction of Israel, with all of its tensions and grandeur. As a lawyer who handles cases for terrorism victims, I loved the realism of the novel and felt deeply the joys, disappointments, and triumphs of its characters. But the matters of the law were eclipsed by matters of the heart—faith, love, and hope in the midst of despair—this is where Whitlow truly shines."

—RANDY SINGER, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *RULE OF LAW*

"Whitlow writes a fast-paced legal suspense with amazing characters. There are twists and turns throughout, and a number of unexpected surprises to heighten the suspense. Whitlow is an amazing writer and he touches upon delicate topics with grit and respect."

—*RT BOOK REVIEWS*, 4 STARS, ON *A TIME TO STAND*

"Whitlow's timely story shines a spotlight on prejudice, race, and the pursuit of justice in a world bent on blind revenge. Fans of Greg Iles's *Natchez Burning* will find this just as compelling if not more so."

—*LIBRARY JOURNAL*, STARRED REVIEW, ON *A TIME TO STAND*

"Part mystery and part legal thriller . . . Definitely a must-read!"

—*RT BOOK REVIEWS*, 4 STARS, ON *THE WITNESSES*

"Whitlow's characters continuously prove that God loves the broken and that faith is a lot more than just showing up to church. [This] contemplative novel is a fine rumination on ethics, morality, and free will."

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* ON *THE WITNESSES*

"Attorney and Christy Award–winning author Whitlow pens a character-driven story once again showcasing his legal expertise . . . Corbin is highly relatable, leaving readers rooting for his redemption even after family and

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friends have written him off."

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* ON *A HOUSE DIVIDED*

"Christy Award winner Whitlow's experience in the law is apparent in this well-crafted legal thriller. Holt's spiritual growth as he discovers his faith and questions his motives for hiding his secret is inspiring. Fans of John Grisham will find much to like here."

—*LIBRARY JOURNAL* ON *THE CONFESSION*

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Double Indemnity
Relative Justice
Trial and Error
A Time to Stand
The Witnesses
A House Divided
The Confession
The Living Room
The Choice
Water's Edge
Mountain Top
Jimmy
The Sacrifice
The Trial
The List

THE CHOSEN PEOPLE NOVELS

Chosen People
Promised Land

THE TIDES OF TRUTH NOVELS

Deeper Water
Higher Hope
Greater Love

THE ALEXIA LINDALE NOVELS

Life Support
Life Everlasting

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ISBN 978- (epub)
ISBN 978- (HC)
ISBN 978- (TP)
ISBN 978- (IE)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[CIP TO COME]

Printed in the United States of America

$PrintCode

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For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us

an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

—2 Corinthians 4:17

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CHAPTER 1

Jon Tremaine drove his dusty red pickup along the dirt road that separated two large tracts of pencil-straight pine trees. At forty-two years old, his dark hair had recently started showing streaks of gray. Sitting in the passenger seat of the truck was Betsy, a three-year-old Catahoula leopard dog. Ever since growing up in Louisiana, Jon had always wanted one of the dogs bred by early settlers to herd wild cattle and hunt feral pigs. Reaching over with his right hand, he scratched the energetic dog behind her floppy ears.

Tree farming wasn't a six-month process. Pine trees took fifteen to twenty years to reach the right size to be harvested as pulpwood. The trees to Jon's left were eighteen years old. It was hard for him to believe it had been that long since he planted the seedlings. At the time, he had just relocated as part of the Federal Witness Protection Program, also known as the Witness Security Program or WITSEC. Federal agents with the U.S. Marshals Service moved Jon from a Houston safe house to southeast Georgia following his testimony before a federal grand jury and in two criminal trials. Fourteen members of an organized crime syndicate known as the Los Reyes cartel were sentenced to

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prison based in part on Jon's testimony. As incentive for his testimony, Jon was granted total immunity from prosecution and a new identity.

Two years earlier, Jon was promoted and placed in charge of the entire southeastern Georgia operation of Granger Forestry LLC, the company that owned and operated fourteen thousand acres of timberland in Glynn and Brantley Counties. In addition to running the farm, Jon's duties included communication with the company's major European investors in Spain and France. The fact that Jon spoke both Spanish and French, the latter with a Cajun accent, was one of the reasons for the promotion. Visiting investors liked interacting with someone who spoke their native language. Jon was also good with accounting and knew how to manage the immigrant workforce that performed the day-to-day labor on the tree farm. Upper management had no idea about Jon's criminal history.

Jon reached a bumpy section of the road and firmly gripped the steering wheel. He squinted as the sun caught an opening in the trees and shone directly into his brown eyes. His phone, which was locked into a cradle on the dashboard, signaled an incoming call from his wife, Sarah.

Other than the federal agent assigned to his case, no one in Jon's current life knew his real name except his wife. Jon met Sarah, the assistant director of the local battered women's shelter, shortly after his promotion to a position that evolved into his becoming manager. They dated for a year before marrying seven years ago. Her work at the shelter turned out to be good preparation for marrying a man who needed to live a secret life because of a dangerous past.

Sarah, at thirty-two, was seven and a half months pregnant with a baby boy. As her due date crept closer, she'd cut her hours at the women's shelter to two days a week.

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"I'm on my way and should be there in ten minutes," Jon said before Sarah spoke. "I had to make sure the men cleared the fire damage from last month. The trees that remain look better than I expected. The fire didn't destroy as many—"

"You need to head to Cesar Mendez's trailer," Sarah said, speaking rapidly. "His wife called and said something about him being arrested."

"Arrested? Why?"

"Maria was hysterical, and I couldn't make sense of what she said. I told her that you'd be there as soon as you could."

It was several miles to the trailer park maintained by the company to house some of the workers. Jon checked his watch. On the dirt and gravel roads, it would take around ten minutes to get there.

"I'm on my way," he said.

"Do what you need to do, and don't worry about getting home for supper. I'll keep a plate warm for you in the oven."

Kelli Quinn stopped for a red light on the outskirts of town and rubbed her tired eyes. There had been so many last-minute details to take care of that she'd not left Atlanta until 1:30 p.m. for the five-hour drive to Brunswick. The moving van would be arriving at her aunt Carly's house in the morning. Kelli's aunt lived in the New Town neighborhood, a misnomer since many of the houses in the upwardly transitional neighborhood were more than a hundred years old. Carly Withers, a retired schoolteacher, had inherited the house from her parents. Over the past few years it had tripled in value.

The last hour of the drive had been blissfully quiet. Both seven-year-old Emma and eleven-year-old Max had fallen asleep. Kelli

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glanced in the rearview mirror at the children. Emma, with her reddish-brown hair, green eyes, strong chin, and confident personality, was a copy of her mother. Max, much quieter and more reserved than his sister, had the dark hair, brown eyes, and lanky frame of his father. Brad Quinn, a software engineer, had abandoned the marriage and the family nine months earlier. Kelli knew that she and Brad had grown apart but didn't think he was prepared to call it quits. As soon as the divorce was final, Brad moved with his new girlfriend and her children to California.

The divorce had hit Max harder than Emma. The boy couldn't accept why his dad had chosen to leave him and move to Los Angeles with another woman and her two sons. Kelli was trying to be emotionally present for the children while struggling with her own feelings of betrayal and rejection.

"Mom, are we there yet?" Emma asked in a sleepy voice.

"Almost," Kelli replied.

"I'm hungry. Let's stop."

"Aunt Carly is fixing supper."

"What is it? I may not like it."

"Fried chicken. Do you remember our visit two months ago? You liked it then."

"It's not nuggets."

"I liked her fried chicken," Max interjected. "And that other thing she made with smashed-up crackers on top."

"Squash casserole with the yellow and pattypan squash she grew in her little garden," Kelli replied. "It may be too late in the year for fresh squash."

Kelli reached the center of town. Not only were her eyes tired and her heart broken; her soul was weary. The strain of her forced decision to resign after six years with a well-respected law firm

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in Atlanta had taken a toll. Before the marital breakup, Brad had worked remotely and could watch the kids when they were at home. Kelli flourished at the Peachtree Street law firm where she landed after spending two years with the U.S. Attorney's Office. Kelli had been on the verge of becoming a partner when Brad abruptly left. She thought she could navigate her home and work responsibilities. But as a litigator with an active caseload and constantly changing demands on her time, Kelli found it impossible to balance her responsibility to her children with the requirements of a career. Three nannies failed. When Kelli was passed over for partner, she met with the managing attorney. He suggested reassignment to a different team with a significant cut in pay and permanent associate status. Kelli read the description for the new job and realized she'd be working as hard as before but for less money. A request for additional modification in her job duties was rejected, and she realized there was no future for her at the firm. The severance package was a huge disappointment.

The streetlights flickered on as they turned onto Union Street. Carly lived in a rambling wooden home on a corner lot. Built shortly after the Civil War, the original house was narrow with two stories. Decades later additional wings were added to the right and the left. The wing on the right was devoted to a large kitchen and a much smaller dining area. The wing on the left contained two bedrooms, a living room, and a spacious bathroom. There were two bedrooms upstairs. Aunt Carly had invited Kelli and the children to stay with her until they found a place of their own. The movers would drop off a few items at the house on Union Street in the morning and then take everything else to a storage unit.

Kelli pulled her blue SUV into her aunt's driveway. The lights were turned on in the open-air porch that stretched across the front

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of the original house. There were two wooden rockers and the same porch swing Kelli had enjoyed as a child. She checked her appearance in the rearview mirror. Her reddish-brown hair touched her shoulders. The green eyes she shared with Emma looked fatigued.

"Leave everything in the car," she said. "We'll unpack later."

"Except my tablet," Emma responded. "I need it in case I get bored."

Carrying the tablet in its pink protective case, Emma ran ahead toward the front door. Max stayed beside Kelli as they left the vehicle.

"Do you think we can be happy here?" he asked.

"That's a big question," Kelli replied, looking down at her son. "I wouldn't lie to you and say yes because I don't really know. I'm going to take it one day at a time."

"That's hard to do."

Kelli put her arm around his shoulders. "I'm here for you no matter what," she said.

"Dad said the same thing."

Kelli winced before taking Max's hand in hers as they walked slowly toward the house. He was still young enough not to pull away. Kelli stopped at the bottom of the steps.

"The main reason we're here in Brunswick is so I can keep that promise," she said. "Do you believe me?"

Max looked up at her. Kelli wasn't an emotional person, but the expression on her son's face caused a lump to form in her throat.

"I want to believe you," he said hopefully.

Kelli leaned over and planted a kiss on the top of his head. "Let's go inside and eat some fried chicken and squash casserole," she said.

"Mom, come on!" Emma called out from beside the swing. "I want you to ring the doorbell."

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The door opened before Kelli reached it. Wearing a faded summer dress with an apron around her waist, Aunt Carly opened her arms as wide as she could. Her dark eyes were alive, even though her joints were increasingly becoming misshapen as a result of the rheumatoid arthritis that had forced her to retire from teaching.

"Welcome!" announced the slender woman with a short mix of gray and brown hair. Half-frame reading glasses sat perched on the end of her nose. "I'm glad you ran late. I just took the squash casserole out of the oven. I remember how much Max enjoyed it the last time you came and harvested the last of it from my garden this afternoon."

Carly took a deep breath as she closed the door. She had five nieces and nephews, but she'd nurtured a special affection for Kelli ever since her niece was a little girl. Opening her home to Kelli and the children wasn't a hard choice.

When she planned the welcoming meal, Carly hadn't been sure she could pull it off, but the infusion she'd received the previous week from her rheumatologist was still providing relief. Not that the pain was gone. Mornings were the worst, evenings after a day of activity a close second. But today Carly felt better than she expected. Shortly before Kelli arrived, Carly had slipped into the long room where Max was going to stay. A ceiling fan stirred the air. On the nightstand beside the bed was a small vial of fragrant oil.

Carly had gone through the entire house, anointing the doors and rooms by touching them with oil placed on the tip of her permanently bent right index finger. She could have used ordinary vegetable oil from the pantry; faith was the key ingredient to the process. But Carly liked the scent of the oil from the land where Jesus's feet were anointed during his earthly ministry. The fragrant liquid came from a supplier in Tiberias, Israel. Hebrew letters she

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couldn't read were printed on the label. Just as the fragrance lingered, she hoped the healing effect of her prayers would touch the family she knew was hurting.

The vial was in the pocket of Carly's apron as she followed Kelli and the children into the kitchen.

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CHAPTER 2

Jon's truck bounced up and down on the bumpy roads. Cesar had been employed at the tree farm for almost eight years. Originally from Mexico, the thirty-year-old first-generation immigrant had obtained employment authorization with Jon's help from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. He and Maria had two little boys. Six months earlier, Jon had sold his older model red pickup to Cesar, who was making payments on the vehicle.

The trailer park came into view. The purchase of ten double-wide units placed in two rows of five had been Jon's idea. The location of homes on the farm meant the men were quickly available when needed for emergencies. The rent was reasonable and the accommodations more stable than what was usually available for immigrant workers in the area. Over half of the workforce lived in the trailers, and there was a waiting list to get in.

Jon pulled onto the gravel-covered parking space beside the Mendez home. At the sound of his truck, Maria dashed out the door and down the steps. Jon could see through the open door of the trailer that several other women were inside. He was barely

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out of his truck when Maria began speaking in a torrent of Spanish heavily influenced by her mixed Mexican–Native American background.

"Mr. Jon," she said, "Cesar is in the jail, and they won't let him out! He went to pick up a crate of chocolate, and they arrested him!"

Cesar had a side business buying cocoa from relatives who lived in the Oaxaca region of Mexico and selling the gourmet chocolate to a restaurant distributor in Atlanta. The intense, bitter chocolate was used in expensive restaurant dishes.

"Was there something wrong with the documents from the shipping company?" Jon asked. "All the forms have to be filled out correctly. The business office on the ship should have given him what he needed."

"I don't know!" Marie replied. "But Cesar is in the jail in Brunswick, and they're not going to let him out! Please, will you go?"

Jon pressed his lips together tightly. He could call the police but knew that wouldn't satisfy Maria.

"Okay," he said. "But I can't promise anything tonight."

"Thank you, thank you," Maria said. "With the money from the chocolate, we were going to help Cesar's grandmother pay for a surgery she needs. But if we have to, we can use it to get him out of jail."

"How much do you have?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

Jon knew Cesar was frugal but was still impressed with the amount he'd saved.

"Hold off on that," Jon replied. "I'll let you know what I find out."

Jon left the trailer park. The drive to Brunswick would take forty minutes. He called Sarah to let her know his supper would have to go from the oven to the refrigerator. The main highway was mostly deserted on a Thursday evening. Jon accelerated to five miles over

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the speed limit. He'd not even received a traffic ticket since relocating to Georgia.

"Betsy, you've never been to the jail," he said to the dog as they sped through the darkening evening. "Trust me, it's not a place you want to stay."

Emma skipped past Aunt Carly into the house. Kelli received the obligatory hug and kiss on the right cheek. Her aunt's bony arms didn't completely wrap around Kelli, who was careful not to squeeze too hard. Max received a pat on the head.

"How was the drive?" Carly asked as they entered the small, high-ceilinged foyer of the original house.

"Tiring when you tie it together with all the last-minute things I had to get done. I'm sure I left some loose ends."

"You'll get it worked out. I'm so glad you're here."

Kelli knew her aunt's words were sincere. Carly had insisted that Kelli and the children stay with her free of charge while getting settled in Brunswick. She also placed no time limit on her hospitality.

"Since there's just the four of us, I thought we'd eat in the kitchen," Carly said.

The smell of crisp fried chicken greeted Kelli. The refrigerator, stove, oven, sink, and most of the counters and cabinets were against one wall, leaving an open space for a large, round antique oak table. The table could seat six adults. To the right of the table was a bank of three windows that provided light for a wide variety of indoor plants positioned on wooden racks. Carly was a knowledgeable horticulturalist.

"Look at all these tiny white flowers!" Emma exclaimed, reaching

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out toward a lower plant.

"Don't touch—" Kelli started.

"It's okay," Carly said. "Fall blooms on an oxalis are a bonus to be celebrated and enjoyed. Let's eat while the food is warm."

They served themselves buffet-style. To Kelli's relief, Emma didn't complain about the chicken and selected a drumstick. The little girl rejected the squash casserole but loaded up on sliced carrots sautéed in butter and brown sugar. Max selected two pieces of chicken, a small portion of carrots, and a generous serving of the casserole. There were hot yeast rolls and butter on the table.

"I didn't brew any tea," Carly said. "I hope water is okay."

"Perfect," Kelli replied as she fixed her plate. "I starved myself all day because I knew we'd have a feast when we arrived."

Emma, who was already at the table, lifted a roll to her mouth.

"Don't eat until we pray," Kelli said. "That's the rule here."

Emma slowly lowered the roll. Once the four of them were seated, Carly spoke to Emma: "Emma, praying isn't so much a rule as it is an opportunity. I'm thankful you're here and told you that first thing. It's the same with a meal. Being thankful in little things helps us be grateful for bigger things."

Emma didn't respond. Carly and Max closed their eyes. Kelli motioned for Emma to do the same but then kept her eyes open as Carly's gnarled fingers came together in a misshapen clasp.

"Lord, thank you for bringing Kelli, Max, and Emma here this evening and for this food. Amen." Carly opened her eyes and smiled. "It's best not to pray too long when the food is hot and waiting to be eaten."

Kelli bit into a chicken thigh. "Aunt Carly, this chicken is delicious," she said, savoring the flavors.

"I found a farmer who raises his own hens. They're organic

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without tasting gamy."

"What does that mean?" Emma asked, a partially eaten drumstick in her hand.

Carly gave an explanation that revealed the teacher she'd always be. At sixty-two, she was seven years older than Kelli's mother, Valerie, who lived with her third husband in St. Petersburg, Florida. The two women couldn't be more different. Valerie inhabited a world with herself at the center, yet quickly dismissed Brad as a narcissistic loser and suggested her only daughter should move on to a new relationship as soon as possible. Kelli wasn't in the market for romance. Relocating to Florida hadn't been an option for Kelli and the kids. And not just because Kelli wasn't licensed to practice law in the Sunshine State. A long weekend was the maximum time she could endure for a visit with her mother.

Max remained quiet as he shoveled casserole into his mouth.

"Eat some chicken too," Kelli said. "There's more casserole on the stove."

Max picked up a breast and took a bite. His eyes lit up. "This is good. Better than the other time."

"I'm glad to hear that," Carly said with a chuckle. "A cook always wants to improve and appreciates an honest critic."

"I wasn't criticizing you," Max quickly responded.

"That's not the way the word is used," Carly responded.

Another teaching moment about the nuances of criticism and critique followed. Kelli could remember similar conversations from her childhood. Carly loved words.

"So it's not a judgment," Carly said. "It's an analysis. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah," Max replied. "It's like the review of a product on Amazon."

"An honest review," Carly replied.

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They ate in silence for a few moments. Seeing the children around her aunt's table brought a measure of peace to Kelli's soul. They finished the meal, including a second large serving of casserole for Max. Carly was good at not pestering the children with questions but responding to what they brought up. When they were silent, she let that happen as well. At one point, she glanced at Kelli. "We'll talk later, if that's okay?"

Kelli nodded.

"What's for dessert?" Emma asked.

"Don't ask," Kelli responded. "It's impolite."

Carly picked up her phone, which was beside her plate. "That reminds me to place our dessert order."

"What do you mean?" Emma questioned.

"Do you like homemade ice cream with fresh strawberries?" Carly asked.

"I'm not sure I've ever had it. Mom, is that what we had at the beach?"

"That was good ice cream but not homemade."

Carly slowly touched the letters on her phone.

"There," she said. "They should be here in about ten minutes."

"Who's coming?" Emma asked.

"They want to surprise you," Carly replied.

Jon turned off the Norwich Street Extension onto Sulphur Springs and then into the parking lot at the Glynn County Detention Center. With its brown brick and white roof, the headquarters for the local sheriff's department and jail looked like a high school. Jon parked in a visitor's place near the front door. There wasn't much activity on a Thursday evening. He cracked open the passenger-side window

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so Betsy could get fresh air and went inside to the reception area. A middle-aged female deputy was seated behind a glass partition. She slid it open as he approached.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I'm Jon Tremaine. One of my employees, Cesar Mendez, was arrested earlier today. I'd like to find out the charges against him."

The woman eyed Jon for moment, then turned to her computer monitor and typed on her keyboard.

"It's a drug charge," she said after a few seconds passed. "Cocaine and fentanyl trafficking with intent to distribute. He's set for arraignment Tuesday morning at ten thirty in Glynn County Superior Court."

Jon swallowed. This was a lot worse than he'd imagined. Nothing about Cesar had given him a clue that the earnest, hard worker might be involved in something like this. Jon hesitated.

"Would it be possible to talk to one of the detectives?" he asked.

"That's up to them."

"Could you check?"

"What's your name again and your connection to Mr. Mendez?"

Jon explained in detail who he was and how he knew Cesar.

"Have a seat. I'll check with Detective Briscoe," the woman said.

Jon sat in a beige chair with a thin cushion on the seat. Being in a correctional facility, even one as outwardly benign as Glynn County, was like revisiting the scene of a nightmare. Jon nervously tapped his fingers against the armrest of the chair. He saw the woman talk on the phone and lower the receiver without any signal to him. She could have simply been answering a phone call. Ten minutes passed. Jon decided to wait two more minutes before leaving. A door opened, and a large, muscular Black man in his forties, wearing a dark suit with the tie loosened, entered.

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"Mr. Tremaine?" he asked.

Jon stood and stepped forward. "That's me."

The detective extended his hand. "Noah Briscoe," he said. "Mendez asked for you earlier when we explained his right to contact an attorney."

"I'm not a lawyer—"

"I understand. Come to my office."

Jon followed the detective through a metal door that clicked shut when it closed behind him. The heightened confinement was ten times worse than the reception area. Jon had spent several months in jail after his arrest. His heart beat faster. The detective entered a small office.

"I'll leave the door open," he said.

"I prefer that," Jon quickly responded.

"Place your cell phone on the desk. No recordings of our conversation allowed."

"Yes, sir."

Jon placed his phone on the desk, the screen saver photo of Sarah in one of her maternity dresses now in view.

"The receptionist confirmed what the accused told us about your relationship with him," the detective said.

Uneasy in the presence of the detective, Jon tried to keep his voice steady. "I'm his boss, that's all. He and his family live in housing provided by the company on our property in Brantley County. His wife called and said he'd been arrested and asked me to find out what I could."

The detective stared at him for a few seconds without speaking. Jon knew it was standard police practice to gauge a person's level of nervousness when under investigation. Jon tried to make his breathing calm and regular. To do that he chose not to speak.

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The detective cleared his throat. "What do you know about Mendez importing chocolate from Mexico?"

"He has family connections in the Oaxaca region. They send him a crate of raw product every so often. Cesar sells it to a restaurant distributor in Atlanta. It's been a way to supplement his income from the tree farm."

"Have you ever assisted with any of the deliveries?"

Suddenly, Jon realized that he was under investigation. He quickly debated whether to end the conversation until he could consult with a lawyer. He decided that would only increase the detective's suspicion.

"I arranged help through a local lawyer to set up the paperwork for him to be an importer and traveled with Cesar to Atlanta for his first meeting with the distributor. I didn't participate in their discussion. The man spoke fluent Spanish, and it was a simple transaction. Cesar gave him an invoice; he inspected the chocolate and paid."

"With cash?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember the man's name who bought the chocolate?"

"No."

"You speak Spanish?"

"Yes, and French."

"And Cajun?" the detective asked.

Jon didn't respond.

Briscoe leaned back in his chair. "I played two years of football at LSU before I blew out my knee. I ate my weight several times over in red beans and rice. If you ever hear about a place around here that serves good beans and rice, I'd like to know about it. I even got to liking crawfish."

As the detective talked, Jon relaxed. He replied in a more normal

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tone of voice: "The best local beans, rice, and crawfish come from the kitchen at my house," he said. "My wife grew up around here, but she's a quick learner."

"If you ever have leftovers, consider giving me a ring," the detective responded, then paused for a moment. "Tell Ms. Mendez that her husband isn't getting out of jail anytime soon and that the FBI is opening a federal investigation as well."

"No bond?"

"Not yet. That will be handled at his arraignment on Tuesday. It's going to be high. Not sure what the feds will do."

"What about visiting hours?"

"Monday and Thursday for two hours from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. and Sunday afternoon from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. That's when kids can come too. Most likely he'll stay here even if the feds file their own charges."

Briscoe led the way back to the reception area. They stopped in the waiting area.

"I know you're just trying to look out for one of your employees," Briscoe said. "I appreciate that, but people make mistakes that have more serious consequences than they imagined."

"Yeah," Jon said, nodding. "That's true."

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CHAPTER 3

Kelli suggested to Carly that she take the children into the living room while she cleaned up in the kitchen.

"Show them your collection of board games," Kelli said. "What was the one we played the last time we came?"

"It was Sorry!" Emma replied. "Only there was nothing to be sorry about when I sent Max's pieces back to the beginning."

"We may not have time to finish a game before dessert arrives," Carly said.

"Go," Kelli said, shooing them out of the kitchen.

Kelli put the leftovers in the refrigerator. There was only one piece of chicken, a thigh. Kelli didn't mind eating cold fried chicken. She might even make it part of her breakfast in the morning. She carefully rinsed everything before putting the dishes in the washer. Her aunt had a particular way of doing things that Kelli had memorized on previous visits. She was wiping the counters when the doorbell rang. Carly and the children were already standing at the door when Kelli entered the foyer. It was Ann Carter and her husband, Roy.

Kelli's law school friend had a container of strawberries in her right hand. Roy cradled a metal cylinder from an ice-cream

THOMAS NELSON since 1798

maker. A tall woman, Ann was as slender as she had been when she and Kelli sat next to each other in torts class during their first year in law school. She was wearing shorts, a cotton top, and sandals with her blond hair in a ponytail. After going prematurely bald, Roy had elected to keep his head shaved, which made his dark eyes more striking. Ann gave Kelli a quick hug.

"Where do you want to serve dessert?" Ann asked Carly.

"We're right here; let's eat on the porch."

"I'll grab some extra chairs," Kelli said. "And bowls and spoons."

"You'll need help with that," Roy said.

Roy worked as a veterinary technician specializing in large animal care. He had a four-year college degree and an advanced degree with an emphasis in bovine and horse care. Roy was about the same height as Ann but with a well-developed muscular physique.

"I'll get the chairs," he said, grabbing two with each arm. "How was the trip?"

"Tiring, but it was nice to arrive to a home-cooked dinner, and now this surprise from you and Ann."

"This is Ann's doing. It was an excuse for me to put away my old hand-cranked ice-cream maker and get one with an electric motor."

They returned to the front porch. Positioned next to Ann, Emma's legs dangled from the porch swing. Kelli sat beside them.

"Is it true that you're going to be Mom's boss?" Emma asked Ann as they gently swung back and forth.

"Is that what she said?" Ann replied with a glance at Kelli.

Kelli didn't respond.

Ann patted Emma on the leg. "Your mom and I have been friends for a long time and thought it would be fun for us to work together."

"I don't think being a lawyer is fun," Emma responded.

Ann motioned to Kelli. "You take over this conversation. She's

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your daughter."

"I'll defer," Kelli laughed. "Time for ice cream and strawberries."

The dessert kept Emma's mouth occupied. It was a warm evening but late enough in September that insects weren't a bother. Emma left the swing and sat on the steps near Carly.

"Moving the kids after less than two months of school may not have been the best timing," Kelli said to Ann. "But I appreciate you making a quick decision."

"It wasn't quick. I've thought about being part of the same firm with you for years. It just seemed you were settled on your career track in Atlanta while I slowly built my practice here in Brunswick."

"And you're sure I won't be a drain? I'm not bringing a book of business."

"Remember what I told you when we first talked. I can keep you busy so long as you're not looking for complex litigation. And it will be nice not having to refer out simple lawsuits that keep coming up for my regular clients."

"You could be a litigator—"

"Maybe, but I don't want to. And a big benefit to running your own practice is the freedom to do what you want. For me, that's spending time with Roy and being involved in activities at our church. For you, that's spending time with your kids."

Kelli appreciated the contrast between her friend and the Atlanta firm where she was under pressure to bill two thousand hours a year.

"And if you're satisfied earning less," Ann continued.

"Brad is on the hook for increased payments under the order issued by the judge at the supplemental child support hearing held after my job ended. I'm fine with him helping to fund my new lifestyle."

"When do the children start school?"

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"Monday. We'll take the long weekend to settle in with Carly," Kelli said. "If it's okay, I might bring the kids to the office tomorrow so they can see where I'll be working."

"Of course. Maybe around lunchtime so we can grab a bite together."

"Not a salad delivered to my desk so I can keep billing my time while I eat?"

Ann smiled. "No. There's a nice place close by that lets you build your own salad and has a healthy kids' menu."

"Great."

The homemade ice cream was a hit, especially with Max, who asked Roy a bunch of questions about the process. After Ann and Roy left, Kelli, Carly, and the children returned to the living room. Emma yawned broadly.

"Maybe you should finish the Sorry! game tomorrow," Kelli suggested.

To her surprise, Emma nodded.

"Showers for both of you," Kelli said. "Emma first. I'll get your suitcase from the car."

Max went with Kelli to help her. There was a lightness in his step as he grabbed both Emma's suitcase and his own.

"This feels like being on vacation," he said.

"Good," Kelli said with a smile.

After both children were in bed, Kelli returned to the living room to talk with Carly. She found her aunt fast asleep in a slender leather recliner with her eyes closed and her mouth slightly open. Kelli tiptoed out of the room and upstairs to her bedroom.

Jon snapped a leash on Betsy and took her for a short walk in the

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grass near the sheriff's department. Back in the truck, he drove more slowly on the return trip to the trailer park. He thought about calling Maria to break the bad news but decided he should talk to her in person. She had recently been laid off from her job, and the rent would soon be due for the trailer. Cesar's truck payment to him could be postponed, but company housing was available only for current employees of Granger Forestry. Jon could protect an employee's job for a while but not indefinitely. And the valuable worker would have to be replaced.

Cesar would also need legal representation. He would likely qualify for a court-appointed lawyer, but Jon remembered the court-appointed lawyer assigned to his case. If he'd taken the lazy attorney's advice to quickly plead guilty, Jon would still be sweating out the final years of a twenty-year sentence in a federal prison in south Texas.

He reached the trailer park. The lights were still on in Cesar's trailer, but he didn't hear any noise from other people as he stood on the small stoop in front of the door and knocked. Maria opened it.

"I talked to Cesar," she said morosely in Spanish. "There were drugs in with the chocolate."

"Did he admit to smuggling drugs?" Jon asked in shock.

"No! No!" Maria replied emphatically. "The police used a dog to find the drugs in the bottom of the crate. Cesar didn't know anything about it. He said it was cocaine bricks wrapped in foil and some kind of pills. There was a second floor to the crate, a secret place. It was damaged, and some white powder spilled out. Cesar pointed it out to one of the men on the dock, and the man's supervisor called the police."

Jon frowned at the description of the shipping method for the cocaine and fentanyl. It was one of the techniques used by his old

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criminal gang. The cocaine would be enclosed in airtight plastic bags with cayenne pepper or other strong spices or chemicals used to disguise the scent of the drug and defeat the use of dogs trained in narcotics detection. Unwitting third parties used to transport drugs were called "blind mules." There could easily be forty to fifty kilos hidden in a crate like the one used to transport the chocolate.

"The fact that Cesar pointed it out should count for something with the police," Jon replied. "He wasn't trying to hide anything."

"The police said they'd been watching him and think he brought in drugs before."

"Ugh," Jon grunted. "I met with one of the detectives. He didn't tell me much but says the FBI is getting involved, and the bond to get Cesar out of jail will be very high."

"What is bond?"

Jon explained the process.

Maria shook her head sadly. "What are we going to do?" she asked as tears began to stream down her face.

"You look after your sons. I'll try to find out more information."

Jon left without saying anything about the trailer rent or Cesar's job. Arriving home, he parked his truck in the open carport attached to their single-story ranch-style house. Jon opened the gate to the fenced-in backyard where Betsy stayed. Sarah was waiting for him at the front door, wearing a nightgown with a light robe wrapped around her. Jon took off his work boots and left them beside the door.

"What did you find out?" she asked.

"I'll go over it while I eat."

Jon placed his plate in the microwave. The long, narrow kitchen was at the rear of the house. There wasn't another residence in over a mile. When all the electric lights were off at night, the sky exploded

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with stars. Jon sat at a small table covered by a red-checked plastic tablecloth. Sarah poured a glass of ice water and sat across from him while he told her what he'd learned about Cesar's arrest and his conversation with Detective Briscoe.

"Do you think the detective suspects you're involved in whatever happened?" she asked in alarm.

"That thought crossed my mind, but he didn't ask any follow-up questions about my interaction with Cesar and his chocolate business." Jon took a drink of water. "Let me jump ahead. Maria talked to Cesar, and the police claim they've been watching him for a while related to other shipments."

"You went with him to deliver chocolate in Atlanta."

"That was just the first time," Jon said, keeping his voice calm. "Surely Cesar wasn't on their radar at that point."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Jon knew they weren't true. Cesar could be caught up in an investigation that had been ongoing for months or even years. He finished telling Sarah what he'd learned from Maria but left out the method of concealment for the drugs and the similarity to what he'd seen in the past.

Sarah sighed. "I feel sorry for Maria and their little boys."

"Yeah. She won't be able to stay in the trailer once Cesar is off the company payroll. I'll stall as long as I can."

"Maria and Cesar go to a little Spanish-speaking church near Blackshear,"

Sarah said. "Maybe someone at the church can help them find a place."

Sarah ran her fingers through her hair. "What if there's a news report or something online about the arrest that mentions Cesar working for Granger?" she asked.

"I still want to wait. That will give Maria time to figure out what

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she's going to do."

Sarah frowned. "It's not the kind of housing emergency I'm used to dealing with, but it's still a crisis. We should help them if we can. After all, Cesar saved your life last year when that damaged tree was going to crush you."

"I thought about that earlier," Jon said as he nodded. "And he spent six months recovering from shoulder surgery."

It was shortly after 3:00 a.m. when a sharp pain in Carly's lower back jarred her awake. She shifted position in an attempt to get comfortable, but it was futile. Going into the adjoining bathroom, she took a long, hot shower. The water had a soothing effect on her joints. The next step involved sitting in a chair and strategically placing heating pads over the most tender joints. Tonight, that included her lower back and right ankle. Once the heating pads were properly positioned, Carly opened her Bible. In the night, she lived in Psalms. The honesty of David's thoughts and feelings about his circumstances and God's response often mirrored her own soul. She turned to a familiar passage in Psalm 69:

"I am suffering and in pain. Rescue me, O God, by your saving power. Then I will praise God's name with singing, and I will honor him with thanksgiving . . . For the Lord hears the cries of the needy; he does not despise his imprisoned people."

There are many sources of pain and distress, and multiple origins of captivity and need. Carly lifted up the psalmist's words for herself but also turned them outward for others. This step had been a key to her mental and emotional survival in the midst of disease. She took what the Lord provided her and prayed it for others. She'd felt Kelli's pain during the visit weeks earlier, and it was stronger this

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evening when her niece stood on the front porch. The children were also caught in upheaval and turmoil. Trauma doesn't respect age. There was much to pray for Kelli and her family. Carly read and prayed for almost an hour. Before closing her Bible, she included a few moments of praise in advance of an answer.

An early riser, Kelli rarely relied on an alarm clock. While it was still dark, she put on exercise clothes and went out for a walk. The streets of Carly's neighborhood were empty. Without a destination in mind, Kelli simply started walking rapidly. In college she'd been a jogger, but by the time she entered law school, she'd realized that she preferred walking because it required less concentration and exertion. She'd come to a corner and either proceed in a straight line or take a random turn. If she lost her way, the GPS feature on her watch would guide her to Carly's house.

Unlike her neighborhood in Atlanta, the streets of Brunswick were pancake-flat. Just as her feet were allowed to move forward without conscious direction toward a destination, Kelli didn't try to dictate the thoughts in her mind. She let herself inhale air tinged with a hint of the ocean, feel the comfortable temperature against her skin, and listen to the birds that, like her, were awake to greet the day. Dawn brought amber light as she returned to Union Street. At the house, Kelli peeked into the kids' bedrooms. They were sprawled out, still deep in sleep. Carly had not yet appeared. It looked like her aunt was also sleeping in on Friday.

Kelli was sitting in a rocker on the front porch finishing a cup of black coffee when the truck arrived. The eight boxes Kelli wanted delivered to her aunt's house were stacked at the rear of the truck. They were quickly placed in the foyer. Max came out of his bedroom

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rubbing his eyes.

"Go back to bed," Kelli said to him. "I'm going with the movers to the storage unit. We'll unpack this stuff later. It's mostly clothes and personal items."

"I want to go with you."

"There's nothing for you to do at the storage unit," Kelli said, but then she relented. "You have two minutes to get dressed."

Max sat in the passenger seat of Kelli's SUV. It was a fifteen-minute drive to the storage facility in a less prosperous part of town. The driver backed up to the unit. Kelli raised the sliding door. Using hand trucks, the men rapidly carried the remaining boxes and items of furniture down a ramp.

"Can I put that table in my bedroom?" Max asked when it appeared. "That's where I like to build things and do my homework."

The narrow wooden table was an antique. Years earlier it had been in one of the rooms at Carly's house. Recently, a LEGO set under construction had often sat on the dark, shiny surface. Max and Brad used to spend hours sitting beside each other at the table while putting together specialty kits. Kelli had put the table on the list to be stored because she was concerned it would trigger bad memories for Max. The table would barely fit in the back of the SUV.

"Are you sure?" Kelli asked.

"Yes."

"Okay, but we probably need to find something that Emma cares about too."

"Her horse lamp," Max replied quickly. "Unless it's in one of the boxes at the house."

"I don't think so. It should be labeled."

Kelli and Max went into the unit. Within a few seconds, Max called out: "Here it is! The box says 'bedroom lamp.'"

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An old piece but not an antique, Kelli had bought the lamp on a whim at a yard sale when she and Brad were first married. There were three hand-painted wooden horses surrounding a wooden spindle. It had been a fixture in Emma's room since she was a baby. When she was four years old, Emma named the horses Sprint, Happy, and Frisky. Recently, she'd expressed an interest in riding. It was something Kelli promised they would discuss with Roy once they were in Brunswick. Roy was familiar with the horse facilities in the area.

They put the table and the lamp in the SUV. After the movers finished, Kelli took one last look at the pile of stuff and wondered what she should have given away or sent to the dump. There were items in the storage unit that, like Max's table, held memories for her, once good, now bad, but she'd not wanted to expend the emotional energy in Atlanta needed to undertake a purge before the movers arrived.

At the house on Union Street, Emma squealed with excitement when she saw the lamp. "Thank you, Mom!"

"Thank your brother," Kelli replied. "He's the one who suggested you'd like to have it here and not wait until we move into our own place."

Kelli went into the kitchen and joined Carly.

"Good morning," Kelli said to her aunt. "I'll get the boxes out of the foyer in a bit."

"No rush. I gave Emma cereal for breakfast with a banana cut up on top."

One of Kelli's self-identified failings as a mother existed in the inadequate breakfasts she provided to her children. Emma was used to scrounging for something to eat from the pantry. The most common breakfast for the children was a cup of yogurt. Max

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joined them.

"Mom, would you make scrambled eggs with cheese in them?" he asked. "And some crispy bacon?"

"I have bacon," Carly said. "I'd be glad to—"

"No, I'll do it," Kelli said.

Emma entered. "Aunt Carly, I want to show you some of the outfits I brought with me. I found the box they're in."

"Go," Kelli said to Carly.

Kelli took the eggs from the refrigerator. Max joined her.

"Why are the eggs brown and in a little bag?" he asked.

"Aunt Carly buys eggs from a man who has his own chickens. Some are layers, and some are fryers. Stay and help. It's time you learned how to do this."

Cooking breakfast together had been a common practice for Brad and Kelli during the early years of their marriage. Brad made the best spinach-and-mushroom omelet on the planet. While Max and Kelli worked, she explained the difference between the types of chickens.

"You sound like a farmer," he said.

"That's the limit of my knowledge."

Max used a whisk to combine the eggs, salt, and two tablespoons of whole milk. Kelli started frying the bacon in a cast-iron skillet.

"Mom, I want us to do more things together here than we did in Atlanta," Max said. "I was thinking about that last night before I went to sleep."

Watching the boy who increasingly looked more like his father, Kelli let out a sigh.

"Yes," she replied. "That's one of the reasons we're here."

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Photo by David Whitlow, Two Cents Photography

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