

1

*Once Upon a
Campus*

LJ

KAREN
KINGSBURY

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

*Dedicated to every Liberty University student,
past, present, and future,
those bold and brave young men and women,
driven toward excellence
and determined with every heartbeat
to become champions for Christ.*

#1 New York Times Bestselling Novelist

Karen Kingsbury

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

Once Upon a Campus...

Part 1

————— *A Liberty University Short Story Series* —————

Introduction

As a visiting professor at Liberty University who teaches in classrooms several times a semester, I recently decided to write a short story series set on the beautiful Liberty campus and tailored to this great school's amazing staff and students. For fun, I chose to involve the Flanigan Family – part of my Baxter Family series, along with a few new characters. The story is fictitious. But in real life, my family and I are passionate about Liberty University and its unique ability to train up the next generation as champions for Christ. All five of my sons have attended Liberty, and currently four of them are enrolled in classes. They love this university more than they dreamed possible, and I couldn't be more thankful. I'm also a strong believer in the power of story to explain truths and ideas that might otherwise be overlooked. For that reason, I bring you ... *Once Upon a Campus*.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. Flanigan', written in a cursive style.

Part 1

Shawn Flanigan shouldered his duffle bag and ducked his head as he stepped off the prop plane at the Lynchburg Regional Airport. For a quick moment once he reached the tarmac he didn't move, didn't hurry off with the other young passengers. A breeze stirred the warm October air and overhead the blue sky seemed to stretch forever.

The kind of sky heaven might have.

A smile tugged at Shawn's lips. The traffic this fall weekend would hardly feel like heaven. At least that's what his older brother, Connor, had told him. Connor was a sophomore at Liberty University, and for the most part he was the reason Shawn was here.

Today was the beginning of College For A Weekend — or CFAW, as it was known by students at Liberty. The university hosted two CFAW weekends each semester — a chance for high school kids like Shawn to see what Liberty was all about.

Why it was one of the fastest growing universities in the world.

And why most students like Connor believed it was the best Christian university anywhere on the planet.

Shawn gripped his bag and headed across the tarmac. What was this feeling? Excitement and adventure. Like he'd stepped into his own amazing, unforgettable movie. Shawn could almost hear the soundtrack playing in his mind.

"Okay." He whispered the word out loud, took a deep breath and headed across the tarmac. "Here goes."

The airport was slightly bigger than Town Hall in Bloomington, IN, where the Flanigan family lived. But the buildings were modern. Lynchburg, VA., wasn't the most happening college town he'd visited this past year. But somehow it already felt like home.

Which was crazy.

No matter how nice Liberty might be, Shawn had full-ride scholarship offers to play basketball at Duke, Ohio State, and Indiana. There were other offers, too, but he'd narrowed it down to those three. Signing day was in a few weeks. The official time for high school senior athletes to declare which university they would attend.

Liberty University wasn't on the list.

No, Shawn wasn't here this weekend to seriously consider playing basketball at Liberty. He was here

because of Connor. Two years ago Shawn had promised his brother that before he signed with any other school, he would at least attend CFAW.

This was Shawn making good on that promise.

A quick ride up the escalator and Shawn spotted Connor on the other side of security. His older brother was a music performance major, a part of the LU Praise team. Over the last two years, Shawn's year-round basketball had kept him from making a single visit to the Lynchburg campus.

Until now.

Life would get even busier after this. He would sign at one of the three biggest basketball schools in the nation and immerse himself in earning his scholarship.

But this weekend he would hang out with Connor — the brother who twelve years ago begged their parents to adopt three six-year-olds from a Christian orphanage in Haiti. Three little best friends who wouldn't have had a chance otherwise. Bailey and Connor and Ricky Flanigan — Shawn's siblings — all voted back then. Yes, they wanted three new brothers.

It was the first time anyone had ever said yes to Shawn. He hugged his brother as the two met. Connor's face lit up. "You're actually here! I can't believe it."

"You gotta show me this amazing place you're always talking about." Shawn slung his arm around his

brother's shoulders. "I want to know everything about your school."

"*Your* school, you mean." Connor grinned at him.

"Whoa!" Shawn chuckled. "Too far!"

Connor shrugged. "We'll see."

The airport was busy, crowded with high school students like Shawn. A few guys nodded in their direction. Shawn and Connor did the same. They made their way through the glass doors toward the parking lot and Shawn felt the heaviness of the approaching signing day slip away.

Never mind the busy ride ahead, the big basketball program commitments and full-time training. The local media coverage likely to come whenever Shawn made up his mind about what school he was going to attend. This weekend Shawn would put all of that aside. He would throw himself into CFAW and he would enjoy his time with Connor, his older brother.

His best friend.

Twenty minutes later they had brought Shawn's things up to Connor's East campus dorm on the third floor of one of the buildings that made up the square. One of the most social dorm sections at Liberty.

Connor had a meeting with his RA and after that the two of them would walk to the Hancock Welcome Center so Shawn could check in. But for now he was alone in Connor's room.

From his spot on Connor's lower bunk he could see the football stadium and the campus beyond that. Connor was right. The campus was stunning. Every building looked new and state-of-the-art. He'd toured ten schools and none of them was as beautiful as Liberty.

He leaned back and closed his eyes. Days like this his past seemed close to the surface, a reminder of how far God had brought him. He didn't remember much, of course. He was only six when his family brought him home to Bloomington. But sometimes when he closed his eyes he could still see the barren ground, the razor wire fence that surrounded the low-slung brick orphanage.

And of course the day that would always stand out in his memory. The day his mother abandoned him. It was hotter than usual that afternoon when his birth mother grabbed him by the shoulder and marched him through the streets. The whole time she shouted at him. "You're no good. You're always in the way!"

Shawn remembered every word. They had come at him like so many bullets. They must've walked five miles that day before they arrived at the orphanage. Shawn was a skinny kid back then. Food was scarce and his raggedy clothes hung on him.

When they had reached their destination, his mother glared at him. “Go!” She shoved him toward the orphanage.

His little body couldn’t take the force. He remembered flying across the rocky dirt and landing on his hands and knees. Both started bleeding, and tears came before Shawn could scramble to his feet.

“Mommy? Why did you do that?” Shawn had wiped his face. He could still feel how the dirt from his hands mixed with his tears. Still feel the mud on his cheeks.

“I said go! Get away from me!” She had been a thin woman. Pretty with a low cut shirt. But she had never looked more mean, more angry than that day. Shawn could see her still.

He took a step back. “I ... I’m scared, Mommy.”

Just then a woman from the orphanage had opened the locked door. She must’ve seen the muddy tears on Shawn’s face or his bloodied hands and knees. Or maybe the fury in his mother’s eyes. Either way she stepped out. “What’s the problem?”

What Shawn’s mother said next would stay with him forever. She squinted at the woman and then spat her response. “Take the boy.” She cast angry eyes at Shawn. “I don’t want him. He doesn’t belong with me.”

Doesn’t belong. Shawn winced even now at the memory of the words. He could remember the woman

from the orphanage stepping up and taking hold of him. He fought her, scrambling in the dust and dirt for the chance to follow his mother. But then a man from behind the gates joined them and there was no escape. Shawn's mother turned and walked back to town.

She didn't look back. Not once.

And like that, Shawn was an orphan.

The memory lifted and Shawn opened his eyes. After he was adopted, his parents had told him countless times that even on that awful day, he was never alone. God had been there, in the midst of the rocks and dirt and a little boy's broken heart. The Lord had held onto Shawn right there in the middle of the moment. Protecting him. Placing him in a godly orphanage. Preparing him for his real family.

The Flanigans.

Connor's meeting with his RA was for one reason only: To pray for his brother, Shawn. It was a miracle that Shawn was here for CFAW. The kid was being pursued by every major university in the nation. His game was that good. Not that any of the Flanigans were surprised by the outpouring of offers. Shawn had been gifted at basketball since he came home from Haiti.

As far back as Connor could remember, Shawn had been the laughter in their home. A very bright light. When he first arrived from Port-au-Prince, and once he had even a slight command of English, Shawn was the one who had a million questions. “Who would win: a bear or a lion?” or “Which is stronger: a tornado or a hurricane?”

Now the question playing in Connor’s mind was different. Who would win? Shawn or the culture he was about to throw himself into? Especially at one of the universities he was considering.

Shawn was a follower. It was something he knew about himself, something he warred against. He hadn’t gotten into much trouble, but on occasion — despite his faith and his family name — Shawn would go the way of the crowd. He was always looking for a place to belong, and sometimes his choice of places wasn’t the best.

Connor believed Liberty University could be the difference for his brother.

So when he teased Shawn about Liberty being his school, too, Connor wasn’t actually kidding. His RA and the prayer leaders from his dorm met him downstairs and the five of them had circled up and prayed. That God might get Shawn’s attention, and that against all odds he might leave this weekend with a different hat on his head come signing day.

A hat from Liberty University.

When the prayer ended, Connor thanked the guys and hurried back to his dorm. He opened the door to his room and saw Shawn standing by the window. Connor hesitated. The view was a selling point. He didn't want to rush him. After a few seconds Shawn turned around. "The campus is beautiful."

"If heaven had a university. That's what I always say." Connor smiled. "You ready?"

"For sure." Shawn stretched. "I'll get my backpack."

They walked across the bridge, past the bookstore and up the hill to the welcome center. Streams of kids were gathering from all directions. Liberty students had mixed feelings about CFAW weekends. Another four thousand people added to the already thirteen thousand students made for congested roadways and busy sidewalks.

But Connor enjoyed the insanity. It was on a weekend like this that he had known for the first time that Liberty was where he wanted to attend school. The university took its motto seriously. Training champions for Christ. Connor had loved every minute of his time at Liberty. He had just one complaint.

His time here was flying by too quickly.

They filed into a long line of students and after half an hour they had Shawn's information packet and a new T-shirt. Next was lunch at the Reber-Thomas Dining Hall — better known among the students as The Rot.

On the walk there, Shawn chuckled. “I might not want to ask this. But why do they call the cafeteria, The Rot?”

“It’s a nickname.” Connor laughed. He had wondered the same thing his first time here. “It’s not because of the food.” He looked at his brother. “I told you right? The Rot was voted best college cafeteria in the U.S.”

“You told me.” Shawn grinned. “It’s basketball I’m looking for. Food’s food.”

Connor didn’t want to push too hard. “When are you meeting Coach Calloway?”

“Saturday. Early afternoon. Before the concert.” Shawn looked concerned. “I hope the man doesn’t think I’m really looking.”

“He knows about your other offers.”

“Good.” Shawn set his eyes straight ahead. “This place is great, Connor. But I have to be serious about hoops.”

Connor let the conversation end. Before switching topics, he caught a glimpse of the still blue sky. *God, this is your time. Speak to my brother. Help him to see that life is more than basketball. And that he can be a standout player for You right here at Liberty. Maybe more than anywhere else.*

They reached The Rot. Connor opened the door and followed his brother inside. *Work a miracle this weekend, God. Please.*

After the silent prayer, Connor felt better. No one

loved Shawn Flanigan more than the Lord did. Connor had done his part.

Now it was up to God.

Coach Cason Calloway closed his Bible and sat back in his office chair. He'd been at Liberty for two years, and without a doubt Saturday would be the biggest day of his time with the Flames. It would be the first time a top five blue chip recruit would walk into his practice gym.

Like most CFAW weekends, Cason would be busy morning to night for the next four days. Lots of talented players were looking to make Liberty their home. The Flames' record had improved dramatically each year since Cason had come to Lynchburg. Last season Liberty men's basketball had a number of appearances on ESPN, and games against top contenders like Notre Dame and Michigan.

But the program would never be mentioned with the great basketball schools until they signed a blue-chipper like Shawn Flanigan. The fact that the young man was even gracing the campus was nothing short of an answer to Cason's ongoing prayers.

Cason ran his fingers over his Bible. He had read Philippians, Chapter four today. Verse thirteen would

always be his favorite. *I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.* Cason smiled. Maybe even convince Shawn Flanigan to at least think about attending Liberty.

Normally Cason didn't like talking about his resume. However successful, all of it was part of his life before Christ. But his past accomplishments were bound to come up with Shawn.

Cason had come to the United States from Greece straight out of high school. He spent four years as a starting guard at Kansas, and another four coming off the bench for the Portland Trailblazers before a knee injury ended his career. After that there was only one thing he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

Coach basketball.

He worked his way up through the college ranks, coaching at a handful of small schools before landing a job at North Carolina. There he had taken his team to the NCAA Tournament Final Four six times in his ten years at the school.

The change for Cason came four years ago.

One of his players, Mark Maddox, an outspoken Christian, was killed in a car accident heading home from church in the middle of the season. A teenager was texting and crossed the double yellow lines. Maddox never knew what hit him.

The tragedy cut through Cason's agendas and ambition.

Up until that point Cason had viewed God much the way he viewed Santa Claus. A nice idea, good for holiday. But after losing Maddox that weekend, Cason vowed to never believe in God again.

Not ever.

But all that changed at Mark Maddox's funeral.

One after another his players took the podium and talked about Maddox, the difference he'd made, the sort of man he was on campus and in the community. Cason fought tears the entire time, even as he took the podium and spoke about Maddox and his work ethic, his impact on the team.

At the very end, Maddox's home pastor spoke. He talked about how Mark Maddox had given his life to Jesus in middle school. At that point, the boy was already a talented basketball player.

Cason could still remember what the pastor said next.

"On the day he was baptized, Mark told everyone in the church that he didn't want to be famous for playing basketball. He wanted to be famous for leading people to faith in Christ." The man looked around. "Mark told us that if he could lead one person to become a Christian, his life's goal would be fulfilled."

The pastor went on to talk about the reality of heaven and hell. The fact that no one could ever know when

someone might cross the double yellows in his or her life. “Make Mark’s goal complete. If you haven’t decided to follow Jesus, this is your day.”

Suddenly something clicked in Cason’s heart. With his players and their families gathered in the church, with sorrow and sadness heavy in the air, Cason could only think of one thing:

What if it had been him?

He gave his life to Jesus that day and never looked back. His wife and daughter got on board with his newfound faith, and they became believers, too.

A year later, he heard from Liberty University. They were rebuilding, looking to create a program that could compete with the major basketball schools. His wife was all for the move. What better environment to trust God with the future, she told him?

But before Cason could decide about Liberty, his wife was diagnosed with an aggressive liver cancer. Two months later she was gone. In the whirlwind of grief and the shock of becoming a single parent, Cason called Liberty University and accepted the job.

He and his fifteen-year-old daughter, Vienna, moved to Lynchburg and began living out the rest of their lives. Vienna was beautiful like her mother, long dark hair and piercing blue eyes. She was a senior now at nearby Liberty Christian Academy, and this weekend she was attending CFAW.

Cason had his concerns about Vienna being here for CFAW, mixing with college students. She was his entire world now. The two of them attended church and did Bible studies together. He would do anything to protect her.

Before CFAW began he pulled her aside. “Be careful this weekend. College guys are very ... different from high school boys. You’re still young, Vienna.”

“Daddy.” She smiled, her expression troubled. “The guys at Liberty University are great. You say so yourself, all the time.”

“Just be aware.” He kissed her forehead. “That’s all I’m asking.”

She might have another year of high school left, but Vienna was ready to take flight. She was a cheerleader at LCA and next year she wanted to cheer for the Flames. He could do nothing to stop her from soaring into a bright and beautiful future. He didn’t actually want to stop her. He only wanted to keep her safe. His prayer was that one day she would meet the right young man at Liberty University.

Just not yet.

Which meant he had two things he’d be praying about this weekend. That his daughter would stay away from the guys at Liberty University and that Shawn Flanigan might — by some miraculous change of heart — actually think about making this his home.

Shawn followed Connor into the Vines Center. The Welcome Rally was tonight, featuring an appearance by the school's worship band and a message from chancellor Jerry Falwell Jr. The center was also where the Flames basketball team played.

Whatever Shawn had expected, he wasn't prepared for what he saw when he and his brother walked into the arena. The place was huge, filled with students all here because they were excited about Liberty. No question, the enthusiasm in the building was contagious.

Connor led the way down the stairs and the brothers took their seats. Until now, every university Shawn had visited felt about the same. But here, waiting for the evening to begin, once more Shawn had that feeling. The thrill of excitement and anticipation. Like something big was about to happen, something Shawn couldn't put his finger on.

But it wasn't until the worship began that Shawn felt a supernatural peace and joy wash over him. He'd never been in a room with this many high school kids singing for Jesus. A power filled the Vines Center, a rush of God's presence that sent chills down Shawn's arms and filled him with hope.

If this many young people cared about God, then the future couldn't be all bad. No matter what the headlines said.

Next to him, Connor was singing, his hands raised, eyes closed. Connor had always been close to God, always able to draw near to Him through times of worship. Suddenly the goodness of God came over Shawn like never before, and he could do nothing but respond the same way. He lifted his hands toward heaven, toward God and with all his heart he sang along.

“Holy Spirit You are welcome here ... come flood this place and fill the atmosphere ...”

The song was nearly finished when Shawn felt someone step into the row and take a seat. He didn't look that way until the singing was finished. Then, as everyone sat down, he glanced over and what he saw took his breath.

Sitting with just one seat between them was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. She noticed him at the same time and smiled. It wasn't just her long shiny dark hair and her pretty face. There was a beauty in her eyes he simply hadn't seen before.

Shawn turned his attention back to the stage. But throughout the assembly he caught himself looking her way and thinking about her. When the event finished, Connor had to get to a study group for a few hours.

Once Connor was gone, Shawn walked out of the building alongside the girl and her friends. It took all his courage to get up the nerve to talk to her. He positioned himself so he was walking beside her and then he

caught her eye again. “Hi.” He smiled at her.

“Hi.” She grinned. “Wasn’t worship amazing?”

He understood her eyes. Like they’d known each other all their lives. “I’ve never been a part of something like that.” They walked toward the exit and Shawn checked a few times to make sure his feet were on the ground. She had that effect on him. “I’m Shawn, by the way.”

Her eyes lit up, but there was a shyness in her voice. “Vienna. Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.”

When they were outside, they turned left along with most of the students. Curfew was in less than an hour, but Shawn was desperate for a way to keep the night going. He slid his hands in his pockets and turned to her. “Have you seen DeMoss Hall?”

Vienna grinned. “Yes.” Her eyes sparkled in the lamplight. “A few times.”

“I haven’t.” Connor kept the pace slow. Anything to make the moment last. “My brother goes here. He says it’s got, like a thousand classrooms.”

She laughed. “Something like that.”

He peered around the trees that lined the sidewalk. “It might be open.”

The girl raised her eyebrows. “Let’s check.”

Shawn could hardly believe it. She wanted to spend time with him.

The two of them picked up their pace. Instead of continuing toward the dorms with the mass of CFAW students, they crossed the parking lot, past the fountain and toward the impressive DeMoss stairs. The pillars that made up the front of the building were the most massive Shawn had ever seen. He stopped and looked up. “Amazing.”

“Come on.” She led the way, hurrying up the steps to the grand entrance.

He kept up with her and sure enough, the doors were open. “You think it’s okay?” His voice fell to a whisper.

“Sure. We’re just looking.” Vienna waited while Shawn held the door for her.

Once inside, Shawn stopped again. “I’ve toured lots of schools. None of them look like this.”

A smile lifted Vienna’s lips. “There’s nowhere like Liberty.” She paused, and her eyes met his. “The buildings are just a small part of that.”

Shawn nodded. Already he understood what drew people here. There was a look in the eyes of most students. Clear and intelligent, kind and intent on excellence. If the party crowd was here, they weren’t in plain sight. Nothing like the big basketball schools he’d toured.

Vienna showed him around the main floor of DeMoss

and then she checked the time on her phone. “We should go.” She gave him a quick look. “Curfew!”

“True.” Shawn chuckled. “My brother will be looking for me.” None of the other schools had a curfew. But then, excellence came at a cost. *Higher standard, higher results.* That’s what his dad always told him.

Vienna pointed to the left of the sidewalk. “See that? The Welcome Center was the first of the new buildings.” They walked past it toward the bookstore. “You staying on East Campus?”

“I am.” He narrowed his eyes, curious. “How do you know so much about this place?”

She looked straight ahead and for a moment she didn’t respond. “My dad works here.” Her eyes met his again. “He’s ... very protective.”

I can see why, Shawn thought. He nodded. “My dad was that way with my sister, Bailey. He kept her safe. She’s married now.” He smiled. “So it worked out for the good.”

“Yeah.” Vienna shook her head. “It’s different with me.” She stopped and looked at him. “My mom died a few years back. It’s just me and my dad now.” Her expression was a mix of sorrow and compassion. “He doesn’t want me to date. Hates when I go out with friends.” She shrugged. “I get it ... and I love him for caring.” She started walking again. “It’s just hard.”

Shawn didn't move. He was too struck by her story. "Vienna," he spoke her name softly. "Wait."

Her hair framed her face as she turned back to him. "It's okay. It's my life. I accept it." She offered him a sad smile. "God has a plan. It's just ... my dad has to let me go at some point."

"Hey." Shawn took a few steps and caught up with her. He looked deep into her eyes. "I'm sorry about your mom."

"Thanks." She looked down for a long moment and then back at Shawn. "She was amazing. My dad met her in college. She was Jamaican and in her last year she had a love for God bigger than the ocean."

"Her last year?"

"It's a long story." She started walking again. "Curfew, remember?"

Shawn wanted only to stop at the Starbucks in the campus bookstore — the one where he and Connor had gone earlier today — and hear every detail of her story. Instead they walked over the bridge and Shawn stayed with her until they walked up to the dorm where she was staying.

"Hey ... Vienna ... can I get your number? Maybe we can get coffee tomorrow?"

She hesitated, then took a few steps toward the dorm. "I better not." She seemed suddenly nervous. "We'll see

each other. Look for me.”

Disappointment hit him like a cold wind. “Okay.” He held up his hand. “I will. Goodnight.”

“Night.” She flashed him one more smile. “Nice meeting you, Shawn.”

“You, too.” He watched her go and then slowly he turned toward the square. Connor’s dorm was just four buildings down from the one where Vienna was staying.

Shawn had no idea what was on the schedule for tomorrow, but he knew one thing for sure. He would find Vienna.

If he had to spend all day looking.

CFAW was everything Connor had told him it would be.

At convocation, the worship time was beyond powerful. The place was packed, every seat and even the standing area around the perimeter of the Vines Center. The LU Praise team sang during the worship time, and Shawn was blown away. If he thought the welcome rally was amazing, this time of singing to God brought tears to his eyes. Literally.

Heaven will be like this, he thought. And how good You are God, to let me see my brother singing for You this way.

After convo, Shawn sat in on classes and for each one, the professor prayed before starting. Shawn later asked Connor if that was something special for CFAW. It wasn't. Liberty professors always started their class time this way, inviting the Lord to be part of the learning process.

After lunch, Shawn went with Connor to the Snowflex Centre on Liberty Mountain, overlooking the campus. The lodge reminded Shawn of a luxury resort, complete with wood paneled walls, enormous fireplaces and comfortable leather sofas.

Connor smiled at Shawn's shock. "Crazy, right? Kids come up here and study all the time." He pointed to the towering manmade snowy hills behind the lodge. "On breaks you can watch the snowboarders. They're amazing."

Next Shawn sat in on Dr. David Wheeler's evangelism class. Dr. Wheeler was a favorite on campus, and Shawn was moved by the dialogue that took place in a single hour. They talked about sharing Christ in a practical way, what to ask and how to defend faith in God.

As the hour ended, Shawn felt something he hadn't before.

A sense of purpose and belonging.

He thought about the three schools he was considering. His memories of those places felt suddenly dark and empty. Nothing like the fullness of hope and joy and direction he felt here at Liberty.

Only one problem plagued Shawn all day. He never saw Vienna. Not at The Rot and not that afternoon when he and Connor took in a men's hockey game at the LaHaye Ice Center. And not hours later at the Liberty Tower Theatre where they met up with a group of Connor's friends from his sister dorm — to watch the musical, *Hairspray*. At Liberty every guy dorm was matched up with a girl dorm. Brother-sister dorms, they were called. Shawn loved the idea.

But even so, he didn't see Vienna once through all of it.

When Shawn slipped into his sleeping bag that night, he could hardly wait for another day on campus. *I'm actually going to miss this place*, he thought. It was like Vienna had said. The draw was so much more than the buildings.

The next day was filled with more wonderful moments, and then it was time to meet Coach Calloway. Shawn had been dreading the meeting, not wanting to disappoint the man, but knowing he had no real choice. On his way into the meeting he talked to his parents.

"Liberty's amazing." He chuckled. "My head's spinning."

"Good." He could hear his father's smile over the phone. "Remember, son. Pro players have come from Liberty, too. You could be one of those."

Shawn felt dizzy by the time he walked into the practice gym and found Coach Calloway. What was happening to his plans? His high school coach would

think he was crazy if he came here. The media would mock him. Who would turn down a scholarship to a basketball powerhouse like Duke or Ohio State? What kind of player would miss the chance to play in their backyard for Indiana?

Coach Calloway spotted him and his smile lit up the gym. “Shawn Flanigan. You’re here!”

“Yes, sir.” Shawn met him midway across the gym and the two shook hands. “Thanks for meeting with me.”

The coach’s eyes shone in a way that was other-worldly. His mom had taught him that a person’s eyes said much about their character. Coach Calloway had what his mother called Jesus eyes. Full of light and love, kindness and faith. The man smiled and looked intently at Shawn. “I know you’ve got bigger offers. The world expects a certain kind of answer on signing day in a few weeks.” He paused. “Isn’t that right?”

Shawn nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Well,” his smile grew. “God’s bigger than the world. His ways are higher. I’ve asked Him to talk to you this weekend ... so that you would know what many of us already believe.” He paused. “Liberty University is where you belong.”

Belong.

The word came over him like a summer breeze, making its way to the depth of his heart. Wasn’t that what he’d

always wanted? Ever since his mother abandoned him? He belonged with the Flanigan family and now ...

In a rush Shawn knew without a doubt Coach Calloway was right. This was where he belonged. With other believers, other guys and girls looking to make a difference in the world. Other students wanting to be champions for Christ.

Why would he take his God-given talent anywhere else?

He swallowed hard. And as he opened his mouth to tell Coach Calloway that maybe he was right, a girl's voice echoed across the gym. "Dad! There you are!"

They turned to the sound and Shawn felt his heart skip a beat.

The girl was Vienna.

Was this really happening? Shawn's head started to spin again. The girl he'd met Thursday night was the coach's daughter? This was the man Vienna had told him about, the one so protective he wouldn't let his girl date?

Shawn wasn't sure what to do, what to say. Vienna was halfway across the gym floor before she realized it was him, that he was the basketball player talking to her father. For a brief moment, she hesitated and then turned her attention back to her dad.

"I'm going to Chick Fil A with a few of the girls." She smiled at him. "If that's okay."

“Isn’t there enough food on campus?” He put his hand on her shoulder. His eyes were kind, but clearly he didn’t want to let her go. Even for lunch.

“Dad.” Her tone was gentle. “I’m eighteen.”

“I know.” He kissed her forehead. “Go ahead. Wear your seatbelt.”

“I will.” She looked to Shawn. Her expression remained light. “You didn’t say you were a basketball player.”

“You didn’t ask.”

Coach Calloway cleared his throat. “You two ... know each other?”

Vienna smiled. “We met at the welcome rally.”

“I see.” Coach turned to Shawn and back to Vienna. “You better get going. Don’t make your friends wait.”

“Okay.” She waved to her dad and then looked at Shawn. “See you around.”

“See you.”

Again Coach Calloway hesitated. But he let the moment pass. When Vienna was gone he motioned toward the back of the practice gym. “Let’s take a look at the facilities. They’re brand new ... best locker rooms in the NCAA. The Liberty administration made sure of that.”

The tour was incredible, like everything else about Liberty. But Shawn didn’t need a big sell at this point.

He had made up his mind. Like Coach Calloway said, this was where he belonged.

And maybe one day in the near future he and Vienna Calloway would have a class together. Or a coffee date. He wasn't sure about that. Especially since her father was about to be his coach.

Because Shawn was sure about one thing. When signing day came, he would tell the whole world that he had made up his mind. After this weekend there was only one school where he wanted to spend the next four years. One school where he couldn't wait to attend. One school that would take him from here into the future God had for him.

Liberty University. ■



About the Author

Karen Kingsbury is a #1 *New York Times* *Bestselling* novelist with more than 25 million books in print. She is America's favorite inspirational storyteller as her last dozen novels have hit top spot on national bestseller lists. Several of Karen's books have been the subject of Hallmark movies. In addition, it was recently announced that Roma Downey and MGM Studios are developing a TV series out of 22 of Karen's Baxter Family books.

Karen is also a visiting professor at Liberty University. She lives in Nashville with her husband and five sons, three of whom were adopted from Haiti. They live nearby to their actress/designer daughter who is married to Christian recording artist, Kyle Kupecky.

*Ever wonder what it
would be like*

to follow a couple of incoming Liberty University freshmen through their college experience? Run with them through campus as they search for Green Hall, sit with them at convocation - the largest Christian student gathering in the world. Cheer with them from the stands on a football Saturday. And feel your heart pound as romance begins and lifelong friendships start.

Ready?

Here's your chance. Read Part 1 of
Once Upon a Campus today!

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

Liberty.edu/KarenKingsbury