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Revelation 2:10 *You will be persecuted for ten days.*

1.

*June 21, 1980 – Day 1*

“Now. Push. Hard!”

One push. That’s all it took. In less than sixty seconds, a tiny red human with skinny, flailing arms and legs—and unmistakable boy parts—emerged. Not the little blonde girl that Mike and I had been dreaming about for so many years. Not our baby Angela. I collapsed back on the bed, numb. Too exhausted to voice the rage that seethed inside me. How could they have thought this was false labor? How dare they tell me to go to sleep and quit bothering them? Could such a tiny baby live? At the moment, I wasn’t even sure I cared.

“Waaaa!” My tiny preemie protested. A strong, angry cry.

My baby! Of course I wanted him to live. So what if he wasn’t a girl. He was a Wahlberg, Mike’s son, Jason’s little brother, and my precious baby. The soft jabs and kicks these past three months had come from his tiny limbs.

Dr. Turner swaddled my son in a blanket. “I’m the only doctor on duty, and I need to stabilize him.”

My chest pounded. “Stabilize—”

He cradled my baby in his arms and left without another word. Freckle-faced nurse Judy touched my shoulder. “I’ll be back.” Then she rushed to follow.

I lay there, bleeding, blaming. It had all happened so fast. I could barely absorb the reality. He wasn’t due for another six weeks.

Judy hurried back into the room. “I’m so sorry, Kate. We don’t normally deliver on the ward. Colonel Reeves insisted it was only Braxton Hicks contractions. Then I heard your

scream.” She swabbed my arm with a stinky antiseptic, jabbed me with a needle, and inserted an IV tube.

Dr. Turner popped back, a surgical mask slung below his neck. “We’re doing everything possible to save your son, Mrs. Wahlberg. We’ll know more in an hour.”

Everything possible? Dreams of booties and baby buntings now dangled. I closed my eyes and sent up a silent Hail Mary.

The doctor administered a few quick stitches, where he had cut my episiotomy. I winced at each sharp sting.

“We didn’t want any pressure on the baby’s brain. Premies are extremely fragile at this stage,” he explained. “We’ll get you something for the pain, and to help you sleep.”

Then he hurried back to the nursery before I could utter a word.

Just seven days ago, Mike had kissed me goodbye and headed for Okinawa. My swollen ankles had told me something wasn’t right with the pregnancy. I should have seen a civilian doctor, gotten a second opinion. But I couldn’t upset Mike before he flew overseas. I’d been an Air Force wife long enough to know: the mission comes first.

The drama of the past week had been overwhelming—three trips to the base hospital emergency room, juggling work deadlines and mommy duties, shuffling my toddler Jason between day care and neighbors. I’d had it all under control. Then the dam broke.

Judy returned. I struggled to sit up. “I want to see my baby.”

She pressed my shoulder back on the bed. “Right now, you need to rest.”

She injected pain medication into my IV, closed the khaki curtain, and placed the call box near my hand. “This will help you relax. Let us know if you need anything.” She tucked the sheet up under my chin and stroked my long blonde hair.

I had as much strength as a mouse, and I succumbed. The dim yellow light from my night lamp cast soft shadows across the half-empty hospital room. I sunk into the mattress and listened to the two girls across the hall giggle about their stretch

marks. No roommate for me. I caught the closing tune of *MASH* before they turned off their TV. My television stayed dark, the remote control strategically out of my reach. Doctor's orders. Any excitement could spike the toxemia.

And now—a premature baby—struggling for life in the nursery. For the moment, his fate was in someone else's hands. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to slide into a cocoon of sleep.

\* \* \*

"You gave the nurses quite a run for their money last night, young lady."

I startled awake. Was it day? Night? The doctor stood at the foot of my bed, perusing my chart. Colonel Reeves, six foot one, towered over most of her OB staff. Her silver hair was cropped an inch longer than the standard military cut. No makeup. No jewelry. Her finely shaped eyebrows the only hint of femininity. The years had etched a permanent scowl on her face. Rumor had it she had been scorned in love during medical school and was now married to the Air Force.

"You were just upset because your husband's overseas," The Colonel said. "That's why the baby came early. I see it all the time with you young ones."

I wanted to scream. *No! I was upset because my contractions started six weeks too soon.* Instead I said, "I may look young, but I'll have you know, I am twenty-seven years old, a college graduate, and a department head." I wanted to add that if I ran my department like she ran hers, I'd be fired. But I held my tongue. Thankfully, a blood pressure of 190 over 140 had gotten me admitted to the OB ward. Had the nurses ignored my pains because of an order from The Colonel? From my first appointment, something had told me not to trust this woman.

She tapped on my chart with her pen, as if pondering a battle strategy. "Does the baby have a name?"

"Not yet. We were expecting a girl."

"Best to plan for all contingencies." Her tone hinted that she was miffed that Mother Nature had pulled rank in the middle

of the night. “The boy weighed in at three pounds, eight ounces. We’re not equipped to keep infants less than four pounds here. But we’ve got a new pediatrician—Khan. Good man. They called him at 0400 hours. He’s been with your son all morning. We’ll transport the baby to the Travis neonatal unit sometime today, as soon as there’s an opening.”

Travis was somewhere in Northern California, a couple of hours away. “I won’t need long to get ready—” I said.

“You’ll stay here.”

“Like hell I will.”

“Mrs. Wahlberg, you will stay on my ward for a minimum of forty-eight hours.”

“Do you know who my husband is?” The pilots of the SR-71 supersonic spy plane were an elite breed, the best of the best. If Mike were here, he’d get his commander to pull some strings.

“His rock-star status holds no sway with me.”

“But—” I sunk in the bed, too drained to argue. I needed to regroup, find an ally, and form a plan.

The doctor palpitated my abdomen. “How are you feeling?”

My power to negotiate was hampered by the sharp jabs. “A little better.” I was afraid to ask, but figured I’d better get it out. “Doctor, what are his chances? Will he ... make it?”

“I’m going to order your IV removed. Then you can go see him. Under thirty-six weeks gestation, we monitor for breathing problems, but, so far, his respiration’s good. Toxemia primes the lungs. He’s in an incubator.” She snapped the chart shut. “He seems to be a real fighter.” Her tone softened ever so slightly.

Three pound, eight ounces. I’d never known anyone who’d had a baby that small. Jason, our three-year-old, had weighed over eight pounds. In college, I’d gone on a field trip to a hospital for handicapped kids. Children of five, even eight years, lay in cribs wearing diapers, drooling, with absent stares on their faces. I had never considered the possibility that my baby would be anything less than perfect.

“And his mental development? Can they tell?” I spoke just above a whisper, my voice trembling.

The Colonel slid the pen in her pocket. “Statistically, there’s a good chance your baby will be 100 percent normal. But at this stage, we certainly can’t determine these things.”

After she left, I flopped back on my pillow. I felt totally confident with the younger OB doctors at the base hospital, but I couldn’t get over this uneasy feeling about The Colonel. She always seemed too busy, too inflated with her rank and position. But in a military hospital, I didn’t have the luxury of choosing my physician. I’d tried to talk Mike into letting me deliver at Ridner Hospital, just five minutes away from our house, but that would have cost a lot more money. He was way too frugal to spend the extra bucks. All the other military wives delivered at the base hospital, and so could I. If I hadn’t been so obsessed with my work, with getting the new marinara sauce project completed, I would have gone behind his back and seen another doctor.

But playing the blame game wasn’t going to earn me a do-over. From here on, I’d need to trust my instincts, not The Colonel and her team.

2.

Judy removed my IV and taped a cotton ball in the crook of my arm. “Can you stand, or do you want a wheelchair?”

“I prefer to walk.”

I slid over the side of the bed and pushed up, putting weight on my wobbly legs. She reached for my right elbow to steady me.

“I’m okay. Just give me a second.”

“Let’s get you covered.”

She slipped a thin cotton robe over my arms. I followed her down the olive-drab hallway toward the nursery. We maneuvered past an airman who pushed a noisy vacuum and joked with the woman loading breakfast trays onto a tall metal cart.

The nursery was cheerier and quieter than the ward. On one wall someone had painted a huge Tigger, on the other, Winnie-the-Pooh, his paw dripping with honey. Eight bassinets held sleeping babies, some wrapped in pink blankets, some in blue, strategically placed near a viewing window so dads and visitors could catch a first peek. The other babies all seemed chubby and content, although one little boy started to squirm and whimper. I shuffled past them to the incubator in the far corner and peered in.

A monitor beeped softly. My baby lay naked, tubes and wires attached to every part of his body. My heart went out instantly to the little guy. He was all arms and legs—just like his daddy—but small and thin. His skin was almost transparent, his fingernails paper-thin. His delicate face was framed by soft blond hair—that he got from me. His tiny mouth moved in little sucking motions. I stood in awe, afraid to love him,



fearing God might punish me for my obsession with having a daughter.

A short unshaven man came over and adjusted the leads coming out of the incubator. He looked barely old enough to be out of college. He extended a hand. "I am Dr. Khan. You are the mother?"

I felt strength in his warm grasp.

"Baby is still critical." The doctor's tired eyes offered little optimism. "We don't have a full neonatal unit here. Better if you'd been transported to Travis before the baby was born. You didn't realize you were in labor?"

I cast my eyes down in shame. I had asked the nurse for a watch to time my contractions, instinctively lapsed into Lamaze breathing, ignored my own body, and believed The Colonel. I should have listened to the gals at work and quit weeks ago. I'd been so selfish, so stupid.

"Sorry, little guy," I whispered under my breath. *I'll make it up to you.* I pointed at the little cotton shackles wrapped around each ankle and pinned to the sheets. "Bad behavior already?"

"This one's a fighter. Watch." He unpinned the left side, and immediately my little tyke lifted his leg and maneuvered his foot toward the IV that snaked out the top of his head.

"We don't want him to pull out the tube," added the doctor. "Don't worry. Fabric soft. Doesn't hurt him."

He gently pulled down my baby's leg and reattached it to the sheet with the safety pin. The leg was no bigger around than the doctor's thumb and shifted side to side, as if he were struggling to kick free.

"It's okay for you to touch him, but very gently. Wash hands first." The doctor nodded toward a sink along the wall near Tigger.

I complied, then returned, feeling like a surgeon with sterile hands. Dr. Khan opened one of the two ports on my side of the incubator and motioned for me to reach in.

The air inside the incubator was warm on my skin. “Hey, little guy. It’s me, your mommy.” His teeny fingers closed around my giant pinkie.

“See? Instinct. He knows his mama. Important for mother to bond with baby,” Dr. Khan said.

I pulled my finger away slightly. But he held on. Definitely a fighter.

“You didn’t pick name?” He pointed to the card that said, “Baby Boy Wahlberg.”

“Angela.” I paused. “I’m rethinking that choice.”

“In my country, everyone wants boy. Grow up to be doctor, support parents.”

“In this country, girls can be doctors—”

“Of course. The Colonel. My aunt is an internist. She studied in Boston. Go Red Sox,” he added with a grin.

“I’m a Royals fan myself. George Brett?”

“Brett plays third base. He’s a heavy hitter.” Dr. Khan was clearly a fan of the sport. He jotted some notes on the chart, hung it next to the incubator, and wagged a finger at me. “Baby needs name before we transport to Travis. Pick a name today and let the nurses know.”

My head swam. Pick a name? A boy’s name? The odor of disinfectant was making me nauseous. My knees wobbled and I gripped the counter to keep from collapsing.

“Mother needs her rest,” Dr. Khan said.

“Yes, I think I’ll go back to my room.”

“One more thing. Will you breast-feed?”

“I did with Jason, but now ... can I?” How was I supposed to get past the wires, the tubes?

“It’s very important for preemies. The nurses will give you bottles and help you.” The young doctor stifled a yawn.

On the way back to my room, I stopped at the nurses’ station and used the desk phone to call my parents. My dad answered. His usually cheery voice carried an unfamiliar tone of alarm. “Grandma Bernon had a stroke yesterday morning and fell in her kitchen. Your mother’s still at the hospital with her.”

I twisted the phone cord around my pinkie while Dad explained Grandma's condition. She had paralysis in her right leg, arm, and eye. She would need therapy. It would take weeks before they would know her full prognosis.

Last summer had been rough on Kansas farmers. My parents didn't have a lot of extra cash, and Mom had already bought a plane ticket to come out just before my due date, still six weeks away. I couldn't ask her to abandon her own mother now.

"Tell Mom to take care of Grandma," I said, "get rested up, and then come out to meet her new grandson."

"Grandson. Whoa. I thought you weren't due until the end of July. Are you okay? Your mother can be on the next plane."

Mom was a nurse. The best. I needed her desperately, but couldn't ask her to abandon her own mother now. I hesitated, running various scenarios through my mind, none of them working.

Finally I said, "Tell Mom to give my love and prayers to Grandma. Do you have a pencil? I'll give you the number and she can call me here at the base hospital when she gets home. I'll be fine. I will."

I wrapped my arms around my shoulders and hugged myself tight. A dark, dense feeling within me said nothing would ever be fine again.