



*T*hanksgiving Day. Tradition demanded the day's focus was on being grateful. And as both the wife and mom in the Thatcher family, I was. But throughout the day, in between remembering all the reasons I was thankful, the words, "*Tell them,*" replayed in my mind. Don and I needed to tell them while the family was all here together.

But announcing our news to Johanna and Jillian and Payton was more difficult than I'd expected. And so, it was back to being thankful. Again.

If someone asked me what one thing I was most thankful for today, I'd tell them it was the drama-free scene right here in my kitchen.

My daughters had been together from mid-morning to late afternoon, and there'd been no snark. No irritated looks tossed back and forth between the trio. No chilly silence. Johanna hadn't hassled Payton about how many sugars she'd dumped into her cups of

coffee. Jillian hadn't needed to referee any verbal skirmishes between her sisters.

With our Thanksgiving meal finished, the kitchen was crowded, couples working to clear away the mess. Johanna and Beckett washed serving utensils and pots. Jillian and Geoff loaded the dishwasher. Payton and Zach put away leftovers.

The family scene was threaded through with laughter, punctuating the lack of tension as everyone worked together, instead of squaring off with one another because someone was annoyed, offended, or outright angry.

So many good memories were tucked inside this house. Some heartbreaking ones too.

And some of the best memories had been made in the last two years.

Johanna leaned close to Beckett as he whispered something in her ear, her platinum blonde hair pulled back in a low ponytail. She grinned, splashing a bit of soapy water in his face. He caught her closer with a playful growl, droplets of water clinging to his dark hair.

Those two. So obviously in love with one another—and still leaving us all guessing as to whether they'd ever get married or not after reconciling with one another after Ellison's birth.

Johanna gave Beckett a quick kiss and stepped away from the sink, drying her hands on a dish towel. "I'd better check on Dad and Ellison."

“I’m sure they’re fine downstairs.” I gave the island one last swipe with a damp rag and centered the vase of flowers Jillian and Geoff had presented me that morning—all golds and yellows and oranges. “Your dad loves spending time with his only granddaughter—even more than he loves spending time with Winston.”

“Just don’t tell Winston—he’ll put on his best doggie pout.” Jillian shook her head, offering me a grin.

“I’m surprised how good your dog is with a rambunctious two-year-old.” Johanna folded the dish towel, laying it on the counter next to the drying pots and pans.

“Winnie would never hurt Ellison.” Jillian shut the dishwasher and turned it on, running her fingers through her short blonde hair—her chosen style now, no longer caused by cancer. The low hum became the mechanical background music in the kitchen. “And you and Beckett were both so patient, teaching Ellison to be gentle with him.”

“Except for that one episode.” Johanna grimaced. “Poor guy. All he did was whimper until we realized she had both fists wrapped around his eyebrows.”

Jillian’s eyes lit up as Johanna shared the memory. Laughter and happiness surrounded her most days. Such a change from two years ago.

Johanna and Jillian had rediscovered their close relationship after Johanna’s unexpected pregnancy—discovered after she and Beckett had broken up—and

Jillian's infertility created an emotional impasse between them.

Had Jillian's faith caused the change? Or the fact that Jillian and Geoff had tabled the decision about having children during the past two years? Whatever the reason, it was good to see my middle daughter happy. Content.

With a swish of the door and a giggle from our granddaughter, Don entered the kitchen, carrying Ellison piggyback.

"Heather, this little girl wants something to drink." He deposited her in one of the chairs in the breakfast nook. "And Winston is enjoying time in the backyard."

"I'll get her something, Mom." Beckett removed a lime-green sippy cup from the cupboard. "Water, juice, or milk, Jo?"

"Whichever one she wants."

"Ellison?"

"Juice, Daddy."

"What do we say, sweetheart?"

"Please." Ellison tilted her head and smiled, prompting Beckett to drop a kiss on top of her strawberry blonde hair.

"Anyone else want something to drink?"

"Just worry about Ellison, Beck. We can get what we need." Johanna sat beside her daughter, tucking a curl behind her ear. "But thanks for asking."

"Anyone want to play a board game?" Zach closed the fridge door, the leftovers all stored away.

“When’s the next football game?” Don glanced at the floral clock in the breakfast nook.

“We can always have the game on in the background while we play Codenames or Catan.”

“Sounds good. And then we can have some leftovers before anyone heads home.”

Payton groaned. “Dad, we just got everything put away.”

“But the leftovers are the best part of Thanksgiving.”

To the casual observer, we looked like the stereotypical happy family. But then, most people didn’t know about the secrets that had threatened our relationships. The choices that had almost torn our family apart. The losses. The heartaches each one of my daughters still carried.

Don hugged Payton, saying something only she could hear and making her laugh. My daughters didn’t realize how lucky they were to have such a good dad. Or maybe they did. I was thankful their memories of their dad were so different than mine.

And now we were all here . . . well, all of us except Pepper. I could only be grateful for the memories we’d given her before she died at sixteen. The love she’d experienced as one of the Thatcher sisters in her all-too-short life.

*Tell them.*

Don and I had discussed it all again last night—that if the opportunity presented itself today, we’d take advantage of it.

I met Don's gaze. Raised my eyebrows.

He mimicked my expression.

Was that a yes? A no?

I widened my eyes . . . and Don mirrored my expression again.

"Mom. Dad. What is going on? You look like two mimes doing a poorly rehearsed mirror routine."

Johanna's question caused Payton to giggle.

I guess we weren't so subtle after all.

"Dad and I want to talk to you all about something."

"Is that what all the eyebrow raising and eye widening was about?"

"I was trying to figure out if now was the right time . . ." My voice trailed off as all three girls fixed their gazes on me.

"Is everything okay?" Jillian leaned into Geoff, who wrapped an arm around her waist. "You're . . . not sick, are you?"

With all the upheaval in our family in recent years, including her breast cancer diagnosis, it wasn't surprising Jillian would expect the worst.

Everyone stepped closer to one another. Stilled. An emotional circling of the wagons.

What we were about to tell them was a *change*, not a crisis. I needed the girls to see this change was good.

"Your dad and I are selling the house."

My announcement was met by silence. Unblinking stares from Johanna. Jillian. Payton.

“Can I have more juice, please?” Ellison’s sweet voice broke through the tension.

“Just a minute, sweetheart.”

“Sure, Elle.”

Beckett’s and Johanna’s conflicting responses collided.

“I’ll get her something.” Beckett stepped away from Johanna, but not before he gave her hand a quick squeeze. “Just half a glass.”

Johanna refocused on me. “Why . . . why are you thinking about selling the house?”

“We’re not thinking about it anymore. We did that for the last six months. More like a year.” I paused, but Don seemed happy to let me handle explaining our decision. “I guess the main reason is we don’t need this big house.”

“But you just put the deck in a couple of years ago.” This from Payton.

“And the deck adds to the resale value of the house.”

“Isn’t selling the house going to be a lot of work?”

“It’s still a seller’s market. Our Realtor says—”

“You already have a Realtor?” Jillian’s voice was higher-pitched than normal.

“Yes. You need one to sell a house.” I tried to soften my words with a laugh. “She’s the wife of one of your dad’s former colleagues. She’s very good and we like working with her.”

“How quickly do you plan to put the house on the

market?" Johanna, ever the calm one, was fact-gathering.

"The second week of December."

"That soon?"

"Well, there's no need to wait, especially since we've already bought a house."

"What?" Jillian's question came out on a gasp.

"You've bought another house?" Payton gripped Zach's hand.

"We know it's a little backwards, but we've been casually looking and found a perfect house with less square footage than what we have here. A wonderful view of Pikes Peak. Things are moving so quickly right now, we decided to put an offer on it and—surprise!—it was accepted. We close in early February."

"You're serious . . ." Payton's blue-green gaze—always a reminder of Pepper—darted between me and her dad, as if expecting one of us to change the story.

"Very much so." Don's voice was firm.

"Fortunately, we painted both the interior and exterior of the house last summer and we selected neutral colors for the rooms just in case we decided to sell. The Realtor told me what to do since we're showing the house during the holidays. Normally, we don't go crazy with Christmas decorations. Your dad and I are trying to decide if we're going to put up a tree or not."

"No Christmas tree?" Jillian's tone was similar to Ellison's when her parents told her no.

"Again, the Realtor recommended it. Or she said

we should put up a smaller one with white lights. No ornaments.”

“Your Realtor sounds like a Scrooge.” Johanna crossed her arms. “Bah, humbug.”

“Jo, our decision to sell the house doesn’t stop you from celebrating the holidays. You can still decorate your house however you want to.”

“But we always open gifts here. And have Christmas dinner.”

“And we still will. Christmas is on a Saturday this year, so we won’t show the house from the Wednesday before through the weekend. And who knows? Maybe we’ll sell the house fast.”

We seemed to have switched roles—having to explain ourselves to Johanna, Jillian, and Payton—as if Don and I were the children and they were the parents.

Don stepped next to me, resting his hand on my shoulder. He hadn’t said much up until now, but his touch was a gentle reminder we’d agreed on this decision.

We’d bought a new house. Signed a contract with our Realtor, Tracey, to sell this one.

Did the girls even remember we’d decided to sell this house once before and then backed out when Pepper died when she and Payton were juniors in high school?

This time, we weren’t going to change our minds.



THEY'D BEEN HOME FOR SEVERAL HOURS, AND PAYTON still grappled with her parents' decision to sell their house. She'd ignored Johanna's texts and Jillian's phone call, needing to make sense of it herself before she could talk to her sisters.

Life was changing so much—more than Johanna and Jillian and Mom and Dad realized.

“Do you think we should have told them?” Payton sat on the edge of their bed and pulled a pillow into her lap, wrapping her arms around it. Laz, their big black mutt, settled at her feet.

“Payton, if you're talking to me, I can't hear you when I'm in the shower.” Zach's words were muffled behind the white and black geometric-patterned shower curtain.

There was no sense in having a conversation with her husband when he couldn't hear her. Besides, she'd asked him the same question as they'd walked away from her parents' house, and then again on their drive home. But even though Zach had given her the same answer every time, she still struggled with their decision.

The sound of the running water stopped, and a few moments later, Zach appeared in his sweatpants and Broncos T-shirt, toweling off his black hair.

“Did you say something while I was showering?”

“I don't like keeping a secret from my family again.” Payton hugged the pillow closer.

Zach sat beside her on the bed, the scent of his soap and shampoo familiar and comforting. Laz raised

his head for a moment before settling back on the floor, his head resting on his front paws. “We were going to tell them, but when your parents made their announcement, it wasn’t the right time.”

“I never expected my parents to sell the house.” Payton rested her head against Zach’s shoulder, savoring the warmth of his embrace as his arm encircled her shoulders.

“I don’t know which one of you was more surprised—Johanna, Jillian, or you.”

“And to put it on the market during the holidays—”

“People do it—maybe not all the time, but houses do sell. The market is still strong in the Springs, so I imagine your parents will get a good offer pretty quickly.”

“I thought *we* were the ones who were changing things up.”

“And we are.” Zach leaned forward, his gray eyes meeting hers. “You’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

“No. I’m excited about the move to England and your opportunity to learn more about woodworking and cabinetmaking.” Payton closed her eyes for a moment. Sighed. “But Mom and Dad’s decision makes me realize how things will be changing back here while we’re overseas.”

“We’ll be overseas for a year—maybe two. And then—”

“And then we don’t know.” Payton shrugged away from Zach’s embrace. “We might come back to

Colorado, or we might not. We can't see that far ahead yet. The one thing we know right now is God's led us to say yes to this opportunity in England."

Zach straightened but remained close. "I know you're giving up a lot so I can do this, Payton."

"Hey, we do life together. And there's volleyball in England too. I'm doing my research before we leave in June."

"We've got time to figure things out."

"Now we just need to figure out when to tell my family about all of this. I really don't want to wait much longer."

"You're getting together with your sisters for your book club the beginning of December. Why don't you go ahead and tell them then?"

"Tell Jo and Jill but not Mom and Dad?" Payton rose and moved to the bathroom to brush her teeth. "That doesn't seem right."

"Then we'll tell them when we go over to decorate for Christmas—"

"Mom and Dad aren't decorating for Christmas, remember? Realtor's orders." Payton gripped the edge of the sink, fighting against the pressure building up in her chest.

There was more change happening than she'd expected.

"Payton." Zach came up behind her, resting his hands on her shoulders. "We'll figure out the right time to tell the family, okay?"

“Okay.” She relaxed against him. “Now I just have to make sure I don’t slip up during the book club.”

Conversation ceased as they flossed and brushed their teeth, the minty flavor of toothpaste rinsed away with swishes of cold water. Could she spend a morning with her sisters and not mention how she and Zach were moving to England?

Probably. All she needed to do was talk less and listen more.

Payton slipped beneath the blankets and moved closer to Zach, who slid his arm beneath her head. Could she move to England knowing that her family home wouldn’t be waiting for her when they came back to the States?

“Are you excited to go see the new house?” Zach’s question rumbled beneath her ear.

“Excited? Not really. More curious, I guess. I want to be happy for Mom and Dad. Just like we want them—*everyone*—to be happy for us.”

“Exactly.” The bed shifted a bit as Zach nodded in agreement.

“I wonder if there’ll be any more surprises this Christmas season?”

“Isn’t this the season of wonder and surprises?”

“I guess so.” Payton rolled over to lay on her back. “It’s funny, because we like to think of surprises as fun and exciting, but sometimes they cause things to change. And then you have to choose between holding on to what was and embracing the new. You can’t have both. It’s like crossing a river . . . what was on the one

side wasn't bad. You can't stand in the middle of the river because that's too dangerous. You have to keep moving forward to the other side. To what's waiting for you. You're moving toward the unknown, and you have to pray and hope for all the goodness there."

"That's quite a philosophical way to look at life right now."

"*Hmm.* It just came to me. It's not so much philosophical as trying to work through things so I can accept all the changes." Payton turned her head, able to make out the outline of Zach's profile in the moonlight. "So we tell everyone about England as soon as we can?"

"Yes."

"And we're excited for Mom and Dad."

"Yes."

She'd have to work on that part—transitioning her hesitancy to excitement. Supporting her parents' decision in the same way she and Zach wanted to be supported.

Things were changing more than she'd expected—and possibly more changes were coming. She didn't know. The important thing was to not lose the closeness the family had found in recent years, no matter what happened.