

WHEREVER LOVE TAKES US

By Carrie Turansky
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“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay.

Your people will be my people and your God my God.”

Ruth 1:16 NIV

Chapter One

“Mom! Watch out!”

Tessa Malone gasped and slammed on her brakes as an eighteen-wheeler slid in front of her van. The truck’s rear lights flashed. She pumped her brakes, praying they would hold the van back from a collision.

“What a jerk!” Brianna, Tessa’s sixteen-year-old daughter, scowled at the offending truck as it sprayed their van’s windshield. “He ought to check his mirrors before he changes lanes.”

The truck pulled ahead, widening the space between them. Tessa bit back a corrective comment. It would only increase the tension she and the children felt as they drove through the storm.

“This weather is crazy!” She strained to see through the foggy windshield and wiggled the useless temperature and defroster buttons. How many times had she told her husband, Matt, they needed to take the van in to have the defroster repaired? Why didn’t he ever listen to her and follow through on things like that? Didn’t he care about their

safety? Did she have to do everything herself? She tried to put a lid on her resentment, but it bubbled like a pot on high.

Evan, her eleven-year-old son, tapped the back of her seat. “Mom, what time is Brie’s orthodontist appointment?”

“Four thirty.” Tessa glanced at the dashboard clock and blew out a frustrated huff. They were going to be at least fifteen minutes late.

“Mom, you know Dr. Fisher hates it when we’re not on time. He’ll probably make us wait forever.”

“Well, there’s nothing I can do about that now.”

“But I told Ryan I’d be home by five fifteen so he could call.”

“Brie, please, I’m doing the best I can.” Tessa pulled in a deep breath, trying to calm her frazzled nerves. The wipers beat out a furious rhythm, but they couldn’t keep up with the torrent flooding the windshield.

This wasn’t the best time to be out driving, but what other choice did she have? They could only afford one car, so Matt expected her to pick up the kids from school, stop by the dry cleaners, return the overdue library books, and then take Brie to the orthodontist . . . all before going home to prepare and serve dinner in time for her and Matt to make it to the parent-teacher conference at Evan’s school tonight.

She loved her family, but working full-time and dealing with all their needs often left her feeling exhausted, out of sorts, and weary to the bone. But she couldn’t imagine giving up her job. She loved Sweet Something, the cozy tea and gift shop she and her younger sister Allison had opened three years ago in Princeton, NJ. The shop was more

than a moneymaking endeavor, it gave her a place to shine and use her baking and artistic talents.

“Mom?” Evan called from the backseat.

“What?”

“I think I’ve got a problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“I forgot my science stuff at school.”

“Well, you’ll just have to call a friend and get the information from them.”

“I can’t. I need my papers tonight. The project’s due tomorrow.”

Tessa gripped the steering wheel. “Honestly, Evan, what do you expect me to do now? Turn around and drive all the way back?” Cornerstone Christian Academy was twenty minutes from their house on a good day with no extra traffic, and this was definitely not a good day!

“But, Mom, I really need those papers.”

“I’ll have to get them tonight when I go back to your school.”

“Okay, but that means we’ll have to stay up really late.”

Tessa wearily massaged her forehead. Getting to bed before eleven wasn’t happening tonight.

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Tessa heard the front door open. She glanced at the clock and then continued stirring the simmering spaghetti sauce.

“Dad!” Evan thundered through the living room. That set off Chaucer, their golden retriever. His excited barking added to the confusion.

“Hey, sport. How are you doing?”

From the sound of things, Tessa knew Matt was wrapping their son in a bear hug and squeezing him tight. For just a moment she wished that hug were for her. The sauce bubbled and splattered. She frowned and wiped the red spot off the stovetop.

“I’m okay,” Evan said. “Except I’m probably getting a D in Science.”

“Why? You love science.”

“Mom won’t take me back to school to get my stuff, and my project’s due tomorrow.”

“I see. Well, maybe we can work something out. Come on, let’s see what’s cooking.” Matt’s briefcase thumped to the floor, and he walked into the kitchen. Lifting the lid of the largest pot, he sniffed and smiled at her. “Mmm, smells good.”

It was just plain pasta again. Tessa wiped her hands on a dishtowel, ignoring his comment.

He replaced the lid and studied her for a moment, his gray eyes soft and welcoming.

“Did anyone get the mail?” Brie trotted into the kitchen, her dark brown ponytail swinging.

“I didn’t have time.” Tessa turned away from Matt’s gaze and walked over to the refrigerator. Matt followed her and slipped his arms around her waist. She stiffened.

“What’s wrong?” He rubbed his rough chin against her cheek. “Have you had a tough day?”

How about a tough three years? Tessa pressed her lips tighter. She would not say it in front of the children.

When she didn't soften or return his hug, he sighed, dropped his arms, and walked out of the kitchen.

Tessa shook off the wave of guilt. What did he expect? She had run around like a mad woman all afternoon taking care of everything their family needed, and now he was looking for a little romance in the kitchen. No thanks!

She had to get dinner on the table, and then get them back out the door by six thirty. She jerked open the refrigerator and snatched the salad and Italian dressing from the top shelf.

"How long 'til dinner, Mom?" Evan picked up his basketball from the corner by the garage door.

"Five minutes. There's no time for basketball right now."

"Aw, Mom, please?"

"Evan, stop. Dad and I have to leave in a few minutes." Tessa deposited the salad on the table with a thump. "How about helping?"

He mumbled something under his breath and shuffled across the kitchen. "How many people?"

"Just four. Justin has a late class at the college."

Scowling, he rummaged around in the silverware drawer.

Why did she always come out looking like the bad guy? Evan adored his dad and gladly followed any instruction he gave. But when she asked for a little help, he considered it torture.

Brie returned with a stack of mail and tossed it on the counter. "Why don't I ever get any mail?"

Tessa lifted her brows. “You have to send a letter to get one back.” She picked up the pile and sorted through the bills and junk mail.

A thick, white envelope caught her attention. She lifted it from the pile and studied the return address. Why would a lawyer in Oregon be writing to Matt? A chill raced down her back. Was this another legal problem from Matt’s business failure? She’d warned him not to take on Patrick Stokes as a partner, but he hadn’t listened. They’d ended up losing their home and been forced to move into this small condo. All the money from the sale of their house and their savings had been used to repay the disgruntled investors and prevent any lawsuits. What more did those people want?

Tessa’s hand trembled as she recalled the terrible storm that had blown into their lives three years ago, nearly shipwrecking their marriage.

Matt walked back into the kitchen. He slowed when their gazes connected. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me?” She tossed the envelope on the counter.

A perplexed frown settled over his face. “What is it?”

“A very heavy letter from a lawyer in Oregon.” She bit out each syllable and sent them flying at her husband like poison tipped arrows.

Matt ripped open the envelope and pulled out the thick sheets of stationery. His eyes darted over the words as Evan and Brie gathered around.

“What is it, Dad?” Evan asked. “Are you in trouble?”

“No, I’m sure it’s not . . .” Matt’s sank onto the stool. “I don’t believe it.”

Tessa gripped the counter, bracing herself for the terrible news.

Matt burst out laughing. “This is incredible! Unbelievable!”

“Dad! What does it say?” Brie leaned over his shoulder.

“It’s the answer to our prayers. I knew the Lord would come through. I just didn’t expect Him to work things out like this.” He scanned the page then looked up at Tessa.

“Remember my uncle Don in Oregon?”

“The one who died last January?”

“Yes. I haven’t seen him since our family moved out here when I was a teenager.”

“What about him?” Tessa wanted to grab Matt and shake him. Why couldn’t he hurry up and explain?

Matt smiled and waved the letter in the air. “It seems I’m in line to inherit my uncle’s property on Lost Lake.”

Tessa stared at him in stunned surprise.

“Where’s that?” Brie asked.

“In the Cascade Mountains in Oregon.”

“Wow, that sounds cool.” Evan added. “A house on a lake!”

“Not just a house,” Matt continued. “It’s twelve acres of virgin forest with a large lodge and seven guest cabins.”

Brie settled on the stool next to her dad. “So it’s like a camping place or . . . a motel?”

“Well, I haven’t been back there in years, but I’d say it’s sort of a mountain resort. Uncle Don lived in the lodge and rented out the cabins to vacationers. It’s a great place for fishing and hiking in the summer, and in the winter there’s skiing nearby.”

“Why would he leave it to you?” Tessa asked.

Matt glanced at the letter again. “He originally left it to his son, Charles, but he passed away before his dad, and the will was never changed. I’m the next closest relative.”

Excitement tingled through Tessa. “That property must be worth a lot of money. How many acres did you say?”

“Twelve. And it’s beautiful. Tall fir trees, cedar, vine maple.” Matt sprung from the stool. “Where’s the atlas? Let’s take a look at the map of Oregon.”

“I’ll get it.” Evan ran from the kitchen.

Tessa hugged herself. “This is wonderful! I’m sure it will be enough.”

Matt turned to her, confusion in his eyes. “Enough?”

“Yes! We can buy a house and another car. And we can pay for Justin’s college expenses and Brie’s orthodontic bills.” The thought of lifting the burden of debt off their shoulders made Tessa feel almost dizzy with joy.

Matt frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Selling it, of course!”

“Tessa, you don’t understand. This is like a miracle. I’ve been praying for a way to get out of this dead-end job and change careers.”

“What?” Heat flooded her face and her mind spun. “Matt, how could you possibly manage a resort in Oregon when we live here in New Jersey?”

“We’d have to move there.” Matt rubbed his hands together, the excitement of a new challenge glowing on his face. “If we lived in the lodge and rented out the cabins, all the money we’d make would be free and clear.” He stepped closer and took both her hands in his. “Just think of it, this is our chance to start over, fresh.”

She pulled her hands away. “Start over?” Panic nearly choked off her voice.

“Yes, it would be a great opportunity for all of us.”

“How can you even think of moving? Our family is here. Our life is here.” Tessa shook her head. “No! We’ve got to sell the property and use that money to get back on our feet financially.”

Matt pulled in a deep breath and pressed his lips together. “Tessa, we can’t throw away a great opportunity like this.”

Fury built inside Tessa like a volcano about to erupt. “How could you even consider dragging us all the way across the country for another one of your harebrained business schemes?” Once she opened the vent on her anger she couldn’t stop the flow. “You’ve been praying! Well, I’ve been praying too. We’re barely scraping by on less than half the money we made before. And now, you have the perfect opportunity to pay off all our debts and start rebuilding our lives, and you want to toss it all away on some silly childhood memory!”

“Tessa, come on.” Matt’s voice remained controlled, but she could see the color rising in his face and a muscle twitching on his jaw. “Look, I know this is a surprise, but I think—”

“Surprise! Oh no. What surprises me, is that you care so little about what I want or what’s best for this family!”

Anger and hurt flashed across Matt’s face. He spun away and strode out of the kitchen.

Her bitter words had hit their mark. Brie and Evan stared at her in frightened silence.

Guilt poured over her like hot wax dripping from a candle. It burned and coated her heart like a heavy weight. She tightened her fists and turned back toward the stove.

Why should she feel guilty? Everything she said was true. This proved he didn't love her or the children. All he cared about was running after some foolish dream. Well she wouldn't stand by and let it happen again. She had put up with more than enough from Matt Malone!