

Living Stones

Cheryl Fehrmann Okimoto

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The Shepherd Series:
Seasons of Change
A Gilded Sky
After the Storm
Always a Sunrise
The Blessed Winter

The Ohana Project:
A Cord of Three

Hilo Suspense:
Shadows In Light

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As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ... But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10

This book is dedicated to men and women in full-time ministry. Living a life of service to the Lord often puts you in a glass house; everyone seems to watch your every move. It isn't an easy life and I respect you very much. Four people in particular I must mention: Uncle Ron who was the first pastor whom I realized had an actual life outside of the church; Pastor Mike who became a senior pastor while he was still single; Pastor Virginia who dared to step out into an impossible dream and Pastor Sid who gave me some great stories about how pastors need to support each other.

The Ohana Project is a follow-on series to The Shepherd Series. I tried to make sure that this novel can easily be read as a stand-alone story, but you might still get 'lost' a few times. There was no way I could adequately sum up the previous six books to fill in all the back story to this book. If you're a person who needs chronological order, I strongly suggest that you read The Shepherd Series and *A Cord of Three* before you read this novel.

In the course of this book, you may find some words that are unfamiliar to you but you can't find them in a standard dictionary. They're mostly either Hawaii pidgin or words I made up. To help you out, there's a "Notes" page in the back of this book.

Chapter 1

Virginia ‘Stormy’ Wolfe watched the restaurant door eagerly. She loved her biweekly lunches with her cousins. Not only did they help her wrap her mind around the recent changes in her life, but Heather Jeremiah and Jenni Kalaau were delightful people.

No, delightful wasn’t the right word. It was close for Jenni, but it missed the sassiness that Heather had in abundance. Stormy’s cousins frustrated, challenged and encouraged her even while they made her laugh.

Stormy spotted her cousins before they saw her. She watched them with more than a touch of irony. Heather and Jenni were much closer than she was with her own sister and they hadn’t even known each other for two years yet.

“Hey, cuz,” Heather came around the table to give Stormy a hug, but Jenni dropped tiredly into the closest chair and gave her cousin a little wave. Stormy smiled at Jenni who was due any time now.

“This baby has got to be a boy,” Jenni rubbed her very large belly. “I know he’s playing football in there!”

It wasn’t easy to understand Uncle Joshua’s family. These women were sisters, her uncle’s daughters and yet they were also sisters-in-law because Heather had married Jenni’s brother, Steve. It wasn’t that strange if you knew about their family ministry, The Ohana Project.

Until last winter, Jenni and her brothers Steve and Dave had been orphaned with no family, not even each other. Dave had been abducted and taken from his family when he was a baby, then Jenni had runaway from home when she was fifteen. Steve had met the Shepherds in Hawaii two and a half years ago, almost a year before Jenni came back into his life. The Shepherds had accepted Steve into their family, an attachment he made permanent when he’d married Heather. Jenni had married Pete Kalaau, Steve’s teammate and best friend for many years.

Then last year when the Shepherd family started The Ohana Project, a ministry that found families for orphaned adults, Stormy’s Uncle Joshua had adopted the Shepherd children after he married their mother, Gloria. The Shepherd-Wolfes had adopted Jenni, while Pete Kalaau’s parents had adopted

Steve, officially giving the two older Jeremiah siblings parents, just like the people they reached out to in their ministry. Dave, who had been found by his family not even a year ago, would be likewise adopted, as soon as he decided which family he would formally join.

Initially Stormy couldn't comprehend why anyone would go to such ridiculous lengths as an adult, but the more time she spent with Uncle Joshua's family, the more she understood. It was about having a place where you belong. Sadly, she didn't have that sense of belonging even though both her parents were still alive. They'd divorced while she and her sister were still in grade school. Both were 'free spirits,' her father an artist and her mother a singer/songwriter. Stormy's childhood had been unsettling, shuffled between parents who were more childish and self-centered than their children.

Stormy's younger sister Lorna had been born with an unflappable soul. Nothing got to Lorna which made Stormy's misery that much more acute. Without even another lost child to commiserate with, Stormy had drifted through life, learning to hate it. Somewhere along the way she began to despise herself.

God only knows where that would've taken her if Grandma Perez hadn't been praying for them all. Lorna had found the Lord when she was fourteen. It had taken her three years to finally get through to Mom, another year for them to get to Dad. Stormy had been the last to fall in love with her Creator.

Five years ago Stormy had finally accepted God's love and salvation, but she still struggled with feeling unworthy of that love. That was one of the reasons why she was in Chicago for the summer, why she hadn't even started looking for a job. She might have her master's in music ministry, but she didn't believe it would do anyone any good because she was unworthy.

Stormy had met Heather and Jenni when Uncle Joshua got married at Christmas time. Since then, they had spoken into her life. They had begun to help her know the truth of who she was now. Stormy had come a long way in dumping the lies she'd always believed about herself. She had decided that today she would tell her cousins the truth about who she had been. She'd learned to trust these women, so now it was time to put it all on the line.

"I can't believe you're supposed to wait another three weeks," Stormy looked doubtfully at Jenni. "Are you going to be able to hold out 'til the end of July? You sure you're not having twins?"

"No we aren't," Jenni said emphatically. "We know that for certain. The gender is the only part we wanted to keep a mystery."

"It would be so cool to have twins," Heather grinned. "James and Hosea are so adorable."

"I made a deal with God and Pete," Jenni crossed her arms over the top of her belly. "No twins 'til after Pete retires from football. One baby's bad enough when Daddy's going to be gone so much the first six months of his life."

“At least Kara’s big enough to really help,” Stormy said. “Beth said Danny’s more a hindrance than a help.”

“But Beth has Greg home almost every night,” Jenni said firmly. “One active Daddy is better than a half dozen big sisters.”

“You have a point,” Heather agreed.

The waitress came by and they placed their orders. Stormy didn’t really want to eat, but she ordered a tuna melt anyway. Heather got the Chinese chicken salad and Jenni asked for a bacon cheeseburger with waffle fries.

When the waitress left, Stormy looked thoughtfully at her cousins. “Do you all like being a big sister?”

“I love it,” Jenni grinned, “especially now that I have one big brother to take the heat, more little brothers to pick on and sisters to love on and shop with!”

“I’ve got to agree with Jenni,” Heather laughed. “Little brothers are great to pick on, even when they end up bigger than you.”

“Especially when they end up bigger than you,” Jenni snickered. She’d already proven to Steve that she could still take him down even though he was now considerably larger than her.

“I wish I’d had a brother,” Stormy sighed. “Then maybe things would’ve been different.”

“I always wanted a sister when I was growing up,” Heather sighed sadly. “It would’ve been so cool to have someone to do girly things with.”

“I know what you mean,” Jenni nodded. “Steve was great, but there came a day when he no longer let me dress him up.”

“I’d love to see pictures of that,” Heather giggled.

“I hated being the big sister,” Stormy said suddenly. “Even though I loved Lorna, I hated having a sister.”

Heather and Jenni both stared at her in surprise.

“I guess that’s because I was a big sister in all ways,” Stormy stared sadly at the table. “Not only was I older than Lorna, I was larger too. We were compared from the time she was born, not so much by Mom and Dad but by Mom’s family. I was a nine pound baby, Lorna was an ounce under seven. I continued to be a rather heavy child even after I started walking. I was almost three when Lorna was born. Mom’s family had already nicknamed me Chubbly-Wubbly. Right away they gave Lorna a nickname too – Thumbelina because she was so tiny compared to me.

“When we got a little older, it was obvious that I was very smart and rather musically talented. Lorna was smart too and very artistic, just like Dad, but Mom’s family didn’t like him, so they refused to see that. All they could talk about was how smart, pretty and petite she was. The best they could come up with for me was that I was almost as talented and smart as Mom. Most of their comments were negative. I was compared to Lorna and told I was big, never

pretty and petite like her. Pretty and petite came to be synonymous in my mind. I wanted to be pretty but the best they would give me was ‘smart.’

“Obviously I wasn’t smart enough because when I was a pre-teen, I decided that the reason I wasn’t favored like Lorna was that I was fat. Mom’s family still frequently called me ‘Chubs.’ In fact, to this day one aunt has never called me anything but Chubs, so I knew I was fat. I hoped that if I wasn’t fat, Mom’s family would finally be able to see that Lorna wasn’t the only one who was pretty.

“Being smart, I decided that if I exercised and strictly followed the food pyramid I’d learned about in school I wouldn’t stay fat. It worked but there were a few problems. One, I hit my growth spurt and even though I slimmed down, I didn’t lose weight. Though I lost a dress size, the scale still said I weighed one-twenty, and it kept going upward as I got taller. But Lorna was still petite and babyish and I was still compared to her. Aunt Karen still called me Chubs.

“My portions got smaller. When I started high school, I was hardly ever eating meat. By the time I was sixteen, I was an avowed vegetarian.

“But I really had an eating disorder. It wasn’t severe enough for anyone to notice. I wasn’t totally anorexic when I graduated from high school, but by the end of my freshman year in college, I was.”

Stormy paused while the waitress served their meals. She resumed her story as soon as they were alone again.

“It started because I didn’t go to the cafeteria. I claimed the food was too nasty. I told myself that I didn’t want to take time away from my studies to find meals elsewhere. At first I kept my frig in the dorm stocked with fruit and veggies, but lots of times I didn’t remember to make my weekly run to the grocery store. By Christmas I was hardly eating at all. I drank juice everyday and took vitamins, kidding myself that I was still healthy.

“When I went home for the summer, Lorna was still the pretty, petite one. I was barely recognized at all which was preferable to the alternative. Aunt Karen still called me Chubs. I was five seven and weighed one hundred fifteen pounds, but she still saw the fat little girl.

“I decided that summer that I would disappear. I didn’t go home for holidays or any breaks for the rest of the time I was in college. Lorna started at the bible college here in Chicago my junior year. I was in Champaign at that time. I didn’t go see her. By the time my senior year rolled around, I lived on fruit juice and sports drinks. I weighed a hundred and ten pounds. Lorna decided not to go home for Christmas that year. She surprised me in Champaign. I surprised her even more.

“She knew immediately what was wrong. I was angry at her for coming and for so quickly discovering my secret. But she didn’t talk about the anorexia at all. She talked about Jesus. By the time she went back to Chicago for the spring semester, I was a Christian. Lorna had even found a church for me.

“I tried to eat healthier, and I did some, but it isn’t easy coming out of something like that. After I graduated with my bachelor’s in music theory, I enrolled in Lorna’s school the following fall. Since I didn’t know anything about my new faith, I figured that if I got a bachelor’s in theology, I’d be able to catch up some. I even had a fledgling idea of using my musical talents for the Lord. I stayed to get my master’s because I knew I was still way behind my peers when it comes to knowing God and the bible and how to live a Christian life.

“I’ve tried so hard to be a good Christian. It’s only been in the last year that I’ve begun to understand the truth that I won’t change by my power but by God’s.

“Honestly, I feel worthless right now. I have a master’s degree in theology but I don’t have the foundation to use it. Music I know, but to do it as a ministry? What was I thinking? Sure I have a theological degree, but I’m a broken person. I have no business being a leader in any church. And that’s what I’ll be if I take a job out there in the real world. I’ll be a leader in a church, but a very messed up one! I don’t want to be messed up, I want to be worthy to serve God. So how do I get there? How do I become someone who’s worthy to lead a ministry?”

Heather and Jenni looked at each other in surprise, then smiled at Stormy.

“It’s no wonder we get along so well with you,” Heather laughed. “I was told I wasn’t much of a girl, too big, too roughneck, too mechanically inclined. I decided that since I wasn’t much of a girl, I wasn’t going to get the ‘girly’ things, like a husband and a family.”

“You don’t sound much different from me either,” Jenni pushed back from the table and gently rubbed her belly. “I wasn’t going to marry Pete because I wasn’t worthy to be his wife. The circumstances of my past were different, but the results were the same. I was broken. I despised what I’d been. I was afraid I would fall back into my old habits.”

“We both still struggle with feeling unworthy to do what God’s called us to do,” Heather explained gently. “All we can tell you, Stormy, is that it’s not about us being worthy. We’re always going to be unworthy. What it is about is honoring God with our trust and obedience. God is able to complete whatever he starts in us, regardless of our weaknesses.”

“Don’t wait,” Jenni grinned at Heather. “No laters, no bumbai. Do it now Stormy. Find that job in music ministry. God will give you the strength to do the job right, whether or not you’re qualified in your own mind. Trust him.”

“Now, finish your sandwich,” Heather waved at the waitress. “We’re going to share one of those monster banana split things.”

Stormy ate the last few bites of her sandwich and chips. She felt good, better than she had in a long time. She actually thought she could share that rich dessert and enjoy it. Maybe she could find a job and enjoy that too.

Chapter 2

Tim Shepherd trailed behind the other students as he left his English class. He still wasn't very comfortable here in Oklahoma. It wasn't the fault of the state itself, it was the general attitude of the students. If he had stayed in Hawaii, he would have had friends at school whom he could hang out with, but here no one knew him. They knew he was a football player but that just made things worse.

Everyone seemed to have an opinion about 'jocks.' People believed they fell into one of two categories, sometimes both, either dumb or oversexed. Tim wasn't either, but he didn't know how to convince people of that fact.

Maybe Greg could help when he came to visit next weekend. Tim's big brother made friends just by walking into a room. People naturally gravitated to him. Even though Tim was five inches taller than his big brother, which made him an inch taller than their oldest brother, Luke, Tim knew it wasn't his intimidating size that kept people at bay. Greg outweighed him by at least ten pounds of muscle. He was built like a linebacker – exactly like a linebacker – Pete Kalaau, their brother-in-law and an eight year veteran of the Chicago Grizzlies. Tim was much less intimidating at six-ten and two hundred-thirty pounds, but wide receivers don't need to be intimidating, they need to be fast.

Tim knew that his problem with making friends was partly because he easily saw the shallowness of people and didn't tolerate it well. He should've been able to make friends on the team but unfortunately the problem with some stereotypes is that they're based in reality. In the case of the jocks, most of them *were* either non-intellectual or more than willing to barter their popularity for sexual favors. Tim didn't know if his teammates were trying to live down to the stereotypes or were really that shallow, but in the two months he'd been here he hadn't made any friends.

Tim's lack of friends was disturbing, but it was more than just having someone to hang out with. If he was going to have study partners, he needed to make friends, at least casual ones. His prospects in that direction weren't looking very good. Though classes had just started, way too many girls had

already made known their interest in him as a bed partner. The guys seemed to think he could help them pick up girls of their own. Tim wasn't interested in either of those kinds of so-called friends, but he wasn't sure how to find students who shared his interest in living a godly life.

It didn't help matters any that before he moved to Oklahoma to attend his brother-in-law Steve Jeremiah's alma mater, Tim had lived in the same house all his life. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been on the outside looking in. He'd always been surrounded by friends when meeting the new kids in school. He hadn't realized before what a position of power he'd had. Back home he'd been a popular kid, so he'd never had to worry about who truly fit the stereotypes and who was just making the right noises.

Now he was thousands of miles from his friends and he was the new kid, but as a Christian, Tim refused to make the noises. His size and family connection with both Steve, who was now in his tenth year as a professional football player, and with Pete Kalaau insured that the other players would leave him alone in spite of his refusal to fit their mold. But being left alone didn't help him make real friends, it just kept him from having to put up with false ones.

On Friday afternoon, Tim cut across the big grassy quadrangle. It was surrounded by buildings which were disgorging many students into the Quad which would soon have a dozen different clusters of students. Some would be playing football, some would be studying, some would be in pairs, some would be in large groups. He usually ignored them all, especially since there were always way too many girls looking at him like he was a prime piece of ahi in a fish market.

Today a small cluster of guys caught his attention. It almost looked like the bigger, better-dressed men were harassing the two geeky-looking younger guys. Tim really got ticked off about that kind of stuff. Rather than going around the group as he usually would have, he walked right up to them.

The biggest guy in the group looked to be about six-three and two-twenty without near as much muscle as Tim's big brother. He pushed one of the smaller boys. "I can't believe you had the guts to say hi to my girl. I oughta beat your face in."

"Aw, lighten up Curt." This guy was shorter but broader with considerably more muscle but apparently not much brains. "It isn't like he knows how to do anything. Dude's still a virgin, I'll bet."

Tim saw both the geeky boys flush a bright red. "Are you really?"

All six men turned and looked at him in surprise.

"Are you really what?" Guy Two asked.

"Are you guys really virgins?" Tim kept his attention focused on the two being bullied, ignoring the other men.

The young men looked at the ground and flushed a deeper red.

“That’s way cool,” Tim said, infusing his deep voice with an extra measure of excitement. “I was beginning to think I was the only guy on this campus who still was!”

All six men gaped at him as he grinned down at them. He wanted to laugh at their expressions, especially the older guys when they had to look up at him and still try to look down on him. They were totally shocked that such an obviously masculine man was still a virgin. That was the purview of geeks like the two boys staring at him in wonder.

“You are too?” the shorter one asked in awe. He had to be more than a foot shorter than Tim.

“Yep. When Steve Jeremiah married my sister, he said my brother Greg became the world’s largest virgin,” Tim still ignored the bigger guys, talking only to the two younger men. “Then Greg went and got married and passed the mantle on to me. Of course, I’ve already gotten bigger, well taller at least, than both of them, so if they hadn’t gotten married I woulda still taken it from them.”

“Steve Jeremiah of the Chicago Grizzlies?” One of the bullies asked.

Tim’s eyes flicked briefly to him but snapped quickly back to the boys he wanted to make friends with. “I’m Tim Shepherd. What’s your name?”

“I’m Brad and he’s Russell,” the taller one pointed appropriately.

Tim stepped into the center of the small circle, clearly joining the bullied boys as he extended his hand in friendship. With gratified grins, they each shook his hand. Tim didn’t look at the other men but he was well aware that they were shifting nervously. They were probably trying to decide what to do.

“Are you guys still virgins because you want to obey God?” Tim asked hopefully. It was great to meet other virgins but if they were Christians and knew a good church close by, that would be even better. Since he’d arrived in Oklahoma back in June, he’d visited a few different churches but he hadn’t found any place where he knew he belonged.

“He is,” Brad spoke again. “But I couldn’t get a girl to look at me in high school ’cause I’m such a geek. But I’m a Christian now too, so I’m kinda glad I’m a geek.”

“I know what you mean,” Tim laughed. “You guys got a church around here somewhere? I haven’t found a really good one yet.”

“Yeah, we go to White Stone Community Church,” Russell said.

“It’s a hike, but it’s worth it,” Brad was excited.

“I ain’t done with you yet, geek,” the biggest bully suddenly grabbed Brad’s arm.

Tim looked down at him in stunned amazement. “Man, I thought you were just kidding earlier. You weren’t? You really got your bowels in an uproar over him saying hi to your girl?”

Tim heard gasps of surprise from well beyond their small circle. He hadn’t

realized they'd gained an audience, but he should've figured it would happen.

The other man turned beet red and sputtered angrily. Tim decided to help him out.

"Dude, you gotta get over it. A gentleman's just naturally gonna say hi to a lady when he sees one. Brad's gotta say hi to your girl. Unless," Tim widened his eyes in surprise. "Unless you're saying your girl isn't a lady?" The man looked like he was about to explode. Tim sighed in obvious relief. "I didn't think that was the case. So get over it or get a girl who ain't a lady. We virgins-by-choice are gentlemen, and we're gonna say hi to the ladies. But don't worry," Tim leaned down and assured him with a plaintive sigh. "We wouldn't know what to do if a girl liked us anyway." Tim glanced at his new friends, grinned slyly and winked. He whispered loudly with another big grin. "My brothers say it's easy to figure it out on your wedding night."

Laughter flowed around them. The bullies suddenly realized they were surrounded by people who appeared to be on the side of the world's largest virgin. Guy One and Two grabbed the big one's arms and pulled him back.

"Come on Curt, let's go. Gina ain't gonna be bothered by punks like these."

Tim couldn't help himself. He shouldn't have done it, but he just couldn't stop the laughter. It was the fault of that darn Shepherd sense of humor, getting tickled by the strangest of things. He laughed so hard he couldn't stand straight. He bent over with both hands on his knees. After a few moments, he reached up and gripped Brad's shoulder.

"I can't wait to tell my brothers," he finally gasped out, "that I got called a *punk* by a *shrimp*!"

Once he got it out he burst into another round of loud laughter. Brad and Russell laughed with him. The laughter rippled out through the crowd, following the four retreating men. Curt was still furious, his "shrimp" friend looked embarrassed and slightly amused, and the other two were flat-out trying not to laugh.

"You guys in a hurry to get anywhere?" Tim finally controlled his laughter enough to talk to his new friends. "'Cause I think I need to have a seat and get my breath back. That was too funny."

"Technically I think he was calling Brad and Russell punks, not you." The girl was a cute little blond with a curvy figure and deep dimples. She stood with three friends, looking down at the boys who had sprawled in the grass.

"Hello ladies," Tim nodded his head. "Technically you'd be correct, I guess, but since Brad's my friend and that guy made it very clear that he considers Brad a punk because he's a virgin, then that has to make me a punk too."

"Maybe he thought Brad is a punk because he's kinda geeky." This girl was a little taller than her friend but slender enough that she looked like she could blow away in a moderate trade wind.

“Don’t think so. All he mentioned is the virginity thing.” Tim snorted and shook his head. “Like Brad couldn’t fix that if he thought it was something to fix.”

“Are you really a virgin?” This girl was short like the first one, but dark, darker even than Tim who had enough Hawaiian, African and Indian in him to be perpetually tanned.

“Yes ma’am, I am,” Tim said politely, “but if we’re gonna be having a conversation, you should probably sit and introduce yourself.” Tim looked around at about twenty other young men and women standing around watching them. He motioned toward them and whispered loudly to the four girls. “Are all these guys your friends?”

“I think they’re your friends now if you want them,” the fourth girl said dryly, dropping to the ground in front of him and staring at him like he was an interesting science experiment. “I’m Joylynne.”

Tim tried not to stare at the girl because that was rude, but it was hard. She was a natural redhead with a smattering of freckles and eyes a brilliant green like his dad’s. He’d seen that she was tall, maybe even as tall as his sister Heather who was an even six feet. Joylynne was intriguing, and it didn’t help him any that she was looking at him as if he were the intriguing one.

“Oh, I want friends all right,” Tim forced his attention away from Joylynne. He looked around at the small crowd that had gathered around him. “Sit and talk story awhile if you want. Introduce yourselves but please forgive me if I don’t remember all your names. When you see me again, please remind me of your name until I tell you I’ve got it, okay?”

He received a lot of answering grins as people dropped into the grass around him.

“What makes you think we’ll all remember your name?” Joylynne challenged him.

“Well, I’m a Shepherd,” Tim grinned sheepishly, “and we tend to do things that make people remember us.”

“I’m Sally,” the blond girl said. “Are you related to that guy in St. Louis?”

“What are you talking about?” Tim asked warily. There were two reasons why strangers knew about his brother Greg. One of those reasons the family didn’t like to talk about because they didn’t want to give anyone ideas about attempting a do-over. Greg had been kidnapped last November for a three million dollar ransom. After torturing him, his abductors had accused Greg of being part of a plot to defraud Steve who’d been the one tapped for the ransom. It had only been a couple months ago that Greg was legally found innocent in a trial.

“You gotta be,” the dark-skinned girl said. “That guy was Steve Jeremiah’s brother-in-law and so are you.”

“It seems you have me at a disadvantage,” Tim hid his sigh. Apparently everyone either already knew about Greg’s ordeal or they were going to find out soon.

“She’s Kendra and I’m Reylene,” the slender dark-haired one said. “Does your brother really have nail scars in his hands?”

“Yes, he does,” Tim said sadly. He hated thinking about that time.

“He runs that adoption program, doesn’t he?” Tim looked at Joylyne with surprise and relief. He loved talking about that part of Greg’s life! She gave him a small smile and he suspected that she had deliberately changed the subject.

“You know about The Ohana Project?”

“That’s it!” Sally said brightly.

“Pastor Charles was talking about it last week,” the young man had dropped into the grass behind Kendra and Reylene. “I’m Matt.”

“Hey, I bet I remember your name,” Tim grinned at him. “That’s my nephew’s name too. Forgive me if I call you brat, okay?”

“I got a nephew too, so I’ll just deny the brat part,” Matt grinned.

“Are too,” Tim laughed.

“Are not,” Matt snickered.

“Too.”

“Not.”

“Too too too.”

“You obviously both have nephews,” Kendra rolled her eyes.

“Probably more than one,” Joylyne shook her head slightly. “You do that too well to have only done it with one nephew.”

“I’ve got a few,” Tim nodded happily. “Four nieces and eight nephews, but I haven’t gotten to see my sister Jenni’s baby yet. Gideon’s just about a month old now.”

“About that adoption ministry, is it really for adults?” Brad asked. He wasn’t interested in talking about babies.

“Yeah, but we try to hook up with the existing programs for kids and cover all the bases.”

“What do you mean?” Tim wasn’t sure who asked that question. She was in a little cluster of kids behind and between Joylyne and Brad.

“Everyone needs a family, young and old. Whenever anyone talks about our ministry, they always make sure that people have all the options at hand. Some people might not be interested in adopting an adult, but they would adopt a kid out of the foster care system. We want them to have that option.”

“You should come to our church and talk to Pastor Charles,” Kendra said.

“You all go to the same church?” Tim asked. Brad, Russell and the four girls all nodded. A few more of the other young people clustered around him also nodded or raised their hand.

“We have a youth service tonight since it’s Friday,” Sally said brightly. “Why don’t you come with us?”

“I’d love to go with you guys, if it’s after practice. But I’m not the one you really want to talk to about The Ohana Project, my brother is.”

“Would he come this far?” Joylynne looked at him doubtfully.

“Even if I wasn’t here, he’d come to talk about God’s ministry if you wanted him to. But he’s planning on coming next weekend for the football game.”

“Pastor Charles is going to be so excited to meet you!” Sally literally bounced in excitement.

“What time is service?”

“Seven,” Kendra said.

“Then I gotta get some studying done first,” Tim rolled his eyes in pain. “Does anyone here have Calc I? I don’t know why I thought it was a good idea to take college calculus!”

“You’re the guy who sits in the back of the class and asks questions!” This girl wore a pair of wire framed glasses and was almost sitting on the lap of the boy beside her.

“I ask questions because I’m more than a little confused half the time,” Tim smiled ruefully. “And I sit in the back of the room so no one has to try to look around me. I’m a little bigger than the average guy.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Sally sighed. Joylynne rolled her eyes.

“I need to study.” Tim tried not to blush as he pulled his calculus textbook out of his backpack. He heard Joylynne’s soft laugh, then he noticed the textbook she pulled out of her bag. Tim suddenly realized he’d seen her in class. He was thrilled that she could help him study.

That discovery was surprising.

Now he was really trying not to blush!

Chapter 3

Pastor Charles Brown was still in his study when he heard the voices out in the multipurpose room. He looked up at the clock and was startled to see that it was already well past six-thirty. He'd lost track of time again. It seemed that happened every time he got out his GK Concordance. Or when he started digging into the commentaries. Or even just chasing leads in his cross reference bible.

Maybe that's why he was still single at thirty-nine. He never got out of his study long enough to meet women unless they came to a service at the church. But even then he didn't really get to meet them per se. He saw them and shook their hands after the service but then they were gone. Great-grandma was probably up there fussing at Jesus about sending a good Christian woman for her boy. He'd resisted her efforts when she was alive and he would continue to do so now that she was gone. He'd already had enough woman trouble to last a lifetime.

He knew he was safe tonight. It was the young adults' meeting and everyone was twenty years younger than him. Maybe that was one of the reasons why he enjoyed it so much. He didn't feel the pressure of failing to make the grade like he did with women closer to his own age. The curiosity and energy of the kids didn't hurt either. They helped him renew the joy of his salvation. He often needed it on Friday night since the council met every other Thursday. Thankfully yesterday had been an off day.

Pastor Charles shut down his computer and headed for the door, drawn to the eager voices like a moth to a flame. For the last two years, the Friday night young adult service had been attended by a dozen faithful young people. Half of them had gone to the church since they were babies, a few attended during the school year, and the rest had joined the group even though they went to other churches. Some of them were now in college and others were working. They occasionally brought friends, but the numbers always stayed close to twelve. Charles was shocked to see about twenty young people gathered in the room.

The girls whom he privately called the four princesses seemed to be the center of attention along with an extremely tall young man whom Charles had

never seen before though he looked vaguely familiar. For a few years now Joylynn, Kendra, Sally and Reylene had ruled the youth group. Only Sally and Reylene had regularly attended the church since childhood, but when Joylynn and Kendra had joined the youth group in their junior year of high school, the four girls had ruled the other students. It probably helped a lot that three of them were cousins and they had all known Kendra since kindergarten. These four were the ones most likely to bring someone else with them, but some dynamic was missing in the youth group. The kids would come but they wouldn't stay unless, like Joylynn and Kendra, they had a strong personal reason to stay.

Charles wasn't surprised that they had someone in tow tonight, but he was surprised at how many someones they had. There were twenty people and three of the regulars weren't even there yet. He stared in surprise at the group. Sally spotted him and broke away from her friends.

"Pastor Charles, you gotta come meet the new guy!" Sally rushed across the room, grabbed his arm and pulled him into the small cluster at the center of the room. "He's part of that family ministry you were talking about last week!"

Charles looked in surprise at the tall young man. He was blushing as he stepped toward Charles with his hand outstretched.

"I'm not really with The Ohana Project," the young man explained. Charles heard a slight accent he wasn't familiar with. It was soft with strange cadences and inflections. "But since my brothers run it, I'm rather familiar with it."

"And your name is ...?" Charles asked with a smile.

"Oh, sorry," the teen blushed. "Tim Shepherd. Luke and Greg are my brothers. Luke's the attorney and Greg's the minister. They're the ones who're actually part of the ministry. They pretty much run it."

"I've heard enough about The Ohana Project to pique my interest," Pastor Charles smiled at Sally, "as I'm sure my friend here has told you."

"She did seem rather excited about your interest," Tim gently teased Sally.

"Sally seems rather excited about everything," Joylynn laughed at her cousin.

Sally tossed her head and stuck out her tongue. "I won't be a stick in the mud just so you don't look like Grumpy Bear."

"Don't worry Sally," Tim patted the girl on her shoulder. "My brother's annoyingly cheerful too and he has a lot more real friends than I do."

"But didn't those guys who kidnapped him beat him up pretty bad because he wouldn't shut up?" Kendra asked, grinning slyly at Sally.

"There's that," Tim shrugged sadly. "I guess you take your chances Sally."

"Stick with being cheerful," Pastor Charles recommended to Sally. "It pays off in the long run. But right now, how about you introduce me to the rest of your friends?"

Sally bounced off beside Pastor Charles.

"You don't like talking about your brother," Joylynn said quietly to Tim as

the others all followed Sally and the pastor.

“Wrong. I love talking about my brother,” Tim corrected her. “He’s awesome. I just don’t like talking about his ... ordeal. It was”

How do you explain something like that to someone as pure and innocent as this girl? If he lived to be a hundred, he would probably still remember the sound of his brother screaming as that nail was driven through his hand.

“What do you like talking about?” Joylynn asked.

“My family’s the coolest.” Tim’s eyes lit up. “I love hanging out with them. We have lots of fun but you never know when something serious will break out.”

“Like what?” Brad had wandered back over to join them. Russell had followed him like a shadow. It seemed they were two peas in a pod, best friends who never got far away from each other. Tim would bet that they even had most of the same classes.

“Well, like the time we were filling my sister’s tub with Jell-O,” Tim smiled at his new friends. “My little brother asked Greg and Steve why it wasn’t setting up right, even though we cranked Heather’s air conditioning to freezing and even turned a fan on. Greg poked at the Jell-O and shrugged.

“‘This is an awful big project,’ he said, ‘and it probably needs some adjustments that we can’t figure out with our back-of-the-box-instructions knowledge. To do it right, we’d have to call on someone a whole lot wiser in the ways of Jell-O. We’ll get the job done well enough without help, but it won’t be the best it could be.’

“He grinned at us in that surprised-I-figured-this-out way that he has and says, ‘Becoming a man’s a lot like that. We’re gonna do it and we’ll get by, even if we don’t get God’s help, but he’s the expert. If we’re gonna be satisfied to be a tubful of half-set Jell-O, no problem not asking for more than the basic instructions. But if we’re gonna be solid yet still transparent like well-set Jell-O, we’ve gotta call on God.’”

“I bet you think of God whenever you eat Jell-O now,” Joylynn grinned.

Tim grinned back and nodded. “Oh yeah. I sure do.”

“Your brother sounds so cool,” Russell said. “He’d really like Pastor Charles.”

“Why’s that?” Tim asked.

“‘Cause Pastor does the same stuff,” Brad answered.

“Last year he taught us about sex at the Harvest Festival,” Russell said.

“Bobbing for apples versus caramel apples,” Joylynn grinned broadly.

“You’ll waste your time and make a mess by fumbling around at the tank grabbing for apples all the wrong way,” Kendra had also rejoined them.

“Sex is like that if you do it before marriage,” Brad said shyly. He obviously wasn’t too comfortable talking about sex, at least around girls. “You’re handicapped, just like when you bob for apples and you’ve got to keep your

hands behind you and you can't really see what you're doing because you're sticking your face in the water."

"When you have premarital sex you get some experiences, but it's not the right kind," Joylynn picked up the tale. "Sometimes all you get is a mouthful of water. Sometimes you brush up against an apple. You might even get your teeth in an apple or two. But you don't get a really good connection with something worth keeping."

"Besides which," Kendra shuddered, "you're sticking your face in something that lots of other people have been in. How gross is that?"

"But God has something better," Joylynn smiled shyly. "If you can resist the temptation to bob for apples, there's a platter of caramel apples waiting for you. Look those apples over carefully and pick the one that's the best."

"They're better in so many ways than what you find in the tank," Pastor Charles joined the group, grinning broadly. "I'm glad to hear that you all remembered that lesson, but now it's time to come together for a new lesson."

"Are we talking about sex again tonight?" Russell asked eagerly.

"Sex isn't the only thing to talk about Russell," the pastor seemed to be trying not to laugh.

"Yeah, I know," Russell sighed, "but it's one of the best things to talk about."

"What are we talking about tonight, Pastor Charles?" Kendra followed the pastor as he led them toward the sanctuary.

"We're talking about hearing the voice of God," Pastor Charles replied.

"That's a cool topic!" Tim said cheerfully.

"Better than sex?" one of the girls asked coyly.

Pastor Charles looked at her with a thoughtful frown. "Of course it is Amy. Sex is just one of the things God talks about, one of the gifts he's given us. We need to learn to hear the voice of God so we know for ourselves what he says about sex, and every other topic too."

Tim grinned down at Joylynn and whispered, "He does sound a lot like my brother. Does he lecture about biblical context too?"

"Only all the time," Joylynn laughed softly as they found seats in the back of the small group.

Tim was surprised when the pastor turned on a worship CD after his opening prayer.

"What, no worship band?" he whispered to Joylynn.

"We had a guitar player," she whispered back, "but he graduated last spring. We tried the church organist for a while but *bor-ing*. This is better. Trust me."

"You need a musician," Tim whispered again, sinking down lower in his seat because Pastor Charles was looking at them.

"Send one our way, please," Joylynn smiled serenely at the pastor. "I know Pastor Charles is looking for one."

“Maybe I will,” Tim muttered to himself as he realized he did know a Christian musician, his cousin Stormy. If the family grapevine was correct, she was looking for a job.

The worship was difficult to get into, but Tim really liked the way bible reading was an important part of the service. When Pastor Charles preached, it was more like talking out in the backyard than listening to a preacher. Tim was surprised but not too much – the man was like Greg – when Pastor Charles told the youth that they had to check *every* voice against God’s, including his.

“I make mistakes,” the pastor said earnestly. “Like last week when we were talking about the Holy Spirit in Acts. I got carried away and said something that wasn’t in the bible. Did anyone catch me?”

Joylynne and Brad both raised their hands. The pastor nodded at Brad. “What did you catch?”

“You said the earth shook when the Holy Spirit filled the believers on the Day of Pentecost, but that was the wrong time. It was at the end of Acts 4 that the earth shook, not in Acts 2.”

“Excellent Brad!” Pastor Charles grinned then grimaced. “But not so good for me. I taught you something wrong. I’m glad some of you learned from my finer moments and read for yourself the passages that I referenced in last week’s message.”

By the end of the service, Tim was certain he’d found his new church home, but they really did need to do something about the worship. He would call Greg and get his advice on how to see if Stormy wanted to move to Oklahoma and if Pastor Charles wanted to hire her.