

Chapter One

Sam Morgan stared at the shabby sign outside the old dilapidated Victorian. In peeling paint it read:

Grace House Women's Center
Giving women a fresh start during troublesome times.

A fresh start. That's what he wanted for himself and his son, Joshua. But he worried he'd had more than his fair share of fresh starts... How many fresh starts could a person, a family be allowed to have? One? Two? An unlimited number?

Apart from college, Sam had lived in Golden Ridge, Missouri, all his life. He'd met his wife, Vicky, there and they had their son in Golden Ridge. He thought he'd die here in this small town nestled close to Big Golden Ridge Lake. Years ago any person who spent a pleasant sunny afternoon in Golden Ridge would have thought, what a wonderful carefree place. The people are so friendly with their easy talk and warm smiles. And the homes in this town are so well-kept. What a delightful place to live in and raise a family.

Those used to be his thoughts and dreams. To live a perfect life in this perfect town. But he'd been wrong. Now this place brought him nothing but sorrow. This town reminded him of failed promises and death: the death of his parents, death of his wife, and the death of his dreams. His spirit was as worn out as the broken-down house and neighborhood before him. It was time to collect his son and try to piece together their lives elsewhere. Away from the painful memories Golden Ridge held around every corner.

A gentle clinking sound drew his gaze to a small wooden sign swinging on metal chains below the larger one. In bold black letters the words leapt off the stark white sign:

Now Open
Grace House Preschool
Serving the Community of Golden Ridge
All Children Welcome

Sam looked at his watch. Five o'clock. School should be out and hopefully most of the kids had gone home. Well, at least those who didn't live there with their mothers. Sam walked up the path to the house. He paused at the steps and clutched the railing. The time had come for him and Joshua to start anew.

* * *

"No, I won't go!"

Sam's gut wrenched at his son's panic-filled cry. He'd known this wouldn't be easy for Joshua, but he didn't think getting his son to leave Grace House would be this hard. Like a recurring nightmare, he was disappointing Joshua again. Huge tears spilled from his son's eyes as he clung to the hem of his caregiver's skirt. Sam had tried to cajole Joshua out of Grace House and into the car. They'd gotten as far as the foyer when everything stalled.

A more direct approach was needed. He took a deep breath and took hold of his son's arm. "Joshua, I'm sorry. You can't stay here. Mommy doesn't live here anymore. It's just you and me, buddy. We're going to be okay. I promise." He buffered his gruff actions with a smile.

Unfortunately, Joshua wasn't buying any of it.

"No. No. No. I want to stay with Miss 'Cole." Joshua turned his tear-streaked face up to Nicole James. "Tell him. Mommy wanted me to stay with you while she's in heaven."

Sam's heart constricted. No child should ever have to lose their mother. And no child should have to carry the weight of such a loss alone. Especially not alone. Sam had known that and thought of his son while he worked overseas, but at the same time he'd grasped at reasons not to return and face the reality of his wife's passing.

Some father you are, he told himself.

Miss James rubbed a gentle hand over the boy's curly, dark honey-colored hair. "Joshua, your daddy wants to take you home, but I'm sure he'll bring you back for preschool tomorrow." Her green-flecked eyes narrowed as she lifted her chin and glared at Sam, challenging him to defy her words. "Won't you?"

She had to be kidding. He had no intention of bringing his five-year-old son back there tomorrow or any other day. He had a realtor to contact and movers to talk to. Regardless of whether or not their house sold right away, he planned to roll out of Golden Ridge, Missouri as

soon as possible. He postponed several surgeries in Guatemala after he'd learned of Vicky's death. People were counting on him to return, ASAP.

With Vicky gone there was nothing left for them in Missouri. He had responsibilities and Joshua—even with his disability—would adjust in time. His son would be fine once they got away from all the misery and sad reminders Golden Ridge had to offer...and the iron-spined redhead standing in front of them.

Though he didn't know her well, Sam had exchanged a few pleasantries with Miss James at church. He knew the attractive twenty-something-year-old was co-owner of Grace House, which apparently just opened a preschool. But beyond that he knew little else. In letters she wrote and during phone calls, his wife had raved about the support she and Joshua received there when they returned from Guatemala. He didn't care if Miss James was the best preschool teacher in all of Missouri. Right now she was the roadblock that stood between him and his son.

Sam gritted his teeth. "Come on, Joshua. Daddy is going to take you back to Guatemala. You remember. You and Mommy were there for a month. Remember Jario? The man who made the wooden flutes? You liked the songs he played."

Joshua yanked his arm from Sam's grip and seized Miss James' legs like she was a buoy keeping him afloat during a dangerous ocean storm. "No. I don't 'member. I don't. I don't. I don't." There was no negotiating with him now: Once his son hit the "fit" stage, Sam knew it was all over.

"Dr. Morgan, please," the teacher said. "Joshua is having a hard time dealing with change. Most young children with his condition do. And because of his short-term memory problems, and his mother's accident and death, he's even having problems remembering you."

My God. they hadn't been apart that long, had they? Sam's mind ticked away the months. *Could five months erase a child's memory of their father?* Not normally, but a child with severe Fetal Alcohol Syndrome might forget... Guilt tightened its band across his chest.

Sam rubbed a hand across his aching forehead. "Look, Miss James, I appreciate all you've done for my son, but now it's time for Joshua and me to make a new life." *Away from Golden Ridge.* "There are only bad memories for us here."

She squeezed Joshua closer. "I mean no disrespect, but I was working with Joshua and his mother while you were gone. Joshua has made excellent progress at Grace House's Preschool and since your wife moved here she...was working very hard too."

The pause in Miss James words was worth a thousand words. Though this young teacher didn't want to admit it, in the end, Vicky had fallen off the wagon again. All the years of therapy hadn't changed the outcome. Vicky's alcoholism had finally killed her, albeit with a car and a tree. Had she stayed sober, she wouldn't have hit that maple tree and Joshua would still have a mother.

Miss James lifted her pretty chin another notch. "I think you should consider enrolling him in the kindergarten program we're starting this fall. The more things stay the same, the better off Joshua will be. Trust me."

I love my son and am not doing anything wrong. Why should I trust her—a stranger to me—to know what's best for Joshua?

No way. He was done with those words. He'd trusted his wife would remain sober. He'd trusted God would help her stay that way too. His gut tightened. He'd trusted everyone else—his whole life. And look where that had gotten him and Joshua.

"I don't think that's going to happen."

Why had Vicky started drinking again? Going to Guatemala had originally been her idea. She'd been so enthusiastic when they thought about giving a year of service to the International Surgical Christian Outreach Program. She'd said it was God's will, His plan for their family. She'd thought a year in Guatemala would do their marriage a world of good too. Sam had hoped she was right, for their marriage could use all the help it could get after years of lies and deceit.

He'd wanted a new start just as much as she had. He wanted the fun-loving, caring wife he married years ago and he was willing to do almost anything to have her healed of her addiction. Even if it meant spending a year away from his home. But a month after arriving in Guatemala, Vicky had packed up and left with Joshua, blaming his son's FAS for why they couldn't stay. However, Sam had signed a year's contract with ISCOP. They desperately needed his services and before she left, Vicky made it pretty clear she didn't want him back home right away either.

The move hadn't changed a thing. She was still unhappy and he hadn't a clue about how to change her attitude. So he honored the terms of his contract and made a decision he'd regretted every day since Vicky's death.

The air seeped out of Sam's lungs as he eyed the young woman pensively. "Come on, Joshua."

Miss James' hand covered his. "Please, Doctor Morgan."

At one time, he'd believed this woman could keep Vicky sober in his absence and change her back into the woman he'd married long ago. He'd believed Grace House offered the answer to his prayers.

Some answer. He hadn't even been gone four months when Vicky served him divorce papers. To top it off, she had moved into Grace House with Joshua. Her letter had been pretty clear: *"I hate everything about you. Even your house."* He couldn't get rid of the niggling feeling that Miss James had something to do with that. Sam knew he should have come home as soon as he was served the divorce papers, but he thought helping a kid who had been waiting for eighteen months for a new jaw was more important. Besides, deep down, Sam knew his marriage was finished... That going back right away wasn't going to change the outcome for any of them.

Clearly his decision to stay overseas had been wrong and Joshua was suffering as a consequence. Sam pried Joshua away from the not-so-tender grip of the delicately built Miss James. "Sorry, we have to go."

His son kicked and shrieked, his wide open mouth displaying his crooked baby teeth; that too was caused by FAS. Well, at least that was fixable—if Joshua would sit in a dental chair. At the moment, his son twisted and turned, flailing his limbs. Sam mentally sighed. He could straighten teeth, but he'd never be able to fix Joshua's mind or change the past for either of them.

A second later that set of tiny teeth latched onto his hand. In surprise and pain, his grip loosened and Joshua made a beeline for the stairs and his bedroom. His son was out of sight in less time than it took a hummingbird to blink.

Beads of blood left an imprint of uneven teeth on the side of Sam's hand. The wound stung, but not as much as the pain in his heart. He'd known things would be tough when he returned home, but he hadn't expected his son to freak out at the sight of him.

Miss James took his hand in hers, examining the slight injury. "You're hurt."

Her hands were warm and soft as she gently touched the side of his hand, running her fingertip over the wound. She had all the earmarks of being a caring, loving person, but he knew better than to believe that. If it wasn't for Nicole James, he'd probably still have a wife waiting for him at home. Not to mention a son who didn't screech at the sight of him.

He pulled his hand away. "It's nothing major."

Her brow wrinkled. "I don't know. Bite wounds can cause serious infections. You really

should—”

“I’m an oral surgeon—I got it.”

The metal rod returned to her spine. “Of course, you know best.”

Now she got it. He did know best. This town was bad news with its reminders of his parents wasted lives and his dead wife. If he had gotten his family away from this town years ago maybe things would be different now. He should have insisted that Vicky and Joshua stay with him in Guatemala. But he had trusted Vicky’s judgment. He had trusted God. He had trusted the good people of Golden Ridge. Trusted all of them to watch over Joshua.

But no more blind trust. No more bad decisions. He couldn’t handle making even one more mistake. Looking up to where his son had retreated, Sam took a deep breath and made for the stairs, but Miss James stepped in front of him.

“I think you should leave Joshua here for the night. This has been his home since before his mother’s death and I think we should try to keep things as normal as possible for him.”

Sam had managed to make it back for the funeral, but obviously not fast enough. Pastor Martin said Joshua was in excellent hands. At the moment Sam felt that statement was up for debate.

“I know this is hard for Joshua,” Sam inched toward the stairs, “but staying here longer than necessary will only make things worse. You’ve known him for five months. I’m his father. I’ve known him his whole life.”

Miss James didn’t back down. Instead she rose up on the bottom step and looked him in the eye. “He’s still very shaken up from losing his mother. Uprooting him before he can come to terms with his mother’s death could mentally scar him for life. I am sure all he needs is a few more months of stability—in Golden Ridge.”

Heat rushed over Sam’s body and he broke out into a sweat. “I disagree. The sooner Joshua forgets this place, the better.” Sam winced at the forcefulness of his voice. *Was he mad at her or at himself?* He should have been here for Joshua when Vicky died rather than leaving his son with a stranger. Things seemed clearer on this side of the equator, away from so much need.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Morgan, w-we all think it is important for Joshua to stay awhile longer,” she stammered.

“We? Who’s we?” He clenched his hands at his sides, controlling the urge to push her out of the way and make his way up the stairs to his son.

She shot a glance at his fists and then put a hand to her throat. “Why Pastor Martin and me—”

“I’m Joshua’s father. I know what he needs. You and the good pastor think you know what is best for my son? What credential gives you that right? Well I disagree. Now if you’ll excuse me.” Sam made another attempt to step around Miss James, but she quickly blocked his way again.

She held out her dainty, though shaking, and white palm. Bold as the angel guarding the entrance into Eden, she raised her chin. “Please, Dr. Morgan, you and Joshua are very upset. I’m sure you want to do what is best for your son. What’s one more day after all? He *did* just lose his mother.”

Sam should have pushed her aside and headed up the stairs, but her words took the fight out of him...and he sensed Miss James wouldn’t back down. For a little thing, she sure was filled with grit. Sam pulled his hand across the back of his neck. What difference would one more day make? After all, Joshua had become used to not having his father around for long periods of time.

“All right, Miss James. Joshua can stay the night, but...”—Sam gave her a pointed look to make sure she knew he meant business—“I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon. Please make sure Joshua is ready to leave by then.”

Without another word, Sam stalked across the foyer but closed the door quietly behind him. Tomorrow he’d collect his son and then return with him to the surgical mission clinic in Guatemala. Obligations had to be met there before Joshua and he could move on to their new life. At least at the mission clinic, Sam knew he was doing something good. But here...in this town...his failures as a husband and father seemed to taunt him from every place Vicky and he used to walk.

What did he always pray in the Lord’s Prayer? *Thy will be done.*

Cynical laughter stuck in Sam’s throat. *This was God’s will?* What kind of God would leave a disabled boy motherless?

He’d go back to the Guatemalan mission and do the surgical dentistry, but nothing more. He’d leave the preaching and teaching of God’s word to the ministers, because deep down he finally knew the truth—God really didn’t exist for him.