



Keeping the Faith: Still Running (Book 2)

Deleted/Alternate Scenes

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The Songs of Keeping the Faith

Chapter 31: Slander

The song that Susana sings to Chris (p. 231)

Paraphrased from **Psalm 27:1-3, 13-14**:

*He is my light and my salvation
whom shall I fear?*

*He is the stronghold of my life
whom shall I fear?*

*When evil men advance against me, when enemies and foes attack me,
They will stumble and fall.*

*Though an army besiege me, though war break out against me,
My heart will not fear.*

*Of this I can be sure:
I will see his goodness.
I will wait for him; I will take heart,
For I will see his goodness.*

Chapter 32: War

The song Debora sings while comforting Chris here (p. 240), as well as in the first book after his father dies

Paraphrased from **Psalm 55** (First stanza: v. 4, 6, 8; Chorus: v. 5, 16, 22; Second stanza: v. 1, 2, 23).

*My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me.
Oh, that I had wings of a dove! To fly away and be at rest –
I would hurry to my place of shelter
far from the tempest and storm.*

*Hear me, do not ignore my plea;
Hear me and answer, for I will trust in you.*

*Fear and trembling beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.
I call to you and you save me, you hear my voice.
I will cast my cares on you,
and you will sustain me.*

*Hear me, do not ignore my plea;
Hear me and answer, for I will trust in you.*

Chapter 36: Perversities

The song Mrs. Jenkins and Stanley sing while fleeing (p. 270)

Paraphrased from **Psalm 91:9-13**.

*If you make him your dwelling,
No harm will befall you.
He commands his guards concerning you
And they'll keep you in all your ways;
They will lift you up in their hands,
So you won't hurt your foot on a stone.*

*You will tread on the lion,
You'll trample the cobra.
If you make him your dwelling.
If you make him your home.*

Chapter 1: Extended Version

[Second scene follows this:]

“Thank you, Mr. Lang,” Chris said. “And I’m sorry about your wife.”

“Thank you. And you’re welcome. But please call me Don.” With a warm smile, he added, “Congratulations. Enjoy your life together.”

* * * * *



Susana awoke slowly the next morning, savoring every sensation: the warmth of Chris’s chest against her cheek, his soft breaths tickling her hair, the faint scent of his aftershave mingled with her perfume. A deep appreciation for waking up next to this man of integrity, compassion, and faith washed over her. She was a truly lucky woman. Right now—in this exact moment—she had everything she had ever wanted.

But for how long?

She squirmed as she remembered that picture of Don staring sorrowfully out the window. He still looked so young, with so much life ahead of him. Yet his one true love had already been taken from him. What if the same thing happened to her?

But there she went—worrying again. Didn’t her coach, Debora Damour, often warn her of its futility, even danger?

Yet Susana knew better than most people how quickly life could change. From the time she was eight until just nine days ago, she had been disfigured by burn scars, the result of a neighbor’s momentary carelessness. As a result, she had been teased mercilessly for most of her life. In fact, until she met Chris, the only guy to ask her out had done it as a cruel joke.

That incident had forced her to accept her lot in life. That very day, she sat herself down in front of a mirror and gave herself a good talking to: she, Susana López, was just plain ugly. No sensible guy would ever consider her a desirable woman. It would save a lot of heartache if she simply accepted that truth

and lived her life without expecting to find that class of love. That night, she had gone so far as to purge her life of all reminders of such a fantasy.

Well, except for one. Tucked underneath everything in the bottom drawer of her dresser, she had kept one picture she couldn't bear to give up, one childhood drawing of her dream family. Occasionally she would pull it out and study the people making sandcastles at the beach: herself, a husband, one daughter named Bethany, and three sons.

She smiled as she reminded herself: that impossible fantasy was actually possible now! She now had the husband that could make that perfect dream come true.

She sighed softly. Yes, her life was perfect at this moment. Right now, she was perfectly happy. So, rather than questioning it, she would capture this feeling of absolute contentment in her heart like a moth in a jar, and she would hold it there all day. She would choose not to worry about the future she couldn't see.

When Chris awoke, they settled in to read *The Runner's Manual* and talk to Doug Damour via the transmitters they wore on unbreakable chains around their necks. During the week since the wedding, this had already become a treasured part of their morning routine. Then they went down to the hotel's outdoor pool to work out in the brisk, invigorating water. Being a little tired, Susana cut her exercise short. She sat at a table in the drizzling rain to wait while Chris finished his workout.

[and that's when she meets Camille disguised as Don Lang ...]

Chapter 7.5: My Portion

*“Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup;
You have made my lot secure.” Psalm 16:5*

Harry flung himself onto the ball to block a goal, his kneepads squeaking on the wood floor of the indoor soccer court. Chris jumped up and cheered just as the buzzer signaled the game’s end.

“Way to block, Harry!” Chris called. “Great game!”

Harry turned a huge grin in Chris’s direction and then ran to give him a sweaty hug. “Thanks, Uncle Chris.” He motioned for Chris to bend down and, with his brown eyes gleaming, said, “Coach said if I do good tonight, I can be goalie all the time!”

The excitement in Harry’s voice alone was worth every one of the many hours Chris had spent practicing with him. Harry wasn’t blessed with innate athletic ability—or musical talent, outstanding intelligence, popularity, or anything else that would win him much attention. But he was a persistent kid who wasn’t afraid to work hard. When he’d shown an interest in soccer, Chris had done all he could to help him succeed, knowing that helping a child find something—anything—he could do well would help him develop healthy self-esteem.

As Harry’s team was getting the traditional congratulatory hand slaps from the other team, Chris noticed a tall blond man with wire-rim glasses who was watching the children from the doorway. He’d seen the man around a lot lately but didn’t know who he was.

Just then, Harry’s coach, an energetic sun-bleached blond, walked up to Chris with his hand out. “What do you think, Chris?”

Shaking his old high-school buddy’s hand, Chris said, “I think you do good work, Art. The team looked great tonight.”

“When did you get so modest?” Art said. “The way I hear it, I owe my new goalie’s marked improvement to your coaching at home.”

Chris shrugged. “Oh, I may have helped a little. “But mostly it’s just Harry’s hard work.”

“Well, whatever you did, are you willing to spread it around?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m wondering if you’d help me as an assistant coach. You’re so good with the kids and your dad used to spend a lot of time volunteering here. I’m hoping he may have passed his interest on to you.”

“I’d love to. And it wouldn’t be any trouble. I’m already here for their practices. But we’re moving up north for school this fall.”

“That’s okay. I’ll take what I can get. I’ll give you the paperwork right now. We’ll have to do the usual background check and all—working with kids, you know—but we should be ready to go soon.”

* * *

After Harry’s soccer practice the following week, Art pulled Chris aside. “I’m really embarrassed about this, but—” He averted his hazel eyes. “Well, the director’s decided to turn down your application for volunteer work.”

Chris stood momentarily speechless. “What? Why?” Then it occurred to him that it may have something to do with his bogus convictions in Falso County the year before. Josh had worked hard to get that not only overturned, but altogether expunged, so if anything had shown up on his background check, Chris wanted to know about it. “Maybe I should talk to Mr. Mendoza. I’m sure I can explain the problem.”

“Mr. Mendoza’s not here anymore,” Art said. “And I can’t tell you why the new director’s turning you down because I honestly don’t understand it myself. I snuck a look at the paperwork when he was out of the office and everything’s perfect—your background check, everything.”

He looked around before continuing in a low tone. “To tell the truth, I’m thinking about appealing the decision. I have a suspicion it has something to do with that guy.” Art nodded in the direction of the tall blond man Chris had noticed the week before. “He’s a close friend of the new director’s, and I heard him mention your application, even though he’s got no right to even know about it.”

Chris shook his head. “Don’t worry about it, Art. The fact is, I’m only going to be here a few months. I have to admit I’m disappointed—I’d actually gotten pretty excited about it—but by the time you get anywhere with an appeal, I’d be up north.”

Art nodded. “Yeah, that’s true. But I’m really miffed about this. Not only is it personally embarrassing, but I think there are some kids here who would benefit from your attention, even if only for a few months. Still, I understand what you’re saying, and I admire your attitude. It’s unusual to see someone willing to shrug off a slight like that.”

“I’m not sure I deserve your admiration. Not so long ago, I’d have been revving up for a fight. But since I ran Doug Damour’s race, I’ve learned to see things from a broader perspective. I guess I don’t take things as personally as I used to.”

“I have noticed you’ve changed. If you say it’s because of that race, maybe I should do it myself.”

Chris patted him on the shoulder. “You should, Art. You’ll never regret it.”

[The “tall blond man with wire-rim glasses” was to be another of Adlai’s aliases. I intended to develop this story thread further, but it didn’t really help the overall book.]

Chapter 17.5: Pregnant?

“Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a reward from him.”
Psalm 127:3, NLT

“Oh, no,” Susana groaned. Sitting down on the toilet lid, she stared at the plus sign on the home pregnancy test. “How am I going to tell Chris?”

They both loved kids; they both wanted kids. Just not now when they were starting grad school. Managing a newborn while they were in busy and demanding programs would simply be too hard. And this was entirely her fault, too. With all the bustle and confusion of the move from Ventura, she’d forgotten to take several of her pills.

What would be the best way to tell Chris? Maybe she should make him a nice dinner with all his favorite foods and tell him when he was in a good mood. Or maybe she should write it out in a note and let him get over the worst of his anger before she saw him. No, that seemed kind of cowardly.

She checked the test again—still positive—and threw it into the trash can, wadding up some toilet paper on top of it so it wouldn’t be visible. Then she finished getting ready for classes.

But she had trouble concentrating all day. Her mind kept wandering back to the question of how Chris would take the news. He didn’t get angry very often or very easily, and he’d gotten better about talking through problems. Still, she couldn’t blame him for getting mad about this. She’d really blown it.

She eventually decided she would break the news over his favorite meal, so went grocery shopping after classes. In the store, she rolled her cart past a couple with an obviously unhappy toddler. The stressed-out mother was trying to soothe him, bounce him, feed him—anything to quiet him. Meanwhile the father ordered, “Shut him up, would you?”

The young mother’s palpable frustration gave Susana a headache. Then, when she got to the checkout, her stomach began growling as she waited in the long line, and the hunger made her feel queasy. What’s more, she was right behind a very pregnant lady who kept rubbing her back—and soon Susana’s back ached too, even though she knew it was all in her head.

By the time she drove into their apartment’s parking lot, she felt awful. Her head hurt, her back ached, and her stomach roiled.

I'll take some ibuprofen for the headache, she thought ... but then she realized she didn't know if that was safe to use during pregnancy. That was the proverbial straw.

She burst into tears and sat in the car crying. She cried through her frustration, disappointment, and uncertainty, and then started over again, this time feeling guilty about the way she was feeling. Wasn't she supposed to be excited about becoming a mother?

She thought about calling Doug. But he would just tell her to talk to Chris—and she already knew that. So, in the end, she sat there alone until she got control of herself. Then she cleaned her face up and hoped she would beat Chris home to touch up her makeup before he saw her.

When she walked into the apartment, she heard Chris call a cheery “Hi, Suze!” from his desk in the living room. “Any more groceries to unload?”

“No, this is all,” she said, putting the sacks on the counter. So much for beating him home. Maybe I can sneak into the bathroom before he sees me.

But Chris was already bounding toward her, arms extended. When he saw her face, he stopped short. Then he stepped forward to enfold her gently in his arms. “What's wrong, *mi tesoro*?”

The tenderness of his voice and the comfort of his embrace combined to shatter the semblance of composure she'd cobbled together in the car. She melted into tears once again. Chris just held her, stroking her hair until she had cried all her tears.

“Did something happen to your parents?” he prompted when she was calmer.

“No.”

“Mari? Daniel?”

“No, my family's fine.”

“Did I do something? Say something?”

“No. Well, yes, but no. It's my fault.”

“What's your fault? Did you dent your car or something?”

“No. I—” She buried her face into his chest. “Chris, I—I'm pregnant.”

He pulled away. “Suze, did you say we're pregnant?” His exclamation was one of joyous surprise rather than anger.

She nodded, still wary.

“Suze, that’s fantastic!” He lifted her up and swung her around. “Amazing! Wonderful!”

He stopped suddenly. “Wait. Why are you crying? Don’t you want the baby?”

“I don’t even know what I think about it. I was just so sure *you* would be mad.”

“Oh, Suze.” He wrapped her in his arms again. “Why would I be mad?”

“Because I messed up. Everything was so crazy with the move, I completely forgot to take several pills. In fact, I forgot so completely, I didn’t even catch on until I opened a new pack and realized I never had a period. I’m so disgusted with myself! I goofed up all our plans.”

“So we’ll change our plans.” He stroked her hair over her shoulder. “It seems to me, you thought I’d be mad because you’re mad at yourself. But I think you’re being a little hard on yourself. The move *was* crazy. The apartment wasn’t ready after they told us it was, so we rented the truck and drove all the way up here only to be told ‘Oops, sorry about that.’ They agreed to let us unload our stuff into one room of the apartment so we could return the truck, but then they told us the next day it was the wrong apartment. We had to move everything all over again, spend three nights in that hotel, which we hadn’t budgeted for ... What a mess!

“Honestly, if I’d been the one taking a pill every night, I’m sure I would have forgotten too. But it doesn’t matter whose ‘fault’ it is anyway. This will likely only be the first of a bunch of curve balls life will throw at us. And we’ll have to decide whether we want to let them injure us or turn them into home runs by pulling together. That’s what healthy families do, Suze—not blame each other, but pull together to work things out.”

Susana snuggled into Chris’s chest. “Oh, Chris, I love you so much. All day I’ve been worrying about how I’d take care of a newborn and still go to school, about finding a babysitter, about affording a babysitter, to say nothing of all the other stuff a baby needs. And when I went to the store, there was a cranky kid whose dad was yelling at his mom to make him stop crying, then there was a pregnant lady who looked just miserable, and ...” She sighed. “But I guess everything’s doable if you’re going to be there to help with it.”

“Of course I’ll be here! This is an incredible gift we’ve been given. You think I’m going to let you enjoy it alone? Besides, don’t forget we’re heirs of the Damour fortune. Doug will make sure we’ve got whatever we need.”

“Thank you, *mi amor*. Maybe this little accident will work out after all.”

She felt Chris stiffen.

“What is it?” she asked.

He didn’t answer right away. When he did, his voice was soft, almost sad.

“My father rarely yelled at us kids,” he said carefully. “One of the few times I remember him yelling was when I was about six. Steve, who would have been about thirteen, was calling me an ‘accident.’ I didn’t know what he meant, of course, but it sounded bad from the way he said it, so we were involved in one of those intelligent ‘Am not,’ ‘Are too,’ ‘Am not’ things. My dad came bursting into the room and laid into Steve with ‘Don’t you ever say that about any child ever again, especially your brother!’ Steve and I were both so shocked to see Dad yelling, we just stood there, wide-eyed, through his whole sermon. He talked about how Mom and he wanted me and loved me as much as they had Steve or any of the others and he would never tolerate anyone belittling any child of his in that way. ‘Every child is precious,’ he said, ‘more precious than any of us can appreciate. No child is an accident.’”

Susana nodded. “I will never again refer to our baby as an accident,” she said contritely.

“Thank you, *mi tesoro*.” Giving her a squeeze, he said, “Well, come on. We’re going out to dinner to celebrate our son.”

“Son?” she said with a giggle. “You should know, I’m planning on having a girl.”

Chris laughed. “Well, you don’t have much to say about it. And you know our history—in five generations of Striders, my dad’s the only one to have a girl, and that took six tries and a male twin. If you’ve got your heart set on a girl, we’d better think about adoption.”

But he apparently repented of his dire pronouncement, because the next day, he came home with a package and handed it to Susana with a broad grin. She opened the sack to find a frilly pink baby dress and laughed. “I thought Striders didn’t have daughters.”

He shrugged. “But it’s such a great dream. We might as well enjoy it while we can.”

* * *

That night, when Susana woke up at about one o’clock to go to the bathroom, Chris’s side of the bed was empty. She found him at the computer in the living room. “Why are you up so late? That doesn’t look like schoolwork.”

“No, it’s not. It’s investment stuff.”

“Investments? Like the stock market?”

“Yeah. George has a lot of information about the pharmaceutical industry and Preston’s been following his leads and getting really good results. So I invested in these.” He pointed to the computer screen. “They’re all doing really well.”

Susana leaned against the desk to face him. “Chris, you invested our money without talking to me? And what money did you use?”

He sat back and looked up at her. “I’m sorry, Suze. I don’t know, I just thought I’d try it. Preston’s so excited about how his investments are doing.”

“How much did you invest?”

“Just five hundred dollars.”

“Five hundred dollars? That’s half our savings!”

“Yeah, but look what’s it’s already done just overnight!” He sat up and pointed to the screen again.

“I don’t care, Chris. It could flop entirely tomorrow and be worthless. I don’t think you should risk so much of our savings like that. We had a plan for the living expenses Doug gives us, a plan we worked out with him. We’re not supposed to do anything with our savings until we have enough to cover three months of expenses, in case something happens. When we have that done, then we can talk about investing.”

“Yeah, but now that we’re going to have a little one to care for, we may not be able to put that money away. What if something happens when there are three of us and only a measly thousand in the bank? How long will that last us? If we can make that money multiply faster, I think we should do it. Doug wants us to be smart about how we use the money he gives us, right?”

“And this is smart, Chris? Risking half our savings? Especially on the hunch of a guy we barely know?”

“Preston’s been doing really well with his tips. Remember, George worked in the business for fifteen years. He knows people and products and how the market works. Let me try this.” He reached for her hand. “I just want what’s best for us.”

“So do I, Chris. But I can’t see how someone else’s plan can be better than Doug’s. Ultimately, it’s all his money. We should save it and spend it according to his principles. What happened to trusting him for what we need for the baby? This just feels all wrong to me, Chris.”

“Well, ‘feelings’ won’t feed the baby, Suze.”

The next day, she saw Chris checking on those stocks several times. The day after that, he was up at dawn checking them, as well as every hour or two through the day. Susana was really starting to get worried about this new interest.

The next morning, when he drastically shortened their usual chat with Doug to check his stocks, Susana decided it was time to bring the subject up with Doug. She filled him in on what Chris had done and how excited he was over how well his stocks were doing. "Maybe I should be happy at how good things are going, Doug, but it just doesn't seem right to me. He spends every spare moment checking those silly stocks, and now he's even spending less time talking to you."

"When did this start?"

"The day after we found out I was pregnant. He says he just wants to make sure we use the money you give us most wisely, and make sure we have what we need for the baby, but ..."

"But what, little filly? What's the burr under your saddle?"

"I'm not sure, Doug. It just seems like he's too interested in the money itself."

"Hmm. Here's what I want you to do, then. Go check Chris for a dart that will look like a tiny gold-colored sliver. You'll most likely find it in those places you miss when you put your sunscreen on in a hurry, like the back of the neck or between the fingers or toes."

Susana wasn't sure how she was going to check Chris for darts without telling him what she was doing, but went to where he was seated at the computer and began by combing her fingers upward through his hair, starting at the back of his neck. "What shall I make for breakfast?" she asked as she examined his neck and found nothing there.

Chris scarcely seemed to notice. "Anything's fine," he answered. He pointed to the screen with his left index finger. "Look at this! We're going to be rich!"

"I already have all the riches I need," she said, kissing the side of his head. As she looked at where he was pointing, however, a glint between the thumb and index finger of his left hand caught her eye.

Activating her transmitter, she exclaimed, "I found it, Doug! His left hand!"

Chris turned around with a look of puzzled annoyance. "What are you doing?"

Doug answered his question: "She's doin' what I asked her to do, pardner. You have a dart of Greed. You need to let Susana remove it. But don't touch it, little filly. Use a pair of tweezers."

"Where is it?" Chris asked.

She pointed out the tiny golden dart. Then, finding some tweezers in the bathroom, she removed it.

“So there’s an agent around again?” Chris asked.

“Stan’s people are always around, son,” Doug said. “That’s why you can never let your guard down. You can never become complacent and start cutting short the time you spend talking to me and reading that there Manual. Especially not after Camille’s put you on her List.”

“Hmm.” Chris gazed at his computer screen for a moment. “It seemed reasonable enough,” Chris said. “Like a good way to make sure we have enough for the baby. And it was fun, watching my money multiply like that.”

“Who’s money?” Doug asked.

Chris chuckled. “*Your money, Ada.*”

“Son, I’ve got plenty of money, and I’m happy to share it with my children. But money has a strange way of bringin’ out the worst in folks. That’s why I only give you what you can handle. *Áchimi tamí bichiíima, towí ke akemi?*”

Chris groaned and rubbed his face with his hands. “I do trust you. But I guess I haven’t been trusting you lately in this area, have I? I’m sorry.” He turned to Susana. “And I’m sorry I didn’t pay attention when you tried to tell me.”

“Men and women’s brains work a tad differently,” Doug said. “That’s why they sometimes have trouble understanding the other. But a wise man will pay attention to his wife’s intuition, which involves putting together information that flies below the radar of a man’s brain. And a wise woman will pay attention to her husband’s logic, even though it sometimes seems cold and unfeeling to her.”

“Josh once told me that it was the differences between men and women that allowed us to be stronger together,” Chris said.

“That’s right,” Doug said. “Unfortunately, some couples come to resent their differences and allow them to become a wedge that drives them apart. But wise couples will embrace those differences and let them become part of the glue that holds them together.”

With a grin, Chris pulled Susana onto his lap. “Glue sounds like more fun to me.”

“Me too,” she agreed with a kiss.

“Ahem,” Doug said. “Y’all don’t mind me. I’ll just be signing off now.”

* * *

Two days later, they went to Susana's first prenatal visit together, Chris looking every bit the proud papa. But they were both surprised when the nurse, after discovering that Susana hadn't had her pregnancy test confirmed at a doctor's office, repeated it and found it to be negative. "We can draw some blood for a more definitive test and have it back later today," she said. "If it's positive, we'll reschedule your exam."

"Okay," Susana agreed, but felt confused and disappointed.

Chris waited with her by the phone that afternoon. When they still hadn't heard anything just before the doctor's office was to close, Susana called them. The nurse put her on hold while she looked for the test results, and Susana stood by the phone, shifting nervously from one foot to the other.

Finally, the nurse came back to the phone. "Your pregnancy test was negative, Ms. Strider."

Susana felt as though she were a deflating balloon. "Oh," she managed to say weakly. "Well, thank you for checking." She hung up and stood staring at the phone.

Chris wrapped his arms around her, holding her in silence as she burst into tears. "It's okay, mi tesoro. It'll happen. We'll just go back to Plan A."

"Yeah, but ..."

"I know, I'm disappointed too."

"No, it's—we'll have to take the dress back."

Chris laughed. "You worry about the strangest things. But let's keep the dress. Maybe it'll be a lucky charm for the next time."

[I cut this because I decided that the extra story threads introduced in this chapter were tangential to the main story.]

Chapter 20: Lavinia

Susana was engrossed in her lab work when the chatter and clatter suddenly quieted. Noticing her classmates' focus on the door, she turned toward it. Chris stood there, a bunch of cut daisies in his hands, as he scanned the room. When their eyes met, Chris started toward her. A flush warmed her cheeks as her fellow students looked on.

"Whoa, there, Romeo," said Lavinia, the TA. "The rules of my lab say you can only deliver flowers to your girlfriend if you fess up and tell us what you're in trouble for. Either that or I get to read the card out loud to the whole class."

Chris was momentarily mute with surprise. "As far as I know, I'm not in trouble with my wife, but I probably would be if you told her about my girlfriend."

Laughter rippled around the room, but Lavinia, a prematurely crusty young woman, was unimpressed. "Okay, hand over the card if you want to play dumb."

Chris hesitated, his expression giving away his disbelief. "Okay," he said with a shrug. "Wouldn't want to break the rules."

She read the card that he surrendered and studied him for a moment. Then, replacing the tiny card in its envelope, she handed it back to him. "I forgot. The rules say we have to read the card every day except Thursdays."

"Thank you," Chris said with a small smile.

Striding to Susana, he handed her the flowers and kissed her on the cheek. As he turned to leave, someone began clinking on glassware and several others joined in.

He stopped and, laughing, held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. He returned to Susana, who was sure she had turned crimson, and tenderly cupped her face in his hands. He gave her a warm, unhurried kiss and whispered in her ear, "I love you. Sorry I've been gone so much lately."

He pulled a daisy out of the bunch and gave it to Lavinia on his way out. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "I didn't mean to be so disruptive. It won't happen again."

“You can come back anytime,” she said returned with an almost-smile.

Susana smiled after him. She truly was so blessed. This wasn’t even an unusual occurrence for him. Especially when they were so busy with exams and clinicals that they’d hardly seen each other, he would drop by with a quick little remembrance when he had a break. Usually it wasn’t quite so public, but she certainly wouldn’t complain.

Her reverie came to an abrupt end when her lab partner prompted, “Well, what’s the card say?”

Pulling it out of the envelope, she read:

***For my most precious tesoro –
Being married to you makes every day special.
– Chris***

“Aw, that’s so sweet,” her partner murmured. “Too bad you have to be as gorgeous as you are to find a good man like that.”

“What? No, I’m not—” Susana began and then stopped to collect her thoughts.

“Chris isn’t like that. When we met—in fact, up until the day before our wedding—I was the scarred, ugly girl that most guys wouldn’t give the time of day. Here, I’ll show you.” She took out her phone and showed her partner several pictures. Soon a bunch of people had gathered around, looking at Susana’s pictures and listening to the story of how Doug had healed her scars. Even Lavinia joined them, silently listening and studying the pictures.

With all her picture showing and storytelling, it took Susana longer than usual to finish her work that afternoon. But Lavinia, usually impatient and grumpy, didn’t seem to mind staying. She even pitched in to help. As they worked together, she told Susana something about herself and her mother, who had been repeatedly abused by the men in her life.

The story didn’t surprise Susana. She’d recognized a deep sadness in Lavinia’s eyes from the first time they met. Although their circumstances had been different, she felt a kinship with her in the suffering she’d endured. Maybe she could introduce her to the great Comforter who had consoled her in her sorrows.

[I’d planned to continue Lavinia’s story with a friendship developing between her and Susana that ultimately helped introduce her to Doug and heal her emotional wounds. However, it would have taken too long to do it justice, and the book was already getting too long. I had to choose which topics to cut.]

Chapter 23.5: Concealed

“There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.” Matthew 10:26

Twenty-seven years ago

“Come on, Bert, hurry up!” Johnny called.

“I’m coming!” thirteen-year-old Bert called as he struggled to keep up with the other boys.

“Here, pick up some rocks like this,” Johnny held up a rock about the diameter of a quarter.

“Why?”

“You’ll see.”

Bert stopped to gather a few rocks of the designated size. He didn’t know what the rocks were for, but he knew he wanted to fit into this group. His father had moved them here after his mom left three months ago. Bert knew no one and just wanted to belong. He was lonely. And these boys had at least let him tag along. No one else had.

Bert filled his pockets with rocks and raced through the tall grass to catch up. The other boys were taking the walkway that led to an overpass above the freeway. As Bert followed, he wondered where they were going. He’d never crossed the highway before and wasn’t sure Pop would approve.

He didn’t say I couldn’t, though.

When he caught up to the group, Bert was relieved to see that they weren’t actually crossing the freeway. But what were they doing? Just looking down from the middle of the overpass?

As he got closer, Bert saw that his new friends were dropping rocks onto the cars that sped underneath. “Yeah!” they yelled when one boy’s rock cracked a yellow sedan’s windshield. “Yeah!” they cheered again when another boy’s rock dented a Cadillac’s blue hood.

Pop wouldn't like this, said a voice in Bert's head.

I'm just watching, he argued. *I'm not doing anything.*

"Come on, Bert!" Johnny called. "Let's see how good your aim is!"

"I don't know ..." Bert started.

"Ah, I told you he was chicken." Ned, the group's leader, pushed a brown curl out of his eyes.

"He's not chicken," Johnny retorted, defending him.

"Yeah, he is," Ned insisted. "Bertie's a chicken birdie!"

The other boys joined the sing-song chant as Ned continued repeating it.

Bert had to do something and fast. He didn't want to be kicked out of his new group, especially not with such a title following him in a new school. On the other hand, he couldn't just throw the rocks now. To look really cool, he had to come up with a reason why he hadn't thrown them when they first told him to.

"I'm not chicken!" Bert yelled. "I'm just not used to throwing such little rocks! That's not how we do it in LA. I think *you* guys are the chickens!"

With that, he ran back down the overpass to look for the biggest rock he could carry. Finally locating a truly impressive one, he trudged back up to the middle of the overpass with his prize.

"Now this is a rock," he said, putting on as important an air as he could muster. He balanced the stone on the railing while practicing the timing of the maneuver in his head.

Then, at exactly the right moment, he pushed the stone over. The result was perfect—it crashed precisely onto the front windshield of an old white station wagon.

But what Bert hadn't fully understood until that moment, was that those cars were occupied by people—people who could be hurt.

The driver of the station wagon was a pretty woman about his mom's age. She had bronze skin, dark hair, and deep, black eyes. Kind eyes. He saw them clearly. They were the gentle eyes of a nice lady.

He knew the precise moment when she saw the stone. Stark fear invaded her kind eyes.

Her horror became his. "No!" he cried out, as if he could stop the stone in mid-flight.

The stone hit the windshield precisely above the driver's face. "Yeah!" went up the victory shout, even as Bert again yelled, "No!"

He rushed to the other side of the overpass. The station wagon careened out of control and slammed into a light pole. The metal hood screeched as it crumpled around the pole. Steam exploded from the radiator, sending a long hiss into the air.

"No, no, no!" he screamed. The other boys went silent.

Other cars were stopping now, and people were pointing at the boys on the overpass.

"Run!" Ned called, and the group dispersed, some heading to one side of the highway, some to the other.

"Come on, Bert," Johnny yelled over his shoulder. "Hurry!"

But Bert stood still. Horrified. Terrified. The crunching metal seemed to grate inside his head as people wrenched the door of the station wagon open. So much blood! He'd never seen so much blood.

"An ambulance is on its way!" someone called.

"Too late," said a man leaning inside the door. "She's dead. I think the stone killed her before she even hit the pole."

Bert gasped and backed away from the railing. He'd killed that nice lady!

"Hey, kid!"

Bert turned to see two men climbing up the embankment toward him. Scarcely knowing what he was doing, he turned and ran in the opposite direction.

"Stop!" one man called after him while the other yelled, "You come back here, you little devil!"

Bert quickly outdistanced the pot-bellied men and got lost among the still-unfamiliar streets. He hid in some thick bushes and watched the men pass by. He saw them again when they returned in defeat, both panting heavily. Still, he didn't move from his hiding place.

The sun was setting when he finally crawled out of the bushes. He tried to nonchalantly walk the streets until he got his bearings and found his way home. Neither Pop nor his older sister were home yet, so he started making dinner. He'd just act like everything was fine, he decided. A regular day. If anyone asked

about the accident, he'd act as surprised as the next guy. What were the chances that anyone would actually discover him to be the culprit?

When he opened the refrigerator, the first thing he saw was Pop's beer. "Helps me relax," Pop always said. That was just what Bert needed.

He took one from the back of the refrigerator, where Pop wouldn't notice, and popped the top. His nose crinkled at the flavor, but he downed the whole can. Then he opened another, hoping to make the lady's eyes stop haunting him.

Still, questions pestered him. Who was that nice lady? Did she have a family? Children? He needed to know. Curiosity and guilt drove him to the TV. When he found the evening news, his accident was the lead story.

"Thirty-eight-year-old Rose Strider, mother of six, was killed in a senseless highway accident this afternoon," the anchorman said as a picture of the station wagon, complete with Bert's stone, came up on the screen.

"Rose Strider," Bert whispered, frozen to the floor.

"She was on her way home from grocery shopping when a stone thrown from this overpass"—the camera moved to the very spot Bert had stood—"hit her windshield, killing her instantly. Eyewitnesses saw the young teenagers responsible for throwing the missile, but they were unable to apprehend any of them."

"Missile." Bert took a long swig of beer.

The woman's distraught husband came onto the screen. "She was—she was such a good person," he choked. "I just don't understand how someone could do this."

"I didn't mean to," Bert said, tears flowing unchecked down his face. "Really, Mr. Strider. I didn't mean to."

The camera focused on each of the woman's six children. The newspaper recorded their names the following day. Bert memorized each one. But the one who would haunt him was the baby. He had her eyes. Such tender eyes. He would never forget those eyes.

[I never really intended to include this chapter in the final version of the book. Instead, I wrote it to understand Bert a little better.]

Chapter 32.5: No Mercy

“The wicked man craves evil; his neighbor gets no mercy from him.”

Proverbs 21:10

Grief is a wily animal. Just when you think you’ve got it nicely caged, it escapes and jumps at you.

After the first day of weepy existence, Chris had gotten a handle on his grief. Since then, he’d been composed, calmly handling the details that insist on being tended to even after your world has caved in. Until this moment.

Susana had just been transferred to a room on the regular floor after being in the ICU for two days. It wasn’t until then that Chris had left her long enough to go home. He’d still seen the children. Roman—Mike’s son who was staying with Chris and Susana while attending UCLA—had brought them to the hospital twice a day so Chris could hold them and reassure them. But he hadn’t wanted to tell them about Pete until he could do it at home, in a familiar place and in an unhurried way.

Like their parents, Bethany and Andy already loved their little brother. The DVD of Pete’s ultrasound had become Andy’s favorite movie, which he would watch over and over again even though Chris doubted he really knew what he was seeing. Bethany had made a special frame out of macaroni for an ultrasound picture that Susana gave her; she kept it on her dresser and gave it a kiss every night before bed. Telling them that Pete wasn’t coming home hadn’t been easy, and it had wiped Chris out emotionally.

When he returned to Susana’s new room, he saw that a picture had been taped to it. The picture itself was pretty enough—a green leaf with a drop of rain splashing onto it. But Chris knew what that picture represented: death. It was the way hospital personnel had of communicating to anyone walking into that room, whether a cafeteria worker delivering trays or a volunteer delivering flowers, that the woman inside had lost her baby. It prevented people from unwittingly wounding the mother further with comments like, “Congratulations!” or “Did you have a boy or a girl?”

For Chris, who was already emotionally drained and physically exhausted, that picture was the moment the caged animal escaped. It drove home his loss in a way he hadn’t expected and wasn’t prepared for. And when the animal pounced, it reopened all his bandaged wounds. He stared at the picture, and tears again began streaming down his cheeks. With no strength to fight them, he simply bowed his head and

wept. A nurse passing by laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder and handed him a small box of tissues. "I'm so sorry," she said.

Chris nodded. "Thank you," he whispered.

Chris got himself under control, wiped his face, and pushed the door open, wanting nothing more than to hold Susana in his arms and feel her arms around him. But it wasn't to be. When Susana looked up at him, he knew he was in trouble. He'd messed up somehow, although he had no idea how.

Doña Maria, who was in the room when Chris entered, quickly turned her back to him, collected her things, and excused herself. Hoping that his mother-in-law's cold shoulder was merely a product of her own grief, he took a deep breath and approached Susana. "What's wrong, Suze? The nurses have my numbers. I told them to call me if you needed anything at all."

"What I needed—what I expected—was your help and protection when I couldn't speak for myself." Susana's tone was hard, a quality it only took on when she was especially angry.

The implicit accusation caught Chris entirely off guard. He cautiously sat on the bed and reached for her hand, but she pulled it away.

"Suze, I honestly have no idea what you mean. I did everything that could be done at home."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"Then what do you mean? Honestly, I'm lost here."

She turned away from him for several moments, and tears began streaming down her face. Chris wanted to hold her to provide some consolation, but he knew better. She didn't like to be touched when she was angry, and she'd already shown him she didn't want him touching her now.

"You asked Dr. Mays to do the hysterectomy because you didn't want more kids," she said bitterly. "And because you thought I'd never find out the truth."

"What?" Chris exclaimed. "That's ridiculous! I did want more kids, you know that. And I did not ask Nancy to do a hyst. I gave her permission to do it if that's what it took to save your life. Actually, she doesn't even need my—"

"That's not how I heard it."

Chris sat back and sighed. This wasn't like her. Who had been telling her these lies?

He bowed his head, struggling with a fresh onslaught of emotions. He'd lost his son, almost lost Susana, his heart was aching with a pain he never knew existed, and he wanted nothing more than to hold his wife in his arms. And now someone was turning her against him. Why? And who?

Remembering Doña Maria's cool reception as he entered, he ventured, "Suze, if that's what your mom thinks, she's misinformed. I never—"

"Oh, so now everything's my mom's fault?"

Chris's head dropped. That's not what he'd meant, but apparently she was in no mood to try to understand.

He got up and paced to the window, where tears again began to flow. His pain was so raw. It felt as if his insides lay exposed and someone were sadistically poking at them with a stick.

As he stood there trying to figure out what to do, Mike and Benny knocked and entered the room.

"Please leave us alone," Susana spat at them.

Chris was as shocked at her uncharacteristic harshness as they were. Apparently too stunned to think of a reply, they both simply nodded and left again. Chris said nothing but turned back toward the window in confused silence.

Finally, through his tears, Chris said, "Suze, please let's not do this to each other. We've both just lost a son. We need each other right now more than ever before. Whatever the problem—"

"No, Chris. When I needed you, you weren't there for me. As for you, you have plenty of family around. If you need someone, go to them."

He bowed his head in utter defeat. He didn't know what to say. He didn't even know who he was talking to. The Susana he knew was a kind, gracious, generous woman who would never knowingly hurt another living being.

"I mean it, Chris. Please leave."

He turned around and stared at her in disbelief. She was actually kicking him out of her room? But the expression on her face confirmed her words: he was unwelcome here.

Completely disoriented, he left the room and traversed the hallway with no particular destination in mind. His legs on autopilot, he ended up at the doctor's lounge. He stopped and stared at the door. There would probably be doctors in there, people he would have to talk to.

He did an about-face and stared down the hallway. Where did he want to go? Someplace quiet. Someplace deserted. Someplace with air—a balcony. Right.

He set off again, ran up two flights of stairs, and came to a conference room that wasn't being used. Going through the room to the balcony, he drew in several deep drafts of the cool ocean air and stared unseeing into the sky. In a motion almost as automatic as blinking, he reached up to activate his transmitter. When Doug answered, Chris repeated his conversation with Susana as if in a daze. "I'm so lost, Ada. Please help me understand."

"She's gonna need a special measure of your patience and understanding, pardner," Doug said. "Her heart is very tender and her grief very sore. Sometimes when people go through the anger associated with grief, they strike out at those closest to them, those best equipped to help them through their time of trouble. Like a dog biting at the vet who's trying to relieve its sufferin'."

"But in this case the"—he had trouble calling Susana a dog—"the sufferer won't even let the vet in her room."

"I'm sending Debora. In fact, she's just entering her room now. Give Debora some time with her. Meanwhile, you go speak to your mother-in-law and see what you can learn about the source of these accusations. But be gentle, son. Remember that she's suffering too. Debora has already given you grace in ways she's unable to do for those more peripherally involved since they're not as aware of their need. Often the greatest lasting injuries in these cases are to those one step removed 'cause they take to themselves concerns and sorrows that aren't rightly theirs to bear."

Chris really didn't feel like being the helper in this situation. It didn't seem fair. He was in such pain himself; he had little to give anyone else. But Doug had never asked him to do the impossible, so he straightened his shoulders and shored up his resolve. "Okay, Ada. I'll go talk to Doña María, and I'm going to remember that she's hurting too."

"I'm right proud of you, son. Right proud."

Chris made his way to the waiting area closest to Susana's room, but just before he rounded the corner, he heard Susana's mother ranting in Spanish, "Well, I believe her, Pedro. As far as I'm concerned, we should never have let our dear Susana marry un *indio*." She spat the last word out with obvious disgust.

Chris stopped short, feeling as though he'd been slapped. Or shot. He had thought he was in so much pain, he couldn't possibly hurt any worse. But he was wrong.

In the waiting room around the corner, Chris could hear Susana's father and siblings all expressing outraged surprise at Doña María's statement.

“And I don’t care what that woman said,” Don Pedro finished firmly. “I just don’t believe Chris would do that.”

“Me either,” agreed Susana’s sister Maribel. “I’m going to talk to Susana,” she added before appearing around the corner. When she saw Chris, she stopped abruptly and flushed. “Chris! I—uh, hi.”

Chris, still stunned, couldn’t find his tongue. He just stared into Mari’s face. Then, hurt and embarrassed, he turned to retreat.

“Chris!” It was Daniel, Susana’s brother.

Chris turned back and felt some measure of comfort to see Daniel coming toward him. Though seven years younger than Chris, he was also a runner and shared Chris’s interest in cars. The two had become good friends, often working together to fix up old jalopies.

“I’m so sorry you heard that,” Daniel said. “I don’t know where it came from. She’s never said anything like that before about anyone, certainly not you. She’s always singing your praises. She’s just been so upset, Chris. So scared.”

Chris bobbed a shaky nod and tried to focus on the big problem. “I ... was coming to— Susana said ... Please—” His words sounded like his thoughts, fractured and full of pain.

Daniel put his hands on Chris’s shoulders and studied his face. Softly, kindly, he said, “Dime, cuñado. Que puedo hacer?” (Spanish: Tell me, brother-in-law. What can I do?)

Chris looked into Daniel’s face, full of calm concern. He felt the comfort of his steady hands on his shoulders. And he let himself accept some of the strength he felt Daniel was willing him. He took a deep, ragged breath, and then another, more steady. “I need to understand why Susana thinks I asked her doctor to do a hysterectomy. Can you help me?”

“Our mother met one of the hospital cleaning ladies this morning,” Daniel said quietly. His embarrassment over his mother’s comments was still clear in his voice, but he didn’t waver or avoid Chris’s gaze. “The lady said she was there when Susana came in, and that she heard you ask the doctor to do a hysterectomy, whether Susana needed it or not.”

“No.” Chris shook his head. “No, Daniel, I didn’t. In fact—” He frowned as he reviewed the scene in his mind. “I don’t remember seeing a cleaning lady there. What did she look like?”

“I don’t know,” Daniel said. “I didn’t see her.”

“I did,” Mari said, approaching them. “She’s tall, very tall—she’d be hard to miss. Light-skinned, curly black hair, blue eyes, speaks Spanish with a South American accent. Argentinean, I think she said.”

Chris frowned again as he concentrated on the picture Mari described. “No, I don’t remember anyone like that at all.” But he suddenly realized who it might be and inhaled sharply. “Oh, no. George.”

“No, it was a woman,” Mari said.

“The agent you told me about?” Daniel asked. When Chris nodded, Daniel turned to Mari. “They’re really good at disguises. He could easily make himself into a woman, and it sounds exactly like something they’d do.”

“Why?” Mari asked.

“To stir up bitterness in the family,” Daniel said. “Put a wedge between Chris and Susana. Split them up if they could.”

“Then I should go tell Mami,” Mari said, turning again toward the waiting area.

“Mari, please,” Chris pled. “I didn’t ask Dr. Mays to do a hyst. Please tell her. I would never do that. What I asked Dr. Mays to do was to save her life. Doing the hyst was the only way. She was—” His voice cracked, and he had to finish in a whisper. “Mari, she very nearly died.”

Mari nodded. “I understand,” she said softly and disappeared into the waiting room.

“Why don’t you come sit down?” Daniel said. “My mother’s not there. She went down the other hall when she realized you’d heard her.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll go get some air. I need to clear my head.”

Chris went back to the balcony and leaned his arms on the railing, breathing in the cool air and gazing into the distance. Strangely, he could feel no anger toward his mother-in-law. That particular emotion was all channeled toward George. Instead, he felt hurt and bewildered. He couldn’t help wondering how long his mother-in-law, a woman he’d come to love, had thought of him as some kind of subhuman life form.

It wasn’t that Chris had never experienced discrimination before. Sometimes it was overt, coming from whites who either correctly identified him as Native or wrongly pegged him as Hispanic and called him derogatory names associated with that group instead. More often, it was subtler, such as the woman who clutched her purse to her chest when he passed, or the teacher who scolded his primarily white class for letting Chris—a “Mexican”—beat them all on a test.

But he’d never experienced discrimination from Hispanics based on his Indigenous heritage. Worse, since he’d grown up in a predominantly white community in the U.S., he hadn’t even been forewarned

that such prejudice existed among Hispanics. And to have this injury inflicted by a woman who had known him for over a decade, and whom he considered family, was easily the most painful form of bigotry he'd ever experienced. To have that injury added to the already ponderous burden he was carrying was excruciating, unbearable.

Again, Chris's hand took that familiar path to his transmitter, activating it without his conscious decision to do so. After he had unburdened, Doug asked if he could tell him a story. "Sure," Chris said with a half-hearted shrug.

"Once upon a time, there was a young feller," Doug said, "who was a right handsome feller. He was smart too, well liked, and headin' down the road to what outlanders call success. There was just one thing he wanted that he hadn't been able to find, a lady friend to love and share life with. So I sent him a right fine lady, one of my personal favorites—though all my children are, in one way or another. But he wouldn't even consider steppin' out with her."

"Why?" Chris asked.

Doug paused. "'Cause she was a might hard to look at."

Chris bowed his head, an embarrassed grin coming to his face. Susana and her scars.

"You see," Doug continued, "when that young feller was just a little tyke, he had some kinfolk that put some funny ideas in his head, making him think ugly folks weren't good enough for him. Mind you, he didn't think of himself as prejudiced. In fact, he woulda' been riled up something fierce if anyone had ever called him a bigot. But that's often the way of prejudice. It gets worked into a body when they're too little to know better and can show up later without them even understanding it." Doug paused. "Your mother-in-law's not perfect, son. But then, I haven't got too many runners who are."

Chris nodded his head. "Thanks, Ada."

Behind him, a woman called shyly, "Chris?"

He turned to see Doña María standing at the door of the conference room, her eyes red and swollen. She had trouble meeting Chris's eyes, but when she did, she began crying. He went to her and hugged her.

"I'm sorry," she choked out. "I was so wrong. I don't know why... I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Chris said, and was surprised to find that he really meant it. He swallowed hard. "I—love you ... Mamá," he added softly. It was the first time he had addressed her that way.

She hugged him again. “I love you, mi hijo. I really do. And you’ve been a wonderful husband to Susana. The best.”

“Thank you.”

“I talked to Susana and told her—I told her the truth. She wants to see you.”

He heaved a relieved sigh. “Thank you.”

He ran all the way to Susana’s room. He found her crying—sobbing, like a woman in deep despair. She didn’t even seem to recognize his presence in the room. Sitting on her bed, he gathered her into his arms and held her, weeping with her.

“I’m sorry,” she finally said through her tears. “I’m so sorry.”

“I know, mi tesoro. It’s been hard for us both.”

“I miss Pete so much.”

“Me too.” He wiped the tears from her cheeks. “There’s something I haven’t told you about Pete yet, though. When Debora came, she brought a transmitter and put it around his neck.”

“She did? Then we’ll see him again, won’t we?”

Chris smiled. “Alive and well.”

[I omitted this chapter simply because I thought Chris (and probably the reader) had suffered enough through this event.]

Thank You!

Thank you for your interest in the Strider family's adventure! Stop by DellaLoredo.com to get more information on other books and to sign up for my blog/newsletter if you'd like to stay current as things are added.

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In *The Race: An Allegory*, track star Chris Strider forfeits his own dream-come-true to fulfill the dying wish of the grandmother who raised him—that he run a grueling, 6,000-mile footrace. What neither of them knows is that this puts him squarely in the crosshairs of the heartless mogul who killed his mother

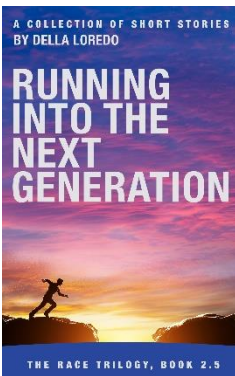
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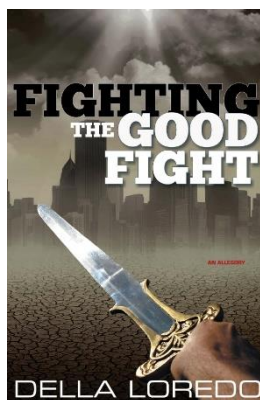
Yet when her perfect life shatters, and her only hope is to surrender, will it be too late?

Keeping the Faith: Still Running is **Book 2** in The Race series.



The 20-year hiatus between Books 2 & 3 of The Race series is fraught with problems. The enemy is ready with plenty of distractions for the Strider kids, while the Moden “offspring” are starting to think for themselves. But how long can that last when they’re raised by the two most evil people on the planet? Can mercy reach even to them?

Running Into the Next Generation, Book 2.5 in the Race series, is a collection of short stories collected from the 20 years between Books 2 & 3. Catch your copy to fill in the gaps today!



She kills on command. He tortures for sport. Yet they’re still Stanley’s little brother and sister, and he yearns to rescue them from the brutes who raised them all. Racing against the clock that’s ticking off Earth’s closing hours, he finally gets the chance. But he has second thoughts when he learns how deeply they’ve surrendered themselves to evil.

Fighting the Good Fight is **Book 3** of The Race series This explosive conclusion follows the Strider family through the harrowing end of the world. But first they have some tough choices to make.