

This is a peek into the life of Dax Donovan, the hero from ***Peace***, book 4 of the Donovan Legacy series. Faith has brought him far from the anger-driven man he was to become a loving family man, though some days are harder than others.

***Sierra Vista, Arizona
September 2015***

“Your mom’s never allowed to go out of town again,” Dax Donovan whispered to the feverish three-year-old in his arms.

Snuggled close to his chest, a soft blanket wrapped around her, Charity hiccupped a partial sob intermittently. Her short black curls damp with sweat, she clung to him. Though normally fiercely independent and very quiet, she screeched any time he tried to put her to bed, demanding to be held. Her equally independent and far more chatty identical twin was in bed, wanting only to be left alone to sleep off the virus they’d picked up at their twice weekly play group.

He glanced at the clock on the living room wall over the TV. According to it, he’d walked the floor with his hot little bundle for nearly six hours. That made him grateful that he hiked the nearby mountains and went to the gym regularly. Even with that in his favor, fatigue was making his arms begin to ache and his legs grow weary. He wouldn’t have expected a mere twenty-six pounds to increase so much in weight the longer he held it.

Each time he stopped walking, Charity stirred awake and started whimpering. So he kept walking.

“This isn’t how I planned to spend my vacation, whirlwind.” He’d taken two weeks off to be home with the girls while his wife Holly went to Oklahoma to care for her sister, who’d had surgery, and help Shannon’s husband Gary care for their six kids. God had apparently decided Dax’s life was too predictable. Holly had only been gone three days when both girls got sick.

Seeing his mini whirlwinds feverish and so quiet worried him. He hadn’t realized how accustomed he’d become to their noise and activity. Holly and his mom had assured him the illness would pass and explained how to care for the girls. Thankfully, they’d both told him the same thing, so at least he hadn’t ended up confused. Still, there was only so much he could do.

Mom had offered to come help him, but he hadn’t wanted to risk her getting sick or taking the creeping crud home to his dad. At sixty-eight and seventy years old, they didn’t need that.

Dax paused and glanced around at the rocking chair in the far corner of the room. Would that appease Charity as much as his walking did? Increasingly achy legs demanded he try. He crossed the room and lowered himself carefully into the seat and set the chair to rocking gently.

Charity shifted in his arms, whimpered softly, and then settled back into the exhausted sleep only illness could bring.

With a sigh, Dax leaned his head back against the chair and closed his eyes, being sure to keep the rocker gently moving.

As a Cochise County deputy, he faced violent drunks and strung-out drug addicts, as well as the occasional jerk just spoiling for a fight. Over the years, he’d been punched, kicked, body-slammed, nearly run over, and shot at. Between his job, his brothers, outdoor hobbies, and roughhousing with friends, he’d had more bruises than he’d ever be able to recall and a few

broken bones. He'd come within inches of taking a bullet to the head from drug runners once.

The last two days had convinced him of one thing. He'd rather go through any or all of those personal hits again than endure the helplessness of his girls being sick. They were so small, so vulnerable, and it was his job as their father to protect them.

"Lord, I really hate this," Dax mumbled. "I can't protect them from this kind of stuff, but You can help them weather this. Mom reminded me that You created our bodies to deal with these things. She said these illnesses as children will make their immune systems stronger for later. I get that, I guess, but, Lord... I still hate that they feel so bad and I can't fix it."

The cellphone in the back pocket of his jeans rang. He shifted in his seat to retrieve it. His wife's face was on the screen. Shifting his hold on Charity slightly, he swiped a finger across the screen to answer the call then set the chair in motion again.

"Hey, how's Shannon?" he asked, keeping his voice down so he didn't disturb Charity. Part of him hoped Holly would say her sister was all better and she was coming home. The rational side of him knew such hope was ridiculous. No one recovered in only a few days from having their appendix removed, especially after it had burst.

"She's run into a complication. Infection, but they think they caught it quickly enough that it won't set her healing back too much. How are the girls?"

"Still feverish." He grimaced. "You're never leaving home again. Ever."

Holly chuckled. "Not easy dealing with sick kids."

"It's not so much that they're sick, although that bugs me big time." Dax sighed, realizing he'd just contradicted himself in a major way, all in a single sentence. "I can't fix it."

"How long did you pace the floor with Charity before it occurred to you to use the rocking chair?"

He blinked and stilled momentarily.

Charity whimpered, and he set the chair rocking again.

"How'd you know?" he asked.

"She gets super clingy when she doesn't feel well, so I've been there. Also, I know *you*. How many hours did you pace with her?"

"Um... about six."

A soft chuckle came over the line. "You have more staying power than I did the first time. I only made it about an hour before I had to sit down. Both girls got that head cold just before they turned one, remember?"

"Uh... not really. I mean, I remember you telling me about it, but I don't remember being here for it. I think I was working a private security detail for Dad at the time." Though he worked full-time for the Cochise County Sheriff, he sometimes moonlighted as a bodyguard for his dad's security firm when there were special clients. He could recall being concerned that he might not finish up that particular job in time to make it home for the girls' first birthday.

"Oh, yeah... that's right. Anyway, Charity gets clingy, and Summer just wants to be left alone. Standard operating procedure for illness with those two."

"I've kind of figured that out at this point. I just wish they'd feel better. I hate being so helpless." A knot clogged his throat, making the last words husky and rough.

"Are you telling me my tough-guy husband who thwarts criminals and stands up to assassins for a living has been felled by two sick little girls?"

Dax cleared his throat. "Apparently."

"Awww, that's so sweet."

Heat rushing up his neck and face, he grimaced and grumbled, "Knock it off."

Holly chuckled. "It really is sweet. Who knew a tough guy could have such a soft marshmallow core?"

"Please... stop," he groaned.

"I should start calling you my cuddle-bunny."

"I'm hanging up now."

Holly laughed. "I'll call you in the morning to check on the girls and update you about Shannon. I love you."

"I love you back." He grinned. "Even if you are one of the most annoying people on the planet at times."

"Admit it, your life would be boring with me."

Humor fell away. "My life was empty without you, and I'm not about to give you up."

A soft sigh reached his ear. "Keep that up, and I'll never want to leave home again."

"Good."

"I have to go. The kids need dinner, and Gary's at the hospital with Shannon for the night."

"Stay safe. It's still tornado season. I almost lost you once to one of those things. That was more than enough for a lifetime."

"We keep the weather reports on all day. I'm not about to take any chances. You have my word. Goodnight, my wonderful man."

"Goodnight, sweetheart."

After they hung up, he laid the phone on the little table next to the rocking chair. *Please, Lord, keep Holly safe. And help our girls feel better. Help me, too, not to dwell on how helpless I feel. That won't do any of us any good.*

Wrapping both arms around his sleeping daughter, he rested his cheek against the top of her sweat-damp head, closed his eyes, and did the one thing that would help at least one of his little whirlwinds. He rocked.