

Follow The Dream

By Kasey Riley

Chapter One

Athena startled awake. Her heart was pounding. Again she'd been dreaming 'the dream.' The same as she'd had for the past week. They were running from something. She and all of her siblings were running from something and trying to reach someone—their mother. In her dream, something had happened when everyone was far from home, and the kids had gotten separated from Mom. They needed to get away from the danger and back home to find Mom. Mom was telling her where to go and how to get there in her dreams. Could that happen? Was it possible? Shivers crawled up Athena's spine and brought goose-bumps up on her arms.

"Athena! Honey, you'd better get moving! You'll be late for school!" Mom's welcome voice drifted up the stairs, stirring Athena to roll out of bed.

Fifteen minutes later, she was in the kitchen with Damian, her older brother, Kira, her older sister, and the three-year-old Peyton. Mom was hustling around the kitchen, half-dressed for work, but making sure all the backpacks were ready to go.

"Damian, keep an eye on Peyton while I finish my make-up, okay?" Alysse tossed this request at her oldest son on her way to her room. She missed the eye-roll Damian shot at her.

"I've got to get something upstairs. You two watch your sister," Damian ordered Athena and Kira on his way from the kitchen.

"You ever notice, whenever mom tells him to babysit, Damian suddenly develops something he needs to do elsewhere? Like, how hard can it be for him to sit and eat, watching Peyton? It's not like she needs a diaper changed anymore." Kira glared after her brother and sighed.

"I think he just likes ordering us around. He'd order Peyton, but she's too young to do what he says most the time," Athena replied, showing wisdom beyond her ten years.

Alysse returned to the kitchen and frowned. "Did your brother duck out again? I swear, he avoids following orders as efficiently as Peyton does, but this time he's in trouble for it."

"He said he left something upstairs; he's only been gone a minute." Athena gallantly tried to cover for her absent brother.

"Damian Burgess! You get yourself down here,

young man!" Irritation vibrated in the shout up the stairs.

"Uh, yes, Mom? What do you need? I had to run upstairs and turn off my computer." Damian floundered through a likely excuse.

"I don't care about your computer. I put you in charge of taking care of your baby sister. How would you feel if something had happened while you were avoiding what I asked you to do? And don't tell me you told your sisters to watch Peyton. If I had wanted them to do it, I would have told them. I. Told. You." Alysse stood by the kitchen table with her arms crossed and her foot tapping. This body language did not bode well for the errant Damian.

"I'm sorry, Mom. You know nothing is going to happen here in our kitchen. I thought by asking Kira and Athena to watch Peyton; she would be safe." Damian reasoned softly, not looking up at his mother.

"Look at me. Did you honestly think all that before you asked, or I suspect you *told* your sisters to watch Peyton?" Alysse didn't need to raise her voice; the firm question made Damian flinch.

He shook his head and looked up to make eye contact with his mother. It was easy to look her in the eye because, at fourteen, he was only an inch shorter than his mother. "No. You're right. You said to watch the baby and left the room, and I passed the chore on to the girls and headed upstairs. I didn't need to turn off my computer. I just like being able

to skip out on watching the baby when Athena and Kira can do it." Damian admitted and waited for his punishment.

"Give me your cell phone. You can have it back tonight. And don't you *dare* take Kira's or Athena's." Alysse extended her hand and waited for Damian to hand over his beloved phone.

"But what if something *does* happen? How would I get help?" Damian tried the ultimate strategy on his mother.

"You can have your buddies call 911—unless all of them are on phone restriction too. Give it." Alysse wasn't buying the ploy. She slid the extra cell into her shoulder bag and began herding her small army out the door. "Come on, move it. We'd better hope for light traffic, or all of us will be late." Damian took shotgun, and the others piled into the back with Kira securing Peyton into her car seat.

"This isn't going to keep us from heading to Burney, is it?" Damian's voice broke despite his attempts to keep it in the lower registers. Sometimes being fourteen was a real pain.

"Honey, I might be angry with you, but the trip to Burney is as much for me as it is for you. *Now*, if you had really screwed up—I would send you over to your grandparents, and we would go without you. Remember that. You are old enough to suffer the consequences of your actions, and I can be mean enough to make sure you remember the action and the consequences for the rest of your life." Alysse

pulled into the drop off zone for the middle-school and waited impatiently for Damian and Kira to hop out. Both waved to her as she pulled away.

"You wouldn't actually leave Damian behind, would you?" Athena inquired as they drove to her school.

"What do you think? Also, what do you think he would have to do to deserve that severe punishment? Think about that today. We'll compare notes when I get home. I want you to watch over Peyton when Stephanie drops her off this evening. I'm working until seven, and dinner is in the freezer. Damian and Kira will fix it. Here we are." Alysse let her daughter out of the SUV.

She marveled at how long and thick Athena's hair had grown. The child had waves in her straight hair—the only one of the four who did. The intermittent sun played with the wavy dark-blond color. One second the light emphasized the gold; the next, it highlighted a darker note. The kitten ears on her headband were black today, contrasting with the gold in her hair even more. Athena was her golden child.

Damian was the leader and a redhead. Not a true red, but his actions belied the darker mahogany shades in his hair. No, the summer bleach out to red was him more than his winter color of sable brown.

As Alysse pulled back into traffic to get Peyton to daycare, she mulled over her other two girls. Kira tended to be the silent type. Only a year younger than

Damian, she most often followed his lead and took his side in any matter. If Damian wanted to lead Kira into an inferno, Kira would blindly follow.

Athena would argue with both of them and often come out the winner. She was steadfast and brave. She worked her way through any problem life threw at her and only requested advice when wholly mystified with the issue.

Peyton. Peyton was the mystery. So far, she seemed able to get what she needed by being what she was—a baby. Would that work for her all of her life with her siblings? She tended to win her way with tears as much as with smiles. Which would she choose to use as she grew older? Alysse hoped it would be smiles. A whiny child would play on her nerves. They all went through that stage; Alysse just hoped it would be a short passage for Peyton.

"Here we are, Sweet Cheeks." Alysse moved to the back door to disconnect Peyton from her car seat. "You be a good girl today, okay? Auntie Stephanie is going to pick you up after school. What's the safe word?" Alysse had been working with Peyton on 'stranger danger,' and they chose a particular word so she could feel safe to go with anyone who tried to collect her from school.

"Pony." Peyton blurted without further prompting.

"Good girl. What do you do if Stephanie doesn't say pony?" Alysse prompted.

"Teacher."

"That's right. You run as fast as you can to your teacher. You are sooo smart. I love you. Behave today, and I'll see you when I get home." Inside the daycare, she hugged and kissed Peyton before turning her over to the attendant. Another year and it would be kindergarten instead of daycare. Easier on the budget but so much harder on the heart to know her baby was going to school. A horn sounded in the parking lot, and Alysse realized she had taken several minutes beyond the unloading time allowed. Oops. She waved, jumping into the SUV to let others take their children into the daycare service at the church.

Her guilt was fleeting about taking too long. She remembered the first day of the year there had been a traffic monitor encouraging mothers to walk away from crying children. It never got any easier, no matter what age the child. That final almost lost look over the small shoulder (or in the case of Damian the almost man-sized shoulder), tore Alysse's heart up. Knowing they were growing up and starting to make decisions scared the crap out of her. What if they made the wrong decisions? What if she hadn't taught them well enough the things they needed to know in life? How could she just drive away and leave them in the care of others? Alysse found her foot moving to the brake pedal and chuckled under her breath. "Way to go, fool. You know you have to trust what you've taught them sooner or later. Keep going, or you'll be late for work," she muttered to herself. Alysse pushed her foot down on the gas, and the SUV jumped

through the intersection.

She spent her day at work cleaning up her desk and making sure everything was taken care of for the weekend. Monday was a school "in-service," and she had talked her boss into letting her have the day off too. She and the kids were going to a cabin she had borrowed up between Burney and Fall River Mills in California. If she could get all her projects completed, she could leave early, as long as no one showed up at her desk with any last-minute emergency projects. Every time she heard the elevator ding, Alysse cringed and refused to look over to see who was getting off on her floor. If she didn't look, maybe it wouldn't be another project heading for her desk.

At four-ten, she had everything put away. She couldn't believe she had gotten it all finished, and her desk was clean until she came back on Tuesday. Tuesday might be a disaster, but the weekend was all for her kids. Burney Falls, hiking, playing in the water and just relaxing with a movie after the sun went down. They needed this. It was time for a family pow-wow. It was time to sit and discuss what was going on at school, what was happening at home, and, most importantly, what was on their minds—each and every one of them. Unplugging from the world and plugging into each other was the goal, and she couldn't wait to get started. Without another look back, Alysse made it to the elevator and out of the building. Shutting the door of the SUV, she felt a weight lifted from her shoulders. Grinning hugely,

she started for home.