

A STRANGER'S GAME



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

A Stranger's Game

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EPILOGUE

THE HOTEL HAD NEVER LOOKED BETTER. TORIE walked the grounds, admiring the meticulous landscaping and fresh paint on the buildings. The colors of twilight gilded the tops of the trees and sparkled on the pool. Over the past six months, she'd raised wages and hired extra staff. The extra care and money showed, and bookings had never been higher, with many guests talking about the hotel on social media. She'd resisted raising room rates because she wanted everyone to enjoy this special place.

She glanced at her watch and reversed course to grab her bike and head to Driftwood Beach for a picnic dinner with Joe and Hailey. They'd all been so busy through the Christmas season that they'd barely spent any time together, a situation that had her feeling anxious.

It was nearly dark by the time she parked her bike and walked along the path to the beach. At the sand's edge, she kicked off her shoes and carried them. Her feet sank into the thick sand as she spotted four tiki torches set up around

a blanket. Their flickering glow pushed back the darkness and illuminated Hailey's smiling face before she shouted Torie's name.

Hailey's feet kicked up sand as she barreled toward Torie and threw her arms around her waist. "We've been waiting forever."

Torie hugged her. "You say that like I'm late when I'm five minutes early." Her gaze connected with Joe's, and his smile widened.

Hailey released her grip and took Torie's hand to tug her to the blanket. "I made brownies, and Daddy bought a big Jekyll boil from The Wharf for us to share. And he got gumbo and crab dip too."

She could smell the rich aroma of seafood mingling with the briny sea air. "Whoa, he went all out. I was expecting fish tacos from Tortuga Jack's."

"Surviving the busy tourist season deserves a celebration," Joe said.

She sank onto the blanket beside him, and Hailey snuggled up close to her side. It was a perfect night, and they had the beach to themselves. The temperature had hit eighty today, a little warmer than usual for early January, and even with the sun setting, it had to be about seventy-five.

"You're dressed up tonight," Torie said. "I like the Hawaiian shirt."

Joe looked scrumptious tonight in his jeans and red hibiscus shirt. His damp brown hair gleamed in the light of the tiki torches.

"Thanks. You look beautiful."

She had worn his favorite sundress, a black-and-white one that skimmed her figure. "Thank you, kind sir."

"Let's eat," Hailey said. "Then we can—" She broke off when her dad shot her a warning look.

Torie suppressed a smile. So they had a surprise planned. Maybe a moonlit walk along the beach or a trip to get ice cream. Whatever it was, she was happy to be in their company.

Joe opened the tray of food, then handed her a plate. She selected a portion of everything from the Jekyll Island boil: steamed shrimp, clams, and crawfish, along with red potatoes and small sections of corn cobs. In short order they ate most of the tray of food and the crab dip.

"I don't think I saved room for the brownies," Torie said. "I think we should take a walk before dessert."

Hailey's brow creased, and tears sprang to her eyes. "I made it special for you, Torie. You have to eat it now."

Normally Hailey wasn't that easily upset, but maybe she'd missed Torie more than she'd realized. "Okay, I might be able to find space for a small piece."

"I have one all ready for you." Hailey lifted out a plastic container and popped off the lid to reveal brownies cut into uneven sizes.

Torie started to reach for the smallest one, but Hailey pushed her hand away. "I made one special just for you."

She selected a misshapen one that looked like it had been crumbled and pressed back into a square. It was larger than one Torie would have chosen, but she accepted it without comment. Hailey was temperamental tonight, and Torie didn't want to spoil the evening with a tantrum.

As her fingers grazed it, she felt a hard piece and something on top of it glinted in the light. Trying not to make a big deal of it, she turned slightly so the flickering light from the tiki torch shone more fully on it.

Her breath caught, and her pulse stuttered at the sight of a ring pushed into the center of the brownie. Her gaze shot to Joe, and the tenderness in his eyes brought moisture to hers. She dug the ring out of the brownie and brushed off the crumbs. It was a tri-color gold solitaire surrounded by two bands of tiny diamonds.

“Daddy, you’re supposed to talk now.”

He cleared his throat. “I’m trying to get up the courage.” He scooted over closer and took Torie’s hand in his. “I love you so much, Torie. You belong with us. Will you marry me?”

“Marry *us*,” Hailey said. “And can I call you Mom?”

A bubble of laughter escaped Torie’s throat, and she clutched Joe’s hand. “I’m not sure which question to answer first.”

“Mine,” Joe and Hailey said at the same time.

“How about I answer both together? Yes!” Torie leaned over and her lips met Joe’s. His kiss held all the love and promise she’d ever wanted, and she was going to disgrace herself by bursting into happy tears if she wasn’t careful. She choked back the lump in her throat and pulled away long enough to pull Hailey onto her lap.

“You and your dad conspired all this together, didn’t you?”

Hailey nodded. “Do you know what today is?” She didn’t wait for Torie to answer. “It was six months ago today that

we met you when you helped me save the baby sea turtles. Daddy thought I was lost, and maybe I kind of was. I need a mom, and then there you were.”

That was enough to tip Torie over the edge, and the tears spilled from her eyes. She hugged the little girl close and reached for Joe’s hand.

“When?” Hailey demanded. “When can you move into our place?”

“I vote for soon,” Joe said. “I know you probably want a big wedding though, and that takes time to arrange.”

“I don’t care about a large event. We could have it at the chapel here. I’ll need to check Dad’s schedule and see when the chapel is available.”

His green eyes crinkled at the corners. “That sounds good. Maybe by April?”

Even sooner was okay with her. “I’ll see what I can find out.”

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Her wedding day. Torie sat on the back patio of her cottage with a mug of coffee in hand and listened to the birds chirping in the berry bushes behind her. The blare of a boat horn mingled with the low voices of groundskeepers tending the flower beds along the path back to the hotel. Somewhere in the distance a mower growled.

The sunshine warmed her arms, and she lifted her face to the late-morning sun that was already spiking the temperature.

“Ready to change your name?”

She lowered her face and saw her dad coming toward her from around the corner. "I'm ready."

His steely blue eyes took in her expression. "You don't look like a blushing bride this morning. If I didn't know better, I'd say you'd been crying."

Busted. She forced a smile. "Lisbeth should be here getting her hair done and giggling with me as we get ready. I didn't even have someone to ask to be my maid of honor. Not that I wanted a big wedding, but I would have liked to be able to glance over and see her encouraging smile."

The concern on his face deepened, and he dropped into a deck chair beside her. "I'm sorry, honey. There's nothing I can do to bring back Lisbeth, but I'm proud of what you've accomplished here. And proud of the woman you are. I'll be busting my buttons as I give you away. Joe is a lucky man."

"I'm the lucky one to gain a wonderful husband and loving daughter all at the same time." She swallowed and brushed away a few lingering tears on her cheeks with the back of her hand. "It's probably just nerves. I'll be okay."

She picked up her phone and glanced at the time. "I'd better get my dress on. I have to be at the chapel in an hour."

He rose and leaned down to kiss her forehead. "I'll see you there. You still sure you want to walk?"

She nodded. "It's not far, and my dress isn't too fancy for the stroll. Hailey should be here any minute so we can get ready together."

Her dad left and she went inside. The doorbell rang, and Torie opened it to Hailey's beaming face.

"I know I'm a little early, but I couldn't wait to show you

my hair!” Hailey twirled to reveal how her red hair had been braided into a coronet matching Torie’s.

Torie hugged her, and the last of her sadness evaporated. “You look beautiful. Let’s get our dresses on.” She took the little girl by the hand and led her to the master bedroom, where both their dresses hung in the walk-in closet.

Hailey had wanted Torie to wear a crystal-encrusted tulle skirt, but she managed to talk her out of it. Torie’s heart was set on something simple and elegant, and she’d found a satin V-neck gown with a lace overlay. Hailey had been soothed by picking out a beautiful pink tulle gown for her role as flower girl.

“Daddy wanted to come with me, but I told him he’s not supposed to see the bride before the wedding. It’s bad luck.”

“That’s right.”

It seemed a silly tradition to Torie. Joe’s presence would have calmed the butterflies in her stomach. She brought out Hailey’s dress first and dropped it carefully over her head, then zipped up the back. She stepped back and smiled. “Everyone will be looking at you instead of me. Let me get your shoes.”

She opened the box of white satin ballet flats and helped Hailey slip them on. “Perfect. I’ll need help zipping my dress.”

Hailey squared her shoulders. “That’s why I’m here.”

Still smiling, Torie removed her dress from the padded hanger and slipped it on, careful not to disturb her hair. She’d opted for her usual loose crown of braids and would have Hailey help her put white jasmine flowers in her hair.

Hailey zipped her up. "Daddy might cry when he sees you."

Torie smiled at the unlikely thought. "I might cry when I see him. Was he dressed when you left?"

Hailey nodded. "He had on his gray tuxedo, but he didn't like his shoes. They pinched his feet. He brought me to the door, then headed for the chapel."

Torie listened with half an ear as she began to poke white jasmine into her hair. Hailey jumped in to help her, and the sweet and alluring scent calmed her more. She slicked on pink lip gloss and slid her feet into her heels.

The wedding was in half an hour, so they had time for a nice stroll along the walkway to the chapel. Torie picked up the ring box and handed Hailey her little bouquet of flowers before she took her own bouquet, a trailing mixture of jasmine, white roses, and daisies.

"You ready?" she asked Hailey.

The little girl nodded and practically ran to the door. "I practiced dropping rose petals and everything. It's going to be perfect."

Torie stepped out into the sunshine and held Hailey's hand as they walked down Riverview Drive toward the hotel. As they passed the hotel and made the turn toward the chapel, she noticed there seemed to be a lot of people out along the sidewalk. As they got closer to the chapel, she realized employees lined the pavement. Dozens of them.

When she and Hailey got closer, the employees began to clap. Flowers rained down on her and Hailey all along the path to the chapel. Proud smiles turned her way, and she

heard several people call out. "We love you, Torie. We're here for you like you were for us."

Her eyes burned, and she tried to hold back the tears, but it was impossible. Her dad waited at the chapel door with a proud smile, and he yanked open the door for the employees to stream past and find their places in the pews inside.

She hugged him when she reached his side. "How did you pull this together in an hour?" she whispered.

"I didn't. The employees went to Joe and asked if they could do this."

They'd done this for *her*? She couldn't take it in as she watched them file past with wide smiles.

Her dad tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. "Let's get you inside, Torie. It's time for your part."

The strains of the processional echoed from inside the chapel, and he opened the door for the little girl whose eyes went wide and frightened.

Torie touched Hailey's arm. "It's okay, honey. You're going to do great. Just look at the front where your dad is waiting. You don't have to glance at the guests."

Hailey slipped inside and Torie's dad closed the door behind her. Torie inhaled and pressed her hand against her stomach as the music changed inside. She suddenly couldn't wait to see Joe's face, to feel the love in his eyes warm her like the sun.

Her dad opened the door again, and she put her hand on his arm. Her gaze locked with Joe's, and his green eyes glimmered. Were those tears in his eyes? She couldn't tell because of the moisture blurring her vision.

This joy had been a long time coming, but the wait had

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been worth the barren years when she thought her life would be only work and duty. Who knew God had selected such a wonderful, ready-made family for her?

When Joe took her hand, she knew she'd come home, no matter where the future might take them. As long as they were together, she could face anything.



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