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JARS HAD SET his alarm to go off at six forty-five. He needn't have bothered. Although he had fallen asleep more easily than he imagined he might, he found himself waking long before the alarm. If all went well he would be meeting Nicki for breakfast at eight.

Rousing had come in stages. From somewhere in the world of sleep to a growing sense of something important, something worth considering. The urging caused his eyes to flutter open. In the place between sleep and wakefulness his mind began searching for clues as to the growing apprehension hovering over him as an early morning fog might cling to the surface of a mountain lake. Then he remembered. In a little over an hour the Peacemaker program would spin the cylinder of the digital Colt .45 implanted in his chest where, inside one of its six chambers, there nestled a deadly nano-bullet aimed at his heart. He was now wide awake. Memories of the previous evening swept into his consciousness like a returning tide. He hadn't known what the future might hold when he had first conceived his deadly experiment. In all his speculations, never had they included a member of the opposite sex—at least not in any romantic sense.

Not that he thought he was in love with Nicole Brown. He wasn't. After all, he barely knew her. But he was attracted to her. Would he have been under different circumstances? He couldn't say. What he did know was that he hoped to still be alive come breakfast. If all went well, he would be.

If all went well... How curious to have intentionally strapped a biological bomb to his body only to find himself translating a failure to detonate as going well. Strange how one's perspective could change based on a chance encounter.

From the standpoint of probability, from now on each morning would find him facing a one-sixth chance of death. If his math was right, within two weeks the odds of the bullet firing was over ninety percent. In three weeks the percentage rose to nearly ninety-eight. Given a month, it was a statistical near-certainty. Of course, probability was one thing

and reality another. Probability claimed he had a good chance of eating breakfast. Reality, not content to stay in the background, reminded him in a firm voice that he wasn't the one in control and anything could happen. In arming the program he'd surrendered his future to an unfeeling, unthinking string of bits and bytes. True, he had initially thought of death—of escaping the growing malaise that dogged him—as the successful conclusion of his novel experiment. He supposed he still did. A single meal shared with an intelligent, good-looking woman had proven itself a lovely diversion but he wasn't about to be fooled. No doubt, the experiment was already working its wonders and the potential of each day being his last was heightening his experiences, no matter what form they took.

I'm fine.

Sten read the text message with relief: He doubted it, though. Jars might be alive but that didn't automatically equate to being fine. He supposed his friend was heading off to breakfast with Ms. Brown and wondered how she fit into the scheme of things.

Jars found Nicki already seated in the dining room, waiting for him. She had dressed casually in jeans and a loose-fitting sweater and, on catching sight of him, greeted her new friend with a smile, a picture of readiness for whatever the day offered. She was drinking tea, a book lay open on the table in front of her.

"You look great." Jars slid into the opposite seat.

Nicki peered at him over the top of reading glasses. "Thank you. It feels good to be in real clothes and about to eat a leisurely breakfast sitting at a table instead of wolfing down a granola bar before pulling on surgical scrubs."

"Surgical scrubs?"

"Yes. Remember? I told you last night. I'm a nurse."

"Right. I guess I pictured you as working in a doctor's office. You know, dressed up in some sort of colorful outfit, complete with official Yankees cap and all." Jars grinned. A

waiter appeared, took their order, then disappeared as silently as he had come. Jars pointed to the book. “Who’s the author?”

“J.B. Phillips.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell. Fact or fiction?” He was curious to learn what sort of books she read.

“Fact—although some would call it fiction. It’s a translation of the New Testament,” Nicki explained. “Phillips was pastor of a church in London during World War II. He was something of a Greek scholar and wanted to translate the original language of the Epistles into more contemporary English so as to encourage and comfort those in his parish who were living through the bombings. After the war, with the encouragement of C.S. Lewis, Phillips expanded his efforts, translating the whole of the New Testament.”

The waiter returned with their breakfast setting Eggs Benedict in front of Jars and a steaming bowl of oatmeal with raisins and apple slices for Nicki. Nicki dug into her pocketbook pulling out four vials, pouring the contents of two into the bowl before spooning out the third then shaking some of the fourth over the bowl. “It’s power oatmeal,” she announced, stirring the mixture. “Gives you all the energy you need to make it through a busy morning. Try some?” Without waiting for a reply, she grabbed a spoon, plunging it into the bowl’s depths. She handed the implement, laden with its mottled concoction, to Jars. “You’ll love it!”

His hesitation brought forth some good-natured teasing. “What’s the matter? Afraid to spoil your appetite for hollandaise sauce by filling your belly with something actually good for you?”

“Truth be told,” Jars countered, “this is the first time in my life I’ve ever ordered Eggs Benedict.” It was, too. On any prior occasion he would have joined her in eating oatmeal. But seeing as how his little experiment called for some outside-the-box experiences he’d opted to try the egg dish he had seen Sten so passionate about. He took the spoon with its mysterious cargo. “Dare I ask what you’ve added?”

“You’d better swallow first,” she advised.

“May it never be said that Jarius Mason was a coward!” He closed his mouth, commanding his lips to stay shut no matter how loudly his taste buds might protest. He swallowed slowly, allowing his tongue to sample the varied flavors in an attempt to identify the ingredients.

“Like it?” Nicki leaned forward, her gentle blue eyes filled with mirth.

“Its different.” Besides the apples and raisins he thought he could pick out at least two other flavors. “I’m thinking molasses. And...maybe peanut butter?”

“Not bad.” Nicki put two of the four containers back in her bag. “Blackstrap molasses and almond butter. That’s two out of four. Want to go for bonus points and speculate on the remaining two?”

He thought about it as the last remnants of oatmeal slid down his throat. “All I can come up with is 3-in-1 oil and some birdseed.” Jars grinned. “Am I close?”

“Not bad for a *guy*,” she conceded, giggling. “This,” she said, holding up a vial of clear liquid, “is coconut oil. And as for the birdseed, they’re chia seeds.” The remaining vials disappeared into her pocketbook. “But you’re evading the question. How does it taste? Do you like it?”

Jars hesitated. “I’d need more than a swallow before I could pass judgment on something so sophisticated.”

“Very diplomatic.” Nicki pointed to his Eggs Benedict. “They look good, too.”

“Want a taste?”

“I’ll pass. But thanks.”

“Afraid you might like them more than your power oatmeal?” he teased.

“I already *know* I’d like the taste better,” Nicki confessed. “But my body wouldn’t appreciate it.”

“Why’s that?” He’d noted how trim and fit she appeared the evening before. Maybe even too slender. She certainly didn’t need to count calories.

“It’s best to keep my immune system in peak condition,” she said softly.

Jars thought he saw a hint of sadness in her eyes.

“When will you be meeting your son?” It was plain Nicki wanted to change the subject.

“We agreed to meet for dinner around seven-thirty.”

Although he hadn’t planned on sharing any details of his past, Nicki was a good listener and Jars found himself opening up over the course of their meal. He talked about his earlier marriages and how his work was all-consuming. He confessed that he had allowed the frail relationship he had with his daughter and son to wither to the point of their being related in name only. It had been years since he had spoken with either.

“Do you miss them?”

It was a question Jars only asked himself once or twice a year—when a birthday or holiday rolled around causing some unseen nerve in his being to momentarily sputter to life.

“I don’t know them well enough to miss them.” As cold as it sounded it was the truth.

“Maybe that’s about to change.” Nicki brightened. “I wouldn’t be surprised if tonight’s dinner turns out to be a new beginning for both you and your son.”

Mac hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair letting his eyes slowly close as his mind sifted through the news his colleague, Dr. Myers, had just shared with him. Audrey Myers was one of the best pulmonologists in the country and had been leading the team treating Nicole Brown’s disease for the past three years. What had been steady progress in combating the cancer invading Nicki’s left lung had slowly ground to a halt before now reversing itself and threatening to go on a renewed rampage against one of his favorite team members.

Nicki had come on board in her late twenties. Even then she had displayed a knack for staying calm under almost any circumstance the operating room threw at her. Surgery

was full of unpredictable events with life and death sometimes hanging in the balance depending on how the team reacted. Nicki had great instincts, a God-given gift in Mac's opinion, and he'd come to appreciate her not only for her professionalism but also as a friend.

The start of their friendship had begun the day Nicki had gotten the news of her husband's death while serving with the Army in Afghanistan. Todd had survived two previous tours: one in Kuwait and another in Iraq. He was one month short of coming home when a fierce firefight with Taliban forces in the mountains along the Pakistani border ended his life. The same bullet that killed Todd nearly killed Nicki, Mac reflected, remembering the young widow's agony. Nicki had waged a fierce war of her own against anger and depression, battles that had included a fierce animosity against the God she saw as responsible for failing to bring her husband back home to her alive.

Mac could relate. His own son had been killed in a drive-by shooting while working with inner-city teens in Los Angeles. Kids with non-existent home lives who wanted to come out of the gangs that had held them in their grip with promises of protection and a sense of belonging. Kent's death had hit him like a sledgehammer to the chest leaving Mac with plenty of unanswered questions. It had also served to prove to those who knew the gray-haired surgeon that his faith in God was no mere show. Although Mac had shed tears freely, he had weathered the blow convinced that the same God who had watched as His own Son died then raised Him from the dead could, and would, one day reunite earthly father and son. And until that time Mac would patiently wait, taking each day as it came, believing it full of opportunities to know God better through serving those around him. Like Nicki.

During the six months leave of absence Nicki had taken after Todd's death, Mac and his wife had been frequent visitors to the young woman's home. He and Marleah took turns, alternating between grocery shopping, cleaning, household chores and listening to Nicki's diatribes against God, some of the railings laced with the sort of colorful language increasingly common to contemporary society. Mac and Marleah weren't in the least offended. Pain often bubbled up out of people in the form of anger. Apart from God, life didn't make much sense. True, not even faith in God provided you with pat answers to everything life threw at you. But where answers couldn't be found there was Jesus.

According to the Bible, Jesus was God's Son, come into the world at His Father's bidding to show people what God was really like. The MacDonald's had learned that Nicki's concept of God had been pretty much formed by the first few books of the Old Testament. As a sophomore in college, it had come into Nicki's mind to read the Bible over Christmas break, something she'd never done. To her, church was one of the most boring places on the face of the planet. At least that was how she'd felt growing up. As she did any other book, Nicki had started reading at the beginning, in Genesis, her facial expression changing from benign interest to a downright scowl as she read what she took to be a tale of an angry and loveless God who demanded unquestioning obedience to a set of bizarre laws, wiping out whole people groups who happened to think differently. Nicki read of terrifying battles killing thousands and horrifying stories of things being done to women helpless to defend themselves from a society that seemed to allow men to do whatever they liked. By the time she had gotten through the book of Judges she was thoroughly disgusted, convinced that the God of the Bible was a mere fabrication of human mythology. It had taken the patient attentions of Mac and Marleah, sharing the love of God for her first through their actions, to lead Nicki to the place where she wanted to read for herself about Jesus in the gospels, and in so doing, begin to think about Him and the things He said and did.

Nicki found Jesus to be as different from her conception of God as could be imagined and wondered aloud how He could possibly be of the same essence as His Father. Mac understood and had shown her how even John the Baptist had said he didn't recognize the Son either—save for the sign God had provided for verification.

Weeks passed with Nicki pouring over every inch of the first four books of the New Testament, encouraged by Mac to allow God's Spirit to introduce her to Jesus, God in human form. Mac challenged her to set aside whatever religious opinions she had previously held or heard from others. He knew that certain man-made religious traditions could run deep, sometimes carving ruinous channels of misconception into people's minds, blinding them to the truth of God's great love. There awoke in Nicki a blossoming flower of fragrant faith, springing to life from seeds of truth sown in her heart by Jesus' life and words. By the time she returned to her duties on the surgical team she had become a new woman. She had been transformed by the dual agencies of sorrow and truth, a potent team for good when administered by the sort of God who wrote Himself into human history to be crucified on a

Roman cross for the sake of the creatures He had made and loved without limit. Like Mac and Marleah, Nicki still had unanswered questions as to the death of someone she deeply loved, but, like them, she allowed God to comfort her with Himself instead of answers she wasn't in a position to comprehend.

Mac sighed. Now he understood why Nicki had so suddenly put in a request for two weeks vacation. Nicki had given Dr. Myers permission to discuss her case with Mac from the very beginning of her illness, grateful for both Mac's medical and spiritual counsel. Given the latest test results, Audrey had thought it best to call and give Mac a personal update.