

Chapter 1

Mama, why don't you live here anymore?" Dixie Wayling set down her fashion magazine and looked over at her five-year-old daughter. Mandy's messy blond hair curtained her face as she bent over a drawing at the table, empty cereal bowls pushed to the side. Dixie listened for the boys for a second but tuned them out when she heard two little voices from the backyard. No one was screaming. All was well.

Mandy pushed her tangles aside and looked at Dixie. "I miss you, Mama."

"Hey, baby, I'm right here."

"But you're not here to tuck me in at night time. Daddy doesn't sing me songs."

"His name is Dan. He's not your daddy." Dixie pulled to her feet. Why did her kid have to talk like this? Oh, she knew. She knew she'd taken the coward's way out... not only once, but a pile of times. She was a poor excuse for humanity. Mom had told her that since she was a kid, and it was true. About the only thing she did well was make more humans... a

skill frowned upon by those who thought she should get settled, get married, and get religion, not necessarily in that order.

“God doesn’t care about your past,” Dan had said earnestly. “He’s ready to forgive you and welcome you into His family. He did it for me, and He wants to do it for you. You just have to ask.”

So, she’d kicked him out. She’d been getting tired of him, anyway. But then he found out she’d gone off drinking with her girlfriends and forgotten to get a sitter — wasn’t Mandy old enough to watch her little brothers? — and returned the favor. He’d moved back in with the kids and told her she could either leave or marry him.

Such romance.

She’d stormed out, but the welcome at Mom’s had worn thin after the first couple of weeks. Now she spent most daytimes with the boys while Mandy went to school and Dan to work. Sometimes he dropped them off at a neighborhood daycare instead, but he said her kids needed her more.

She watched them for no pay, like before, only now she had expenses. Of course, she *had* given birth to them. They weren’t really Dan’s responsibility in any way, except for the youngest. Who knew freewheeling party man Dan Ranta would turn into a grownup when she got pregnant with his kid? He sold used cars back then, and steady jobs were handy for

paying rent and buying new clothes. But then his estranged father had a heart attack, and Dan found himself back in the fold, running the family landscaping business.

More money and an actual rental house instead of a dinky apartment had been kind of nice at first, until Dan *found Jesus*. Dixie bit back a snort.

Chewing on the end of a pencil crayon, Mandy watched her mama from deep brown eyes. “Daddy says he wants to have a wedding, and we can be a real family like everybody else.”

Dixie crossed the space, kicking one of Henry’s shoes into a pile of plastic blocks. She glanced out the patio door in time to see Buddy give the toddler a shove and send him to his diapered rear in the yellowing grass. No screaming. Whew. Dan had done a good thing getting them this house. The yard was kid-proof with not even a gate, so they could let the kids in and out without any worry. Dixie wasn’t *that* bad a mother. She wouldn’t let them loose in the wild without supervision.

She turned back to Mandy and tried to force her fingers through the tangles. “Run get a brush. You look a mess.”

“Okay, Mama.” Mandy slid off the chair and darted up the stairs.

Dixie picked up the drawing her daughter had been working on. It seemed to contain a humanoid

shape, legs and arms outstretched, wearing a... tutu?

Something stabbed deep inside her, not for the first time. She was missing so much of her kids' younger years. Mandy had been in kindergarten for a month already, and Dixie hadn't even met her teacher. Dan dropped Mandy off at Bridgeview Elementary on his way to work and arranged for an older neighbor kid to walk her home every afternoon in case Henry was napping.

Dan was so considerate. He really was a nice guy. He might even pay for dance lessons for Mandy if Dixie asked. He'd been such a pushover, until he asked Dixie to marry him, and she said no. Because of the Jesus thing. Dan had only gotten guilty about them living together. She'd also said no because her mom's words rang in her ear, that she didn't need no man. It was Mom's favorite litany. Men were weak. Men were dumb. Men were needed for only one thing, and wasn't the planet full enough with over seven billion inhabitants? Then she'd look at Dixie's three kids and shake her head, her lips pursed in disapproval.

Yeah, pleasing Mom was impossible anyway. Pleasing Jesus would be no easier. Dixie might not be the sharpest crayon in the box, but she knew she wasn't good enough for God, no matter what Dan said about repentance and forgiveness and all that. He'd never been as bad as her. There were limits to what

God could excuse.

I mean, look at me and my mess.

Mandy clattered down the stairs, neon pink hairbrush in hand. “Here, Mama. Don’t pull too hard. It hurts my head.” She slid back on the chair, her back to Dixie.

Dan had threatened to chop off Mandy’s hair to make it easier to care for, but he was a pushover for the little girl’s tears and had relented. Then he’d seen a YouTube video where some guy vacuumed his daughter’s hair into a ponytail, and now he was all pro. But today was Saturday, and he’d left the house with the kids still in their pajamas.

Dixie didn’t mind doing Mandy’s hair once in a while. She tugged the brush through the lower snarls and worked her way up to the scalp. Then she fingered the long strands into sections.

Mandy’s hands covered hers. “What are you doing, Mama?”

“Thought I’d give you a French braid. Would you like that?”

“Oh! Can you? Autumn’s mommy makes her hair into a crown for dance. It’s so pretty.”

Her daughter was five-and-a-half and Dixie hadn’t braided her hair in so long Mandy couldn’t remember? Failure two thousand three hundred eighty five as a mother. Not that she was keeping count.



Dan Ranta pulled his landscaping truck into the drive beside Dixie's older car. She was still here. Good. Ever since that time in July when the neighbor called him because Dixie had left the kids alone, he worried all day, every day. A guy could only do so much. He had a business to run. He needed the work to keep a roof over their heads and some stability for those young lives. He might not be Mandy or Buddy's biological father, but they were his responsibility now, and he wasn't the shirking kind.

If only...

Dan shook his head, shoved the truck door open, grabbed his backpack and lunchbox, and headed for the house. He eased the door open, braced against what he might find.

No one was yelling or crying. Mandy's giggle mingled with Dixie's. He hadn't heard that in a long, long time. A breath slid out. *Thank You, Jesus.*

He tried not to take moments of harmony for granted. Tried not to segment each day in columns with bad, okay, and good as headers. He set his things inside the door and toed off his grass-stained steel-toed boots.

"Daddy's home!" Buddy charged down the short hallway and flung himself at Dan's knees.

Dan stiffened for impact as well as for Dixie's voice reminding the boy that he wasn't his daddy. For once, she skipped the opportunity. "Hey, Buddy!" He swung the almost-four-year-old into his arms and gave him a whisker rub. "Been good for your mama today?"

"Buddy always good."

Not to hear Dixie tell it... or from Dan's own experience. He chuckled. "Good job. What did you do?"

"Me'n Henry play tag."

Dan cringed. Didn't that just sound like a way for the bigger boy to chase and hit the smaller one? But, the toddler wasn't crying. At least, not right now. Dan dangled a squealing Buddy under his arm as he entered the living room beyond the staircase.

Dixie and Mandy looked up from the book they were reading on the sofa, and Mandy jumped up and ran over.

He hugged her against his leg, noting the braided crown, as he set Buddy down. Henry toddled over and Dan gave the little guy a quick hug as well. But his gaze was riveted on the children's mother.

Dixie looked happier today than sometimes, and he couldn't help smiling back. Her blond hair brushed the front of her top. He loved that one on her. Had he ever told her? But this might not be the moment, since the white lace reminded him of a wedding dress, and

she'd shot that dream down in a big fat hurry every time he'd brought it up.

Dixie bit her lip as she took in the little ones crowding around him. Her eyebrows peaked as her gaze collided with his for an instant. "Hey, Dan." She surged off the couch and grabbed her big red purse. "I thought you'd never get here. See you Monday."

"Stay for dinner? I brought pizza. It's in the truck."

She smoothed the lacy top over her narrow hips with her free hand. "No, that's okay. I'm going out with some friends."

"Stay, Mama!" Mandy dashed back to her mother and clung to her arm. "Maybe we can watch a movie. Please?"

Dixie patted the little girl's back. "Not this time, baby. I have to go."

"I'll walk you out." Dan held the toddler to Mandy, who slung the little guy to her non-existent hip.

"Not necessary."

"I know, but I have to grab the pizza, any-way."

Dixie skirted around him. "Suit yourself."

He hurried after her and opened the door as he shoved his feet into worn sneakers. "Dixie, wait."

But she didn't. He caught up to her beside the gray Mazda. "How's it running?"

She rolled her eyes. "Fine, Dan. It's not your

responsibility.”

“Sure, it is. I bought it for you.”

“You want it back? Is that what this is all about?”

Dan let out a sharp breath. “No, of course not. It’s yours, no matter what. I only care about you.” He longed to sweep his fingers over her cheek, feel the petal-soft skin one more time. “Looks like you and the kids had a good day?”

“It was okay.”

“Mandy’s hair looks pretty.”

Dixie shrugged, still not meeting his gaze. “Yeah. I remembered how. It made her happy.”

“Thanks.” Dan jammed his hands into his jeans pockets. In the old days when she got pouty like this, he’d have just kissed her until she smiled. Or maybe taken her off to bed. But he’d had a come-to-Jesus experience a couple of months ago, and he was determined to treat her with respect, whether she made it easy or not.

She wasn’t making it easy.

Not sashaying in those skinny jeans and snug top. Not when she alternated between playing hard-to-get and throwing herself at him. Today was ice. He never knew ahead of time. The only things she was consistent about these days were jabbing at his newfound faith every chance she got... and refusing to marry him.

He took a breath. “I wanted to talk to you about

Buddy's birthday. It's in just a couple of weeks. October second, right?"

"Yeah." She reached for the door handle.

Dan stayed in her way, and she pulled her hand back. "What do you want to do for a party?"

Dixie stared up at him. "He's just a little kid. He doesn't need a fuss."

"Fran Amato's little boy, Luca, turned four a few weeks ago, and she had a party for him."

He could see the battle on Dixie's face. Even she hadn't been able to come up with any evidence to support her earlier theory that Fran was his other girlfriend. Fran was a nice, married woman from Bridgeview Bible Church who ran a private daycare in her home a few blocks away. She was Dan's backup plan for the boys on days Dixie didn't show before he had to leave for work... which was once or twice a week.

"How nice for them."

That was all Dixie could come up with? He pushed ahead. "I don't really want to do a party with a bunch of little kids, but how about a family time on a Sunday afternoon? We could get pizza and go to a playground or the children's museum, maybe?"

He hated the need that came through in his voice. He hated putting himself at Dixie's mercy. He hated that he had to beg her to spend time with not just her kids, but him.

She stepped closer and rested her hands on his chest, sweat-stained T-shirt and all. “Maybe.”

Dan stilled, forcing his hands to stay deep in his pockets as he inhaled the sweet fragrance of her. It took a minute before he could trust his voice. “What kind of maybe?”

“Quit with the Jesus talk, and we can go back to how things were before.” Her fingers walked across his chest, each leaving a pinpoint of pain. “We were good together.”

He took a big step backward and collided with the trash can, which clattered to the ground. The lid held. Good. “Don’t use me as a pawn against the kids, Dix. They don’t deserve it. They deserve a mom who’s part of their life. Marry—”

“No.” Dixie leaned into his face. “That’s not how this game works, Daniel Ranta. You want to win? You’ve got the magic card in *your* hand. Play it.” She pivoted on her heel, jerked the car door open, and climbed inside.

Without a backward glance, she drove away, taking Dan’s heart with her.

Dancing at Daybreak

is expected to release in summer, 2019.