

Chapter 8

Supervention

Friday, August 31

“Joel, you shaved. What’s wrong?” Bobbi left the papers surrounding her at the kitchen table to hug and kiss her son, home for the long Labor Day weekend.

“Not a thing.” He pulled a chair out and turned it around backwards before straddling it. “Things are great. Better than great, in fact.”

“Sounds like you met a girl.” Bobbi poured a cup of coffee for Joel, a second one for herself, and slid into the chair across the table from him. “Spill your guts, and deliver me from school paperwork.”

“Actually, she’s not just a girl,” he said, reaching for the cup. “I’ve met *the* girl.”

“*The* girl? Aren’t you a little young for that?”

Joel coughed an exaggerated cough. “Let’s see. How old was Bobbi Petrocelli when she got engaged to Chuck Molinsky?”

“Eighteen,” Bobbi admitted. “But things were different then.” Joel mouthed her words as she spoke, mocking her good-naturedly. “Honestly Joel, you really think you know her well enough to be talking about engagement?”

Joel coughed again. “And how long had you and Dad dated? About three months, if memory serves me.”

“Touché. We can argue about all that later.” Bobbi watched him, with his irrepressible smile, and twinkle in his eyes, and she buried her concerns for the time being. “Tell me all about this girl before Dad and Shannon get back from their movie.”

“Her name is Abby Greenway,” he said, leaning forward, resting his forearms on the back of the chair. “She’s a freshman, like me, but she’s from there in Columbia, so she’s not on campus a lot.”

“How’d you meet her then?”

“At church. I was checking out college ministries this summer, and I ended up at her church.”

Church. Good answer. “That’s encouraging. Does she have a major yet?”

“She wants to work with kids, but she hasn’t decided if she would rather teach or work with preschoolers. I told her she should talk to you for the scoop on the teaching side of it.”

“I’d be glad to talk to her. So when do we get to meet her?” Joel stood and turned his chair around, then sat back down. “What? I don’t get to meet her?”

Joel pulled his chair closer and raised his hands. “Mom, just hear me out on this, okay? When I bring Abby home for you to meet her ... I’m also going to bring her son.”

Bobbi blinked slowly and took a long drink, covering the gathering storm of emotion rising inside her. Hadn’t Joel seen what they’d all been through, were still going through, because of Chuck and Tracy? How could he turn around and jump into the same type of mess? Joel betrayed her. Again. Confusion, disappointment and indignation lay just below the surface when she finally spoke. “She’s awfully young to be divorced.”

“Mom,” Joel said, digging in, “she had Ryan when she was fifteen.”

Bobbi set the cup down and rubbed her forehead. She didn’t want to alienate her son. He needed somebody to talk some sense into him. “You need to think about this, long and hard—”

“I have.”

“You have not!” Bobbi shot back, her self-control slipping. “Why would you want to entangle yourself in something when you are completely innocent? Have you missed what’s been going on in your own family these last few years?”

“That’s just it!” Joel’s voice rose in intensity. “I understand what she’s gone through. I saw Dad live it, and I know the kind of grace and compassion a person needs in order to get back on track after it’s all over. I feel like this is an opportunity from God to change lives for the better.”

“This is not a summer mission project. This is your *life*, Joel.” She closed her eyes, and finished off her cup of coffee. *Calm, be calm.* “Honey, I really appreciate that you want to be a gentleman, to be gallant and noble, but this is too big. No eighteen-year-old should be saddled with this. She’s not your responsibility. Her *son* is not your responsibility. Where’s the boy’s father in all this? What about him?”

“Abby and Brandon counseled with their pastor after she found out she was pregnant. They went before their church, just like Dad did, but they decided not to add a marriage neither of them was ready for to their situation. Eventually, Brandon dropped out of counseling, out of church, and out of Abby’s life.”

“Exactly. You shouldn’t have to clean up after this boy.” Joel smiled slightly, and shook his head. “What?”

“Mom, you’re fighting with Dad because he’s trying to do the right thing about his son. Now you’re ragging on Brandon ’cause he skipped out. You can’t have it both ways. Either we fulfill our obligations or we don’t.”

Bobbi's eyes narrowed, and she leveled a finger at him. "First of all, this is not about your dad. Secondly Joel, you don't have any obligation to this girl to fulfill!"

"I do if I love her," Joel answered quietly.

"All right, fine," Bobbi said throwing her hands up. "You love her and you're going to marry her. What's your timetable on this?"

"I just want to get engaged, and make a commitment to her right now. I don't think we should get married until we're through with college."

Bobbi leaned back in her chair. She lowered her voice, consciously trying to speak slowly and keep her emotions out of it. "Do you have any idea how much this is going to complicate your life? You want to finish college in three years. How are you going to be able to focus on school? Chemistry, pre-med is no cake walk, even for you."

"If it takes me four years, that's not the end of the world," Joel said, dismissing her concern.

"What if you lose your scholarship?"

"Mom, please."

"I'm serious, Joel. It's tough to stay on top of your schoolwork when you're tied up in a relationship. When your dad was in law school, he had pressures I never understood, and yet I needed him to be there for me. He was pulled so hard from both directions. It was very frustrating and very lonely for both of us."

"You're probably right, Mom. It'll be hard, but I can't picture going through school, much less life, without Abby." Joel's eyes shone, as tears were just beginning to form.

Bobbi rinsed her cup out, and left it in the dish drainer. Then she dragged her chair closer to him and sat down. “Joel, let me try to explain to you where I’m at on this. My gut reaction is, ‘It’s happening again.’”

“What’s happening again?”

“Tracy, your dad, Jack ...”

“Mom, that’s ridiculous,” Joel said, rolling his eyes. “This is nothing like Dad and Tracy.”

“Not on the surface maybe, but what I see is a woman after my son. A woman preying on his kind heart, trying to manipulate him emotionally into doing something that’s not in his best interest.”

“Mom, that’s nuts. I can’t discuss this with you if you’re gonna be irrational.”

“Joel Anthony Molinsky!”

“Mom, I’m sorry. That was over the top—”

“No, I’m through, Joel,” she said, pushing her chair away from the table and standing up. “No more discussion until you’re listening.” She walked out, leaving him at the kitchen table.

Great. A great start to a long weekend. Bobbi headed upstairs for an aspirin, each step a little heavier. Chuck would take Joel’s side, Brad would take hers, and they’d all be at odds again.

In the upstairs bathroom, she opened the aspirin bottle and shook out two pills, then debated whether to take a third. She settled on two for now, chasing them with a long drink of water.

She felt like the boy who cried wolf, sounding an alarm that was at best ignored, at worst ridiculed. Nobody understood. Nobody saw the danger that Tracy was to her family. Now Joel was too infatuated to see the danger he was flirting with.

Dear God, how do I make them see? It's not about the kids, Jack or this other little boy. It's about these women after my husband and my son. Chuck and Joel don't realize how defenseless they are.

Bobbi heard the front door open, and Shannon's voice ringing from the entry hall. "Jellybean! I know you're here! I saw your car!"

Moments later, Chuck found Bobbi. "Joel said you were up here. Everything okay?"

"Is that all Joel said?"

"Yeah. Did he do something?"

"He wants to get engaged to a girl with a three-year-old." She crossed her arms, and waited for him to tell her what a wonderful idea that was.

"Wow, that's sudden," Chuck murmured. "Of course, we did just about the same thing."

"He used that against me. But Chuck, a three-year-old! Did you miss that part?"

"Honey, how do single mothers ever become un-single unless somebody marries them?"

"Now I see where the insanity comes from! He gets it from you!" She tossed a hand towel at him in frustration.

"Bobbi," Chuck said, catching the towel, "you may be entirely right about this, but Joel will never see it as long as you're so reactive."

“I am not being reactive!”

“You’re shouting.”

“All right,” Bobbi conceded, lowering her voice. “Maybe I’m a little reactive, but marriage? He’s only eighteen.”

“That’s exactly what my mother said.”

“You were twenty-one, and by the time we got married, you were twenty-four. That’s a big difference.”

“He’s not getting married tomorrow. He just wants to start the process.”

“Then you talk to him. You be the voice of reason, because clearly I’m the irrational one.”

“I didn’t say you were irrational.”

“No, Joel did.”

“He didn’t mean it,” Chuck said, motioning for Bobbi to come closer. He pulled her into his arms. “You love him and you want to protect him. He knows that. He’s just disappointed you don’t trust him on this.” As he tried to kiss her, her hands dropped and she pulled away.

“Why am I the one who has to do all the trusting? You guys never have to trust me.”

“Joel does trust you. That’s why he told you. He wants your input.”

She waved a finger at him. “He didn’t ask for input. He told me what he’s already decided.” Then she looked at Chuck with a teasing scowl. “He’s a lot like you that way.”

“Let’s go eat. I’ll talk to him tonight, then we can all discuss it, and try to find some resolution we can live with.”

“Always a lawyer. You’re not going to charge me for this mediation, are you?”

Bobbi raised an eyebrow, and gave him just a hint of a smile.

“Just the standard rate. Dinner, laundry and other intangibles.”

Chuck watched his wife all through dinner, pushing food around on her plate rather than eating, even though Shannon chose one of her mother’s favorite restaurants. He hated that she couldn’t enjoy listening to Shannon and Joel chattering nonstop across the table.

She was creating a burden for herself. Joel had a good head on his shoulders, always thoughtful and pragmatic. He never made a move without careful prayer. Joel begged God for answers, while Brad searched them out the way Bobbi did. However, both boys always arrived at the same unshakeable resolve.

Bobbi knew that about Joel, but it was lost right now in the upheaval over Tracy and Jack. As soon as they got home, Bobbi hustled Shannon upstairs for a bath, but Joel never came in the house. Chuck grabbed two cans of Coke from the refrigerator and found Joel in the garage under his car. “What’s wrong with your car?” Chuck asked.

“Nothing,” Joel said, sliding out from under the car. “Just due for an oil change. There’s a sack on the front seat with the filter in it. Can you get it for me?”

“Oh, sure.” Opening the car door, he said, “Mom said you met a girl.”

Joel dropped his head and smiled. “I bet that’s not all she said.”

“Not exactly, no.” Chuck handed the filter over. “She’s concerned about whether or not you’re making a wise decision.”

“Concerned? That’s putting it mildly.” Joel scooted back under the car. “She thinks I’m crazy, but I think she is too, so we’re even.”

“Probably not your best strategy for winning her over.”

Joel slid out from under the car once again, and sat up on the garage floor. “Dad, I handled it poorly with Mom, I admit, but I know this is the right thing. God brought Abby to me, and I know it’s because I’ve seen how to deal with sexual sin. You and Mom showed me.” He pushed his hair back from his forehead. “I saw how hard it was to rebuild everyone’s trust, and how committed you were to erasing that black mark. I can walk through this with her in a way that nobody else can.” Joel lay down and pushed his way back under his car.

“Mom doesn’t see that right?” Bobbi’s car was parked next to Joel’s, and Chuck carefully leaned against it.

“She started in with all this crazy stuff about Abby being like Tracy all over again, that she was after me to destroy me.” Joel slid out from under the car again. “I don’t want to have to choose between Mom and Abby, and I’m afraid that’s where this is going to end up.”

“It’s a Petrocelli thing. They all react emotionally and then once they calm down, they do the right thing.”

Joel uncapped a quart of oil and poured it in the reservoir. “Excuse my skepticism.”

“This is my fault, Joel. Mom’s misgivings aren’t about you getting engaged, or even the girl. It’s recycled mistrust. You’re seeing the scars that I caused your mom when

I cheated on her. Her suspicion is a direct result of my affair. It's just another way I hurt her, and now it's hurting you, too."

"She immediately thinks the worst though."

Chuck nodded. "She's seeing everything through the infidelity filter. Objectivity goes out the window and everything becomes a threat." Chuck handed Joel the can of Coke he brought out. "She wants to protect you from every possible emotional danger. She doesn't want you to go through anything remotely like what she did."

"It's not her job to protect me anymore."

"You'll never convince her, or any other mother, of that," Chuck said with a smile.

"So what do we do? I'm not budging, and I doubt she is either."

"We bring in outside help." Chuck gulped from his Coke.

"Outside help?"

"Yeah, like Glen."

"And you think Mom will go for that?"

"He's an objective third party."

"Yeah, but what if he says Mom's right? I'm gonna marry Abby with or without Mom's approval."

"Joel ..."

"Dad, you think raising Jack is the right thing to do, and you'll stand up to anybody over it, even Uncle Gavin, right?"

"Yes."

“Then you of all people should understand. I believe God is behind this, and I’ll defend it from now on.”

“I do understand, but this stubborn posturing and pressuring your mother will make things worse, not better.” Chuck took a long drink from his Coke. “Have you told Brad?”

“Yeah, he predicted Mom would go off.” Joel grinned broadly, as he poured another quart of oil in. “Of course, he’s got far more experience than I have judging what will set Mom off.”

“Almost as much as I do,” Chuck said. “So when do we get to meet Abby?”

“Not until this is settled. I’m not bringing her home while Mom’s like this.”

“I’ll tell you, and you can tell Abby, Mom will be okay with it. Give her a little time. Grandma thought I was nuts when I got engaged, but she figured out pretty fast what a genius I was for wanting to marry your mom.”

Bobbi had stared at the same two pages in her novel since she opened the book. Chuck would never change Joel’s mind. They were too much alike.

She was just about to give up the pretense of reading when Chuck came in. “So did you talk some sense into him?” Bobbi closed the book and laid it on the nightstand.

“Only if I can talk some sense into you.” Chuck sat on the edge of the bed beside her.

Bobbi crossed her arms. *I knew it. Here it comes.* “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I want you both to talk to Glen as an unbiased third party.”

“Glen Dillard is not unbiased. He’ll take your side.”

“I don’t have a side in this.”

“Yes, you do. You took Joel’s side.” She pointed toward the doorway. “I knew it as soon as you came in the bedroom. You wouldn’t make eye contact with me, and you didn’t answer my question.”

“Bobbi—”

“No! We’ll meet with Glen, and it’ll be three against one. Joel will think he has a big seal of approval on this.”

“You’re not giving Glen much credit. He’s extremely objective. He’s said some harsh things to me at lunch and in some of our counseling sessions.”

“I’ll go on one condition,” Bobbi muttered with a scowl. “I want Gavin and Rita there. That’ll even things out.”

“We’re not taking a vote on this. You don’t need to line up your troops.”

“You want an objective third party? Well, I want my own objective third party there. I trust Gavin.”

Sunday, September 2

Bobbi settled in the study with her Bible, ready to look at Psalm 91, just as Glen had assigned before the meeting tomorrow. After a weekend of Joel avoiding her, refusing to be in a room alone with her, she expected another disaster once they met.

Chuck’s grand arbitration would only force everyone to take sides. She resigned herself to an hour of emotional bullying and shaming to try to force her to give in. It wasn’t happening. Joel was too young and the situation was too complex. Period.

Before opening her Bible, she whispered a prayer. “Father, it’s going to be very hard for me to read this objectively. I want to find something I can use to prove to Joel that I’m right. Give me a clear understanding of Your truth, and not my version of it.” She read slowly, out loud.

*He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High
Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress;
My God, in Him I will trust.”
Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler
And from the perilous pestilence ...
His truth shall be your shield and buckler.
You shall not be afraid of the terror by night,
Nor of the arrow that flies by day,
Nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness,
Nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday.
A thousand may fall at your side,
And ten thousand at your right hand;
But it shall not come near you.
Only with your eyes shall you look,
And see the reward of the wicked.
Because you have made the Lord, who is my refuge,
Even the Most High, your dwelling place,
No evil shall befall you,
Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling;
For He shall give His angels charge over you,
To keep you in all your ways ...
“Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him;
I will set him on high, because he has known My name.
He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble;
I will deliver him and honor him.
With long life I will satisfy him,
And show him My salvation.”*

Bobbi finished reading with tears in her eyes. *Joel trusts You a lot more than I do, doesn't he?* God promised to protect him because he knew God’s name, he loved God and dwelt with Him.

She, on the other hand, had drifted away from God. It was a gradual, unnoticeable change, but as things between Chuck and her continued to improve over the years, she needed God less and less. God let her wander away, but He stood waiting for her to come back. Any time.

Father, Joel was Yours before he was mine. I'm going to work on these promises You've made, work on really trusting them for Joel and for Chuck. I'm asking for Your grace, though, and some reassurance.

Forgive me, Father, for letting things slip back to where they were before. I'm trying to hold on to everything myself instead of just trusting You. Thank You for working with me in spite of it.

Then as she reread the psalm, she felt a soothing warmth.

This is about more than just Joel. It's about me and that little boy, isn't it? I shouldn't be afraid to take him in, no matter what I think about his mother. You're going to protect Chuck and me from her.

We're going to court Thursday. I've never been in the same room with her, except that day at the coffee shop. Help me remember this when I face her.

Monday, September 3, Labor Day

Bobbi filed into the Sunday school classroom behind Brad, with Chuck and Joel following her. Laurie took Shannon down to one of the kid's rooms for the duration of the meeting. Glen sat at the head of the table, and stood to shake hands as soon as they walked in.

Chuck pulled out the chair nearest to Glen for her, and then he took the seat beside her. Brad rounded the table and sat across from them, but Joel slouched into the chair at the opposite end of the table. Rita and Gavin took the seats between Brad and Joel. Rita never even glanced their direction.

“Let me see if I understand everybody,” Glen Dillard said, surveying the room. “Joel, you think your mother is jumping to an unreasonable conclusion, and that she’s unfairly prejudiced because of what she went through with your dad.”

Joel nodded. “Completely prejudiced.”

“Bobbi, you think Joel is blinded by his feelings for this girl, and doesn’t want to consider that he might be wrong about her. Right?”

“Not necessarily wrong about her,” Bobbi clarified. “There are too many things he’s not considering. I don’t want him to get hurt.”

“Fair enough,” Glen continued. “Chuck, you want them to do what I say, so neither one of ’em is mad at you.” Chuck smiled, and Bobbi rolled her eyes. Her husband could be a politician.

“Brad, what’s your take?” Glen leaned back in his chair and smiled. “You may have the answer, and we can get out of here right now.”

“I doubt that.” He glanced at Chuck, and then looked away quickly. “There’s not gonna be a single answer to this. I think Joel’s naïve. I think there are consequences to Abby’s ... well, I think there are long-term effects that we can’t presume to know. But I think he’s right to believe that God can redeem all that.” He let a long breath go. “If he’d handled it a little better, with a little more consideration for Mom and what she’s been through, we wouldn’t need this meeting.”

“Well said, Brad,” Chuck said.

Brad’s shoulders relaxed and he glanced at his brother at the end of the table.

“Plus, I think he’s totally torqued because Mom didn’t immediately go along with what her little boy wanted, and I get to be the good son for a change.”

“Oh, please,” Joel muttered, crossing his arms across his chest.

“Moving right along,” Glen said. “Rita is not saying anything ever.” She shook her head, and looked into Bobbi’s eyes as if silently apologizing again.

Bobbi slid to the edge of her chair, and tried to make eye contact with Joel. He hadn’t even said good morning to her, plus he rolled out of bed at the last minute, robbing her of the chance to speak to him.

Glen turned to Gavin. “So what’s your ruling? See, Joel, this takes all the pressure off me.”

Gavin smiled, and said, “Joel, as believers, we are a kingdom of priests, right?”

“Yeah,” Joel answered.

“In the Old Testament there were some strict guidelines about who the priests could marry. I know, you’re not a Jewish priest, but you are part of the priesthood of the believers, and I think you can draw from those principles.”

Bobbi shifted in her chair. She knew what those principles said. If Gavin advised Joel against marrying Abby, then there would be an explosion.

“I’m not going to argue whether or not God brought you and Abby together,” Gavin continued, “but you should be aware that you’re starting out in a less than ideal situation. You guys need to build a strong hedge of protection around yourselves. You said Abby made a commitment to a pure life?” Joel nodded. “Then I think you need to go

above and beyond when it comes to honoring that. Maybe even to the point of not being alone with her, not kissing her until you do get married.”

Joel’s eyes grew wide. “Not kissing her? Are you serious?”

“Are you?” Gavin answered. “If you two can do that, and go through some deep premarital counseling, I don’t think Bobbi has anything to worry about.”

With everyone focused on Joel’s shock, no one noticed Bobbi’s dropped jaw. Gavin gave Joel the go-ahead. Gavin. Of all people.

“Of course not,” Joel said, with a scowl. “Nobody ever worries about the monks in the monastery.”

“It’s time to count the cost, Joel,” Glen said gently. “Everything in life costs something. If this is what you want, what you believe God is leading you to do, you’ll be willing to pay it.”

Bobbi watched Joel frown again, that Chuck Molinsky set in his jaw. Ready to go to battle over a "no" answer, he’d been caught off-guard by Gavin’s "yes, but" solution. The words of Psalm 91 and her own prayer from the night before replayed in her mind. Had she meant those things? Would she trust God with her son?

“Wait, Joel.” Bobbi couldn’t hold it back any longer. “I need to apologize to you. You were right. I *was* irrational, and that’s not fair to you or Abby.”

“Really?” Joel looked at her for the first time since Friday evening.

“Honey ...” Chuck put a hand on her arm, but she waved him off.

She looked squarely at her son, and spoke without wavering. “I’m going to accept that you’re following God’s leading on this, that you’re an adult capable of making your own decisions. I’m going to trust Him to protect you, because I can’t. I’ve deluded

myself, thinking that I can.” She wiped a tear away. “God said, *‘Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him.’* I’m going to hold Him to that.”

Joel grinned and left his seat, and then Bobbi stood and met him with a hug once he was close enough. “Mom, you were the one who taught me how to trust God. The whole time you were going through all that with Dad, I was watching and taking notes.”

“That’s what scares me,” Bobbi said. He had no idea what went on inside her during that time.

“I know you’re taking a risk, but this’ll be worth it.” He smiled at her. “I promise you, in front of everybody,” he said placing his hand over his heart, “I will not be alone with Abby until we get married, and I won’t touch her except to hold her hand.” Then he backtracked, “Well, I might kiss her goodnight. If Jacob could serve seven years for Rachel, surely I can make it three or four.”

“If Abby’s intentions aren’t honorable, she’ll never be willing to wait that long,” Gavin added. “We’ll find out what both of these kids are made of.”

“I love it when God works these things out,” Glen said, closing his planner. “Makes it a lot easier on this ol’ boy.”

Bobbi hugged her son once again. “Sweetheart, apologize to your fiancée for me, and bring her home soon so I can meet her.”