CHAPTER TWO

PASTOR MAX & KARINA

The More Things Change...

"TOO MUCH VOLUME, PEOPLE!" Pastor Max yelled with a smile, trying very hard to slightly lower the near-deafening decibel level of the fifty excited foster kids currently under his care. Being trapped in a giant bus for a three-hour road trip resulted in every one of them becoming a bit spastic, squirming all about to get out of their seats, exit the bus, and race one another into the mall. Shaking his head at the futility of his attempts to silence them while loosening the white collar that never quite comfortably rested against his black skin, he wondered again what had possessed him so many years back to take up the ministry. And on top of that, he took on organizing the annual outing for needy kids to go to the mall. Surely, it had been easier for him to quiet down a bunch of motor mouths—a term he called people who went on and on about nothing, just like the guys he met during the three years he spent in prison for stealing cars.

Carjacking was his ticket to becoming a gang member during his younger years. Growing up without a family or home to call his own, Max mistakenly believed that joining the gang would give him a sense of

belonging to a group of people who would care for him and always have his back. Boy, had he been wrong.

When a "simple" car theft accidentally included snatching a baby in a car seat sleeping in the back, he immediately pulled over and turned himself in to the police. At that moment, he realized he was on a very wrong path, both literally and figuratively. That was the last time he ever saw his gang— his "family"— and the first and last time he saw the inside of a police car. After a holding cell, a court case, and, ultimately, a prison sentence, he did time for grand theft auto and attempted kidnapping.

Pastor Max saw so much of his younger self in these kids on the bus: From the too-cool-for-school bullies who only acted out because they themselves were getting abused at home, to the shy and quiet wallflowers who blended in and hoped to disappear, their wounds silently festering inside, until one day they snapped, destroying themselves and anyone else who got in their way. Definitely opposite ends of the spectrum, but at every kid's core, no matter how they behaved, he believed the common denominator to turning their lives around was simple: Love. At the end of the day, love is what they needed—just like what he needed and eventually got when he was their age.

As Pastor Max made his way down the center aisle from the front of the bus to the back, he set out his ground rules for what he expected of these kids while at the mall. Doing his best impression of a drill sergeant addressing new cadets, emphasizing certain words for effect, he shouted out:

"Repeat after me: I EARNED my seat on this bus."

The teens, ranging in age from 13 to 17 and from all backgrounds and ethnicities, responded weakly, "I earned—"

"Oh, no…" Pastor Max stopped them before they even started. "That's all ya got? I heard you talking louder to each other when you were trying to whisper. This ain't gonna do at all. Maybe you all don't think you EARNED this day of FREE gifts and a great lunch and lots of treats and shopping for the people on your holiday lists…?"

The grumblings grew louder as the kids objected.

"Okay, then, let me hear you this time. I EARNED my seat on this bus."

In a thunderous response so loud Pastor Max couldn't help but smile, the kids shouted back in unison.

"I EARNED my seat on this bus," they cheered.

"Again," Pastor Max said as he raised his hands facing palms-up to the heavens, almost as if conducting an orchestra and calling for a crescendo.

"That's it…. Repeat after me: I AM worthy."

"I AM worthy," they echoed.

Pastor Max now spun around doing his own kind of dance from where he stood in the very center of the bus.

"I AM grateful."

No child remained seated. As they repeated the words, Pastor Max looked at everyone's smiles and continued.

"Okay, now, last one, and this one's SO IMPORTANT. Listen to the whole thing, alright? You ready now?"

"I AM a GUEST of the mall today, and I WILL be a MODEL for all others who see, hear, and interact with me."

Suddenly, instead of the thunderous affirmational response, a high-pitched voice pierced the air, screaming the words, "BACK OFF!"

Pastor Max sighed and dropped his arms, recognizing the voice and its ever-present sharpness of tone. It was Karina. His most challenging problem to solve.

At once, the entire busload of kids turned toward the back of the bus, jockeying for the best view of what was no doubt a fight.

"I said, back off or somebody's gonna get hurt." Karina's warning boomeranged from ear to ear and brought everyone on the bus to attention.

Although Karina was Max's problem child, if he was truly honest with himself, she also was his favorite. She had such potential. She was so smart and so caring…well, when nobody was looking.

At only 14 years old, Karina had already lived a life that few could imagine, let alone one that anyone would wish on their worst enemy. Since birth, she had endured terrible abuse at the hands of both her parents. They both ended up in prison—and she in foster care—but periodically, her parents would be released, and Karina returned to live with them. Heavy bruises and broken bones led to hospital visit after hospital visit

until the court finally terminated her parents' legal rights when Karina was 8 years old. Though the decision to remove her from the cruelty of her parents likely saved her life, it also introduced a whole new set of obstacles: Karina's countless placements in different foster homes escalated her bad behavior, and, perhaps worst of all, developed a sense of hopelessness. Max knew her backstory and was concerned for her future. Losing a sense of belonging and faith in what was good and possible in life were feelings that Max understood far too well.

Had it not been for some random stranger from the Legal Aid office who took on his case pro bono, and, by the grace of God, got him a reduced sentence and placement in a minimum-security facility, who knows where Max would be today? Max frequently remembered how scared he was throughout it all and how surprised he was that this man, this *lawyer,* who didn't know him from the man in the moon wanted to help him for no foreseeable reason. Back then, he couldn't believe that anyone did anything with zero expectations of getting something back in return. Yet, somehow, that's what this angel-lawyer did. While he could never repay the debt in full, Max could offer the lawyer—and himself—one thing: The promise of turning his own life around. Helping kids like Karina was part of his promise.

In a flash, Max maneuvered his linebacker-like frame down the aisle. Acting like Moses, he managed to part the sea of kids who were now standing in his way to get a better look at the fight breaking out in the back of the bus. From what he could see, no real punches were thrown yet. He was far less concerned about Karina being able to handle herself than the well-being of poor Randy, a younger boy who was cowering underneath the last row of seats.

Max struggled to keep himself from laughing out loud at the sight. Karina was tall, loved trendy fashion, and acted older than she really was. She adored her long, painted fingernails and flashy, hoop earrings. In what Max thought was her attempt to stay connected to her heritage, she purposely incorporated a certain Mexican-style flair into her clothes and appearance.

Randy, on the other hand, was more akin to an 8-year-old boy's mental and emotional state. Physically, however, he seemed to inhabit a body belonging to an 18-year-old man. Growing up, Randy was labeled "white trash," partially due to a woman finding him in an actual trash can when he was a toddler. He wasn't really a bad kid, although that may have been an assumption based on Max's love of the movie *Boy's Town*, along with his belief that there were no such thing as a "bad kid."

How he wished Father Flannigan could be with him now.

"THAT'S ENOUGH. Karina. Randy. *Enough*." Max's tattooed-covered arms pulled Randy out from where he hid under the seat, while his backside kept Karina at bay. As he struggled with the two troublemakers, he looked up and suddenly became aware of all the other kids on the bus. They were still crowding, taking sides, and shouting in support of their preferred contender.

Max bellowed, turning his head toward them: "SIT DOWN AND BE QUIET ALL OF YOU RIGHT NOW!"

At that very moment, Karina's head accidentally knocked into Max's nose. Her golden earring got caught in his loosened collar, and they both fell back onto Randy. Like a stack of pancakes piled one on top of the other, all three of them were now wedged behind the last row of seats.

The entire bus became silent. Every person's eyes grew wide.

Pastor Max couldn't hold it in any longer. He erupted in laughter. Karina covered her mouth at first in shock, but then began giggling herself. Then Randy followed, snorting with glee. Seconds later, everyone on the bus dissolved into peals of laughter.

"Am I too late to join in on the fun?" Leo's baritone voice put an end to the hilarity, not to mention absurdity, of the situation. All eyes were now on the slender, silver-haired stranger who had silently stepped onto the bus during the commotion. There was an abrupt silence as everyone turned to stare at him.

Karina scrambled to pull herself up, aided by Pastor Max's gentle push. He then righted himself as quickly as he could. Once standing, Pastor Max reached down to yank Randy free, a task that didn't prove so easy.

"Seems like you could use a hand." Leo suppressed his own chuckles at the sight of such an entanglement. As he took a few more steps down the bus's aisle, the children silently slid back into their seats. When he reached Max, he nearly had an encounter himself with Randy, who at that very moment, popped up from the floor with the force of a cork shooting free from a shaken champagne bottle. Leo dodged and managed to stand firm as the boy steadied himself.

"There you go." Max sighed in relief. "Now take a seat. You, too, Karina."

Max then turned to Leo and shrugged. "Kids…"

It was then that Leo noticed a tiny trickle of blood dripping from Max's nose. He reached into his back pocket, pulled out a white handkerchief, and handed it to Max. "Kids…yes. The more things change…"

"…the more they're exactly as they should be." Max finished the sentence while wiping his nose. "Man, it's good to see you my friend."

"You, too," said Leo, as the two men heartily turned their initial handshake into a bear hug. "You look like you have your hands full, as usual."

"I'm sort of grateful you could only handle one busload of kids this year," Max joked.

"There's always a silver lining to every dark cloud. Although I do wish the mall had a bigger budget to help more kids. Who knows about next year…" Leo's voice trailed off.

"Pastor Max, I gotta pee." A random voice shouted out, giving rise to others' rumblings.

"Right," Max shouted back. "Everybody, this is Leo. He's a good friend of mine, and he helped make this trip possible for all of you. Let's give him a round of applause."

The kids clapped, hooted, and hollered.

"Grab your stuff, and let's get ready…"

Leo nudged Max with his elbow, whispering, "Please don't say 'to rumble.'"

Max chortled and whispered back, "We already sorta did that, didn't you notice?"

The kids, oblivious to the interchange, yelled, "…for some Christmas magic." They clearly memorized Pastor Max's affirmations—even if they'd probably never admit out loud that they actually liked the familiar, corny phrases. With minimal pushing and shoving, the energetic group made their way off the bus.

"Form a line once you get outside and wait for me," Pastor Max called out. He directed his attention to Karina and Randy. "You two are lucky that Leo is here to remind me of second chances. We'll discuss what happened here later. Now go."

"The more things change…" Leo repeated the phrase. Karina and Randy scampered off the bus, feigning a friendly glare at one another before escaping to fresher, yet more frigid, air.

"…the more they're different." And Max again finished the sentence with a sigh.

As Leo turned to follow the kids outside, Pastor Max held back for a moment, reflecting. He had learned the hard way that there'd always be questions to answer, obstacles to hurdle, challenges to overcome, and problems to solve. But he always found a way to rise.

While he was in prison, Max worked as one of the Brownies—a label given to inmates who worked in the kitchen and wore brown uniforms. He quickly rose in rank to become the top cook, partly due to his love of food and the joy it brought to others, but also due to his determination to learn a trade, get out of jail, and never come back. Max worked extremely hard to keep his nose clean by steering clear of any hint of trouble. He spent most of his time attending classes and trying to improve himself, earning the title of The Programmer and a reputation as the "go-to book-nerd" and "guy with all the answers." Although, truth be told, he never felt as if he had the answers to much of anything. One thing he knew for sure, however, was that he was given a second chance in life and there was no way he was going to blow it.

That's when Leo came in—his legal-eagle and guardian angel. This then-stranger took on Max's case and ended up rooting for him so much that Max had no choice but to believe in himself, too. They became close friends and have been ever since.

All these years later, Max was pleased that he had made something of himself. Leo's faith in him was worth it. He was worth it. Now the leader of a congregation in one of Chicago's roughest neighborhoods, Pastor Max provided alternative occupational training and education opportunities for thousands of people, both young and old alike. Max was most proud of his Open Kitchen restaurant concept. By combining the kitchen and book-smart skills he learned in prison—both how to cook and how to operate a business—Max created a safe eatery where ex-convicts literally ran the place: Food prep, menu selection, restaurant décor, customer service, bookkeeping, marketing, and more. Plus, at the end of every evening, the excess food was handed out for free to anyone who was hungry and needed a home-cooked meal. It was Max's way of paying it forward and making good on Leo's investment in his life.

Much to his surprise, Open Kitchen had taken off. Reservations were now required and depending on the time of year, the wait list to snag a table was longer than a week. He didn't know if it was due to the taste of his dishes or if it was simply people's curiosity to see ex-cons. Then again, maybe it all was just the newness of the restaurant acting as the trendy "flavor of the month," so to speak. Quite frankly, Max really didn't care about the "why." Whatever the reason, business was booming, and the media kept sharing positive stories and reviews, not just about Open Kitchen, but about the people and the purpose. So, while Max was constantly aware that his success could all go away tomorrow, he also was aware that all anyone ever had was the present moment, and, for right now, it was great—and he was grateful.

Leo's voice bellowed from outside: "Max, you coming?"

Max snapped into action, strolled to the front of the bus, and shook his head free of his thoughts—all except one: Why, lately, did he find himself wishing it would all go away? And why could he not get out of his head the big ticket offer he had received a few weeks ago to sell the restaurant? Especially since the offer came from a guy he knew would bulldoze the whole place and erase everything he had built?