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Forever



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CHAPTER ONE



THERE WERE moments when the sun shone so brightly on her life that Katy Hart could barely stand beneath it. Moments when she would be getting ready for a day of Christian Kids Theater rehearsals or folding laundry or filling her tank with gas and she'd have to check her ring finger. Just to be sure it had really happened.

Dayne Matthews had asked her to marry him.

She opened the door to her apartment, stepped inside, and exhaled. She'd spent the afternoon and evening with the Flanigans, first shopping with Jenny and then having dinner and watching a movie with the family. Now she wanted to be upstairs when Dayne called, the way he called every night around this time. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it for a minute.

Overnight God had taken her life from foggy uncertainty to crystal clear panoramas. She and Dayne wanted a simple wedding on the shore of Lake Monroe. He had already met with a wedding planner in Hollywood, a woman known for her

brilliance at pulling off secret ceremonies, events the paparazzi never figured out until they were over.

The job would be a tough one, and Katy had resigned herself to the possibility that the press might find out, that helicopters could circle overhead and cameramen could infiltrate the trees along the lake to get a picture. Whatever. They'd already dragged her name across the cover of the tabloids.

She was marrying Dayne Matthews. Soon the whole world would know anyway.

They hadn't picked a date, but spring seemed perfect. Bloomington was beautiful in April and May. Dayne would have time to film one more movie by then, and it would allow enough time to find a wedding dress and figure out the reception, time to fly to Chicago and talk to her parents about the plans. Dayne had told her they didn't have a budget, but Katy wanted something simple and elegant, something she could find in Indianapolis as easily as in New York City.

It was the third week of July, which meant they had eight or nine months. Not much time considering how busy they would be in their separate lives over the next few months. Dayne was working six-day weeks filming his current movie in Los Angeles, the romance film with Academy Award-winning actress Randi Wells. And Katy needed to sort through the scripts for the lineup of plays slated for CKT's coming year. Sometimes she felt dizzy with everything that had happened in the last two weeks.

Katy sighed. Yes, the sun was shining brighter than ever in her life.

She changed into her pajamas and brushed her teeth. As she headed for bed, the phone rang. She darted across the room, grabbed the receiver, and bounced onto the mattress. The caller ID told her what she already knew. It was Dayne. She hit the Talk button. "Hey."

"Mmmm." He sounded tired, lonely, but even so she could

practically see his eyes dancing. “Do you know how good that feels?”

“What?” An intimacy filled her voice, one that was reserved for him alone.

“Hearing you, knowing you’re at the other end of the line.” He drew a slow breath. “I look forward to this minute all day long.”

She smiled. “Me too.”

They talked about his day, and eventually that led to Dayne’s recent conversation with his missionary friend Bob Asher. “God’s making it all so clear—the future and how it’s supposed to play out.”

Katy thought about the weeks and months when the future had seemed anything but clear. During Dayne’s involvement with Kabbalah or his time with Kelly Parker. “There were days I didn’t think we’d ever be here.”

“I know.” He was quiet for a moment. “I thank God every night, Katy. Every night.”

The topic shifted again, and he told her about the movie he was making. The director still believed they had a major hit on their hands, and a buzz had started that maybe this was the film that would earn Dayne his first Academy Award. That led to talk about the paparazzi and how a reporter for *Celebrity Life* magazine was getting closer to the truth about the identity of Dayne’s birth family.

“It doesn’t matter.” Katy leaned back against her headboard. “They’ll find out one day anyway.”

“Not now, though. Not before the wedding.”

They talked about the Baxters, how Ashley had accepted the role of assistant director for CKT’s coming season and how the other Baxters were excited about Thanksgiving, when the whole family would be together for the first time.

Dayne steered the conversation back to the two of them. “Have you found it?” His voice held depth and tenderness, a tone that told her how much he missed her.

“What?” She glanced at a photo of them on her nightstand.

“Our house. I keep thinking you’ll call and tell me you found it.”

Katy sat up and crossed her legs. “You’re serious?”

“Of course.” An easy laugh came from him. “If you like it, I’ll like it.”

“But . . .” She ran her fingers through her hair. “Shouldn’t you be here?”

“You find it and I’ll fly out and take a look. How’s that?”

“I don’t know.” If he were any other guy, she’d ask him about their price range. But that wouldn’t be an issue with Dayne—something else that would take adjusting to. “I know we talked about it before, but really, Dayne, you should be here. You said near the lake, but do you want acreage or a smaller place closer to town?”

“Not near the lake.” He chuckled. “*On* the lake. A big yard and a sweeping porch.”

She grinned. “I told you . . . lakefront property is almost non-existent. Something *near* the lake, maybe. But *on* it?”

“I can dream, can’t I?” He laughed again. “Okay. Eventually I want to be on the lake, but for now it doesn’t matter. As long as I’m with you we can pitch a tent in the Baxters’ backyard. Which we might have to do if you don’t start looking.”

“All right, I get it. I’ll look.” She gazed at her ring and adjusted her left hand so the diamond sparkled in the light. “I’ll start tomorrow. I have a CKT meeting at Ashley’s house; then I’ll drive around the lake and see what’s for sale.” The task ahead still felt daunting, but if Dayne trusted her, that was all that mattered.

“No pressure, Katy. As long as we’re in Bloomington . . .” She could almost see his smile over the phone line. “Although . . . I have this props job I’m interested in, so I should probably be pretty close to the theater.”

She giggled. Gone were the sad, drawn-out conversations between them. Instead they were always laughing, always play-

ing. She tried to sound more official. "If the director hires you, you mean."

"True." He paused. "But see, I know her. Got her wrapped around my finger."

"Is that right?" She held the phone closer. If only they didn't have so long to wait until they were together again.

"Yep." His tone changed just enough to let her know this next part was serious. "But not nearly like I'm wrapped around hers." He hesitated. "By the way, my director says I'm more convincing than ever." Dayne's voice filled with tenderness. It felt like he was sitting beside her. "Can you believe that?"

"Must be Randi Wells." Katy was teasing. Dayne obviously wasn't interested in his costar, though at first the tabloids questioned an offscreen romance. He had kept things so platonic that after a few weeks of filming, the gossip rags did an about-face and hinted at feuding between the two.

"You know what it is, right?"

"What?"

"It's you." His tone changed, and she could almost hear his beating heart. "I've never been in love before . . . so how could I have been convincing?"

She sighed. "How am I going to survive until I see you again?"

"If you figure it out, let me know."

Katy opened her mouth. She was about to suggest that maybe she could come out for a weekend, stay at a local hotel, and at least share a few days with him between weeks of filming. But the last time she'd been in Los Angeles the paparazzi had chased them and nearly caused a major collision. Dayne had made it clear: until they were married, they needed to do their visiting in Bloomington. She would've suggested he break away for a visit, but during filming there was often weekend work. They'd have to wait until his film wrapped up.

They talked for another half hour, dreaming out loud about their wedding and the days ahead.

When the call ended, Katy turned off the light and lay back on her pillow. For a long time she stared into the dark, replaying the conversation and missing Dayne. Maybe she would fly to Los Angeles anyway. Show up on his set and surprise him. If they didn't run from the paparazzi, maybe they could avoid a chase. She was still thinking about the possibility when she fell asleep.

The next morning Katy woke up later than she'd intended and hurried through her morning routine. As she raced out of the house, she checked her watch. Thirty minutes until the nine o'clock meeting at Ashley's house, and she still wanted to pick up coffee for the group. Ashley was thrilled about her new position with the theater kids. A week ago CKT coordinator Bethany Allen had asked Ashley to join the theater group's artistic team. She would oversee sets and work with Rhonda Sanders as an assistant director. All of which was wonderful, since Katy would be busy planning a wedding.

This morning the team wanted to come up with a list of props and sets needed for the three upcoming productions. But that wasn't all they would talk about. Ashley was about to become Katy's sister-in-law. By now, all Ashley's siblings knew that Dayne was their brother. It was why they'd made plans for a Thanksgiving celebration.

Katy yawned and focused on the road. Never mind the thunderclouds on the distant horizon; she felt like squinting. The future looked that bright. Yes, they still had some details to work out: How often Katy would visit Dayne during his filming once they were married or whether he'd do all the traveling so their visits could be more private. They needed to figure out a plan for the paparazzi so they wouldn't always be running.

But none of that felt insurmountable. Now that Dayne had decided to live in Bloomington, every aspect of their future felt possible. And one day—maybe not too far down the road—they might even live as normal people. Because Bloomington was the kind of town that treated people like friends and family. Fame

had no place in the circles Katy ran in. Bloomington would embrace them and protect them, and they would virtually disappear from the media landscape.

She checked the digital clock on her dashboard and thought about the coffee. As she looked up, a sign ten yards ahead caught her eye: Estate Home—For Sale by Owner. The stoplight turned red and Katy slowed her car. When she was close enough, she scanned the sign. Most of it was illegible, but she could make out one very distinct word: *lakefront*. The sign pointed right. Katy bit her lip and hesitated. Ashley's house was left.

Dayne's words from the night before filled her senses. "*Not near the lake, on the lake. A big yard and a sweeping porch.*"

Before she could analyze her options, she made a right turn. She flipped open her cell phone and dialed Ashley's number. "I'll be a few minutes late." She didn't want to say that she was following a For Sale sign on a whim.

"I was just going to call you." Ashley sounded out of breath. "Bethany just called. She can't be here till nine-thirty, and the kids are running me ragged. Take your time."

Katy smiled. "Okay. See ya." She hung up just as she saw the next sign. Sure enough, it directed her toward a secluded part of the lake. Her heart beat a little faster. She followed the signs another few miles, through a series of turns and onto a two-lane road that ran along the perimeter of the lake. She was familiar with the area, and suddenly she remembered something. There was a house out this way—more of a landmark really—that had been written about in the newspaper recently. Could that be where she was headed?

She rounded a bend in time to see a larger sign posted close to the road, right in front of the house she'd read about. Katy pulled over and stared at the place. The article had been in last Sunday's paper. The rustic, cabin-style structure had belonged to Carol and Elmer Nichols for sixty-two years. Elmer had built the house, and for six decades it was a place of love and laughter and

much activity. But several years back, both Carol and Elmer had grown ill and been placed in a local nursing home. Their kids lived out of state with their own children and grandchildren, and the grand old place had slowly fallen apart. Even so, the family hadn't wanted to sell.

But a year ago Carol died, and last month Elmer followed. Their deaths made the house part of an inheritance, and that was the subject of the newspaper article. The kids had taken a vote and decided that they would sell the house only if no one in the family was able to restore it. The article had quoted the oldest Nichols daughter as saying, "The last thing we want to do is let the place go to someone outside the family."

Apparently things hadn't worked out, because here it was, definitely for sale. Katy pulled into the driveway and realized how large the property was. There were several acres of overgrown grass that made up the distance from the road to the house. Katy's heart beat a little faster. Even in disrepair the house was unlike any other in Bloomington.

The place was big enough to be a lodge, and if Katy hadn't read the recent article she would've assumed it was. It was situated at the far end of the field on a bluff overlooking the most beautiful part of the lake. Wrapped around the exterior was a full-size porch, and from what she could see, an oversize deck came off the back of the house.

Katy parked and got out of her car. The building looked empty, and as she walked closer she could see the house better. The old place had certainly fallen apart. The decks and railings sagged, and in some places they were broken in half. Two of the windows were cracked, and an old screen door hung from one hinge. The exterior of the house needed painting, and the roof looked damaged in some spots. Katy narrowed her eyes, trying to imagine the place fixed up. It would be spectacular, a house even Dayne couldn't have dreamed she'd find in so short a time.

She jogged to the For Sale sign and pulled a flyer from the

box. *Six-bedroom, four-bath, lodge-style home in as-is condition.* The price was seven figures, but the property alone had to be worth that. She looked around the field. The house sat on at least ten private acres bordered by huge maple trees on two sides and a worn-out, split-rail fence near the road. Nothing blocked the view on the lakeside.

Suddenly Katy had to see. Since the house appeared abandoned, it couldn't matter if she peeked at the backyard. She hurried toward the edge of the bluff and angled closer to the house. The backyard was a mess—a broken hammock; an overturned wheelbarrow; a rusty swing set; old, dilapidated furniture scattered about. Beyond that was a damaged staircase leading down to a private dock.

Again she felt her heart soar. She could picture the yard cleared out and cleaned up, with new decking and railings. She took in the lake view and felt dizzy with the possibilities. The setting was perfect. She could almost see the future playing out before her, hear the voices and laughter from family and friends who would come here for a barbecue or a birthday party. She could see it all—and Dayne by her side, the two of them living out a dream.

Katy turned and studied the abandoned house. What a shame the Nichols family had let it fall apart this way.

Katy folded the flyer and headed back to her car. She could hardly wait to talk to Dayne. She dialed his number on the way to Ashley's, and though she couldn't talk long, she told him she'd found it. Their dream house. She would fill him in on the details later when he was off work.

For now she had to focus on the meeting at Ashley's, get the work done so she could tell Ashley about the house. All her life Katy had wanted a sister, someone to share her heart with, someone who would have another viewpoint on family matters and relationships. She had Rhonda and Jenny, but a sister would be more than a confidante and a friend. A sister was family.

F O R E V E R

She leaned back in the driver's seat as she made her way to Ashley's house. As the meeting finished and she finally had the chance to tell Ashley all about the house, Katy thanked God. This was just one more way He had blessed her through Dayne's love. Ashley was already a friend.

One day soon she would be a sister.

Discussion Questions

Use these questions for individual reflection or for discussion with a book club or other small group.

1. Why do you think our culture is fascinated by celebrity? How has this fascination affected you personally?
2. What are the dangers of being so caught up in the lives of celebrities? Have you seen this cause a problem for you or someone you know?
3. What messages are indirectly being given to young people from the celebrities written about in gossip magazines?
4. What was the Baxter family's immediate response to Dayne's accident? What were the risks of John and Ashley's trip to Los Angeles?
5. Tell of a time when your family showed you great support in a time of need. What do you believe motivated them? How did that support affect you?
6. What was Katy's response to the accident? As Dayne's coma continued, what did Katy's actions say about her faith?
7. Talk about Luke's struggles with Dayne before the accident. What did you think of Luke's attitude in the early part of the story?
8. What do you think motivated Ashley to get Dayne and Katy's lake house fixed up? How has Ashley grown through this series and the last?
9. Have you ever undertaken a project—a party, a task, etc.—as a labor of love? Explain the project. What were the results of it?
10. Why do you think Elaine left John's house frustrated that day? Do you have a relationship that seems to be on hold? Explain and discuss what you believe is holding that relationship back.
11. Katy found strength in the Bible verse, "Be still, and know