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Cody Coleman took the football field alone, the way he did most things these days. The Southern California sunshine landed on his shoulders and worked its way through the winter in his heart. It was the first day of spring training for his Oaks Christian High School team and Cody was ready.

Ready for something new.

Even if it was only another season on the gridiron.

He adjusted his baseball cap, slung the bag of footballs over his shoulder, and walked to the coaches' bench. Along the way he lifted his face to the sun. *What's next for me, God? Is this really where You want me?*

Cody waited. Sometimes when he talked to God, he heard an answer. Or felt one. Words would appear on the screen of his soul and he would know deeply, intimately, that he had received an actual response from God.

Not this time.

Cody sighed and dropped the bag to the ground. He grabbed a stack of orange cones and walked toward the twenty-yard line. His football coaching days had been extraordinarily successful. God had blessed his profes-

sional endeavors at every turn. His time at Lyle High School, an hour outside of Indianapolis, had seen him take a losing team and turn it into a winning program.

Sports Illustrated had even covered the story and for a short time everyone knew Cody Coleman. They called him America's favorite high school football coach. But then he felt God calling him away from Lyle. He took the job here at Oaks Christian for a lot of reasons. But the one that was most compelling was a blue-eyed girl with long blond hair and a laugh that stayed with him still.

Andi Ellison.

He pictured her, months ago, standing in front of him saying goodbye. He could hear her voice and feel the way he had been lost in her eyes. Cody straightened and drew a slow breath. He couldn't think about her here. Not Andi.

Not today.

Four cones along the twenty-yard line, four more at the thirty. Cody made his way up the field. His assistant coaches would be here in an hour. The players, an hour after that. Spring training lasted just five weeks—right up till the end of the school year. He had to take every minute seriously. Otherwise the team would pay come fall. After spring training, they'd take a month off and in July they'd start summer two-a-days. Just like last year and the year before.

The difference between Lyle and Oaks Christian was something Cody had figured out this past weekend. The

thing that set them apart was purpose. The Lyle High football team had needed him. Before he showed up no one wanted to work with those kids. And Cody had seen a little of himself in the Lyle players.

A potential that took some work to find.

Whatever the reason, Cody felt like he was walking in the center of God's will at Lyle High. Here, though, he was starting to have a sense that the Oaks Christian football team didn't really need him. They were a powerhouse in the Santa Clarita Valley before he took the job, and they would remain a powerhouse long after he left.

Which might be soon.

He finished placing the cones, returned to the bench and opened the gear bag. His clipboard was at the bottom of the bag of footballs. He grabbed it, sat down and studied the list of names. Blake Miller, Hawk Austin, Sam Knell, John Vaught. The seniors had come a long way playing for him, no doubt.

Ten of the players met every Monday night for Bible study with Cody, a time where the focus was on faith in God and friendship off the field. That had been his prayer from the beginning. He smiled. Okay, so maybe he had made a difference. Even still, most of the students wanted for nothing. If he moved on, someone else would fill his shoes. A coach or a parent. Oaks Christian had dozens of mentors.

Cody peered across the field. Yes, he definitely needed a change of pace. Another state, another school. A different challenge.

Or maybe he was only missing Andi.

He never imagined living in Southern California without her. But two broken engagements were too much. For both of them. Somehow like every other relationship Cody had been a part of, his love story with Andi had fallen apart. Crashed and burned. And some days his broken heart felt like it would never mend. Not ever.

She had moved away after the last breakup. These days she worked for a Christian aid organization that helped people in the midst of national tragedies. Andi was on the disaster relief team. Ironic, since she hadn't done anything about the very personal disaster between the two of them.

Something moved near the fieldhouse. Cody lowered his cap and squinted. Aaron Baylor, junior wide receiver, was walking toward him. Cody watched the boy. Skinniest kid on the team. Baylor was still wearing his school uniform, khaki pants and a white button-down shirt. His hands were sunk deep in his pockets, his shoulders stooped.

The player looked the way Cody felt.

A minute later he reached Cody and took the seat beside him. "Coach."

"Baylor." Cody leaned over his knees and looked at the kid. "You all right?"

"Kind of." Baylor ran his hand through his red hair. "Okay, not really. Not okay."

This was easily Cody's favorite part of the job. Being here for the guys. "You wanna talk?"

"If that's okay." Baylor's eyes looked nervous.

"Of course." Cody sat up and shifted so he could see the boy better. "What's on your mind?"

"Prom." Baylor winced, as if the word had stung his lips on the way out. "People are starting to ask." He stood and raised his hands, then he exhaled hard and let his arms fall back to his sides. "I wanna ask Macy Withers. You know Macy Withers, Coach?"

Everyone knew Macy. Cody smiled. "You think you aren't the only one who wants to ask her."

"Are you kidding?" He laughed, but his voice cracked in a way that sounded pinched and anxious. This was really stressing the boy out. "Like . . . I don't know, six guys on the football team wanna ask her."

"Okay, so you be first." The conversation was pushing Andi back to the bottom of his heart. Where Cody liked to keep her. "You're a good guy, Baylor. She'll say yes."

"No she won't." The kid paced ten yards out onto the field and spun around. "Have you seen my face? Every time I work out, I get another zit. And then there's this . . ." He grabbed a handful of his hair. "This carrot top." He shook his head, his words tumbling out faster now. "I'm the biggest nerd on the team, Coach, and I can't bulk up to save my life. My dad jokes that if I turn sideways I disappear. No matter how many times I think it through, the facts are the same. Macy Withers will never say yes, even if I ask her first. Even if I dye my hair or my face clears up or—"

"Baylor." Cody patted the bench beside him.

The boy stopped. He was breathing hard from the rant. "Yes, Coach?"

"Come sit down." Cody waited.

After a few seconds the fight left Baylor. His shoulders slumped and he did as Cody asked. "It's impossible, Coach."

Advice rushed at Cody, but he took his time. He wanted to say the right thing. "I remember when I was your age. I knew exactly who I wanted to ask to prom." Cody leaned back on the bench and pictured himself, a football player with a crush on one particular girl. The coach's daughter.

Bailey Flanigan.

"Yeah, well, look at you, Coach." Baylor slumped a little. "No girl would ever say no to you."

"Except this one girl." Cody looked at Baylor. "I always thought she was better than me. She seemed perfect. And me . . . I was just some mess-up football player."

For the first time the kid seemed to really listen. "You were a mess-up?"

"Definitely. Really bad." He let that sink in. "That was before I decided to follow Jesus. I'm a different guy now."

"Got it." Baylor nodded slowly. "So the girl? Did she talk to you . . . even though you were such a mess-up?"

"She did." A lifetime of Bailey memories circled him, demanding to be recognized. He tried to stay in the moment. "She helped me understand something." Cody put

his hand on the player's shoulder for a few seconds and then crossed his arms. He needed the boy to understand this next part. "You're a child of God. No matter what you see when you look in the mirror. No matter what you've done or might do in the future. God loves you. He's crazy about you." Cody grinned. "There's only one Aaron Baylor."

Cody wasn't sure Baylor wanted this heavy of a response. But Baylor was still watching him, still waiting. Cody continued, "See . . . value comes from within a person. Those who believe in God find their value in Him, what He wants for their lives."

The kid was quiet. Then gradually he started to nod and after a while he turned to Cody. "You believe that?"

"Bailey helped me see it . . . a long time ago." He lifted his eyes to the sunny California sky, those sweet yesterdays alive again. "She told me about the Bible. I began to read it and there it was in black and white. The truth about God's love. I've believed it ever since. It's what keeps drawing me back to the Lord."

Baylor smiled and shook his head. His eyes shifted to the ground and for a long moment he rubbed the back of his neck. "Deep stuff, Coach. Real deep."

"But true."

He turned to Cody, his eyes marked by the beginning of hope. "So you're saying I need to know who I am, how much God loves me. That's why I should feel good about asking Macy Withers to the prom?"

"That's why you'll feel good about anything." Cody

grinned. "Playing football. Getting good grades. And yeah, even Macy Withers."

Baylor nodded again. A breeze drifted across the football field and for a minute they were both quiet. Baylor spoke first. "You and Bailey . . . it didn't work out, right?"

"It didn't." Cody steeled himself against the reality. "She married someone else."

Baylor winced. "Sorry."

"It's okay." Cody exhaled. "She married the guy she was supposed to marry."

"What about the blond girl who used to come to the games?" Baylor wasn't being rude or pushy. He seemed genuinely curious.

"Andi Ellison."

"Right." Baylor hesitated. "Weren't you engaged?"

"Twice." A familiar ache came over Cody. "It was my fault. I couldn't get it right." He forced a smile. "She deserved better."

Baylor stood and for a long time he looked at Cody. Then he shrugged, his heart clearly lighter than it had been. "I don't know, Coach. There's only one Cody Coleman."

Cody chuckled. "Touché." He pointed to the field house. "Go get your homework done. Practice in ninety minutes."

Baylor jogged off, but ten yards out he turned around. "Hey, Coach."

"Yeah?"

“Thanks.” His smile lit up his eyes. “I’m gonna ask her. And hey . . . maybe it’s not too late with Andi.” He lifted his hands. “Just saying.”

“Go on, Baylor.”

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CODY’S TOWNHOUSE SAT on a quiet tree-lined street a few blocks off Hillcrest Drive, not far from the Oaks mall. If he had to live alone in Southern California, this was the place to do it. He had come to love his home—him and his dog, Riley. The townhouse was lodged between a park and a botanical garden and as many open miles of trails in the Santa Monica Mountains as he could’ve ever wanted.

Quiet places he could go to think and pray on days like today.

Practice had gone great, better than he had hoped. Most of his starting lineup had enough experience and talent to go the distance in the fall. Maybe all the way to state. And his coaching staff was the same great group of guys he’d had last year. They knew each other’s styles and play-calling, and the way they had clicked today was proof of the winning days ahead.

But none of that could rein in his wayward heart.

Ever since the conversation with Baylor, Cody had barely gone through the motions. There had been times in his life when football had taken off the edge, made the sad and lonely less of a burden.

Back when he and Bailey first went their separate ways, or when he lost his next girlfriend, Cheyenne, to

cancer. Yes, he hurt and yes he lay awake at night asking God why things had gone so wrong. But at least on the football field he could see straight. His passion for the game was a respite from the pain that surrounded him.

Not so today.

It wasn't the loss of Bailey Flanigan or Cheyenne that wouldn't let up today. God had different plans for each of those girls. Cody couldn't argue with that. He was at peace with how things had turned out. No, the face he couldn't push from his mind today was the one Baylor had asked about.

The sweet face of Andi Ellison.

Cody parked on the street in front of his condo, went inside and greeted Riley. The black mixed Lab was three years old, and he lived for the time he spent with Cody. "Hey, boy . . . how was your day?" Cody bent down and patted the dog's head, scratched the soft fur behind his ears. "You ready for a run?"

Riley knew what that meant. He barked and ran to get his leash. When Riley wagged his tail, he did so with all his body. Like he might break in half he was so excited. "Give me a minute." Cody laughed. His dog was his best friend these days. The best thing about coming home.

Cody changed into his running clothes. Then he attached a specially designed running shoe over his prosthetic lower left leg. The missing limb was the result of an explosive device in Afghanistan. The phantom pain from his injury only hit him every once in a while now—

and never while he was running. Out on a run it was easy to forget the injury had ever happened.

And today, Cody couldn't wait to get out there. Five miles on the mountain trails would help him sort through his feelings. He and Riley set out and from the first few steps the memories joined him. Memories he couldn't shake.

He didn't want to even if he could.

The past he shared with Andi Ellison was complicated. Again and again. They'd met in college, of course. Back when Andi had been Bailey's roommate. Back when Cody was too in love with Bailey to even notice anyone else. Andi was wild and rebellious back then. Her parents had been missionaries turned Christian filmmakers.

Andi wanted none of it.

She ran against everything she knew to be right and true and she spent her days at Indiana University on her own terms. Cody remembered the first time he understood how bad off Andi had gotten. He had found her on campus late one night, laying on the ground so drunk she was nearly unconscious. He helped her back to the dorm room she shared with Bailey, and he stayed long enough to make sure she was okay. For an hour Andi had mumbled things to Cody she'd never said before.

When the night was over, Cody knew two things. First, Andi's drinking was as dangerous as Cody's had once been. And second, Andi was in love with him. Back then it was easy to dismiss, easy to think she didn't really have deep feelings for him. Her confession had

only been the alcohol talking. That's what Cody told himself.

Especially since back then his heart belonged to Bailey . . . and only Bailey.

Andi's behavior got worse after that. She took up with a foreign exchange student, a dark-spirited guy with wrong intentions. They dated for a few months and the guy found a way to get Andi to do things she never meant to do. Cross lines she had never imagined she would cross. Andi wound up pregnant. She told Cody later that only then did she realize what she'd done, how far she'd run from the faith she'd been raised with.

She had the baby—a boy—and put him up for adoption. Luke and Reagan Baxter adopted the child and Andi had a dramatic change of heart. She returned to God, made things right with her parents, and moved home. Not long after, Andi's family left Bloomington for Southern California.

It wasn't until much later, when Cody flew to Los Angeles for the interview at Oaks Christian, that he ran into Andi again.

This time things were different.

Sparks flew and the chemistry between him and Andi was undeniable. By then both Cody and Andi had been sober for years, and Andi was strong in her faith, trying her hand at acting. It made sense since her dad was a producer. After the interview at Oaks, Cody flew back to Bloomington but he and Andi talked every day.

A month passed before Cody made a decision.

He called Bailey, picked her up at her parents' house, and took her to Lake Monroe. They walked their favorite trail, and that morning he did what he had tried and failed to do for years. He ended things with Bailey Flanagan. He told her that no matter how close they had been, no matter how they had felt for each other or how much they still cared, it wasn't right between them. It never had been and it never would be. And he told her to find her way back to Brandon Paul. The guy who had given Bailey far more time and attention than Cody ever had.

His words that day were not because he didn't care about Bailey.

But because Brandon really was better for her.

And because of one other reason: Cody had fallen in love with Andi Ellison.

Cody breathed deep and kept running. Riley panted as he kept up beside him. A stream wound its way beside the trail at the top of the hill, a place where Riley could cool down and get a drink.

The past lingered in Cody's soul as he and Riley continued on the familiar dirt path into the mountains. He had taken the job at Oaks in part because he was certain that his future belonged to Andi. For the next year that's exactly how things had played out. They rode bikes along the path at Redondo Beach and they walked to the end of the Santa Monica Pier. They swam in the chilly surf and spent Saturdays in Santa Barbara, strolling the stretch of shoreline where artists and craft vendors set up their wares each weekend.

After a year, Cody talked to Andi's father. He wanted to do more than date Andi. He wanted to marry her. He was sure. Cody would never forget the man's reaction or the words he said that day.

"When you came into Andi's life, I had a chat with God," Keith Ellison told him. "God assured me you were the one." He chuckled. "Obviously that wasn't something I ever shared with Andi. But I believed I'd really heard from God." He smiled. "And now I know that I did."

The man had hugged Cody. "You're like a son to me. You always will be."

Andi's mother was also in agreement. Everything seemed like it was headed for the most beautiful happily-ever-after.

And when the time was right Cody took her to an early dinner at Bella Vista, the prettiest Santa Barbara restaurant perched high on a bluff overlooking a perfect stretch of the Pacific Ocean.

After the meal they walked along the water, hand in hand, and as the sun melted over the sea, Cody pulled a simple solitaire diamond ring from his pocket and dropped to one knee. He asked Andi to marry him and she said yes. The happy moment lasted only a few hours.

Later that night, back at Andi's house, they learned the terrible news.

As Cody was proposing, thousands of miles away in Indiana, a semitruck hit the van carrying Erin Baxter Hogan; her husband, Sam; and their four daughters. The

family had been headed to Bloomington for a family reunion.

Only Amy Hogan—one of the little girls—survived.

The news rocked Cody's world. Years earlier, Bailey Flanigan's family had been best friends with the Baxters, which made them Cody's friends, too. At least back then. Which made the accident a little too close to home. Maybe it stirred up memories of Cody's days in Afghanistan, or maybe it reminded him of the frailty of life.

Whatever it was, he couldn't rebound.

Sometime after the accident he called Bailey and the two talked about what had happened that day, how the people of Bloomington were handling the tragedy, and how the Baxter family was doing. Toward the end of the call, Cody realized he was doing everything he could to keep the conversation going.

As if only Bailey could understand him, only Bailey could talk him through his angst and sorrow. Whatever confusion his heart had felt during that time, when the call was over he was no longer sure of his feelings for Andi. He let a week pass, and then two. But at the end of that month he knew he was wrong to keep walking blindly toward a wedding date.

He had lost his certainty. Lost his way when it came to Andi and the future he had imagined for the two of them. On a heartbreaking day late that summer, he drove with Andi to a secluded spot in the mountains. "I can't do this, I can't marry you," he told her. "I'm sorry." Tears filled his eyes. "I need time."

Cody's feet pounded the path. He stared at the fading sunlight ahead of him. His decision back then had been both unnecessary and cruel. At least from the vantage point of today. He should've told her how he was feeling, why he was breaking things off. He should've talked about the accident and the sadness it evoked. Instead after he broke off the engagement, Andi had cried and asked him why, what had she done? What had he done? He had no good answers for her then.

He had none now.

Confusion, that's all it was. Heartache and hurt for the people he knew so well and a mixed-up sense of what the future held. Maybe he just needed someone to talk to. Someone other than Bailey. Either way, the wedding was off. And that was only the beginning of Andi's and his crazy, tragic love story.

The top of the path came with a view of the setting sun over Thousand Oaks, flickering lights from the residential streets, the haunting transition between day and night. Riley jumped into the shallow stream and Cody stopped for a few seconds to catch his breath. That's how his life had always been. As far back as he could remember. Flickering lights, catching him in the transition between day and night.

Mostly night.

*Father, what's wrong with me? Why did I let her go?
Twice?*

An ocean wind from the other side of the mountain range drifted through the scrub brush and cactus plants

that dotted the mostly barren mountainside. Cody stared at the vast sky. *Are You there, Lord? Do You see me?*

I see you, My son. You're never alone. I am with you. Always.

Peace flooded Cody's veins. There it was, the familiar voice of God. The sureness that no matter how quiet and lonely the nights, Cody was never truly alone. He let the assurance wash over him like sunshine on a winter day. God would see him through this season—no matter how long it lasted. Riley ran up to him and shook off the stream water, dousing Cody, head to toe.

"Thanks, Riley." Cody laughed and wiped his face with the back of his hand. "Let's get home."

He and Riley jogged back and Riley found a cool spot on the bathroom floor while Cody took a shower. Like he did every day after his late afternoon run. "Just you and me again tonight, buddy." Cody wrapped a towel around himself.

Once he had changed into sweats and a T-shirt, Cody found the most comfortable spot on the sofa. Maybe Baylor was right. Maybe it wasn't too late for Andi and him. He considered it for a minute and then dismissed the thought. No way. It was definitely too late. Things couldn't be worse between them.

Not just the broken first engagement, but his recurrence of post-traumatic stress disorder. The PTSD was like a snake in the grass, ready to strike at any moment. And so their relationship had suffered deeply. His episodes of anxiety and moodiness were something he

hadn't explained to Andi. Didn't want her to know he was still struggling. A misstep for sure. A mistake. Cody sighed. If he had it to do over again, he would be more honest, more open.

But there was no going back now.

God had shown him so much since then, ways to handle the terrifying flashbacks and phobic fears that almost always came without warning. A guy at church had told him about a group for wounded soldiers that met at a home close to Cody's. For five months he attended two meetings a week and over time Cody learned how to deal with the episodes. How to live with them.

So why not call Andi and explain the situation? How messed up his mind had been and how much better he was doing?

He thought about it but after a while he let the possibility die and settled in with his book. She would never pick up. Not if he texted or called. In that way, there was nothing different about this night compared to the others. Riley lay on his feet as Cody read three chapters in C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* and then the entire book of James in the Bible. Cody kept the TV off and turned in early. Like most nights lately as he fell asleep he saw the blue eyes of the girl he still loved. The one he missed with every breath—even if there was no chance he'd ever see her again.

The eyes of Andi Ellison.