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Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kingsbury, Karen.

Rejoice / Karen Kingsbury with Gary Smalley.

p. cm. (Redemption series bk #4)

ISBN 0-8423-8687-4 (sc)

I. Married women—Fiction. 2. Mother and child—Fiction. I. Smalley, Gary.

II. Title.

PS3561.I4873R45 2004

813'.54—dc22

2003024807

Printed in the United States of America

10 09 08 07 06 05 04
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SWIM PARTY seemed like a great idea, the perfect ending to a perfect summer.

Brooke Baxter West's partner at the pediatric office had a daughter Maddie's age, and to celebrate her birthday, the family had invited ten kids and their parents for an afternoon in their backyard pool.

For two weeks the girls had talked about it nonstop, seeking out Brooke each morning and tugging on her arm. "Mommy, when's the swim party?"

But two days before the big event, another doctor at the office had received word from California that his aging grandmother had only days to live. Before he caught an emergency flight, he'd asked Brooke if she'd take his on-call duty for the weekend.

"You're my last hope," he told her. "My family needs me."

Brooke hated being on call when she had plans to spend an afternoon with her girls. But other than the swim party, the weekend was open, and she could take the pager with her. The chances of getting a Saturday afternoon call were fairly slim. Saturday evening, yes. But not Saturday afternoon.

Now the big day was here, and Brooke was having doubts. She should've called around, found someone else to take the doctor's on-call duty. Her kids wanted her at the party, and if a call came in, she'd miss the summer's last hurrah.

Brooke slipped a pair of shorts on over her swimsuit. She was raising the zipper when she heard Peter's voice downstairs.

"Hurry up, let's go." Frustration rang in his voice. "The party starts in ten minutes."

Brooke rolled her eyes and grabbed her bag—the one with the life jackets and sunscreen. What was wrong with him? He was constantly grouchy; the two of them hadn't had a normal conversation in weeks. Their home was so tense even little Hayley had noticed it.

"Is Daddy mad at you, Mommy?" she'd asked earlier that week.

Brooke had mumbled something about Daddy being tired, and that yes, they should pray for him. But after days of sidestepping him, she was sick of Peter's attitude. He made her feel incompetent and irritating. The same way he'd made her feel ever since Maddie's diagnosis. Didn't he get it? Maddie was better now; no fevers for more than two months.

Brooke headed into the hallway and ran into Hayley and Maddie. "Guess what, girls?" A glance at the grins on her daughters' faces and her smile came easily. "I'm wearing my swimsuit!"

"Goodie, Mommy." Maddie jumped up and down and reached for Hayley's hand. "We can play tea party on the steps."

They joined Peter downstairs and but for the girls' excited chatter, they rode in silence to the house across town where Brooke's partner, Aletha, and her husband, DeWayne, lived.

At three years old, Hayley was still small enough to carry, so Brooke swept her into her arms as they headed up the walk toward the front door. On the way up the steps, Hayley took hold of Brooke's hand and squeezed it three times. The sign Brooke

used with the girls to say, “I love you.” The love from her younger daughter was the perfect remedy for Peter’s coolness.

“You’re a sweet girl, Hayley; do you know that?” She shifted her pool bag to her shoulder.

“You, too, Mommy.” Hayley rubbed her tiny nose against Brooke’s. “You’re a sweetie girl, too. Know why?”

“Why?” Brooke and Hayley trailed behind, and Brooke took her time. She loved moments like this with her girls.

“Because—” Hayley tilted her head, her pale blonde hair falling like silk around her wide-eyed face—“I love you, that’s why.”

The door opened and Aletha smiled at them from the front step. “Hi. The party’s out back.”

Peter pulled out a smile, the one he wielded whenever they were in public. Brooke studied him, confused and hurt. Why couldn’t he smile that way at her? She’d been meaning to ask him, but she hadn’t found the chance. She was a few feet from the front door when her pager went off. She exhaled hard as she unclipped the pager from her waistband and stared at the small message window. *Urgent*, it read. The word was followed by the hospital’s main number. *Great*, she thought. *I won’t get even an hour with them in the pool.*

Peter came up behind her and looked over her shoulder. “What is it?”

“A hospital call.” She didn’t hide the disappointment in her voice. “Maybe it’s nothing.”

Several children, breathless and excited, ran into the foyer and surrounded Hayley and Maddie. Brooke ducked into the nearest bedroom and pulled her cell phone from her purse. “Dr. Brooke Baxter West here. Someone paged me.”

The nurse on the other end rattled off the information. One of the patients from their office had been admitted with a staph infection. It looked serious. They wanted a pediatrician to consult. Immediately.

“I’m on my way.” Brooke hung up the phone and returned to the foyer.

Peter caught her look and raised his eyebrows. “Well?”

“I have to go.” She pursed her lips. Doctoring was the most exhilarating career she could imagine having. But not when it interfered with her family. “I’ll be back as quick as I can.”

“It’s your own fault.”

A ribbon of anger wrapped itself around her heart. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Peter shrugged, his eyes distant. “You took the on-call.”

Maddie ran up to her. “Natasha wants us to swim, Mommy. Can we, please? Can we right now?”

“Um, baby—” she looked at Hayley standing a foot away, waiting for her answer—“why don’t you wait till Mommy comes back?”

“We can swim then, too. Please, Mommy? Can we?”

Natasha did a little dance nearby and hugged Brooke. Their families had been friends for years, and Maddie and Natasha were best buddies. “Please, can we swim?” Natasha linked arms with Maddie and the two smiled their best smiles.

Brooke could feel the fight leaving her. So she’d miss out on some of the fun. If she hurried, she’d be back in time to join them in the pool. “Okay.” She allowed a slight smile. “But let me talk to Daddy first.”

Peter had moved into the living room, and Brooke found him and DeWayne seated side by side, their eyes glued to the television. A baseball playoff game was on, and Aletha had joked that having the party at that time could mean the men might never leave the TV.

Brooke crossed the room and positioned herself between her husband and the big screen. “The girls want to swim.” The bag in her hands was bulky, and she set it on the floor between them. “Here’s the sunscreen and life jackets. The girls need both before they can go out back.”

“Right.” Peter leaned sideways so he could see the game. “I got it, honey.”

The term of endearment was for DeWayne’s benefit, Brooke was sure. She didn’t appreciate the way he looked past her to the game. “Peter, I’m serious. Don’t let them outside without sunscreen and a life jacket. They’re not pool safe.”

He shot her a look, one that said she was embarrassing him. Then he yelled out, “Hayley . . . Maddie, come here.”

The girls scampered into the room and came up close to Peter. “Yes, Daddy.” Hayley spoke first. “Can we swim?”

“Not yet.” Peter looked hard at Brooke and unzipped the bag. Quickly and with little finesse, he lathered sunscreen into his hand and then tossed the bottle to Brooke. “Do Hayley.”

She needed to leave, but this was more important. Moving as fast as she could, she squeezed the lotion into her hand and positioned herself in front of their little blonde daughter. “Here, sweetie. We don’t want a sunburn, right?”

“Right, Mommy.”

Brooke rubbed the sunscreen over Hayley’s arms and legs, her back and neck, and finally her face. She and Peter finished with the girls at the same time, and Peter tossed her the smaller life jacket. He said nothing as they worked, and that was fine with Brooke.

These days, the less he said the better.

She took the blue-and-aqua life jacket and slipped first one of Hayley’s arms, then the other, through the holes. Next she latched the buckles down the front and attached a strap that ran from the back of the vest, between her legs, to the front.

Brooke had researched life jackets, and this style was the safest of all.

When Maddie’s vest was on, Peter gave Brooke one last glare. Again because of DeWayne seated beside him, he kept his tone light, almost friendly. “There you go. See you later.”

Brooke said nothing. Instead she turned and bid the girls a quick good-bye. She found Aletha and promised to be back as

soon as possible. A minute later she was in the car, doing a U-turn toward the hospital. With every mile she felt the distance between herself and her daughters. They were playing in the pool by now, getting used to the water, their little-girl laughter ringing across Aletha's backyard.

She stepped on the gas. She'd make this the quickest call ever and be back before the underwater tea party even began. Then—other than her relationship with Peter—everything about the day would play out just like it was supposed to.



Peter was grateful for the National League Championship Series on TV.

Because as much as he liked DeWayne and Aletha, the last thing he wanted was to spend that Saturday with a bunch of doctors. Swimming wasn't his thing, and the current series was easily one of the most exciting ever. Besides, most of the guests were Brooke's friends, people he barely knew. The prospect of catching a game with DeWayne had swayed him to come.

Especially after Brooke took the on-call assignment.

What had she been thinking? Of course she'd get called Saturday afternoon; kids needed doctors then most of all. Soccer injuries, illnesses that had brewed all week at school. Insect bites. Weekends were notoriously busy for pediatricians.

The fact that she'd let the other doctor talk her into taking his on-call was further proof that she wasn't capable. Not nearly as capable as he'd originally thought her to be. Back when they'd met in med school, her confidence and competence had been part of what attracted him to her. But after the situation with Maddie—when she'd insisted that their daughter didn't need a specialist—Peter had seen his wife in a new light.

One that was far from flattering.

An hour passed, and the sound of children came from the other room.

“Okay,” he heard Aletha tell them. “Dry off, and we’ll have cake.”

It was the seventh inning, and his team was down by one. Peter hoped they could keep the cake thing quiet—at least until the commercial. Not that he didn’t like birthdays, but he’d had one of the longest weeks in his life. His patients had needed him more than usual, he’d gone without sleep for two days, and now—on his day off—he was spending his Saturday at a kid’s birthday party.

At that instant—with the tying run on third and a power hitter at the plate—Maddie and Hayley ran into the room. They were shivering, and their life jackets made a trail of dripping water. “Daddy, can you take off our jackets?”

He glanced at them and then back at the TV. “Just a minute, girls. Daddy wants to see this.”

The count was 3–0, but this time the pitch was good. The batter cut and connected, but the ball flew over the catcher and into the stands. Foul tip. Strike one.

“Okay.” Peter looked at his daughters again. “Now what?”

“We’re dripping, Daddy.” Maddie took a step forward. “Can you take off our jackets? Please?”

“Sure, pumpkin.” He unsnapped the buckles on both vests and helped take them off. “Give them to Natasha’s mommy and ask her to hang them near the bathtub.”

The next pitch was a perfect strike, one that caught the hitter looking. Full count.

“Daddy . . .” Hayley stepped up. “When’s Mommy coming back? We’re a’posed to have a tea party with her in the pool.”

“Soon, baby.” He leaned around her and watched the man at bat belt one out of the park. The moment it was gone, he and DeWayne stood up and slapped their hands in a high five. “That’s my boys.”

“Bigger than life.” DeWayne gave a few nods and sat back down. “On their way, baby. On their way.”

“Daddy . . .” Hayley angled her head. “I love you.”

“Right.” Peter eased himself back to his seat. His eyes returned to the game. “Love you, too.”

“Bye.” Maddie turned and dashed from the room, her life jacket slung over her arm.

“Bye, Daddy.” Hayley was close on her sister’s heels.

“Bye.” Peter studied the screen and then remembered something. “Don’t go outside without those life jackets.”

But the girls were already out of the room.

He stared after his girls, and even with the noise from the game he could almost hear Brooke telling him to find them, make sure they understood about the life jackets. But the game was almost over, and anyway, the kids were about to eat cake. He could remind them about the pool in a few minutes.

His mind cleared, and all his attention centered once more on the game. A single and a stolen base, another single and a sacrifice fly. Two-run lead. If they won this game they’d take a three-two lead and the series would be as good as over.

Instead, the pitcher struck out the next two batters, and in the following inning the other team scored two runs to tie it up. Not until the bottom of the ninth inning did his team score the winning run. The game ended, the win forever in the books, and Peter was thirty minutes into a discussion on the merits of switch-hitting and relief pitching when he heard Maddie call him from the other room.

“Daddy! Daddy, quick! Help!”

He held up his hand to DeWayne. “Just a minute.” He raised his voice. “In here, baby.”

Maddie tore around the corner. Her hair was dry, her eyes round with fear. “Daddy, I can’t find Hayley.”

Peter was on his feet, his heart suddenly in his throat. “What do you mean?” Fear dug its talons into his back, his neck. It was all he could do to keep from sprinting toward the backyard. “I thought you were eating cake.”

“We did. Then we ’cided to go swimming, Daddy.” Maddie’s

mouth hung open. “But Hayley said she wanted to be first to get the tea party ready for Mommy. Now I can’t find her—”

Peter didn’t wait for Maddie to finish. He took off for the patio door, not so much because of what Maddie had said but because of the thing she was holding in her hands. The thing Peter had only that instant recognized.

Hayley’s life jacket.

A WORD FROM KAREN KINGSBURY



OFTENTIMES WHEN I write a novel, God presents me the opportunity to live through things he wants me to tell you about. During the writing of countless novels, I marveled at the strange similarities taking place in my life. But the situation that came along as I wrote this novel was almost more than I could believe.

Four months after I'd written the first chapter of *Rejoice*, the chapter that sets up Hayley's drowning, I got a call from a close friend in Arizona. Her sister—another friend—needed prayer because her nineteen-month-old son, Devin, had fallen into an irrigation canal in central Arizona and drowned.

Little Devin traveled the canal for nearly a mile—eighteen minutes—before a neighbor saw his body and pulled him from the water. Eighteen minutes. Devin's body was blue and lifeless; he was not breathing, and he had no pulse.

Nevertheless, the neighbor administered CPR while a helicopter was called to the site. Devin was life-flighted to Children's Hospital in Phoenix, where he was put on life support. The lead doctor pulled aside Devin's mother and told her that the next two days were bound to bring about brain swelling, a condition that would push Devin even further from the possibility of ever waking up. To make matters worse, the family was asked to consider organ donation since Devin was basically brain-dead, being sustained by machines and pumps.

On the phone with me that day, my friend's request was simple. Pray. Pray for a miracle for Devin.

I'd like to tell you that when I hung up the phone, I rejoiced in God's healing power and prayed exactly as my friend had asked. But I didn't do anything of the sort. Instead, I begged God to let Devin go home. Let him run and skip and jump and catch frogs

A WORD FROM GARY SMALLEY



BY NOW YOU'VE figured out that the title *Rejoice* didn't mean this book was full of only good times and celebration. Rather, the calling of every member of the Baxter family was to find joy in the midst of great trials and pain. Jesus tells us to be joyful always, to consider it pure joy when we face trials of many kinds, to rejoice in the Lord always.

Rejoice. It is the command of Christ that his people keep a positive outlook, that we find a reason to smile even through our tears. And the reason?

Because we are what we think.

In my years working with relationships, I've seen two of the principles in this book played out time and again. First, the idea that couples struggle when tragedy befalls them. And second, the truth that couples always do better when they choose to be joyful, regardless of life's circumstances.

The following are five life seasons in which you will better serve your relationships by choosing to rejoice.

REJOICE IN THE MUNDANE

Though we will all go through hard times, most of us are not in the midst of a situation as difficult as the one faced by the Baxters after Hayley's drowning. The key, then, is to find joy in the ordinary times. Many marriages are dying slow deaths because people walk through life half awake, passing each other in the halls and barely remembering to say hello. A woman once told me that she attended a barbecue with friends, and partway through the meal the host had her laughing hysterically over a funny story.

"I remember that it felt strange to smile, and then it hit me,"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Use these questions for individual reflection or for discussion with a group of reader friends, a circle of people at church, or your family members. Maybe, like the Baxters, God is calling you to a more joyful place. Even if the season you're in now is one of your most painful.

1. Statistically, the tragic loss or accidental injury of a child is one of the most difficult situations for married people. Discuss situations you are familiar with where such a tragedy led to a troubled marriage.
2. Why do you think so many marriages end in divorce after such a time?
3. Doubt has a way of creeping into any dark time. We saw that with Luke after September 11, and now with stalwart John Baxter in light of Hayley's accident. Why do doubts plague us who have faith? Where does it have its roots?
4. What does it look like to rejoice during a trial? Talk about a time when you or someone you know chose to rejoice during a hard time. Compare that to a time when you or someone you know chose to respond differently.
5. Why do you think God asks us to respond to hard times by being joyful?
6. Use as many adjectives as possible to describe *joy*.
7. Is it possible for doubt to exist in a joyful setting? Why or why not?
8. Is God asking us to hide or bury our true feelings about pain? Is he asking us to be happy about bad situations?
9. God has given us free will. As such, we have a number of ways we can respond to a tragedy. Think back on some of the Baxter family members and how they responded to Hayley's drowning: Elizabeth . . . John . . . Brooke . . . Peter . . . Ashley . . . Maddie . . . Cole.