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Forgiven



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CHAPTER ONE



THE ANSWERS WERE INSIDE the brown paper sack. At least that's what everyone was telling him.

Dayne Matthews carried the bag inside his Malibu beach house, set it on his kitchen counter, and took a deep breath. Kelly would be gone until the next day, visiting her agent in Manhattan. Dayne had all night to sort through his questions, all night to catch even a glimpse of the peace he was missing.

He opened the bag and pulled out a thick, heavy book: *Kabbalah—Becoming Your Own God*.

Dayne ran his fingers over the cover. He'd gone to the Los Angeles Kabbalah Center a few times, and earlier today he'd stopped by and purchased the book. The Kabbalah bible. He was starting to understand the stuff, and now that he'd gotten past the guilt, past the nagging inner voice accusing him of turning his back on his parents' faith, he was ready to dive deeper.

A man in a white shirt and white pants had been working behind the counter. He hadn't seemed to recognize Dayne, but then dozens of celebrities attended the center. Famous actors

probably didn't impress the guy. Why would they, when enlightenment meant shedding worldly values, exchanging them for a higher level of consciousness?

Dayne had set the book on the store's counter. "This is it, right? The big book?"

The man smiled, an otherworldly smile. "The answers to life are between the covers."

That's all Dayne needed to hear. At this point in his life, he was all questions and no answers. None at all. He was living with his current leading lady, Kelly Parker, but he didn't love her. Even so, he didn't want to break up with her. Filming for the movie started in two weeks. Cut it off with Kelly now and they could forget having any chemistry on camera.

Dayne now flipped the book over and read the inside back cover. An italicized section at the top of the page said: *Are you lacking peace? Does traditional religion leave you empty and searching? Come to the oldest truths in the world, the truths that will truly set you free.*

That's what he was missing. Freedom.

He was trapped in his life, locked in with no way out. Not in the situation with Kelly, and not with his biological family, the Baxters. They knew nothing about him because he needed to keep it that way. Otherwise the paparazzi would take away his family's freedom the way they'd taken his.

And what about his anger? The way he'd gone from a relaxed sort of guy who didn't get bothered by much to being mad all the time. Mad at his adoptive parents for sending him away to a boarding school so they could traipse around the Indonesian jungle telling people about Jesus. Mad that they died in a plane crash when he was eighteen and mad that he'd lived without any family ever since then, when the whole time he had biological parents and siblings living in Bloomington, Indiana.

That was another thing. He was angry that his parents hadn't explained the whole adoption thing to him. It wasn't enough to

tell a little kid that some other mother gave birth to him. What was he supposed to make of that? If he hadn't run into Luke Baxter at his attorney's office more than a year ago, he never would've known who his biological mother was at all.

But he knew now, and because of the photographers—the parasites that stayed within breathing distance of him at all times—the Baxters might as well not exist. And that made him mad too. But nothing made him angrier than the stalker who attacked Katy Hart and him last month, the lunatic fan who because of some wild delusion actually believed she was married to him. The woman's case was going to trial in May, and he'd have to see her again. Sit across from her while he took the witness stand. The jury better throw the book at her.

He pictured her, the way she'd jumped out of the bushes, grabbing Katy and holding the knife to her throat. After that there was no way Katy would take the starring role Dayne had offered her. She couldn't wait to get back to Bloomington, where he'd found her. But the girl had captured his heart and mind and soul. He sighed and stared out the window at the ocean beyond his backyard.

Katy Hart. Even now he couldn't forget about her.

A week ago something happened that reminded him of how the memory of her had become part of his being. His housekeeper was out sick for three days, and Dayne had tried his hand at a load of laundry. Hidden among a basketful of his white T-shirts was a pair of red Ohio State running shorts. By the time Dayne returned to the washing machine, every one of his white shirts was pink.

In a hurry to fix the problem, he grabbed one of the T-shirts and ran it under cold water. He scrubbed it with his hands and then with a washcloth and finally with a wire brush. He could get the pink out and make the T-shirt white again, he figured, if he rubbed hard enough, if he worked at it, if he put an extra dose

of effort into the job. But it was impossible. The red had become part of the white, woven into every fiber.

That's how it was with Katy.

She was there when he woke up and waiting for him when he lay down at night. Sure, he had hours when she didn't come to mind, but then she'd rush back in. Never mind that she hadn't returned his phone calls or made any contact with him since she returned to Bloomington. Forget the fact that he'd probably never see her again. She was there—nothing he could do about it.

He looked at the back inside cover of the Kabbalah book again. Truths that would set him free? Yeah. He needed freedom, all right. Plenty of it. Freedom from his anger and guilt and obsession with Katy.

And maybe freedom from Kelly Parker too. Living with her was like living a lie, waking up beside her every morning, parroting *I love you's* every night. When they were done with the film, he'd tell her good-bye. She'd be fine. Her next leading man was only a film away.

The thing was, he didn't want to wait until they were done filming. Especially when they'd be spending the first two weeks on location in the place he'd pushed for, the place he felt would give the best picture of a small town. The one location where he didn't want a girlfriend hanging on his arm.

Bloomington, Indiana.



Ashley Baxter Blake had to talk to her husband.

Only Landon could fully understand the importance of the information in her hand. Information that would change all of their lives. All she had to do was find him. Because on this fall day, Landon and Cole, their son, were at Lake Monroe, taking advantage of the summerlike day Bloomington was famous for.

This was the sort of news that couldn't wait until they came home—good day or not. Of course, Cole didn't need to find out—not right away. But Landon? He deserved to know as soon as possible. She stared at the information, tried to absorb the reality of what it meant to all of them. But especially what it would mean to her husband.

He'd stood by her as far back as she could remember, through her darkest hours when she was alone and pregnant with Cole, in the days following September 11 when everything in their worlds felt upside down, and even when her health was in desperate jeopardy.

Landon had been there through all of it.

She made the decision quickly—the way she made most of her decisions. Without stopping to tidy up the kitchen or check her look in the mirror or make sure every door was locked, she snatched her keys from the kitchen desk, hooked her purse on her forearm, and hurried out to her car.

The information was still in her hand, the way it would stay until she reached the lake. On the ride there, she fought tears, refusing them because how could she be crying when she found him? They could cry later, together.

When she finally pulled into the gravel lot at the lake, she parked and ran lightly down the path to the water's edge, where she saw the shaded backs of Landon and Cole, sitting on the old red ice chest, the one with the plastic hinges and the crack along the right side.

She slowed, and when she was ten yards from them she stopped and took in the picture of them. Landon, tall with muscled shoulders, elbows resting on his thighs, the fishing pole out in front of him; and Cole, his blond hair sticking out from under his baseball cap.

They were something together. Ashley never missed the fact, never got tired of watching the way Cole thrived in Landon's

presence. She closed her eyes, and for a moment she let the breeze off the lake wash over her.

A single deep breath and she stared at the information in her hand one more time. It was really there, shouting up at her that everything was about to change. Even the picture of Cole and Landon in front of her. When she took another step, a few early fallen leaves crunched beneath her feet.

Landon turned around. “Ashley . . .” His smile lit his face. “You came!”

She hid her hand behind her back. “I, uh . . .” *Think, Ashley, think of something to say.* “It was too nice to stay home.”

Cole turned around, and as he did, he dropped his fishing pole. “Mommy!” He scrambled off the ice chest, ran to her, and flung his arms around her waist. “I caught a fish! It wasn’t the biggest guy in the lake, but Daddy says we can keep it and eat it for dinner!” He tugged on her arm, leading her closer to the water, and pointed at a string of fish anchored on the shore. “See it! It’s the very first one, the one with the little rainbows on it.”

“Wow, Coley!” She stooped down, careful to keep her hand hidden from both of her guys. “He’s perfect for dinner.”

Cole puffed out his chest. “That’s what Daddy said.”

Ashley turned to Landon. “So . . .” She couldn’t last much longer. Not only did he deserve to know, but she couldn’t feign conversation when all she could think about was sharing the news. She shrugged and pointed up the hill toward the parking lot and the kids’ playground adjacent to it. “How ’bout you two fishermen take a break so Cole can play on the swings?”

Landon must’ve read her eyes, because his smile faded. He looked at her as if to say, *What, Ashley? What is it now?* But none of that came from his mouth. Instead he gave a slow nod and looked at Cole. “Let’s leave our gear for a few minutes, buddy. Okay?”

Cole’s expression fell a little. “How ’bout we play later?”

“Well—” Landon was gentle but firm—“Mommy and I need to talk, so let’s take a break. Just for a little bit.”

“Okay.” Cole set his face, resigned. “But the fishes stay here, right, Daddy? In this very spot?”

“Right.” Landon set his pole down on the ground. He winked at Cole. “But here’s the secret—the fish are always right here.”

Cole found his smile as they started up the hill. “Maybe we’ll catch a bigger fish ’cause this way the fishes will all get tricked that we’re leaving.”

“Exactly.” Landon put his arm around their son and slowed so Cole could keep up.

Ashley’s heartbeat kept time with her feet, thudding through her entire body. All the while she kept the hand with the news in it behind her back. When she couldn’t stand the slow pace another minute, she leaned down and grinned at Cole. “Race you to the top!”

Cole jumped in the air as he took off through the trees, weaving and hopping and getting to the top a few seconds before Ashley. “You’re pretty fast for a girl, Mommy.” He was out of breath, giggling at her. “Maybe next time.”

Landon jogged up to them just as Cole was making the comment. “I’d say she’s pretty fast, period.” He chuckled.

After talking for a few minutes about whether the bigger fish would come back while they were gone, Cole ran off and found a boy his age to swing with.

As soon as he was gone, Ashley looked up at Landon. Her air seemed stuck near the base of her throat, as if she could neither speak nor draw a deep breath.

“Ash—” Landon searched her face—“what is it?” Concern and surprise filled in the slight lines above his brow. “What’s going on?”

She laughed, but it sounded more like a gasp. “I had to come.” Her arms were shivering, even with the sun directly overhead.

She fingered the information in her hands, and then in a rush she held it out to Landon.

He glanced at it and then back at her. Then he looked down and squinted, trying to make it out. "What is it?"

"Take it." She was unable to breathe. "Read it, Landon."

"I'm trying." He took it from her and narrowed his eyes. Then like the slow lighting of a fluorescent lightbulb, somewhere in his heart it registered. She knew this for one simple reason:

Landon was crying.