

As I Live & Breathe

Cassandra Baker Durham

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In honor of all Natasha's across the world that somehow make it back home. We pray that God restores all the things that you've lost along the way. May our God bless and keep you safe in His arms!

Prologue

The sulfuric scent of charred wood and busted glass singed her nose jerking her awake. Ribbon like streams of smoke and ash filtered under her bedroom door filling it with gaseous fumes. Blood-curdling screams, followed by legions of heavy footsteps caused her heart to hammer in her chest. In a foggy stupor, she heard voices yelling, screaming, crying, but couldn't make out what they were saying. Her first instinct was to turn the twin sized bed over on its side and barricade herself against the wall. Natasha fumbled around in the darkness desperately seeking something to cover her mouth and nose. She blindly grabbed and pulled the little cot closer to her as her mind imagined one thousand reasons why there was so much smoke and so much noise. She couldn't understand why the light didn't come on when she flipped the light switch in her room.

Natasha cried. She remembered in elementary school a talking dog came to school and told them to stop, drop, and roll if they were ever on fire. Her survival instincts kicked in as she groped her way to the bathroom sink. She turned on the faucet and drenched a towel. The fumes caused her to be nauseous and her eyes burned. She wrung out the towel and placed it over her face. Natasha crawled on her hands and knees to the door of the room that held her prisoner for months. She touched it and the heat radiating from the door caused her hand to recoil as if it was on fire. She tried to peek under the door to see what was happening, but all she saw was flashes of red, orange and yellow.

She couldn't believe this was how her life was going to end. Her throat and chest tightened until she thought she was actually being strangled. She prayed in earnest. "Lord, you said you would never leave me nor forsake me." Tears cascaded down her face. "I feel very forsaken at this moment. I'm so tired. I've tried to maintain my dignity and my spirituality while in this mess, but God, please take me now. I don't have another round of fight in me. I quit. I give up. I give in. I can't take another thing. So, thank you for whatever is happening here tonight. Lord, let my body be claimed, so my mother and siblings can bury it." Natasha's throat tightened around the golf ball sized knot in it. She cried harder as smoke filled her lungs. "Lord, you said 'to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord'. Please release me from this bondage of affliction," she screamed. "I want to be present with you, Lord. All these things I ask in your son Jesus name, Amen." She crawled

on all fours back to the cot, turned it right side up, and put the cover and the pillows back on the bed. She climbed back into the bed, her breathing more erratic now than ever. She welcomed death.

Natasha was so caught up in preparing to die she was unprepared when the door to her sulfur filled room was kicked open. Masked men quickly filled the space. A brilliant light and a sonic boom went off behind her. Someone grabbed her and spoke to her through the mask covering their face. As their voice was fading, she welcomed the blanket of darkness.

Natasha woke to the scent of cedar and pine. Deathly afraid to move, she peered out of half-closed eyelids. Inwardly, she prayed the atrocious thing she experienced was a nightmare. Her eyes adjusted to the somewhat dim lighting that filled the room. The bed she was laying on was close to the floor, almost like a cot, but much more comfortable. As she gazed up, she saw where the knotty pine wood slats met to create a magnificent cathedral ceiling. She wanted to see the rest of the place, but she was unwilling to move.

Unable to resist the urge any longer, Natasha turned to her side. The image before her caused her heart to smile. She knew it was a woman. If Natasha didn't know any better, she would believe the woman's hair shimmered and shone like the rays from the sun danced on it. It was long with types of red-like strings intricately woven within it. She wore some type of tribal attire. Something was sitting in front of her and Natasha couldn't make out what it was.

Natasha looked at the walls; they were covered with intricate quilts, different sizes, shapes and colors. Each one depicting images of nature, including birds, deer and wolves. She continued to scan the room, and tears of relief came running out of her. She tried to sit up, but her chest ached and throbbed from the smoke that she inhaled. Without warning, her head started to swim making her woozy at the edge of the bed.

The woman stood up. "Ah, you are awake," she said and smiled.

Walking over to a loose floorboard in the cabin, she reached into it and pulled out a box. She opened the dark brown wicker box and removed a small cell phone. Natasha heard the chiming of the numbers as the woman smiled so warmly at her.

A male voice answered the phone. "Hello."

“Desert Sun Drive, El Paso, Texas. Do I need to repeat it? Your package is ready for pick up.” She abruptly hung up the phone and powered it off as she neatly wrapped it up, and enclosed it into its case. She gently laid the box back into the earth and replaced the floorboard.

“Well, hello, Sweetie. Glad to see you survived your journey. So many like you don’t.” She walked to Natasha. “Hush Chile, it’s all right now. I used to be one of them too, but the Good Grace of God Missionaries busted me out years ago, as well. Not to worry, my Dear, you’re going home.” She pulled Natasha closer to her and enveloped her in a warm embrace, she said, “Always remember, regardless of what you’ve endured, it didn’t kill you. You survived. You made it. You’ve endured.”

Natasha pressed in closer to her and unleashed a buckets of tears.

“Ah Suga, calm down before you upset the baby,” she said in a motherly tone rubbing Natasha’s back.

Chapter One

The piercing ringing of the phone caused her to sit upright in the bed. She reached over snatching it off the receiver.

“Hello?” She said groggily.

“Get dressed, Shayla.” His deep raspy voice caused her eyes to flutter open.

“Okay,” She stammered.

“You have ten minutes. I’m already on the way.”

Shayla ended the call and threw back the covers on her bed. She ran to her closet, grabbed her medical bag and the small black duffel bag that rested in the corner of her closet. On her way to the bathroom, she stopped by the kitchen and hit the button on the coffeemaker.

The comb dropped twice in the sink. Her hands were shaking. His call meant that he had found Natasha. “God, you are our refuge and strength, a present help in times of trouble. Lord, I think we’re getting ready to get into trouble. Lord, lead, guide and direct us. Send your angels of protection to encamp about us. In Jesus’ name amen,” Shayla prayed. Moments later, she heard Wilson pull into her driveway. She grabbed her bags, their coffees, locked the door and quickly went to meet him.

The stone cold silence lent an eerie feel to the still dark morning. The vastness of the tranquil nighttime sky and the sound of crickets set her teeth on edge and made the hair on her arms stand up.

“Good morning, here is your coffee.” She reached up and kissed his cheek.

“Morning, Babe, thanks.” Wilson grunted. He took her bags with his free hand and escorted her to his truck. He maneuvered out the driveway, down the street and past the other townhouses in the neighborhood.

Shayla gazed out the window of the truck trying to peer through the shadows cast by the moonlight bouncing off the trees. A chill went through her confirming the seeds of fear that were taking root in her heart. Wilson focused his eyes on the dark road ahead of them. Slowly, he increased his speed. The changes of scenery went from residential to industrial

to country and back again as they moved from town to town. Greensboro, Burlington, Chapel Hill. They reached the airport in record time.

Wilson pulled the truck into one of the metered parking spaces and put the truck in park. He ran his hand down his face and let his head fall backwards trying to get his mind focused on the task ahead. Gulping down his now cold cup of coffee, he breathed out sharply.

“Is this another drill, or is this real?” Shayla eyed him nervously.

“It's real. You have everything you need, right? The flight takes off soon. I'll be back tomorrow.”

“Yes, yes,” she stammered.

“Shayla, go straight to the hotel. Charge the phone. Don't talk to anyone. Here take this,” he said handing her an envelope. “If I'm not back on Saturday, open it.”

Shayla took the envelope in hand, turned and got out the passenger seat of the truck. She walked around to the back of the truck and met him in the middle. She lifted her face in the direction of the rising sun. She reached up to hug and kiss him. The kiss was light at first, then the urgency that she may never see him again rose up in her. Her body trembled and vibrated under his touch. She wondered if she would ever stop shaking and trembling every time, he kissed her.

Wilson groaned when he felt her tongue enter his mouth. He reached down lifting her up off her feet. He kissed her as if he was never going to see her again. He broke the kiss and put his forehead against hers. He mumbled, “I'm sorry, but I promise you that we will sneak off and get married. We will definitely get married.” He squeezed her tighter to him as if he could pour the weight of his love into her.

Shayla thought about their planned elopement and a single tear slipped out of her eye and her lip trembled slightly ... “I know, Babe. I know.”

Wilson gently put her feet back on the ground and grabbed his bag from the back of the truck. “I love you and I'll see you tomorrow.”

Shayla reached over, desperate to touch him one last time smacked him across the butt and said, “Go get 'em tiger!”

Shayla climbed into the truck and adjusted the seat. She stared at him through the enormous floor to ceiling windows of the airport. She watched as he made his way to the airline ticket counter. “Lord,” she prayed, “Give him the strength he needs get the job done. Send him back to me, to us, in Jesus name amen.” She wrung her hands in her lap and continued to watch him make his way through security. Flipping the radio to the satellite gospel station, she shook her head about how she finally let him persuade her to elope and get married. They had plans to meet up at the courthouse, tie the knot, and go away for an extended weekend. The Bible says, “It is better to marry than burn with passion.” She chuckled at the scripture knowing full well she was getting to the point where she could no longer contain herself. She was burning, intensively, powerfully, and passionately. She was no longer experiencing a quick burn here or there, it was now more like a blazing inferno. Every time she was in a room with him, any room, she was burning and yearning. Whether it was the living room, bathroom, or a Sunday school classroom. It was driving her crazy. He was driving her crazy.

Shayla pulled the gear shifter down from park to reverse as she backed up and then pulled away from the airport and checked into the hotel as they had previously discussed. The room was large with two queen-sized beds in it. The bedspreads were a solid taupe color. She silently rejoiced, she hated hotels that had the floral multicolored blankets. She called them stain hidens because you couldn't tell if they had stains or not. She walked further into the room and her footfalls sank deeper into the plush carpeting. They didn't know what to expect when they received a call about Natasha, but she knew separate rooms wouldn't work. She walked over to the black flat screen television the hotel mounted on the wall and turned it to one of those twenty-four news stations. She wanted to be alert and on guard in case something happened. She opened her duffle bag and pulled out her lounging gear and her iPad. At least she would get some reading done she supposed. She plugged her phone in to make sure that it didn't go dead. She set the alarm clock in the room for 11:00 am so she could call the resort they had planned to stay at for the weekend and postpone their reservation.

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Wilson felt the tingles of apprehension beginning to settle deep in him. He found his seat on the oversized airplane in expectation of his journey to El Paso, Texas to pick up his

sister. He was thankful the ticket agency allowed him to choose his seat. He had not been in a plane that had six seats in a row in a long time. He chose an aisle seat. Wilson pressed his lips together tightly forming a straight line. The heaviness in his chest plagued him. He hated to get Shayla involved. However, what choice did he have? He felt compelled to confess to her what he did to try to get Natasha back. He knew that she was so intuitive that she would know something was up anyway. On some levels, it felt good to have someone to confide in. He wanted Natasha to be at ease once they came back to North Carolina. Shayla had a peace about herself and he knew they both were going to need it. It seemed one part of his body was always on high alert when it came to her. He pulled his shades down on his face as the flight attendants issued their flight instructions. He wanted to rest, especially since he didn't know what exactly he was blindly walking into.

Wilson awoke with a start, feeling dizzy, confused and his head pounding. The voice of the pilot seemed as if he was speaking through a bullhorn telling everyone on the aircraft that they were preparing for descent into Houston, Texas where he had a two- hour layover. He tugged on his seat belt ensuring that it was buckled in correctly. He took the opportunity to not only pray, but to give God praise as well. He was finally going to pick up his little sister. He didn't know what condition she was in, nor did he care. A part of him didn't want to get too excited, but he knew God didn't bring him this far to allow him to go back home empty-handed. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. He grabbed his bag off the overhead and turned his cell on so he could connect with Shayla. He disembarked from the plane and walked in search of a food court.

The airport was overflowing with people. Each time Wilson turned there was someone bumping into him or him bumping into someone else. The long lines at each gate reminded him of Christmas travelers eager to get home to loved ones or too far away vacations. He walked down to the concourse that held the most appealing restaurant choices. The aroma of fast-food restaurants permeated his senses. He stopped at a large chain restaurant and ordered a large cup of black coffee and a sandwich.

The sound of his phone vibrating shook him from the daze and he momentarily lost himself in the one in which he imagined his family all being together. The caller ID displayed Momma.

“Hey, Momma, how are you?”

“I’m fine, Son, how are you? I was just calling to see where you were?” She said sounding exhausted.

“I’m in a business meeting right now. Can I call you later this evening?” He tried to hurry off the phone before any overhead announcements blasted through the airport.

“Yea, sure. Have you talked with Shayla? I wanted to talk with her about a few wedding details. You two are not trying to run off and elope are you? I feel like there is something you two are not telling me.” She laughed nervously.

“Mom, let me call you this evening. I love you.” He hung up the phone. He cringed at the thought of possibly hanging up on her. However, he couldn’t take any chances. He had a very short window in which to get Natasha and he didn’t need any additional hindrance.

Later on he dialed Shayla’s number and prayed she answered. “Hey, Baby, my mother is looking for you, so just a head’s up.”

“Oh, OK. That’s fine. How are you? I miss you.”

“I’ll be back before you know it.”

“You promise.” She replied softly.

“Yes, Baby. Listen, you know we can’t talk long. I’m going back to my gate. I’ll call you when I get there.” Wilson ended the call and went back to his gate.

Wilson quickly boarded his flight to El Paso when the flight attendant called for his section. He was bursting with nervous anticipation. He didn’t know what to expect. The only plan he had was to rent a car at the terminal, go to the address, get his sister, come right back to the airport and get the next flight out of this hell hole.

Wilson impatiently bounded off the airplane, made his way to the rental car terminal, and stopped dead in his tracks. He looked up and saw a gentleman holding a sign with his first initial and last name.

Wilson stood there for a moment wondering how anybody knew he would be in the airport. Fleetingly, he considered walking right past the sign. He looked ahead and saw his friend T.B leaning against an airport advertisement for wireless services and he knew then he was taking the right steps.

"Wassup, man," Wilson dapped him when he walked up on him.

"What's good witcha, bro?" T.B. embraced him back. He pointed towards the door "Let's get it."

The automatic airport doors slid sideways when they made their descent closer to the outside. Waiting directly in front of the building was an armor proof black hummer. The doors of the hummer opened and two men dressed in Army fatigue and Smith & Wesson tactical boots. Wilson and T.B climbed into the back of the truck for a military style debriefing. The two men filled them in on the specifics of the operation and that Juarez managed to escape capture. Wilson closed his eyes and leaned his head back on the seat, "Good that gives me an opportunity to kill him myself."

He was silent for a moment, then looked at T.B., "Have you seen her?"

"Naw man, at least not with my own eyes, but I know she has been rescued." He dragged his hand down his face. He reached into a duffle bag on the floor and presented to Wilson a 44 magnum.

Wilson took the fire power, "Oh for real."

"Yea, bro, I'm always armed. It's just what I do."

According to the map they had the drive to where Natasha was being held took roughly thirty minutes across the desert. They came to a place in the road near an old shack. In front of the shack were flower bouquets and cactus plants. They stopped and the driver got out and knocked on the door. Wilson watched as an envelope was exchanged and in return they received another map that would pinpoint her location. They drove further on in the pitch black night. Eventually, the headlights of the truck lit up a single story bungalow type home. They slowed in front of the house and pulled onto a gravel covered driveway.

## Chapter Two

A sharp penetration of light pierced Natasha's eyelids, prying her out of her first real sleep that night. She didn't know which was worse, the deep rib cage rattling cough developed from smoke inhalation or back and forth roller coaster feeling in her stomach. She shuddered and turned over on the makeshift bed. Thankfully, it was close to the floor and near the pink basin usually reserved for people in hospital emergency rooms. She was already sick of throwing up and the dry heaves that always came later. She wondered if she would ever stop shaking. She looked over at the little woman that never left her side. Natasha closed her eyes and took a deep breathe. "When will I get to go home?" She asked softly.

"Sooner than you think my dear, much sooner than you think." She said looking at her watch.

"How did I get here?" She asked attempting to sit up in the little bed.

"Some things are best not known. Natasha, when you go home there will be hundreds of questions that people will attempt to get you to answer. Your safest bet is to always to say, 'I do not remember.' Don't do any interviews when you get home. Or lash out in the media and God forbid keep your thoughts to yourself concerning these social media crazes. She reached out and patted Natasha's hand lightly. Just try to get back into your regular routine as quickly as possible. Keep your head low and try to stay off anybody's radar. Try to assimilate as quickly as possible."

"How do I do that?" Natasha questioned as her small hands clenched into fists. "Should I just act like this never happened to me."

"Oh, I never said act like it never happened." The lady turned away from the small wobbly table where she sat writing in a journal. "Your life will now always be divided into two sections, the first being before this incident and the second will be after this incident. Nevertheless, don't let it define who you are." Walking to Natasha, she made a sincere effort to soothe her. "Do not allow it to victimize the rest of your life." She hugged her tightly.

"Many years ago, I too was where you are now. Once I returned home, there was no way to put my life back together. Most days were plagued with shock, fear, and panic and

functioning was near impossible. Afterwards, I became numb; walking around in a daze eventually being institutionalized for months.” She sat down on the edge of the bed beside Natasha. “Do not let the shame and fear control you. God has given you an opportunity to be a light for someone else.” The woman stood up at the sound of a vehicle’s tires crunching against the broken, chipped and cracked cobblestone drive and the slamming of car doors.

She stiffened against Natasha when she heard a knocking on the door. “Stay in here until I come and back to get you.”

Walking away, she latched the door behind her. Natasha could hear the sounds of Spanish voices. It caused fear to shoot right through her. She pulled the covers even closer to her. She listened to the footsteps coming closer to the room. She slid off the end of the bed and stood to her feet. Her eyes darted around the small room in search of a weapon. Finding one in a bat-sized piece of wood, she stood in the stance of a major league baseball player ready to kill or die trying. She was willing to die right there in that room. She uttered a prayer in earnest as was taught in Sunday school. “*In You, O Lord, I put my trust; for You are my rock and my fortress.*” She clenched her fists tightly around the bat in front of her ready to go to war.

She heard the latch on the door turning. Fear rumbled through her like fire. Her pulse quickened and pounded as blood rushed through her veins. Waves of dread rocked against her resolve. Exhaustion tried to cast its foggy shadow over her, but her spirit of self-preservation kicked in. Ready to do battle with whomever was coming in the room she squared up like her brother showed her.

Her angel rushed into the room. “Natasha, someone is here to get you. A member of your family, I believe.”

Natasha instantly knew who it was. She stepped around the woman that treated her so kindly and walked brazenly towards the massive venetian red door. “Where is he?” She asked. “Where is my brother? Wilson!” Her anguished cries lined the darkened hallway. The echo of her voice bounced off the old sheetrock like ping pong balls. She moved closer still to the door. Her hand found its way to her chest to keep her banging heart from leaping out of it.

The sound of Natasha's voice made the hairs on Wilson's arms stand straight up like soldiers on the battlefield. He turned and headed down the dimly lit passageway. He noticed the only light provided was small bulb barely hanging from broken sockets. The old, rigid wooden floor buckled and cracked under his weight as he went deeper into the rapidly shrinking passageway. The closer he got to her voice, he had to turn sideways to get closer still. The walls appeared to be holding a deeply inhaled breath along with him. He stood in the doorway of the room that held his sister and a flood of emotions slammed him against the wall.

The scent of his cologne had filled the air before he reached her. She looked into his face and her heart literally stopped beating. All of her prayers, all of her hopes, all of her dreams manifested in this one moment. The exquisiteness of seeing him caused her now stiff legs to unlock and move forward.

Wilson staggered for a moment while walking into the room. Natasha was there. Right there, right in front of him. His heart hummed and beat like bongos playing in a mariachi band. She ran into his arms, crying and shaking. She released tears that kept cold in their ducts for the last few months. Natasha's uncontrollable whimpering tore his heart and the hearts of those observing into tiny slivers. He grabbed her and held on tight for dear life.

"Girl, I'm so glad to see you." He said through broken sobs. "Oh, my God, it's really you." She squeezed him tighter, "Take me home, take me home please!" she pleaded with him, "Take me home!"

Heartbroken, Wilson looked down at her. "Let's... let's go home."

They turned and walked down the dimly lit hallway. Natasha's heart felt tied in knots. He felt her shaking as if she was a puppy soaked with a water hose. He held on to her tighter and spoke softly to her

"Just put one foot in front of the other and soon we will be walking out the door. It is all right now. I got you." He felt the tension rise by two decibels in the room. He tightened his grip knowing the only thing to separate them would be death. He again tightened his hold on her. "We got this Baby Girl. Just keep stepping. Just keep walking. You can do this. We're going home." As they reached the threshold of the door, he felt her pull back slightly. Momentarily, fear ran a rugged course through her. She felt a chilly wind move

softly over her cold clammy skin. She exhaled sharply and closed her eyes even tighter. Her walking felt jerky and forced. She could feel a cobblestone like material under the thinly soled shoes they forced her to wear. She could feel every nuance, every cranny, every broken line in the driveway, but she kept walking.

She heard the squeaking sound of a car door opening. She paused for a moment to listen to sounds. There was none. She wondered if it was night because of the eerie silence.

“Duck your head down and get in the car.” He said to her.

She quickly complied while still holding onto him. She opened her eyes.

He slid in beside her and removed the covering from her head.

Handing her a bottle of water, she licked her chapped, cracked lips and gulped it down.

“Natasha, this is T.B, he is a friend, and he is going to get us home.”

She looked up with a tear lined face and nodded her head.

Leaning into her brother, Natasha wrapped her fist into his shirt stretching and pulling it into a knot. Listening, but not listening to what they were both saying. She was just glad to be going home.

It seemed as if they reached the airport in record time.

Natasha’s hands shook with fear as she imagined all types of assassins and kidnappers would pop out at any moment and drag her kicking and screaming back to Juarez.

Wilson relaxed slightly as they made their way down the dust-covered highway. T.B told him that they were on their way to a small, obscure landing strip that was once controlled by drug runners moving dope from Mexico into El-Paso, then disbursed all across the United States. They finally arrived at the dusty gray hut surrounded by tumbleweeds. Even at night, the sticky dryness of the Texas heat gave new meaning to the term “hot enough to cook an egg on the sidewalk.” An old leather faced caretaker greeted them warmly then led them into a small glass encased waiting room to await their transportation.

Initially they sat in silence in the small room, listening for any sounds indicating they were followed. After a moment, T.B stretched his dark chocolate, five eleven frame against the green pre-school chair and stood up. “I’m going outside and keep watch. Our ride should

be here soon.” He drug his hand down his face, across his mustache, kissable lips and flattened over his beard. He turned and walked out of small doorway.

Wilson swallowed his sadness when he looked at his sister. He took in her emotionless face. Her pasty, pale complexion, hallowed out jaws and dry, cracked lips. He opened his mouth to speak, but could only utter a grunt in frustration and relief. He said a silent prayer of thanksgiving to God. Wilson leaned over, reached into his pocket, and pulled out his chap stick. He didn’t know how much time passed when she finally glanced at him, “Want some Chap-Stick?” He asked trying to lighten the mood.

Her eyes glimmered a spark of recognition. To his surprise she reached out and took it out his hand, unscrewed the top, and applied the balm to her lips. She finally looked away from him and out the window. “Suppose he comes for us?” She made a noise a short intake of breathe.

Her fingers trembled when she reached out and grabbed a hold of his hand.

“Here.” She flinched when he laid her head against his chest. “It will be okay,” he tried to reassure her. His heart sank. “If he comes, I will kill him.”

“Wilson, don’t let him take me back.” She started crying again tears dripped down her cheeks and soaked his shirt. He knew right then she was going to face a tough road ahead, but they would stick with her every step of the way.

“Our ride is about ten minutes out,” the voice of T.B ricocheted inside the small glass enclosed metal building. The sounds of the small aircraft initially sounded like flies buzzing through the hot Texas heat. It circled around once, then twice before it landed. Wilson pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and alerted Shayla where to meet them. He tightly gripped Natasha’s hand and boarded the small aircraft with T.B behind them. She felt a small sense of security that she had never needed before. She curled in tight against his body putting her head in the space between his chest and underarm.

Day turned into night and turned into day again. Wilson was energized, but exhausted. He hadn’t slept in twenty-four hours. He looked down at Natasha still curled into a tight ball beside him. He looked over at T.B. “Thanks man.”

“Anytime, bro.” He leaned his head back against the cracked leather seat and closed his eyes.

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Several hours later, Shayla slid her finger over the red end button on her phone and ended the call. Her heart thudded in her chest and images of Natasha and Wilson filled her mind. She pulled Wilson's truck out of the truck stop and onto highway fifty-four. She had no earthly idea of where she was going. She ignored the glare of the bright morning sun that threatened to blind her each time she looked at it. Her mind filled with more questions than answers, but she learned with Wilson its best at times to not ask any questions. The night he eased out after proposing to her at his family's cookout came to mind. She noticed he walked away from the cook out, past the garage, and down the driveway. That was weird, where was he going? She stood up and made her way down the same path he took and watched as he got into a black stretch limousine. She knew at that moment she needed to be praying. Whatever it was he was up to could land him in more trouble than just a departmental leave. She stood in front of the walkway praying, pleading, and interceding on his behalf. Before long once the sky turned dusk, she could barely make him out as he walked down the sidewalk. The look of relief on his face gave him away. She knew in her spirit that he was up to something, so she just simply asked him and he told her. He was willing to do anything to get his sister back, even if it meant his life. She met his glance with silence, knowing she would give anything to help him.

The British sounding accent of the GPS told her up on the right she would reach her destination. She pulled around to the back side of the filth covered large windowless warehouse. She parked the truck and got out. Her expression spoke volumes about her concern. The doors of the warehouse made a nails on the chalkboard type of screech and then there they stood as if Captain Kirk transposed them to the spot. She swallowed the lump in her throat and ran to them. Her heart rate soared when she saw Natasha.

She grabbed her first, hugging, squeezing, and praising God. Then she felt it. Shayla took one step back and dropped her arms. "Oh, my God," she dropped her line of vision to Natasha's belly. Instinctively she placed the palm of her hand over the small baby bump that was now Natasha's stomach. "Oh, Honey, it's all right, Baby. You're home now."

Natasha recoiled from her touch and whispered, "Not a word, Shayla.". "Not a word to anyone about this." She pleaded

Shayla threw her arm over Natasha's shoulder, "Let's get out of here."

Shayla and Natasha climbed in the backseat of the truck while Wilson spoke with T.B.

Shayla looked at Natasha and then at Wilson who was still standing in the warehouse,
“Don’t ask me to lie to him because I can’t.”

Natasha's mind raced, "You can tell him, and nobody else."

