

FINDING

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my children. Sometimes a mother doesn't get to choose all of the children who will come under her care and become part of her family, but she can love them just the same. I want all of you to know that "biological" doesn't make you family—love does, and I love every one of you. I'm lucky to be part of your lives, and each of you has blessed me in your own unique way. I choose to find the joy that you have added to my life. I hope you will do the same.

A special thanks to Lynsey Joy, who gave me the idea for this novel.

Be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead.

1 Peter 1:6 NLT

Chapter 1

"Blow out the candles, Gram," Max said, angling the large birthday cake toward his grandmother. Jenna grabbed the other side of the cake plate to steady it. Max raised his eyebrows at her. Although younger than his sister by six years, he towered over her. Still, the stern look she gave him made it clear who was used to being in charge.

"Okay, okay," Elisabeth huffed. "Just let me catch my breath." Standing as tall as her five-foot-two frame allowed, the stocky silver-haired lady took a deep breath and, with a determined expression, blew out the

large eight- and zero-shaped candles that signified her age. Stepping back from the cake, she smiled proudly and returned to her seat at the table.

“Make sure my piece includes that yellow sunflower, please,” Elisabeth stated without hesitation.

“Geez, Gram,” Max protested. “That’s right in the middle of the cake! Still, I guess it is your birthday.”

Jenna cut into the cake, pulling the bright yellow sunflower out of the center for her grandmother. Max grinned as he set the piece beside Elisabeth on the table. Then together, Jenna and Max handed out generous slices for the rest of the partygoers.

Max’s girlfriend, Julia, sat silently, picking at her piece of cake. She was pretty—tall and slim with green eyes and blond hair—but her unhappy expression spoiled her appearance. Elisabeth had noticed a growing discontent in the girl over the last few weeks.

“How did work go today, Julia?” Elisabeth asked.

“It was fine,” Julia answered bluntly. Moments later, she sighed, put down her fork, and stood up. “Well, I need to get going. I’ve got school tomorrow.” She carried her plate to the kitchen and threw her half-eaten

cake in the trash. She came back long enough to grab her bag, then headed for the door.

Max jumped up and followed her outside.

Sam, Max's best friend, walked in from the kitchen with a handful of napkins. "What was that all about? Julia looked upset."

Sam caught the glance that passed between Jenna and Elisabeth. "What? I know I make her crazy. Maybe I shouldn't have come."

"Of course you should Sam," Elisabeth assured her. "You're as much a part of this family as anyone else. I just think Max and Julia have some things to work out."

Sam lived across the street and had been friends with Max forever. The entire family loved Sam's cheerful disposition and sunny smile. But Julia hadn't been happy when she found out that the Sam who was Max's best friend was really Samantha.



Max came back inside and sat down. He took a quick bite of cake, more to avoid his grandmother's

questioning gaze than because he wanted the dessert. Julia had just presented him with an unsettling ultimatum and had left in a huff when Max couldn't respond on the spot. "We can't get into this again tonight, Julia," he had pleaded. "This is Gram's birthday party. I want it to be special for her." Julia had left without another word. With a sigh, he pushed the dilemma to the back of his mind. Tonight was about Gram. Not him or Julia or anyone else.

Conversation flowed easily after Julia left. They all enjoyed the delicious cake Jenna had provided. It was three layers tall, with raspberry filling between every layer and creamy lemon frosting. Jenna offered seconds to everyone, and to her surprise, Elisabeth wanted more.

She handed her grandmother another small slice and dropped a light kiss on her head. "Your hair looks nice, Gram," she said. "I hope I end up with those silvery curls when I'm your age."

"Don't wish your life away, young lady," Elisabeth replied. "It's short enough as it is. But I'm glad you find some joy in seeing my curls, gray or not."

“Oh, Gram,” Max groaned. “Not the joy thing again.”

“Maxwell William Davis, don’t you start. You know life is better when you try to find the joy in it. How many times has that helped you get through something difficult?”

“I know, I know. Sorry, Gram,” Max mumbled. He already regretted getting her started. He knew she was tired—he’d noticed the droop in her shoulders that appeared when she was weary.

“Let’s play rummy,” Sam suggested in an effort to distract Elisabeth. “You beat us last time, but I’m feeling lucky tonight.”

Mark, Jenna’s husband, brought the cards to the table as they all gathered around. Elisabeth usually enjoyed the game, but it was quickly obvious that she was having difficulty holding and playing the cards. The party had definitely worn her out.

“I think I’m ready for bed,” she told them all a little while later. “That’s the second time I missed a card. How about walking an old lady down to her room,

grandson?” When the others got up, she waved them back to their game.

“Finish your game, kids,” she told them. “Max will get me to my room. Thank you for the wonderful party. The cake was delicious, Jenna and Mark—you know me well. Goodbye, Sam. Thanks for coming over. Don’t forget to take your folks a piece of cake. Good night, all.”

Max walked his grandmother down the long hallway to the master suite she had shared with his grandpa. He waited patiently while she went into her bathroom to change into the gown she wore to bed.

He had lived with Elisabeth for a couple of years now and had become familiar with her everyday routines. He was very protective of her and often saw her off to bed for the night. It gave them a few moments together at the end of the day, each time strengthening the bond they shared. Max knew his presence brought her comfort, and he knew his grandpa would have appreciated him looking after her.

“Is everything okay, Max?” Elisabeth began as soon as she returned to the bedroom. “What was going on with Julia tonight?”

“Everything’s fine, Gram,” he told her as she climbed into bed. “Julia is just stressing about things. We can talk more in the morning. I know you’re tired—I hope we haven’t overdone it today. Besides, I need to get back to the others before they come looking to see what’s taking so long. Let’s just talk at breakfast, okay?”

Max knew she had sensed the tension brewing between him and Julia—he’d seen her watching them. But he could also see the fatigue in the lines of her face and wanted her to get the sleep she needed.

“Well, okay. It has been a busy night, and I am tired. Are you sure it’ll keep till morning?”

Max hated the anxiety he heard in his grandma’s voice.

“It’ll keep. Stop worrying,” Max repeated. He reached down and gave her a quick hug. “Get some sleep, Gram, and think about all those little bits of joy that surrounded you tonight.” He waited for her soft chuckle before he added, “I hope you enjoyed your birthday. I love you.”

“Love you most,” she replied.

Max wondered how many times they had exchanged those exact words over the years.

He headed back down the hall. It ended in a small sitting area with French doors that opened into the rest of the house. The living, dining, and kitchen areas were all open to each other with only a long counter separating the kitchen from the rest of the house. Windows across the back of the house provided a panoramic view of the yard and the woods beyond. Tonight, the shades were pulled down over the windows, and the candle Jenna had given Elisabeth for her birthday filled the room with the pleasant aroma of apples and cinnamon.

Max stopped in the doorway between the sitting area and the kitchen, not quite ready to rejoin the party. Truth be told, he was worried—and more than a little upset—with Julia for the things she'd said before she left. He just couldn't understand why she was being so difficult about Sam.

He had tried more than once to explain his friendship with Sam. They'd been friends since kindergarten. They'd graduated high school together, started college, set goals, and even helped each other plan their careers.

When he'd moved in with Gram, they'd naturally spent more time together. He'd been sure Julia would understand once she got to know Sam, but that hadn't happened. Instead, while he was working feverishly to finish college, manage a job, and be there for his grandma, Julia had continued to complain about the amount of time he spent with Sam.

He had to find a way to make it all work, but it wasn't going to happen tonight. He didn't realize he was lost in his own thoughts until Mark's deep voice startled him to attention.

"Everything okay, bud?" Mark asked. He was of average height and build, but his deep, soft voice always sounded like it should belong to a much larger man. Max grinned as he headed back over to the table, where the others were gathering up the cards and putting the game away.

"Yeah, fine," he answered, sitting back down beside Sam. "Who won?"

"I did, for once," Jenna piped up. "Two games in a row."

“What happened?” Max turned to Sam. “I thought you were feeling lucky.”

“I was,” Sam said with her usual cheerfulness. Then, leaning over to Max’s ear, she whispered loudly enough for everyone to hear, “But I think your sister cheated.”

Everyone laughed. Then working together, they had the party cleaned up and the rest of the food put away in minutes. When it was all done, Sam hugged everyone, picked up the cake that Jenna had wrapped for her parents, and said her goodbyes. Max walked outside with her to make sure she got safely across the street. He waved when she reached her door, then turned and spoke to his sister and Mark as they came outside.

“Thanks for picking up the cake tonight, Jenna. Gram loved it.” He gave his sister a quick hug as Mark walked around the vehicle to open the door for her.

“See you in the morning,” Jenna called out before she ducked her head and slid into the car.

“Making some extra points, huh?” Max couldn’t resist giving his brother-in-law a hard time.

Mark gave him a quick thumbs-up before walking back around and getting in the driver's seat.

Going back inside and locking up for the night, Max was pleased with the loving relationship Mark and his sister shared. His parents and grandparents had set a great example of a successful marriage, and Mark and Jenna were well on their way to continuing the tradition.

His own relationship, on the other hand, needed some work. Julia was not happy with him. In fact, before she left, she'd informed him that she wasn't sharing him with Sam any longer. If he wanted to keep her, he was going to have to end his friendship with Sam. Max just didn't get it—everyone loved Sam. Everyone but Julia. She was convinced he loved Sam more than he did her.

Of course he loved her—she was Sam, his best friend. What did that have to do with Julia?