

“Okay then,” Brian turned back to Phil. “I messed up Phil. I hope you can forgive me.”

“You?” Phil looked up in surprise. “But I –”

“You’ve been my best friend for the better part of two years,” Brian said sadly. “In the last few months I knew something was really bothering you, but I didn’t step out of myself long enough to ask you about it. I don’t know if that would’ve changed things for you, but I’m sure it could have.”

Phil shook his head slowly, staring at Brian with a puzzled frown.

“God intended for us to be in relationships, Phil. One of the reasons for that is because sometimes things happen in life that we can’t handle by ourselves. We need help from friends and family. If you had shared your struggles with me, I could’ve helped, I’m sure. If I had shared my struggles with you, you would’ve helped me. If I had let you talk to me about Cait before this past week, I probably would’ve courted and married her a year ago. If you had talked to me about your mom, I would’ve helped you balance your conflicted feelings. I also would’ve found out who your father was, long before you found that letter. Things would’ve been different. So this ordeal was partly my fault.”

“But I attacked Mark and Lisa, you and Cait,” Phil looked down again. “That wasn’t your fault.”

“I’m not convinced it was your fault either,” Brian said softly. “Not Phil’s fault. It was Aaron. I don’t know how all that works, but so what anyway?”

“What?” Phil was shocked.

“What did you do that isn’t common to man, Phil?” Brian shrugged. “Jesus said if you call your brother a fool it’s no different from being guilty of murder. Functionally, there are no ‘greater’ or ‘lesser’ sins. Sin is sin.

“It doesn’t matter what you did Phil, it only matters what you decide you’re going to give to God to let him wash away. I have an ugly side of me, so does Cait. When we let those ugly sides out, it’s with more foreknowledge and intent than when Aaron rose up in you. I don’t know them that well, but I’m betting it’s the same with Chief and Davin and Doug. We’re all as guilty as you. If you can’t be forgiven, none of us can.”

Phil looked at the other men. Davin and Doug were nodding in agreement. Chief stared at his boots with a thoughtful frown.

“I love you like a brother, Phil,” Brian said earnestly. “Nothing that’s happened has diminished my affection for you. In fact, I owe you more now than I did before.”

“How’s that?” Phil asked warily.

“It’s like you said Saturday morning,” Brian grinned slightly. “You did me a favor.”

Phil thought about that for a moment then grinned too. “I guess I did.”

“I’m going to go to Georgia tonight to try to bring Cait back here,” Brian said, “but even if she won’t come back, I’m going to. I’m not going to have a family come popping out of the woodwork for me. I’ve already messed up my other relationships, so you’re all I’ve got. I’m going to stand beside you and help you through this.”

“I’ll be with you too, Phil,” Davin wrapped his arm around his son. “I lost out on all those years, I’m not going to miss out anymore.”

“We’ll all stand beside you,” Doug agreed with his father. “It’s not going to be easy for any of us, but Mark’s already said he forgives you. He’s excited to have a little brother. We’ll get through this.”

“A prayer’ll get us off to a good start,” Brian said, bowing his head and getting right to it. “Lord, this is a strange situation for all of us. We don’t know what happened to cause Phil to develop this problem, but you do. You know how to get rid of Aaron for good and to heal Phil. Please keep Cait safe and bring her home to her family. We’re trusting you to show us the way. Shine your light and expose the shadows that exist in all of us. Show us your truth so that we can deal with it and heal from it. Give all of us your grace and mercy. Light the way as we venture into this unknown territory. We know we’re safe in your arms, Jesus.”