

PROLOGUE

March 8th, 2004

GOD TALKS TO ME.

Now, hear me out. Before you put me in the same category as the loony folks who hear voices just before they go on a shooting rampage at the local shopping mall, remember: In general, I don't have visions. I don't hear voices, either—at least not audible ones.

Still, sometimes, even in the most mundane of moments, I hear the voice of God.

Most recently, it happened down at Waterfront Park at Navy Point, right here in Pensacola. I'd taken Gabby, my seven-year-old, and Liz, our golden doodle, for a walk. Gabby rode her new bike, a fluorescent pink Speed Demon complete with training wheels, and Liz trotted along on a leash. By the time we began the final loop toward the car, my daughter had begun a serious meltdown.

"I don't want to ride anymore," she said, climbing off the silver seat. "It's too hard. The wheels get stuck."

She had me there. It seemed her bike's only demon resided in the five-inch-diameter wheels that wobbled and froze in every quarter-sized pothole along the trail. Her short legs had powered their way through nearly two miles of these freeze-ups; she'd had enough. Who could blame her?

If Timothy were still alive, he'd have figured out a way to fix the wheels. Me? I'm no tool man. Instead of fixing the bike, I hoped that Gabby would outgrow the need for wheels. Didn't most kids, eventually?

"We're almost to the van," I said. "You can make it that far, can't you?"

Gabby shook her head as tears began to roll down her cheeks. Crossing arms across her chest, she said, “Go get the car!”

Wanting to avoid yet another battle, I resigned myself to pushing the bike back to the parking lot. I wrapped the dog’s leash around my wrist, threw my purse strap across my back, and bent over to push the bike. Glancing over my shoulder, I discovered that Gabby and the dog had chosen not to follow. Instead, Gabby—with both arms around the dog’s neck—was enjoying a face wash, compliments of Liz’s sloppy dog kisses.

“Come on, you two,” I called. “We don’t have all day.”

By the time we reached the van, my back ached, and sweat rolled down the space between my shoulder-blades. Florida humidity does that to me, I’ve discovered. I unlocked the car and started the engine, turning up the air conditioning before I did anything else. After settling Gabby in her safety seat, I loaded the little bike into the passenger compartment. Finally, I opened the back hatch and spoke to the dog. “Come on, Liz,” I called. “Jump!” I gave a little tug on the leash.

The dog circled around behind me, as if to gain speed for the leap into the cargo space. But, just as her front paws touched the bumper, she balked, backed up, and sat down, whining.

“Come on,” I pleaded. “Just get in the dumb car. We’re already late!”

Once again the dog circled. This time, instead of leaping for the cargo area, she stopped dead and circled back the other way. Apparently changing your mind is not a prerogative saved entirely for women. “Please, just get inside,” I begged, losing what little patience I had.

After two more false starts, I began to exert my position as leader of the pack. This time, as Liz approached the car, I used the leash to drag her forward. Why wouldn’t the stupid dog just get into the car? How hard could it be to simply leap?

That’s when I heard God speak.

“Don’t be so critical,” his voice said clearly. “Lately, you’re not all that different from the dog.”

The problem with hearing from God, I’ve discovered, is that sometimes, he gives you an answer before you even ask the question.

Prologue

Such was the case that day at Waterfront Park. From the day Liz refused to enter the van, until I clearly understood God's meaning, nearly four months passed. And until I put the pieces together, I felt as clueless as a blind man at the bottom of a deep well.

April 28, 2004

EVE ARRIVED LATE, AS ALWAYS, and I found her standing on my front porch with one hand full of brochures, a diaper bag slung over her shoulder, and Olivia, her youngest, hanging like a bag of potting soil—very heavy soil, I might add—over her opposite hip. “Sorry,” she said simply, edging past me as I held open the front door. “Phone call.”

In the instant she spotted me, Olivia grinned and held out her dimpled hands. “Here, let me take her,” I said.

Eve offered me the diaper bag, which I ignored, reaching instead for the smiling, drooling baby. “There, now,” I said, holding her in front of me. “You need to be held by someone who appreciates your sweet face.” Olivia laughed, her feet swimming in the air.

Eve frowned, and tossed me a diaper. “She’s teething. Protect yourself.”

Waving my friend’s concern away, I took Olivia to the kitchen and fished a graham cracker from the pantry.

Eve poured herself coffee, her long lean body moving gracefully through my kitchen. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you. I’m in my third shirt this morning. The drool alone could fill an Olympic swimming pool.” Her Southern accent made even complaining sound positively cosmopolitan.

Laughing, I settled the baby on my hip, and reached for my own glass of sweet tea. “I have notes from last time on the kitchen table. This morning, I’ve been wondering. Don’t you think we’re going to need more help? More parent helpers?” I spread a blanket on the family-room floor, and put Olivia down, dropping a few toys beside her. With her free hand, she began banging a teething ring

onto a baby doll's back.

"It's just Field Day, Brandy, not the World Cup."

"I know. But a whole elementary school! We're responsible for almost five hundred kids!" I dropped into a chair at the table and pulled my hair into a ponytail.

"We're not responsible, silly." She shrugged. "We're just volunteers suckered into planning the day. It's no problem. The kids'll be playing. Running. Competing. We'll do it like we planned. Two parents per game." She pulled out a chair and sat, dropping the brochures over my notes. Sipping her coffee, she nodded at the paper. "Take a look at those."

I rolled my eyes. If Eve were in school, I swear her teacher would suggest medication for attention deficit. "What about Track and Field Day?"

"In a minute," she said, smiling, her eyes full of mischief. "First, brochures."

I picked up the brochures. Each pamphlet came from a different cruise line. The glossy covers pictured slim women sunning themselves on elegant teak deck-chairs. "Caribbean?"

Eve nodded. "All of them."

"They look great. When are you going?"

"We haven't booked yet." She reached over to take a brochure, turning it to the chart featuring rooms and booking fees. "It's so reasonable. A bargain really, when you figure that food and rooms and travel are included."

She paused and her sudden silence caught my attention. I looked up from the room diagram of *Carnival Fantasy*, one of the many ships headed to the islands. Confused, I asked, "What? What is it?"

She leaned forward. "We want you to come. All of us. We talked about it and we think you should come."

I knew exactly what she meant by "we." Timothy and I had shared our lives with four couples from his squadron. Since our earliest years in Florida, we'd done nearly everything together. Church. Camping. Hiking. Kids. Even a few vacations. Though the Navy had separated us for various training assignments and sea duties, we'd stuck together through it all. "Are you kidding?"

“Dead serious.”

“Eve. I can’t go. I don’t have anyone to watch Gabby. Besides, I can’t afford it.” I closed the brochure, leaving my hand palm down on the cover. I didn’t dare look up. I couldn’t let Eve see the truth in my eyes.

She wasn’t fooled. “It’s not about the money, is it?”

“Of course it is. You know money is tight these days.”

“Don’t use that old insurance excuse. I’m not taking that any more.”

For the hundredth time, I pushed down resentment. It wasn’t an excuse. It was real life. My life. A battle I seemed destined to fight until my dying day. “It’s not an excuse,” I said. “Really. Since Timothy died, even with my salary, I’m having trouble making it.”

“So, you can go. Our treat.”

“I couldn’t.” I shook my head.

“Because you don’t fit any more.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You don’t have to. I can see it. You never hang out with us any more. We don’t shop, or run errands. You avoid any place where there might be a group of pilot’s wives talking squadron talk.”

“I’m not part of the squadron any more.”

She reached out and squeezed my hand. “You never were, Brandy. Timothy was. He’s gone. But you and me, we’re still here. You’re still part of us. The girls. Our families. And that can’t change. It won’t ever change.”

Truthfully, I’ve grown tired of this same conversation. We repeat it over and over. No matter how many times I try to explain, Eve just doesn’t get it. Dear sweet Eve. She just won’t give up. From the first day I met her, when her husband arrived for flight training, she’s been a bold and vital part of my life. No sisters could love one another more. “I just can’t go,” I said.

“You don’t know that. Look, we don’t even know when we’re going. You could have Timothy’s parents keep Gabby.”

“Would you like more coffee?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

The phone rang, and I sighed. Sometimes, relief comes directly from heaven. As I stood up and went to the kitchen, Olivia started

to cry. Eve went to her daughter and settled down in my recliner to nurse. I watched, feeling a little jealous as I picked up the receiver.

Still focused on Eve and Olivia, I listened to the words that would change my life. Still shaking, I hung up and headed for the couch across from Eve.

“You look like someone just died,” she said. “What’s happened?”

I must have looked as shell-shocked as I felt. “It’s Maggie,” I said. My voice sounded wooden, even in my own ears. “She’s had another stroke. I have to fly to Canada.”



I’d hardly settled Gabby in her seat and buckled her belt, before the older man beside me took it upon himself to invoke the wonder of his native country. Raising his voice over the thunder of jet engines, he said, “You’ll love Canada. Vancouver Island is so remote. We have a summer place up-island, near Nanaimo, right on the water. The people there are so friendly.”

“Actually, I grew up near Duncan,” I said, smiling. “I know the island quite well.”

I watched as he tried to process this new information. “But you’re not Canadian,” he said.

“No,” I answered, as agreeably as I could. I didn’t want to spend the entire flight explaining my past to this stranger. How could I? I hardly understood it myself.

“Mommy,” Gabby said, pulling at the sleeve of my sweater, “I want my Daddy Book.” She pointed to my carry-on, already stashed on the floor.

“I’ll get it after we’re in the air.” I patted her on the knee. “You can wait that long, can’t you?” I turned to the stranger behind me. “She does love that book,” I explained. An understatement, clearly.

At the ripe old age of seven, Gabby loves her Daddy Book more than any other possession; we never leave the house without it. The custom-made photo book, designed by Eve and given to Gabby by some of the squadron wives soon after her daddy died, with its worn cover, bears fresh fingerprints, always. In the three years since

Timothy passed away, I've learned to love the little book almost as much as Gabby does. Where it once reminded me of loss, now it keeps his memory alive.

Though Gabby reads exceptionally well for her age, this book, written all about her father, has a vocabulary far too complicated for a second grader. Still, my daughter has memorized every word, and recites it with the enthusiasm of a theatrical audition. She managed to read the book twice before we reached cruising altitude. The man sitting next to me settled into a newspaper as Gabby's questions began, as they always do, at the beginning.

"When did you meet Daddy?"

"At school. We went to college together."

"Was he handsome?"

"The handsome-est. His eyes were exactly the same blue as yours."

"Did you love him?"

"Almost as much as I love you."

"Did he think I was beautiful?"

"The most beautiful baby in the world." At this point in our Daddy Book routine, Gabby expects me to re-tell the story of her birth, of our midnight drive to the Pearl Harbor Hospital, of the smell of plumeria wafting in the air as I waited for Gabby to arrive, of Daddy bringing Bird of Paradise to the Hospital on the day she was born. Before the beverage carts started down the aisle, I obliged the tradition.

"I miss Daddy," she said, sighing.

"I miss him too." I tucked Gabby's book into my carry-on. Though I have adjusted in the three years since my husband died, I have not recovered. It is not possible, I believe, even in a world where God often speaks, to fully recover from such an injury—no more than it is possible to recover from the amputation of a limb. Part of me worried that Gabby did not truly remember her father, no matter how many times we reviewed the Daddy Book. A man like Timothy deserved to be remembered.

"Will Maggie be at the airport when we get there?" Gabby asked.

"No, honey, she's too ill to drive. Besides, we have another

plane to catch before we can go visit Grandma Maggie.” I reached over to pull down her service tray. “We’ll fly to Vancouver Island and rent a car. Then, we’ll drive to Maggie’s hospital and visit.”

“Can I get you anything?” the cabin attendant asked my daughter.

“I’d like orange juice,” Gabby answered.

“Please,” I added.

“Please,” she said, nodding to the woman. “And, my mom would like a Diet Coke, please.” My daughter spends far too much time with adults.

We drank our drinks in relative silence for only a moment. “I’m named for Maggie,” Gabby said. “Right?”

We’d had this conversation before. “Why don’t you call me Maggie? I like Maggie better than Gabby.”

“It’s all your daddy’s fault,” I said. “The first time he went to sea, you were almost two; you could walk and talk and you loved to name everything you saw. But as soon as he left, you just stopped talking. I think you missed your daddy so much, you just didn’t have another thing to say.”

Gabby smiled at me, her smile so exuberant that her eyes completely disappeared. Even now, that smile, so exactly like her father’s, takes me by surprise.

“But I got over it,” she said, confident about the end of the story.

“When Daddy got home, you started talking again. A lot. It was like you were making up for lost time. And he nicknamed you Gabby. Because you talked so much.”

“And I haven’t stopped, ever since.”

“That’s exactly right.”

“Did Grandma Maggie talk a lot?”

I shook my head, unable, for the moment, to speak. Maggie wasn’t much of a talker. Instead, she was a woman of action—a woman who lived out every conviction she ever possessed. I found myself thinking about Maggie, about the last time I’d seen her, and against my will, a procession of pictures paraded themselves across my mind’s eye. *How could anyone explain Maggie?* I wondered. Though Gabby had met her namesake only twice, she would not yet remember her. How

would I ever let Gabby know how much there was to love about that wonderful old woman?

I drank my soda, and wondered how I would answer Gabby when the real questions about Maggie inevitably began.