

## CHAPTER 2

The raging southern California sun suffocated Leah in her long-sleeved dress, driving her to seek refuge in the shadow of the ancient walnut trees lining Lake Elsinore's historic boulevard. Her back sticky with sweat, she longed for the air conditioning at the little corner market.

*If I go to college, I won't need Papa's permission to wear my summer dress.* In her father's mind, the immodesty of bare arms wasn't justified by anything less than 90 degrees. Leah mentally added summer dresses to the growing list of reasons she should go to New Grace Bible College. In the "no" column remained four reasons, four irrefutable reasons and she was holding one of them by the hand right now.

Technically four years older than Leah, Ruthie was still one of "the Littles," as Leah called her younger siblings. Even at five foot two, Leah had a full inch on Ruthie. Leah wore her height like a Disney princess while Ruthie carried hers like a chunky kindergartner. Ruthie wore her stained yellow dress with indifference while Leah's eggshell blue dress was neatly pressed. Mama said the blue complimented her brown eyes. Ruthie's matted brunette hair didn't quite reach her shoulders. Leah's blonde hair was in a French braid that extended past her waist.

"Watch your step," Leah said as the sidewalk rose to a peak with gnarled roots snaking out either side.

"I take care myself!" Ruthie said obstinately.

"Of course you do, dear," Leah said. "How was your field trip? To a farm, right?"

Leah pushed the list of yeses and nos and the impending deadline out of her mind and focused on Ruthie's reply. Her simple joy, shining through crossed eyes, was light to Leah. It

baffled her that not everyone was struck by Ruthie's radiance. She stopped to count the money Mama had given her.

"I gonna get mas-mouws!" said Ruthie.

"No, Ruthie. We're getting milk. Mama said no marshmallows today. We have to be good for tonight."

"But I want mas-mouws." Ruthie let go of Leah's hand and stomped her foot.

"How about a banana? You love bananas." She had barely enough money.

"I like 'mananas. I wanna whole bunch!"

"One is quite enough, silly." Leah grabbed Ruthie's hand. "Let's go to my rock first."

"My 'manana?"

"You'll have your banana very soon. Why don't you make a nice sandcastle for me?"

"I make it really big!"

"Of course you will, dear."

A short detour and they were on the shores of Lake Elsinore. It wasn't a large lake. The trees on the other side were near enough to be distinctly seen. Nor was it deep, like the reservoirs that dotted California. But it was a real lake, made by God.

Ruthie sat unceremoniously on the beach and gathered a mound of sand while Leah carefully brushed her rock clean. She climbed up, pulled up her knees, and rested her chin. Eyes closed, she breathed in the cool breeze flowing across the lake.

When people at Leah's little fundamentalist church asked if she was excited for tonight's graduation, she'd nod an obedient "yes." But graduation would leave her in the same house, making the same dinners, pulling the same weeds, reading the same books in the same living/school room.

Unless she went to college.

Leah checked her watch, barely noticing its tiny image of Bambi standing precariously on ice, and her chest tightened. *It's okay, you know these people.* She'd competed against these ten or so homeschoolers in countless Bible Bees. Every year at the Riverside County Fair, they'd find refuge together from the godless 4-H'ers who mocked their large families and prohibitions against worldly things like TV and movies.

*But the reception.* In her nightmare, she'd been thrown into hell, stuffed into a claustrophobic replica of her church's Fellowship Hall and forced to make small talk with a wall of faceless bodies towering above. Leah pulled a small King James Bible out of her purse and hugged it to her breast. She felt its stillness against her racing heart and took a deep breath.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" she recited flawlessly. "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures..." By the time Leah finished the psalm, her heart had returned to normal. She crossed her legs and set the Bible in her lap. The edges of the pink imitation leather were cracked, the corners worn off, and the golden words "Leah Anne Kline" barely legible.

Leah flipped through the treasures it held. A handmade "World's Best Sister" card from Ruthie, a birthday note from Mama and another one from her sister-in-law, Sophia. First place ribbons from Bible Bees and county fairs. Leah skipped past these, pulled out the letter with her SAT scores, brushed off the coffee grounds, and read it again. Ninety-seventh percentile.

*I beat ninety-six people out of a hundred,* she thought. *For all the good it's going to do me.*

Leah's anger swelled when she saw the coffee grounds scattered on her open Bible. *It wasn't his to throw away!* Brushing them off roughly, she ripped the Bible's tissue-thin paper.

She gasped and shoved the anger back down, focusing instead on Mama's beaming face when she'd given her the rescued letter.

*It could have been worse.* At an early age, Leah learned to hide her intelligence from Papa. It had taken Sophia over a year to convince her that being smart wasn't shameful. She tucked the letter back into her Bible, away from Papa's watching eyes.

*Honor thy father,* Leah chided herself. *He's only trying to protect us from the world. Didn't he protect you from Eli? And now he's letting you go to Bible college!*

Leah pulled out the acceptance letter and blank registration form. Only three years ago, it seemed impossible she'd even consider going to college. She had her sister-in-law to thank for changing that.

It had been a twilight-like afternoon in late October, shortly after her sixteenth birthday, and the streets were overflowing with rainwater the storm drains couldn't hold. Sophia and Leah were sitting on Leah's painted white iron bed, cups of Mama's home-made peppermint tea warming their hands. The unadorned walls of her, Ruthie, and Becca's room were covered in wallpaper original to the 1910 Victorian house, no longer showing any distinct color or pattern.

Sophia was unlike any woman who'd ever entered the Kline house. Pretty was the wrong word. Girls were pretty, Sophia was lovely. Fine black eyeliner traced intelligent green eyes that were unafraid of Papa's glare. Her feminine curves were not hidden by a shapeless dress. Sophia had become the big sister Ruthie couldn't be.

"See, right here, Soph," Leah said. "It doesn't say Jesus sweat blood. It says, 'and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood.'"

“Let me see that.” Sophia studied Leah’s pink Bible, then reached into her diaper bag and pulled out a small, royal-blue book bearing the words *Novum Testamentum Graece* in foil-gold letters. “Where was that again?”

“Luke 22:44. Is that your Greek Bible?”

Sophia nodded as she found the passage, her lips moving silently while she read. Leah watched with delight and admiration. Twenty-three years old and able to read the Bible in its original language, something Papa would’ve no doubt disapproved of.

Sophia glanced up. “I can’t believe I missed it. Everyone’s missed it. See, look here.”

Leah examined the spot Sophia’s finger marked and saw the figures  $\omega\sigma\epsilon\iota$ .

“What does it say?”

“*Hosay.*”

“What does it mean?” Leah rolled her eyes as only a sixteen-year-old girl can.

“It means ‘like’ or ‘as.’ You’re right. He was sweating profusely, not bleeding. That’s a really, really good observation.”

Joy and pride welled up in Leah’s breast.

“What did your father say?”

Sophia’s question punctured Leah’s joy and she stared at the Velcro straps on her once-white sneakers.

“He wouldn’t look at it. Just gave me a lecture on the infallibility of Scripture. I didn’t mean anything bad, honestly I didn’t.”

“There’s nothing bad about asking good questions, Leah.”

She grabbed Sophia’s Greek Bible and flipped through its pages of inaccessible symbols.

“I wish I could go to college.”

“Who said you can’t?”

Leah answered with silence and Sophia pulled her close, kissing the top of her head. “Just you wait, dear. We’ll get you out of here yet.”

The sound of splashing water brought Leah sharply back to the present.

“Ruthie! Get out of the water. What if there’s a drop off?”

“I take care myself!” Ruthie said.

“Yes Ruthie, but it’s my job to help you.”

Ruthie glared but returned obediently to the shore, her shoes filled with lake water and hem dripping on the sand.

Leah jumped off her rock, no closer to a decision about New Grace. *Please promise me they’ll be okay without me*, she prayed. *Give me a sign*. As they continued to the corner store, she found comfort in Ruthie’s earnest prattling about each of the ponies she’d ridden on her field trip.

“Which one was your favorite?” Leah asked.

“Lightning! He was white and cute and—”

“Hang on, Ruthie.”

Three teenage boys with weak mustaches loitered near the entrance of the white clapboard store, smoldering cigarettes hanging at their sides. They wore black t-shirts that glorified the satanic bands Papa had warned her about. The tallest boy’s Iron Maiden shirt flaunted a grotesque skeleton threatening her with a bloody hammer.

Leah dropped her head, but all her attention remained focused on the boys.

*Just ignore us*, she pleaded silently. *Please ignore us*. But of course they wouldn’t. Boys only wanted one thing.

The boy with a spiked dog collar around his neck stopped talking abruptly. Leah's shoulders tightened and she felt his eyes on her. He whistled and the other two snickered.

"Ignore them, Ruthie," Leah said as her grip on Ruthie's hand tightened.

The other boys joined in with catcalls. Leah kept her eyes to the ground, shepherding Ruthie towards the entrance.

"Hey sexy!" yelled one.

"Why you hidin' your goods with an ugly dress?" said another.

Leah's cheeks reddened with shame. She'd tried so hard to make a dress that hid her figure. Still she ignored them. Then the tall boy said something she couldn't ignore. Her head snapped up.

"What did you say to my sister?"

"I said, 'Nice dress, retard!'"

The other boys howled.

Leah ignored the blood rushing to her head and the tingling in her temples as she marched up to the boy and slapped him with more force than anyone would've thought possible. Holding babies and pulling weeds is hard work. The teenager stood stunned, a small but bright imprint of her hand on his left cheek. Blood seeped around the edges of his braces.

"Never, ever say that word again! Do you hear me? Do you hear me???" she screamed, her hand numb from the impact.

"Yeah, yeah," he mumbled. "Let's get out of here."

Leah grabbed the iron bars covering the store's windows to keep herself steady as the world faded around her.

"Don't hit, Leah. Don't hit," Ruthie said patronizingly.

She pulled the world back into focus. “It’s my job to protect you. You know that.”

“I big. I take care myself!”

“No, you don’t. You can’t. You need me. You... need me,” she repeated with finality.

“Let’s go home.”

“My ‘manana?”

“Enough of this. I need to go home.”

“I want my ‘manana!” Ruthie yelled.

“Shut up, Ruthie!”

They both comprehended her words at the same time. Ruthie’s eyes grew large and turned red. Her quivering lip pierced Leah’s heart.

“I’m sorry Ruthie! I didn’t mean it. Those boys, they scared me. Please don’t cry. Don’t cry, dear.”

But Ruthie was already sobbing.

“No, please, I’m sorry. It wasn’t your fault. Don’t cry. I’ll... I’ll buy you marshmallows.”

“Mas-mouws?” Ruthie asked through broken breath.

“Yes, dear.”

“A big bag?” Ruthie wiped snot away with the back of her hand.

“A big bag. Just for you.”

“I like mas-mouws.”

“I know, dear.”