

G R A C E  
I N T H E  
SHADOWS

KARON RUIZ

*Heaven Help Us Publishing*

**GRACE IN THE SHADOWS**

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Cover Design by Jake Grotelueschen  
Editing by Carrie Padgett  
Author Photo by Bethany Paige  
Formatting by Karon Ruiz  
[www.karonruiz.com](http://www.karonruiz.com)

Kindle Book Edition created December, 2017

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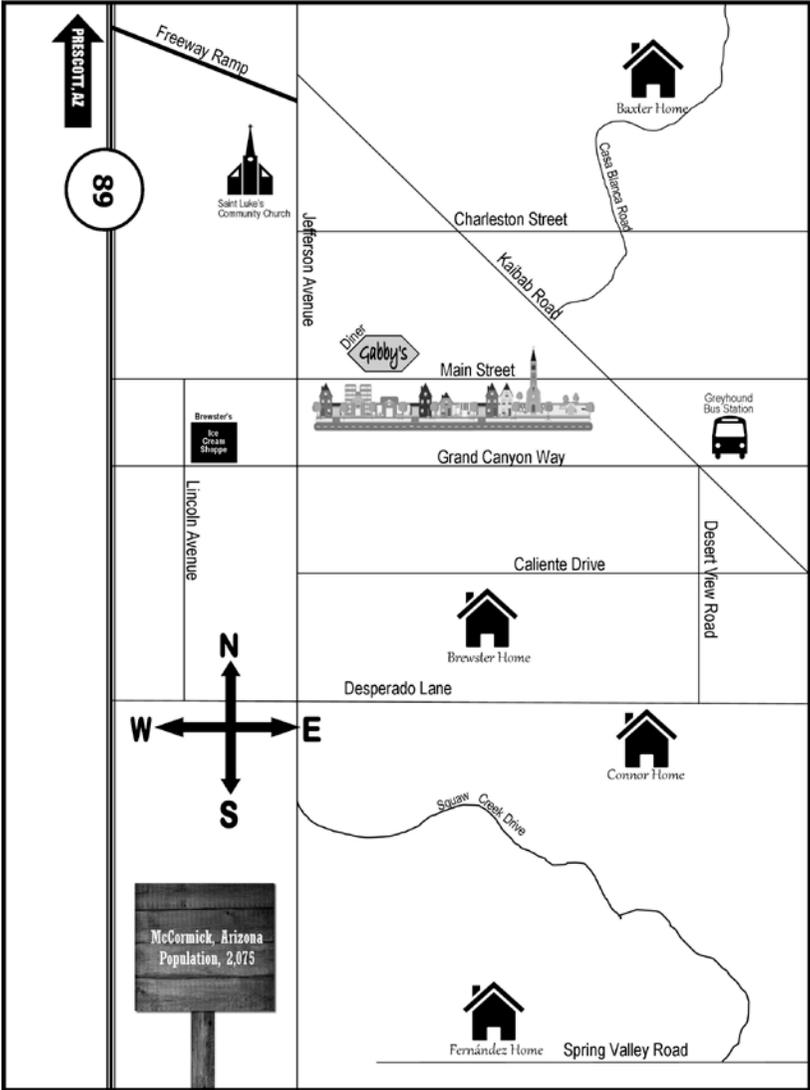
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Karon Ruiz

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: January 2018  
Heaven Help Us Publishing  
ISBN-13: 978-0692892978  
ISBN-10: 0692892974

# Map Of McCormick, Arizona



Until we emerge from the shadows of self performance, we will never understand the light of scandalous grace.

Jesus invites us all ...

*“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” Matthew 11:28-30*

The Message Bible

## CHAPTER ONE

### Willing Captive

**THE WHITE LINE OF POWDER** sang its siren song and Dalton Baxter surrendered. He closed his eyes, anticipating the heady rush, the surge of confidence, the elation. He licked his lips and picked up his straw. Crimson light passed through a high window staining his trembling hands. He steadied his fingers and sucked the crushed Oxy through his nose. The gritty particles warmed his sinuses, a welcome contrast to the ice crystals he'd inhaled that horrible day on Agassiz Mountain.

He leaned back in his chair, waiting for the expected relief to arrive, welcome as a warm quilt on a snowy day. Not that McCormick, in Arizona's high desert, saw much snow. He spun his chair around to look out the window at the dusty parking lot. Make that welcome as walking into an air-conditioned room on an August afternoon.

His brow furrowed. He really had to do something about the repairs on the cooling unit. And he would. Soon.

He turned back to his desk. A Power Point presentation glowered from his monitor creating colored patterns across the smooth cherry-wood top. He watched the reflections and counted the seconds until the tension in his neck and shoulders eased.

Finally.

Euphoria clutched him in its usual grip and surreal contentment quieted an inner ache. Moments ticked by. The drugs performed their miracle. He sat up and straightened his shoulders.

Dalton wiped powder residue from his desk, licked stray specks from his fingers, placed his grinder and pliers inside a metal lock box. He grabbed the prescription bottle, counted six pills remaining, then refastened the lid.

He scowled and rubbed his temples. He needed more.

This afternoon.

The job interview was only four days away. He couldn't pull off such a critical meeting without his meds. Why had he waited so long to replenish his supply? What was he thinking?

The door rattled. "Dalton?" His wife, Sammy, stood outside. She sounded puzzled.

"Just a—a minute." He drew a deep breath as he stood. The familiar pain, deep below his kneecap, barely registered. He

grabbed a worn Bible near his printer and spread it open, then plopped it over the box.

He unlocked the door and wedged his face through. Sammy took a step back. She wasn't smiling.

"Sorry ..." He softened his voice. "I'm not finished."

"It's nearly eight-thirty." Her voiced clipped. "You asked me to remind you."

"Already?" He gave her a pleading look. "Can you cover for me?"

Sammy hesitated as if she wanted to say something. Instead she turned and walked away, the angry staccato of her heels keeping time with her trim hips as they swished under a swirly blue dress.

Dalton closed the door and collapsed into his swivel chair, then turned over the Bible. Yellow highlighted words jumped off the onion skin.

*I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me ...*

The verse kindled so many memories. Mom had a Scripture reference for everything from a skinned knee to a so-called friend's treachery to Father's temper.

*When I was in distress, I sought the Lord...*

He refused to read anymore but her voice wound through his thoughts.

He glanced at her old photo on the credenza. "I'm doing the best I can." He gently closed her favorite book and traced the name imprinted in the black leather cover.

## **Sarah Grace Baxter**

Oh, how he missed her.

He slid the Bible to the end of his desk, then jammed the metal box behind some files in his cabinet. He slammed the drawer shut, knocking over a cane in the corner. When he picked it up, the burnished maple glistened in his hands. Keeping it close reminded him of how far he'd come since the accident. If he could just get off the meds—he leaned the cane against the wall—everything would go back to normal.

Dalton returned to the Power Point slide on the monitor. At last, his elusive focus arrived.

He'd have to hurry.

An expectant congregation would arrive soon and lately his preaching seemed to model his life. Scattered. Inspid. Uninspiring.

That would change today.

"The fifty bucks I shelled out for this online sermon better work," he muttered. This Sunday's message must be a game-changer. His future depended on it.

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*Sunday, 8:25 a.m.*

*Saint Luke's Community Church*

*McCormick, Arizona*

Outside the building, Samantha Baxter rested against hundred year-old clapboard, staring at a mostly empty parking lot. A handful of cars populated the gravel, probably belonging to Sunday school teachers. A hot breeze teased her face, providing miniscule relief from the morning humidity. Not fooled by the cloudless blue sky, she knew a storm brewed behind the horizon. In the high desert, things were not often what they seemed. She'd grown up in Arizona and could sense a monsoon well in advance.

She wiped her brow, dragged in a deep breath, and tried to steady her emotions.

The temperamental weather was the least of her worries. Something was going on with Dalton. His mysterious trips out of town. The frequent withdrawals from their savings account. His lack-luster performance in the pulpit lately. They all spelled trouble. She fingered a strip of paint threatening to peel away from the clapboard.

Was there another woman?

He always seemed to have an excuse. "Got to get that water cooler in the annex fixed," he told her when she asked about a five-hundred dollar withdrawal. "Don't worry. As soon as the council approves it, I'll get reimbursed." She had yet to see either their bank balance head north or a noticeable improvement in the fountain's flow. It still dribbled like a third-world shower.

She'd been a little concerned when he'd abandoned the old hymns for contemporary music. "We need to modernize," he explained. "We're losing people. An upbeat worship service should help." That had been the most recent change of many over the last few years. He'd dropped his clerical garb three years ago.

She'd always respected a man who was not embarrassed to be seen as clergy. Dalton wore his collar for years and when stopped on the street by the down and out, he always took time to listen to weary souls looking for help. The collar was his calling card. Now it was stuffed behind his underwear at home. He might be purchasing high end shirts in Phoenix, but the fancy clothes didn't seem to make a difference.

Congregants were still leaving Saint Luke's. Perhaps because Dalton had changed? In ways besides leaving his collar in the drawer? Indifference seemed his Sunday morning MO these last few months. This was the fourth Sunday in a row he'd left her alone to greet arrivals. She could have tolerated that if it hadn't been for the locked door. Being barred from their shared office was the tipping point.

Before another sun set over her small town of McCormick, she'd learn his secrets.

Even if they broke her heart.

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Precious minutes ticked by. Dalton's anxiety climbed. He'd perused another slide of *Why Tithing Will Change Your Life*, and pushed away from his desk with a frustrated jab. The whole thing had been a big waste of money—money he could have used right now. If it wasn't inspiring him, how would it loosen the wallets of the pew sitters?

He drummed his fingers and scanned the books on his desk, desperate for a fresh idea. Sammy's photo on the desk caught his attention. He'd taken it a few years ago when the whole family had gone to the Grand Canyon. She looked beautiful, straddling an old mule as they descended the gorge. Gordy and Grace had laughed uproariously at the tour guide's jokes about his "stubborn ass."

Those were happier days ... before his accident.

If looks really *could* kill, today hers would have done him in. The scowl on her face this morning reminded him of her testy question a few weeks ago. "Why are you constantly leaving town?" she snapped at him one morning in their kitchen.

"A minister's job is demanding, honey. You know that."

Her eyes filled with hurt. "So demanding that you disappear for hours at a time without telling me?"

He made up some story but wasn't sure she believed him. Remorse at his lies filled him, but he didn't have a choice, not if he

wanted any peace. Not if they were ever going to get out of this hick town and back to the big time. Besides, Sammy had a high pain threshold and he didn't. She wouldn't understand why he still needed his medicine. No one did. Especially his doctor.

He picked up the prescription bottle. His name was faded; the 'r' in Baxter almost gone. Yet the words, OxyContin 40mg, still distinct. Near the bottom, large bold letters seemed to shout:

**NO REFILLS AFTER MARCH 1**

March had come and gone as had Dr. Donaldson's refills.

"Your knee is mended, Dalton," his orthopedic surgeon told him. "Should you have some minor discomfort, take Tylenol. And Dalton ... my advice to you ... no more back country skiing trips."

He couldn't recall much more of the doctor's yammering that morning. Only that his pleas for more drugs were refused. So he'd found someone to give him pills, not lectures.

He tossed the prescription container in a bottom drawer behind some office supplies. Once he got out of this dreary town, he'd learn to cope without them. Then he'd give Sammy the life she always deserved.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Suspicious*

8:45 a.m.

SAMANTHA FACED THE NAVE, gripping the back of a heavily lacquered pew. She stared at Dalton's closed door. Because of his skiing accident last Christmas, she'd excused his mood swings and erratic behavior. But no more. The lump crowding her throat affirmed that something much greater than a torn-up knee possessed her husband.

But what? Or worse, who?

The view of the cavernous old church usually comforted her. Its mahogany vaulted ceiling felt like a protective shelter on most mornings. But today it, along with the creamy glows from natural lighting, failed to assuage. Shudders and hollow sounds from the creaking building magnified an inner ache.

She stared longingly at the large stained glass window above the baptismal. Jesus carried a baby lamb over His shoulders.

"Help me," she prayed.

She bit her lip and steeled her emotions, dabbing the corners of her eyes with a tissue from her pocket.

Get it together, Samantha. God's people are coming.

She headed toward the ladies' room, the old planks groaning with each step. Inside, she stared at her face in a walled mirror behind a bank of sinks. She frowned at her reflection, then wiped away a smudge of mascara. She reapplied lipstick, stared for a minute at the stranger in the mirror, then left the bathroom. A musty scent drifted by as Samantha stood in the vestibule. The familiar odor from generations of oiled wood and aging fabric failed to compose her mood.

*Is Dalton in trouble, Lord?*

Her hands trembled. She caught her breath.

*Is he cheating?*

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Dalton grumbled at the Power Point. He tapped his fingers. Despite the rush and excitement of the past few minutes, irritation resumed when he clicked through several slides.

Whatever made him buy that? It was boring at best.

The benefits of tithing and why it would change your life seemed uninspiring and definitely overdone. He needed something fresh to grab their attention. Persuading congregants to give a little extra had always been easy but today ... today he couldn't take any chances.

He rocked back and forth in his swivel chair, staring at the monitor until the images blurred and his breathing evened. When his chin touched his chest, he shook himself awake, then sipped ice water.

Anxiety surged to his throat when he heard the sound of a kick drum. The worship team was here. His precious thirty minutes had been shaved to fifteen.

Bold lettering from a book on his bookshelf caught his eye. *Happy Life Is Possible*. Written by a mega-pastor from Alabama. Dalton pulled it down and studied the glossy photo on the back cover. Joshua Johnson, trim-fitted in black Calvin Klein, leaned against a desk holding a pen like an unlit cigarette. His wide toothy grin reminded Dalton of the used car salesman who'd sold him his BMW two years ago. He sniffed the crisp, clean pages. If only he could deliver motivating messages like this man.

He skimmed the first chapter. Hmm. He tapped his lips. It could work. If he did this right, even the clock-watchers would sit up and take notice. A dynamic sermon meant more money in the collection plates. More money in the plates meant more available for borrowing. Enough for a couple of months of medication would be all that he would need for a new start in Phoenix. Then he could get off the pills and redirect his journey. The Associate Pastor position at New Generations Church might be the bottom rung, but at least he'd be climbing, earning a more reasonable wage.

The only thing he'd need for the new position would be his passion. He'd lost it. The unrelenting fervor that had once driven him to preach had gotten buried deep within himself like his body entombed by last winter's avalanche. He'd dug himself out of death then, beating all the odds. Surely, he could reclaim his zeal. If not, why even be a pastor?

*What if my calling's gone?* A chill prickled his skin and he rubbed his arms. He glanced up at the ceiling tiles. *Have You taken it, Lord?*

He didn't wait for an answer, but pushed the thought away. Once he got settled in Phoenix, things would be different.

“Someday, I’ll be someone,” he whispered to the open book. He quickly jotted down major points from the first few paragraphs and hit the print button while confidence swirled. He straightened his shoulders and smiled. This would work.

He retrieved a small yellow notepad from his desk and flipped to the back where he kept a running total of the money he’d borrowed. He recorded today’s date and drew a black line. He’d fill in the amount once the offering was counted.

A noise from the roof sounded and Dalton cringed. One of the aging swamp coolers groaned under the climbing temperatures, reminding him the utility bill was past due. He had until midnight tomorrow to pay it or else the power would be shut off. He’d loan himself the bare minimum this time. Parishioners shouldn’t have to suffer in the pews during a heat wave. Not if he could help it.

If only they’d come through with an extra large offering, his troubles would be over.

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The mammoth front doors split open with a loud clunk. Hot air assaulted Samantha’s face. She put on the best pastor’s-wife-expression she could manage along with a welcoming smile. Helen and Emmet Crawford, looped at the elbows, stood in the entrance of Saint Luke’s Community Church.

“Good morning.” Samantha offered a cheerful tone, looking at the old man.

Deep furrows bracketed his mouth, his eyes arched, conveying concern. “We’d like to speak with the pastor. Where is he?”

“He’s been delayed. Is there something I can help you with?”

“It’s that boy your husband sent to help with yard work ... Tyler ... uh ... what’s his last name, Mother?”

“Benson,” Helen answered.

“Some of my tools are gone,” the old man continued.

Helen leaned closed and lowered her voice to a whisper. “I told Emmet that we should talk to the pastor about this. He wants to call the police.”

“And I will if we can’t handle this here,” Mr. Crawford said.

Samantha breathed deep. Amanda Benson was also the council treasurer. She’d be horrified when she found out her teenage son had been stealing. “Are you sure it was Tyler?” she asked.

Emmet's brow knitted and his mouth formed a frown. "Some things went missin' a week ago. After he left yesterday, my weed eater wasn't there."

Samantha nodded. "We can meet with Pastor Dalton after the service if you're able to stay." She'd have to put off her demands for answers, but this was important.

The couple agreed and walked with purpose toward their favorite pew.

Another thing to deal with. Since Dalton's accident and therapy she carried so much of the load around here. He'd better help with this.

Each time the doors opened, attendees hurried by, offering hasty hellos before rushing to the coolness of the nave. A few of the regulars stopped to shake her hand.

Hunched with her cane, the Widow Snyder asked, "How are you dear?" Her smiling grey eyes matched her hair.

"I'm fine, Winnie. I didn't expect to see you this morning. Are you feeling better?"

"That flu bug passed, thanks to your husband's prayer."

"Pastor Dalton went to see you?" Samantha choked on the words as she gripped the woman's hand.

"He stopped by yesterday." Winnie's eyes sparkled. "He even changed a couple of my light bulbs and loaded my water bottle for me. He's a true shepherd."

Samantha's brow furrowed as she watched Winnie walk toward a pew in the sanctuary. Dalton helped with household chores for old ladies, yet hid from her in his office? He visited shut-ins, yet took unexplained trips out of town, always vague about where he went? The man she loved for almost two decades cared for others, yet the stranger she lived with seemed sneaky and aloof. What was going on?

Whatever it was, the mystery must be solved. She nodded. She couldn't go around accusing Dalton of something nefarious if this was all a big misunderstanding on her part.

A few minutes ticked by as people passed, scurrying to their seats. Samantha turned to go inside when she heard a familiar voice. "Sammy, Dahling ... how are you?"

She pivoted to see Deidra Storm enter the vestibule, doors clanging shut behind her. Deidra opened her arms for a hug. A Louis Vuitton handbag dangled at her side.

“Good morning, Deidra.” Samantha returned the embrace while pungent perfume drifted around her nose. “I’m good ... and you?”

“Mah ...velous ... Dahling ... simply mah ... velous.” Deidra’s thin smile stretched between plastic cheeks. She inspected Samantha as if she was an over-ripe melon. A silky black shirt, its top two buttons undone, clung to her like fresh paint.

“Drake and I must have you and Dalton over for dinner soon. Now promise me, hon. I won’t take no for an answer.” Before Samantha could speak, Deidra swiveled and forged toward the front, leopard-print pants hugging her hips.

Close to nine o’clock, the trickle of congregants stopped. That was her cue. She examined the cavernous sanctuary. Half empty today. The heat? Yes, it must be the heat. It had to be.

She started toward her usual seat but the doors parted again. Filling the threshold with her buxom self, Laney Fernández puffed heavy breaths. Their eyes joined, and a wide grin drew across Laney’s face, lighting the anteroom with infectious joy

“Goodness me. Thought I was late.” The older woman gasped. “I ran all the way from the Sunday school room.” She reached for Samantha’s hand.

“Martin’s holding a seat for you.” Samantha pointed to the other seniors near the platform.

Laney glanced over, then back at her. “I’ll stay for worship, but they need an extra hand in the kid’s room.”

“Really? Is Gordy there? I told him to wait with Grace until the teachers arrived.”

“He left when Bev showed up. She’s alone today so I told her I’d come back. I don’t mind helping.”

“Thank you, Laney. Grace loves your Bible stories.”

“I adore those children. Their starry-eyed questions make me feel young again.” She tossed Samantha an affectionate wink. “Guess I should be getting to my seat.” She took a couple of steps then turned around, examining the empty vestibule. “You’re greeting by yourself again? Is Dalton’s leg bothering him?”

“He’s fine.” Samantha regretted her sour tone and quickly added, “He can be a perfectionist when it comes to his sermon prep.”

“How about I help you next Sunday? That way that man of yours can take his time and not feel pressured to get out here. Hijole ... he’s barely back on his feet.”

Samantha swallowed hard, her eyes welled.

“Oh, mija! Did I say something?”

“No, I’m okay ...” Samantha wiped an escaping tear. “Just stressed. That’s all.”

Laney slanted nearer. “That’s an understatement, dear. You’ve carried much of the work around here for months now. And with Dalton’s knee surgery, things must be piling up.”

“You’re right, Laney.” It seemed easier to go with the older woman’s take on her situation. “And my teen volunteers are still at camp.”

Laney swept a hand to her cheek. “That says it all. You really need help, don’t you? I can come tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? What about your job at the clinic?”

“Got laid off. Have lots of time on my hands.”

“Lost your job? I’m sorry to hear that. Will you and Martin be okay?” Samantha gripped Laney’s elbow.

“We’ll survive. I was planning on retiring in the next couple of years anyway.”

“You worked at the hospital for so long, how can they do that?”

“Budget cuts. At first I was angry but then I realized this might be a good thing. Long hours on my feet were getting to me. God must have something else for me to do. Looks like He’s already leading me.” She smiled broadly.

“I appreciate it. If you get here around nine, there’ll be plenty to do.” Laney had no idea what she’d just volunteered for. Samantha’s to-do list stretched from assembling crafts for the upcoming Vacation Bible School to cleaning out the leftover salad dressings and condiments in the dining hall’s refrigerator to painting the nursery walls. Laney’s assessment that everything had fallen on Samantha’s shoulders since Dalton’s accident was more accurate than she knew.

“I’ll work all day if you let me to take you to lunch at Gabby’s,” Laney said.

“Can’t let you do that. It’ll be my treat.” Samantha said. “Bless you, Laney.”

Laney nearly danced down the center aisle to whatever song her soul heard while musicians awkwardly tuned their instruments on stage. Samantha watched and smiled. Maybe meeting Laney for lunch was a good idea. She sure could use a friend.

Seeing Dalton's empty chair on the platform deposited fresh angst in her chest. It had been weeks since she felt welcome in his life.

She shuddered. "Lord, I need to know the truth," she prayed again. "Even if he's having an ..." She didn't want to pray it, but did. "... an affair."

How could a man who prayed for the sick and offered them assistance be a man who would betray his wife and family? It didn't seem possible.

She fumed. That's what she got for bending over backwards, helping him the past few months?

She dabbed a final tear, sucked in a deep breath, then smoothed her dress. With her head held high, she formed a smile, then joined the sea of familiar faces for another Sunday morning charade.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Dalton's Con*

8:55 a.m.

**THE ROOF'S TWO AGING** coolers rumbled, earning their keep. Sunlight streamed through Dalton's window and baked cars in the gravel lot. Dalton could hear people settling inside, waiting for the service to begin.

He cracked open his office door and scanned the sanctuary. Most of the senior citizens were in their usual spots up front. They were big givers and today he desperately needed a large offering. He ran his eyes around the room, not seeing the one man he actually wanted to meet with today.

The Widow Snyder noticed him and waved. He smiled and pulled back into the shadows, then shut the door. She sure looked a lot better than she did yesterday. Had God really answered his prayer? When he got to his desk, he rifled through some papers until he found it.

The pawn ticket.

Dalton located a red pen then retrieved the notepad from the bottom of his drawer. He wrote in large letters at the top of the page,

### **Redeem kettle**

Winifred Snyder would have given away anything if it meant helping the church with financial needs. Dalton grimaced, remembering her trusting smile as she rested on her sofa. Tinges of guilt penetrated his euphoric mood. Had needing his medicine so desperately really brought him to this?

Dalton walked to a small mirror hanging near a bookcase. His arms and legs tingled while flecks of white powder clung to his nose. He brushed them into his hand and licked his skin clean, then re-wiped his desk a second time.

He tapped his phone and texted Matt Connor.

**MEET @ 1PM 2DAY SAME PLACE**

He stared at the screen, willing Matt to respond that he was in the parking lot and had a ready stash. But the phone remained silent, so he switched it to vibrate and slipped it in his pocket, grabbed his sermon notes, and tucked the book under his arm. He

exited the small office and collided with his favorite chair on the platform.

People had filled the front pews where it was still fairly cool. His eyes connected with Deidra Storm and she winked.

Sheesh. That's all he needed. Drake must be out of town again.

The musicians collected their instruments and lead guitarist, Josiah Appleton, walked over. "Hi, Pastor D." His tanned face and sun-bleached hair made him look like a California surfer.

Dalton shifted to cool. "How ya' doing, Sy?"

"Great. We've got some new music today. Hope you like it." Dalton assured him he would then scoured the congregation. Where were Matt and Carla? Why hadn't Matt returned the text? Their usual pew sat empty. Dalton forced a smile as several parishioners nodded a greeting.

Knots of people chatted in groups, oblivious to their children. Several hopped over pews and ran through the aisles.

Why couldn't these people control their kids? The confidence Dalton felt minutes before waned.

The musicians began an upbeat version of *Crown Him With Many Crowns*. Congregants stopped talking and began singing. Sammy rushed down a side aisle toward her usual spot next to the deacons.

Clustered together, Charlotte Sims, Martin and Laney Fernández, and several other seniors bellowed the hymn with conviction. Emmet Crawford glared.

What was the matter with him?

Dalton's vibrating phone interrupted his thoughts. He fished it from his pocket and tapped the screen.

The text was from Matt.

CAN'T. C @ HOSPITAL

His little girl was sick again? Dalton's heart raced. He gulped in a deep breath, looking at the text. It couldn't be that bad. She'd been to the hospital many times before.

He tapped, SORRY. NEED 2DAY. WILL PAY EXTRA

He adjusted his pious expression and sang loudly with the congregation. Moments stretched to minutes. The earsplitting instruments coupled with the lifeless phone orchestrated a tune of turmoil in his stomach.

Seriously? Did they really need to sing all the verses?

Come on, Matt! Answer the text.

The Oxy failed to quell his aggravation. The initial rush had been amazing, but now ... not so much. Maybe all the stress he was under dampened his usual high.

During the third praise song, his phone shivered.

NO

Rage surged. He stabbed the phone screen without thinking.

WHEN CAN I SPEAK 2 CARLA?

The cell went still for several moments.

Dalton tapped: HELLO?

The cell pulsed. WILL B THERE

Like warm oil, relief coursed through him. He dragged in a deep breath. Informing Carla Connor that her husband had returned to the drug business was the only leverage he had. He grabbed the glass of cold water from under his chair and took a long drink. Maybe it would dilute his growing sense of shame. It didn't. He hadn't counted on Charity returning to the hospital. *Please, God, let her be okay.*

The song ended and Dalton walked to the podium. "Good morning, everyone." A chorus of nodding heads and polite smiles filled the sanctuary.

Armando Cristiano joined him at a nearby mic holding the church bulletin. He ran through the announcements while Dalton tried to control the tremor in his legs. He took deep cleansing breaths. The meds always did this, but after months of taking them, he'd learned how to control their side effects.

Laney Fernández scooted out of her seat and down a side aisle. Where was she going? He hadn't even started yet. Dalton resisted a scowl, watched her disappear into the vestibule.

Armando's monotone rambled to a close, then he returned to his seat. Liz Cronklin, the council secretary, got up and said the opening prayer. The musicians played a soft wordless hymn and after she said "Amen," they followed her off the platform, finding seats in the sanctuary.

Dalton leaned into the podium. His hands framed a stack of papers that covered Joshua Johnson's new book.

"This morning I'm beginning a new series. Many of us forget that fundamental to our faith is that God wants us to be happy. He reminds us about this in Ecclesiastes 7:14."

Several seniors thumbed through their Bibles and his brow furrowed. Were they checking on his biblical accuracy? It wouldn't be the first time. They'd probably needle him about skipping the

remainder of the passage where God appoints unhappy times as well. Thank goodness most of the congregation didn't even bring their Bibles, let alone study them.

"No matter the circumstances, we can find true fulfillment and joy by connecting with something called 'the Inner Secret.' Let me explain what this is. There's a God-planted tool deep inside your soul. Discovering it, using it ... will transform your life.

"The concept is simple. Avoid all negativity. When pessimistic thoughts come, cast them aside. How? Locate your Inner Secret and draw strength from it as if it were a deep well of positive power." He paused and checked the congregation for visible responses. Grandma Johnson fiddled with her hearing aid. Marianne Wilkes shushed her squirming children. Martin Fernández stared with raised eyebrows.

Was he skeptical? He'd always been hard to read.

Were these people even listening?

Desperate for affirmation, he looked at Deidra. She puckered and blew a kiss his way. His eyes darted back to his notes. His hands shook so badly, he knocked the hardback off the podium. It landed below the kneeler's bench. Sammy bounced from her seat and recovered it, then handed it back to him. He mouthed a thank you and she looked pleased. Thank God she hadn't seen Deidra's gesture.

Dalton expounded for twenty minutes teaching the congregation how to avoid negativity by swapping bad thoughts with optimistic ones.

"You make a mental exchange, substituting the unconstructive thought with a positive one," he explained. "It's that simple. Stop doubting. The epistle James tells us that questioning God will hinder what He wants to give us."

Though a few nodded, scripture failed to erase the suspicious looks from the old folks who sat near the front. Talk about pessimism.

He held up the hard back. "This book, *A Happy Life Is Possible*, will help you. In fact, much of what I preached today came from it. You may purchase one after the service in the annex. They should arrive by Wednesday."

A harmless lie. The online purchase he'd made minutes before the service began wouldn't arrive at the church by Wednesday, let alone next Sunday. McCormick was in the sticks and Dalton wasn't about to fork out extra money for priority mail.

“Don’t worry,” he continued, “if we need more, I’ll place a rush order tomorrow.” People hated being left out. They’d be shoving old ladies aside to obtain books from the first batch.

“Keep your eyes on our website.” He retrieved a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed the sweat on his forehead. He jotted down four words on the back side of his notes.

*Apology—UPS — late delivery*

He’d post that on the website Wednesday morning, explaining why the books were late.

Dalton motioned to the clock above the piano. “I’ve gone a little over today. Let’s prepare our hearts for the offering.”

He stepped aside and sat in a chair as Armando’s wife, Ana, stood to lead the prayer. Once she finished, the ushers collected four silver platters from the top of a dusty organ while Dalton returned to the pulpit. This better be good. He had already kept them five minutes late and they hadn’t even sung the closing hymn. Many shifted in their seats as temperatures climbed outside. Within thirty minutes the old swamp coolers would reveal their ineffectiveness and congregants would be eager to return to their air-conditioned homes.

He just had to stick to the plan. He’d acted in this play before, perhaps using a different script, but the results were the same. Today’s plea would be no different.

“As we consider our offering this morning, remember what we discussed earlier. The ‘Inner Secret.’ What I’m about to share could change your life forever.”

Heads leaned forward, eyes wide with expectation.

Dalton forged a look of concern. So much was on the line. He had to convince them what they were about to do would, indeed, change their lives forever.

“We made a commitment to the Yavapai Mission in Prescott this past January but unfortunately our mission fund is depleted.”

Bodies relaxed, telegraphing disinterest with the mention of giving a nickel more than their regular tithe. People crossed their arms while polite smiles straightened into flat lines.

He didn’t blame them. So many were already struggling. The collateral damage from the massive recession had affected many in a small town with little to offer the outside world.

Did he really need to do this? Wasn’t there some other way?

No.

His inheritance money was gone and he had nothing left but a small retirement account. He would have drained that already if it weren't for the IRS's tax penalties. That would have been a huge red flag when Sammy signed next year's return.

Though rising remorse assaulted his thoughts, the congregation's unresponsiveness provoked his pulse to pound. These folks weren't interested in helping a homeless shelter up north. They wanted out of here. Fast.

He schooled his voice to a gentle plea. "Examine your hearts." He let the final word crack a bit. If he couldn't convince them, he'd never have a shot at the new job. "God may be speaking to you about increasing your donations. People at the mission will be put on the street if we're not generous today."

Now the hook. He raised his voice along with the book.

"Think of the positive energy you will bring into your life. Giving will produce a windfall of happiness. I guarantee it. Remember your Inner Secret." He served a generous portion of guilt. "Can we put families on the street during a heat wave?"

Now for the final four words to seal the deal.

"Think about the children."

The men pulled out their wallets and the women opened their purses as the plates were passed. Dalton smiled. Mission accomplished.

"Cash is preferable," he added. "That way the shelter won't have to process checks. I'm heading up there today to meet with the director. Your generosity will be the answer to his prayers."

From her seat on the front row, right on cue, Samantha smiled at Dalton with her supportive-wife-look.

Good thing she was dropping Gordy off at the bus stop after church so she wouldn't ask to go with him. Dalton returned her adoring grin and a wink. Samantha's smile grew.

That was a switch. She'd been so touchy. Maybe his message persuaded her, too.

With the collection over, four ushers took the heaping plates to an area behind the baptistery. If only he could count it himself. It looked like a good haul.

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Warm relief flooded Samantha's heart. How could she have misjudged him? Her husband wanted to help the needy.

This was the Dalton she loved.

Convincing him to talk to the Crawford couple before rushing off to Prescott shouldn't be a problem. He'd straighten things out with his typical charismatic way of bringing calm to anyone's storm.

This was the Dalton she knew.

Though she bowed her head for the closing prayer, she didn't hear a word of it. She'd join Dalton for his trip up north so they could talk. And after the mission meeting, they could go to Boondoggles for dinner. The iconic Prescott steakhouse, her favorite, showcased cowboy charm with its red-checked tablecloths and sawdust covered floors. It was a happy place where they could reconnect. It had been too long.

She mentally organized her afternoon. She'd ask Elaine Ainsworth to watch her little girl for the afternoon. Grace would be going home with Elaine for her daughter Lucy's birthday party right after church. Grace could stay until evening. That way Samantha and Dalton could linger in Prescott, enjoying a long over-due romantic dinner.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Missed Grace*

10:27 a.m.

**DALTON HAD ONE GOAL** in mind. Get those people out of there so he could get on the road. He still needed to print the directions from his Google Earth app. Where he was headed wasn't on any conventional map and time was a commodity he could not waste.

The keyboardist began the final hymn.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.*

He tried to sing but the words stuck in his throat like peanut butter. Hadn't he specifically asked the Worship Team to leave this one off the rotation for a while? Apparently his insistence about not singing the old hymn had been ignored.

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved ...*

His seventh birthday ... A day of red splatters and crimson cheeks. His father had been the culprit of both. A tossed plate of marinara and the pounding of his flesh had fused in his brain. His mother scrubbed and scrubbed but the spaghetti sauce blemish had been impossible to remove. *Amazing Grace* always brought back the memory.

Waiving a mud-caked hammer, his father charged toward him while he quivered in a corner. His mother, tried to intervene, shouting, "Wallace, please. He didn't mean to. You promised to take him fishing, remember? He was looking for worms ..."

"Shut up!" Dad yelled as he slapped her.

She fell against the wall. "It's his birthday ... leave him alone!"

He struck her again. Harder. Dalton heard her jaw crack. She crumpled to the floor like a discarded rag doll.

Pulsing veins threaded his father's neck as he got into Dalton's face, breath reeking with whiskey. "This is an expensive hammer, boy!"

Dalton stared at it, eyes wide, lips trembling. Using its claw to dig holes near the horse stables hadn't been a good idea. Even on what should have been a happy day.

“Why are you so stupid?” his father bellowed as he knotted a fist inches from Dalton’s face.

“No ... please Dad ... no!” Strikes one and two hit each side of his face.

His mother crawled and reached Dalton in time to take the third blow. That seemed to appease the old man’s wrath. Dalton cowered, rubbing his face, whimpering as he watched his father storm out the front door.

He gripped his mother’s hand as she led him to a rocker in his bedroom. Once Dad was gone, he spilled his emotions all over her shoulder. He sobbed for several minutes, sitting on her lap like a little kid. But he didn’t care. He needed her to hold him as if he was three again. When she rocked him, his heartbeat quieted, syncing to the gentle sway of the chair. Twilight streamed through his window, amplifying the growing welt on her face. The bruises encircling her wrists from last week’s beating looked like black bracelets. He felt the tips of her fingers draw tiny hearts on his cheeks as she repeated what she’d often told him. “You’re always in my heart, little man.” She wiped his tears, then lifted his chin and sang *Amazing Grace* as the dusk danced across his bedroom wall.

A sudden awareness of the congregation’s singing yanked him into to the present. Dalton breathed deeply, straightening his back, grateful for the hymn’s last familiar words.

*When we’ve been there ten thousand years  
Bright shining as the sun ...*

He swallowed the lump in his throat, the hymn’s words overpowering his medicine’s ability to help him forget. Too many horrid memories were associated with it. He’d have to remove *Amazing Grace* from the worship team’s repertoire permanently.

The song ended with a crescendo and Dalton walked to his usual place at the end of the nave. Many filed past, shaking his hand, and a few even offered compliments and appreciation. The congregant line dwindled. Deidra Storm brought up the rear. His stomach lurched, watching her approach behind Mable Hatfield.

“Thank you, Pastor, for the wonderful sermon,” Mable said. “I can’t wait to get my book. I don’t have a computer. How can I know when to pick mine up?”

“No problem, Mable. Give the church office a call Wednesday morning. When they come in, we’ll put one aside for you.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful ... bless you.” The elderly woman grinned, revealing a row of silver-capped teeth. She squeezed his hand and exited through the vestibule.

“Paaaaas...tor!” Deidra exclaimed, her loud voice echoing off the high ceiling. She moved close, offering bursting cleavage for his view. Dalton stepped back, nearly tripping over a stack of hymnals.

“Hello, Deidra ... uh ... where’s Drake today?”

“Away on business,” she cooed, then winked. “I’m all by my lonesome if you want to come by.”

Dalton scanned the sanctuary for his wife. Samantha was nowhere in sight. “I’ve got a busy week. I’ll give you a call later,” he lied. That incident at her home a couple of weeks ago had been a big mistake.

“Okay, Pastor.” She wrapped him with spidery arms for what seemed like an eternity, then strutted through a side exit. He hurried down the aisle toward his office, his injured knee objecting at each step.

He entered the tiny room with Carlos Miñoz and Rob Winters close behind. They placed the brimming collection plates on his desk.

“Thanks, guys.” An abundance of cash covered the regular tithing envelopes. People had been listening. Today of all days, paper currency was king.

“Your wife asked me to find you,” Carlos said. “Mr. and Mrs. Crawford want to talk to you.”

Dalton stifled a groan. He asked the men to keep the mission offering separate from the regular tithe and took a step toward the door, then swung around and grabbed his cane. Always good to have his sympathy stick with him when meeting complainers. And the Crawfords were known for grumbling about everything from how hot it was in the sanctuary to the modern worship songs.

When he emerged from his office, his eyes met Sammy’s. She sat near the older couple who were knotted together like two grey socks. Emmet Crawford’s face was written in disappointment.

What could be wrong now? The clock raced. At this rate he would be late for his appointment with Matt.

Dalton ambled through the aisle, leaning on the cane. When he reached Mr. Crawford, he shook the old man's hand. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"It's that boy you sent. He's been stealin' from us."

"Are you sure?"

Mr. Crawford laid out Tyler Benson's offenses.

"I suggested we have a meeting in the annex," Sammy said. "I already called Amanda on her cell phone and discussed this with Mr. and Mrs. Crawford. Tomorrow evening at six will work for everyone. That way you and I won't have to rush home from Prescott."

Dalton's throat tightened. Sammy couldn't come with him. Not today!

"Perfect, then. Tomorrow it is," he said.

He watched the couple shuffle through the front doors, then draped an arm around Sammy's back.

"Aren't you taking Gordy to the station?" he asked.

"He decided to hang out with Bethany so he's taking a later bus. Barb offered to drop him off, so I could go with you."

"What about Grace?"

"I told you yesterday ... don't you remember? She's got that birthday party at the Ainsworth's."

"Oh, that's right." He could never remember his daughter's numerous activities.

"Elaine offered to keep her until this evening." Sammy beamed. "It'll give us a chance to have some time together, Dalton. It's been way too long ... since your accident."

Though he couldn't disagree, she couldn't go today. He'd need to make it up to her.

Mid-morning sun streamed through stained glass, creating color patches across Sammy's cheeks. Her beauty drew him like bees to honey. Of all days to leave town. They'd have a quiet house with no kids. It *had* been too long. He missed her. He yearned to hold her but urgency consumed him. If he didn't get his meds today, his shot at an opportunity to put himself back on course would be lost forever.

"Why don't you rest?" he asked. "I'll make the trip by myself."

Sammy's smile flipped to a frown. "I'm not tired, Dalton." Her tone, suddenly ice-like.

“Don’t be angry. I know you’ve been working a lot of extra hours around here. You’ve been picking up a lot of slack for me.” He leaned on his cane. “You need some time to yourself.”

“You don’t want me to come, do you?”

“It’s not that, babe.” This wasn’t going well. “It’s a quick trip, Sammy. When I get back, we’ll have the evening to ourselves. Besides, you’ll be bored.”

“Why don’t you want me to go?”

His eyes widened and his face heated. “You’re over-reacting. Think of the peaceful afternoon you’ll have without Grace underfoot. I’ll even record the offering when I get back.” She hated that job. Surely she’d be thrilled. He pulled her close to kiss her but she wriggled free.

“What’s your problem?” he asked.

“My problem?” she snapped. “Are you serious? You’re the one with all the secrets. You take off to God knows where at a moment’s notice.” Tears welled in her eyes but she wiped them away. “What’s going on with you, Dalton?”

He blew out a sigh. If only he could tell her. But not now, not yet. He opted for a peace offering.

“Let’s go to Phoenix next weekend for dinner. Make reservations at that Camelback Mountain restaurant you like so much. What’s the name ...? Belford’s? ... yes ... that’s it. Pick out a movie and we’ll make a night of it.”

Her lips formed a straight line; her eyes smoldered with anger.

“How about it?” *Come on, Sammy!*

“Hmmm ... let me see, Dalton,” she finally said. “Maybe we could do that ... if I’m free and if I don’t need to take a trip somewhere. I’ll get back to you.”

She whirled around and stormed out of the church.

The hollow clanking of the church doors announced he was finally alone.

CHAPTER FIVE  
*Coerced Priorities*

*Sunday, 10:57 a.m.*  
*Camelback Children's Hospital*  
*Phoenix, Arizona*

**“YOU CAN’T LEAVE NOW!”** The corridor of Camelback Children’s Hospital echoed Carla Connor’s voice.

Matt tightened his arms around her. “I’ll be back in an hour, Car’. Charity’s stable.”

“You heard what Dr. Morton said. Her whites are high.”

“I know, hon. My boss is driving me crazy. If I don’t get that package to his desk today, I could lose my job.” His daughter’s climbing blood counts argued against him. “How did I know this would happen when I agreed to pick it up last week?”

“He’ll understand. He knows you’ve got a sick child. Did you call him?”

“I left several messages,” he lied. “He’s not returning my calls.” He lowered his tone, trying to calm her. “It shouldn’t take me long. I’ll run over there now and be back within the hour. Promise.” Another lie.

“Matt ... something feels wrong.” Her deep brown eyes pleaded. “Please don’t leave.”

He twisted from her arms and walked toward the elevator before she changed his mind. He hesitated at the nurse’s station. Could Carla be right? Maybe Charity was worse than he’d thought.

He stepped into the elevator and punched the button, wishing it was Dalton Baxter’s face. What a lying hypocrite. Why Carla worshipped the guy, he couldn’t understand.

As the door glided shut, he saw Carla crumpled in a seat, crying. Anger and guilt battled in his gut. He hated to leave her. And he hated himself for being so weak.

Instead of a quick run across town to a UPS store, the trip to Prescott would take ninety minutes. He’d meet his supplier, Bulldog, on the town’s outskirts before seeing the preacher at a bus station. The additional rendezvous would cost him an extra hour but it didn’t matter. Even if he broke all speed limits, Matt wouldn’t be back at the hospital until late afternoon. Carla would have on her fight face by then and things would get ugly.

But he had no choice. He had to do this. If Baxter told her the truth about returning to the drug trade, their marriage would be over and he couldn't take that. Their relationship had barely survived his past brushes with the law. Then Charity came out of remission and things had gotten even worse. The mounting bills on the kitchen counter and lapsed mortgage payment made his return to illegal work imperative. If he didn't get the house payment up to date, he'd have a lot more to worry about than another argument.

Baxter. What a piece of dirt. Why couldn't he wait a few lousy days ... at least until Charity stabilized?

The elevator's bells chimed and the doors opened. He walked through the lobby skirting patients in wheelchairs surrounded by Sunday visitors. A set of gigantic glass doors yawned, exchanging cool air with Phoenix heat, blasting Matt's face as he exited. Pavement steamed around his sandaled feet as he headed to their old Buick station wagon with the cracked back window. Once inside, he shut off his phone and slipped it into his pocket. Within an hour Carla's frantic calls would begin. She'd be desperate. He didn't blame her. The frequent vigils at Charity's bedside had taken their toll. Carla was about to snap.

So was he.

He'd be gone at least four hours which should give him enough time to dream up a plausible story. Carla might buy his excuse about having poor phone service but explaining why he was four hours late would be a problem.

As the car rumbled through the parking lot, the engine back-fired giving him an idea. This piece of junk might be good for something after all. A breakdown in downtown Phoenix might be believable. At least he hoped so.

Surely Charity would be better by the time he got back. Maybe even well enough to go home. If that happened, Carla's temper would subside. He'd grab a peace offering in the hospital gift shop once he got back. Maybe they'd have her favorite yellow roses.