

## One

*Wednesday, August 12, Mombasa, Kenya*

“International call from the United States of America. Please wait.” Julie Bolling sat in the rocking chair blinking away the haze of sleepiness. She squinted at the clock on the mantle. A quarter till two, so it was almost six p.m., yesterday, back home. Their friends and extended family called first thing in the morning stateside, so they got most phone calls in the late afternoon or early evening. This felt wrong. Something was up. “Go ahead, please,” the operator said with a click.

“Mark? This is David Shannon.”

Julie immediately got a knot in her stomach. One of Mark’s closest friends, David pastored one of their supporting churches in St. Louis. Had something happened with Mark’s dad there in St. Louis?

“This is Julie. Mark and Peter were in Mapenya all day. I don’t expect them back until tomorrow, or today, I mean. What’s wrong?”

“One of our church members works at the courthouse, and she called me as soon as she got off work. In fact, I just got off the phone with her—”

“David, what’s wrong?” Julie demanded.

She heard him take a deep breath. “Mark’s father has filed a lawsuit to get protective custody of your children. Doug Bolling is suing you for your kids.”

The bewildered nausea of betrayal seized her. Doug . . . was suing . . . how could he do something so despicable? They had endured sixteen years of bitter conflict over Mark’s faith, over his call to preach, over his decision to go to seminary and his surrender to the mission field. Doug’s decision to live with a

woman caused Mark to sever their relationship and Doug hadn't seen the kids since they'd been in Kenya.

But all that was supposed to be over. They were coming home. Mark was giving up the mission work. Just two months ago, he admitted to her that God never called him to Kenya. He chased it, trying to win approval, or validation or respect. He was working to get all the ministries on solid footing so he could leave. Surely Doug knew that. And if he did, what would prompt him to sue?

She pushed aside the swirl of questions in her mind long enough to ask, "On what grounds?"

"I don't know. I've left messages with a couple of lawyers. I'll get one of them to call you as soon as I can."

Lawyers? Like in court? They were going to court? Is that where this is headed? She gripped the arm of the rocking chair. It felt firm, real. If it were a dream, she wouldn't be able to feel the chair or smell the light, lingering scent of spaghetti from last night's dinner still hanging in the house . . . but it couldn't be real either.

It was another moment before she realized David was still talking.

"We'll try to handle as much as we can here for you, and I'll call back tomorrow. God help you, Julie. I don't know what else to say."

"Me either. I'm sure Mark . . . he'll call you. Thanks David." Julie eased the phone onto its cradle and hung her head, coaching herself to breathe.

Mistake. This had to be a mistake. Maybe there was another Doug Bolling and it was just a mix-up. She hugged herself and leaned back in the chair, afraid she might faint and pitch forward out of the chair.

“Dear God in heaven, I don’t know where to start . . . I can’t . . .” Tears choked off her words. Doug loved the kids. She believed that. How could he subject them to the trauma of a lawsuit? He couldn’t. He wouldn’t. She closed her eyes and wished Mark was home.

When she felt the gentle touch on her arm, she snapped upright in the chair. “Mark?”

“I’m sorry.” Her oldest son, Matt, withdrew his hand. “I heard the phone. Is everything all right?”

Julie swallowed hard and smoothed her hair, trying to appear in casual control. “Yes . . . yes, fine.”

The fourteen-year-old dropped his eyes and nodded. He wasn’t buying it. “Matt, please try to understand. I need to discuss it with your dad first. No one is sick and nobody has died or anything like that, but something really serious has happened back home. Let us get the details first, okay?”

“Sure,” Matt shrugged.

“Thanks.” She squeezed his hand, and tried to smile, hoping it didn’t look like a smirk.

“You want me to sit up with you?”

“No, you go on back to bed. You need your sleep.”

“Like you don’t.” Matt kissed his mother lightly on the cheek, and slipped back down the hall.

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Matt stole a glance at his mother before he shuffled into the bedroom he shared with his younger brother, Ben. “What’d she say?” Ben whispered hoarsely.

“Nothing. She wants to talk to Dad first.”

“I bet it’s Grandpa.”

Matt shook his head. “Mom said nobody died or was sick or anything. Besides, Dad always calls him.”

“But I gotta gut feeling.”

Matt dropped on his bed and huffed, “You may as well go to sleep. We’re not gonna find out anything till she talks to Dad.”

“Like you can sleep,” Ben muttered.

“What else can we do?” Any other night, the volume and frustration in Matt’s voice would have been enough to get a parental warning.

“Email Grant Shannon. See if he knows anything.”

“I can’t get to the computer without Mom seeing me. They’ll tell us soon enough.”

“Doesn’t it bug you?”

“Yeah, but I can’t do anything about it.”

“Sometimes I hate being a kid,” Ben grumbled.

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Even after seven years, Mark marveled at how dark the night was. Far away from any towns, the blackness swallowed the beams from the headlights mere yards in front of them. Peter Bakari drove faster than Mark would have, but he trusted Peter’s driving and his knowledge of the road. If it had been daylight, Mark would’ve settled back and slept the rest of the way home, but he felt obligated to keep Peter company.

Sometime soon, he needed to sit down with Peter and explain that they were going to head back to the United States. In spite of the success he seemed

to have, the truth was, this wasn't where God wanted him. It was where he wanted to be, where he thought he could make a name for himself. He dreaded that conversation, that admission. Maybe that's why he couldn't let go of the ministry in Mapenya.

"You are deep in thought, Pastor Mark," Peter said. Even in the dim light from the dashboard, Mark could see Peter's smile.

"Honestly, I was trying to stay awake."

"Sleep if you are tired. We have hours yet."

"Aren't you tired?"

"I will rest when I am old."

"I doubt you will."

"There is much work to be done. I sometimes wonder if God has chosen the right man."

The openings didn't come any bigger than that one, but he balked.

"Peter, about that . . . I think God is calling me back to the States." That was a lie, and he knew it.

"Then you must obey God's call. He has other plans here."

Mark felt heat rise from his shoulders to his ears, and a throbbing pain thumped at his temples. "God never called me to Kenya. I made it up. He's not calling me home, I just can't carry on the act any longer."

Peter nodded slowly. "God redeemed your work here. He has done mighty things."

"I think God was blessing your work, not mine."

"It is His work."

"I've learned a lot from you, Peter."

“And I from you.” Peter was silent for several moments, but then he glanced toward Mark. “It takes great courage to do what you are doing.”

“Tucking my tail and running?”

“You are facing your true self. Few men will dare to do that.”

“It isn’t pleasant. I can tell you that much.”

“It never is. But when men face their true selves at last, that is when they see God.”

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Soft morning light filtered into the kitchen as Julie emptied the remains of the tea kettle into her cup. In four hours it seemed she’d worn a groove between the kitchen and the front window. Surely Mark would be home soon. A few times, she was tempted to take their SUV and head north, to look for Peter’s Jeep, but she couldn’t leave Matt, Ben and Jane.

With nearly every pass through the living room, she tried to pray, but her prayers always collapsed into bitter mental tirades against Doug Bolling. How could he betray them and attack them this way when he got what he’d wanted for years? Mark was moving back to St. Louis. Was this punishment? Was he trying to prove something or teach Mark a lesson? Was the woman he lived with behind this? Had she somehow pushed him into it?

It made no sense. At the end of April, Mark arranged for Matt, Ben and Jane to spend a week with his dad. A week! Doug even called and talked to the kids to make preliminary plans. Then before May was over, Mark decided they needed to leave Kenya and began working to wrap things up. Why couldn’t Doug hold on a few more months?

Julie heard Peter's Jeep crunch to a stop outside. She so hoped things had gone well. She didn't want to deliver her news on top of a disappointment. She waited by the front door, and in the quiet, she could hear Mark, boisterous and exuberant, talking to Peter. She took a deep breath and put on her best smile. He deserved a few moments to savor his victory.

"It was incredible!" Mark beamed, letting the screen door slam too loudly behind him and Peter. "The chief, the one Mbogo knows, he listened, and then he asked how to become a believer! The chief! Then he got everybody outta bed! The whole tribe!"

"Mark, that's wonderful!" She hugged him tightly, and swallowed hard. *God, why now? It will just suck the life out of him when I tell him.*

"Pastor Mark, God is good," Peter said. "I want to tell Helene. She was praying." He took a step toward the door. "Miss Julie, peace and mercy. Good morning to you."

"Thank you, Peter." He couldn't know how much she and Mark would need that peace and mercy. "Give Helene and the kids my love."

"We'll get together in the next day or two and talk about getting regular teaching out there to the chief," Mark said with a wave. Peter nodded, smiled broadly and slipped out the door. "Julie, it was the most amazing thing I've ever been a part of. There were, I don't know, fifteen, eighteen people that believed in Jesus, that want to be baptized."

"Mark, I knew you'd get through to them."

"It was God. Plus Peter's a great translator. He's got a great heart." Mark sighed and dropped into one of the living room chairs. "I'm exhausted, but I'm not. Does that make sense?" Julie nodded. "Man, there's so much to do now.

Wonder if Peter's son is ready to teach? This would be a great opportunity for him."

"But you're winding things down, right? We're heading home, aren't we?"

"Yeah, just as soon as I can see some closure."

In that pause, she delivered the blow. "David Shannon called." She watched the joy in Mark's eyes dissolve and she tried hard not to hate Doug Bolling.

"It's my dad, isn't it?" There was an odd resignation in Mark's voice, an expectation almost. Julie nodded. "Is he okay? What happened?"

"He's filed a lawsuit. Mark, he wants our kids."