The Space Between You and I

Oni Kehinde

STORYPDF

Complete English text · US Letter reading edition

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Introduction

The Space Between You and I

WRITTEN BY ONI KEHINDE

“Love is a shelter

In a raging storm

Love is Peace

In the middle of a war

If we try to leave

May God send his Holy Spirit

To guard the door

No, Love’s not a fight.

But it’s something worth fighting for”

Henry Hart never knew his biological mother. A fact he has struggled with for many years. It has impacted all of his relationships. If the woman who gave birth to him didn’t care enough to keep him . . . How could anyone care about him? Even the ones who cared about him, he ignored them because of his quest on finding his mother, Even Noelle Ojo, a Nigerian who relocated to the United States immediately her father died in a car accident. She was his best friend.

Are there words that can be said to heal a lifetime of pain? Could you forgive the one who left you at birth? Can you let God take control over your life?

The Space Between You and I is an infusing Christian romance about trusting in God. A Christian’s belief is challenged within the pages of this book and God’s grace and mercy is on full display. Only Christians who live by God will enjoy the unfolding of this beautiful story of forgiveness and redemption.

Chapter 1

Using his teeth to pull down on the coffee tube, Henry Hart filled his coffee cup at Mama P's Coffee Shop with their house coffee and then proceeded over to join his father, Jasper, at a table. The smell of fresh coffee lingered in the air that early February morning. Sounds of hushed conversations filled his ears as he journeyed toward the only father he had ever known, even if he wasn't blood-related. He was almost to the table when a woman in line at the counter dropped her keys a few feet from him. Stopping, he turned and saw her with a baby on her hip. Moving closer, he bent down and retrieved the keys for her.

Henry rose to his feet and handed her the keys.

"Thank you, sir. It's sure been one of those mornings!" Adjusting the baby on her left hip, she flashed a friendly smile and took the keys.

"Have a nice day, ma'am."

Continuing to his father's table, Henry was greeted with a warm smile. Pulling out a chair, he hung his coat on the back and sat down. A smile grew on his lips and in his heart as his father folded the newspaper he was reading formerly to his arrival. He loved seeing his dad, an occurrence that didn't happen as often as he had hoped since he moved out of his parents' house six years ago.

"Hey, boy. It's good to see you. That weather is a bit bad this morning." Jasper took a deep drink of his coffee.

"Yeah, I think I heard thirteen degrees on the radio on my drive over."

"Yep. Hey . . ." His father leaned in slightly across the table with raised eyebrows.

"Your mother and I don't see much of you unless it's Christmas. What's going on with that?"

Taking a drink of his coffee, Henry set his cup down on the table and rubbed the rim lightly with the side of his thumb. He nodded lightly. "Work has been busy, Dad. You know all those new renting houses regulations I told you about a few months back?" His father nodded. "They finally rolled out to the production server and it's a mess. One of the new testers on our team marked a ton of things as useful when they weren't. We had to roll the entire update back and slowly release bits and pieces at a time. Lots of cleanup, and that means long hours of work and work."

Raising a hand, Jasper shook his head. "I don't know what most of that means, but I believe you, Son. Just give your mom a call occasionally and let her know you care. Would you?"

Henry nodded in agreement. "I can do that."

Silence fell across their conversation for a few moments. Then his father changed the topic elsewhere.

“Any word on scholarships to get into Bible college?”

He shook his head. “I’m going to have to let that dream go, Dad. If I focus hard at my current job and dedicate it all to the Lord, He will bless that. God will just have to use me where I am.”

“That’s the right mindset to have about it. If it’s God’s will for you to attend Bible school, you will.

“I know.”

“How’s Noelle?”

Henry stifled in his seat. He knew the basic reason of his father’s question. Noelle wasn’t just any girl in Henry’s life but the girl, according to everyone but him. Henry and Noelle had gone to high school together and had been best friends for six years. A year ago, she had started attending the same church as he did, First Baptist. This last year, he had seen her more and more because of it. Their friendship had deepened and tilted back and forth on the fence toward a relationship, according to everyone around them. But Henry didn’t want more than friendship when it came to Noelle. He feared a relationship would only mess up their friendship, and he couldn’t put something so lovely at risk.

Clearing his throat, Henry nodded as uneasiness rose within him.

“She’s good, Dad. You know she and I aren’t ever going to happen. You and Rachel and Mom should all just give it up.”

“Is it because she’s black and Nigerian, son?”Jasper took another sip of his coffee.

“Geez Dad, I’m not racist.” Henry chuckled

“Then what exactly is the problem, son?” Jasper leaned to hear his son’s next words.

“Dad.…uhm how do I start.…”

“Son, listen.” Jasper interrupted his son, his voice lowered, and grew more serious. “Women like her don’t come around very often. She’s God-fearing, never been married, sweetest girl in the works and she’s single. You’ve been her friend for years, and that’s a very good start, but only a start.”

Henry smiled politely at his father’s words. “I know . . .”

A moment passed, then Jasper glanced away for a moment. His gaze came back to Henry. “What else is going on?”

Taking a sip of his coffee, Henry remembered his upcoming schedule ahead of him. His eyebrows furrowed. “We have a business meeting tonight at the church.”

“Oh, yeah?” His dad took a drink of his coffee. “You don’t seem too excited about that.”

“I’m not. I have a gut feeling Terry is going to be proposing more money going to that homeless camp in Campside Park across the street.”

“Son, there’s nothing wrong with that. We have to take care of people, all people.”

Henry shrugged. “I know, and we do. First Baptist already does so much for the poor. Believe me. Even that particular homeless camp, we’ve done a lot for it as it is right now. I just don’t feel we need to keep pouring money into helping those people when they want to be there in the first place. If we keep giving them stuff, they’ll never need to better their lives. Some tough love might be the best thing for them.”

Jasper went silent for a long moment. As he finally spoke, it was gentle. “Caring for the needs of the poor is Biblical, Son. There is no way around it, and you know that. It’s a good thing your church is doing with these people who are in need. That homeless situation at Campside Park is a growing issue, and the need grows with it.”

“Why do you think it’s growing, Dad? Maybe it has to do with the church across from them that’s feeding them daily and providing them with sleeping bags and money. You know what else is good? Using your own personal finances to do it, not the church’s money. You know what Terry did last week? He bought a BMW. Then tonight he’s going to come beg for more money to go into the homeless project. Something doesn’t seem right and I’m not going to pretend it does.”

Jasper didn’t reply at all this time. He only held a look of disappointment in his expression.

Sensing his father’s disappointment, Henry sighed and shook his head. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that about Terry The guy just bugs me, and I don’t feel his heart is in the right place.”

With all seriousness of tone, Jasper asked, “Is your heart in the right place, Son?”

“Of course. I stand with God and wanting to be a good Christian of his resources given to the church.”

His father shrugged. “If that’s true, why did you apologize to me?”

“Because I was rude and it upset you.”

“But if you stand with God and your heart is right . . .”

“I don’t get what you’re saying, Dad.”

Jasper set his coffee to the side and scooted closer to the table. Folding his hands on the table, he peered directly into Henry's eyes. Uncomfortable, Henry turned and looked away.

"Don't look away from me, Son. Look at me. Don't turn away from your father."

Henry turned and looked with difficulty into his father's eyes even though it was uncomfortable.

"You're unhappy toward one of God's appointed leaders. Sure, you might be sorry for what you just said about him, but that doesn't change the heart issue going on inside you. Out of the lips comes what is in the heart."

Henry carefully processed his father's words, letting them filter through his mind and letting them trickle down into his heart. Jasper had been beyond what a typical dad was to a child throughout the years. Jasper had been Henry's spiritual leader. Through his father's instruction, he had been taught what it meant to be a true man of God. His sister, Rachel, was taught what it meant to be a woman of God from their mother. He had caught most of the teachings handed down by his father, but at his core, there was a disconnect to some degree.

Henry had always sensed a deep division in the depths of his soul but had assigned it all to the fact that Jasper and Priscilla weren't his biological parents. Jasper had found him in a manger when he was but three years old on Christmas Eve. Swaddled in a blanket and incoherently unconscious, possibly from his mother drugging him,

Jasper took Henry home to be his son.

"Okay. I'll think and pray about my heart in regard to Terry."

Smiling, Jasper nodded and took a drink of his coffee. "Real men conduct their battles from their knees, not from their mouths. Don't forget that, son."

* *

That evening, Henry slipped into the sanctuary at First Baptist moments before the final song of worship ended. He found a seat near the back and set his Bible and coat down on the long bench. He joined in the singing of the last chorus and then took his seat in unison with the rest of the congregation. Terry took to the stage. Just seeing him up there warmed the fires of uneasiness within him. In his mind, he started to pick apart his wardrobe.

You can spend money on Under Armor clothing, buy a BMW, and walk around like you're some spiritual guru, but when it comes to supporting the homeless, that's all on the church? Give me a break, guy.

"How's everyone doing tonight?" Terry surveyed the audience with a smile on his lips. "Lord's good, isn't He?"

Shouts of 'Amen' lifted from the congregation.

Pointing to the front row, he smiled as his gaze fell on a gray-haired woman. “This is Mary. She’s our guest of honor tonight. She comes from the camp across the street, and I want to tell you a little bit about her.”

Henry zoned out at the ceiling for a few minutes, then glanced around the sanctuary at other people to pass time as Terry went on and on about the woman. After he was finally done talking, he read the church announcements. Henry listened to the announcements, and then Terry asked everyone to bow their heads to pray over the offering.

“Lord, we come to You tonight as your children. We ask a special blessing over these tithes and offerings. May we give back a portion of what you’ve been so gracious to give us. It’s only through Your grace , mercy and goodness that we have anything at all. Let us worship You through this act of generosity. Amen.”

As Henry lifted his head from prayer, he felt agitation eating up his soul. Even the man’s prayers fanned the fire of Henry’s annoyance. Concealing behind every word from Terry’s lips was Henry’s blame and judgment. He didn’t like the way he felt toward Terry but didn’t feel as if he had any power over it. He felt the man was actively working his own worklist in the church and using God’s people and their financial resources to accomplish it.

Catching sight of the back of Noelle’s head a few rows up, Henry’s concern over Terry melted away. His heart warmed and suddenly, everything was fine inside him. She was his favorite person in the world and the only woman besides his mother and sister whom he had ever loved. Everyone wanted him to date Noelle but he didn’t want to confuse up the perfect friendship they had. Henry knew he’d be the luckiest man on earth if he ever married that girl, and maybe someday, that could happen, but until then, their friendship would have to do.

After the ushers finished collecting the offering, Pastor Jacob took to the stage.

“Take a moment, dear sisters and brothers and greet those around you. Then we’ll jump into the Word of God.” Before the pastor could even finish speaking, Henry was out of his seat and into Noelle's bench

“You come here often?” Noelle's question came as her brown eyes caught his gaze. The very next moment, she smiled that smile that lit up Henry's face and made everything else seem not important. Her dark skin matched her white set of teeth.

He laughed and said jokingly, “It’s my first time here, actually.”

They laughed and then embraced in a long hug.

“We are still on for dinner at Bips after this right?” Henry inquired, verifying their plans after church.

“Sure, I had my yogurt and granola before church to bat off the hunger to make it to a fast-food joint for dinner. I hope you know it’s all just for you. By the way . . . normal people eat at five or six o’clock, not nine.”

His lips curled into a smile. “What fun is normal? Plus, I barely left the office before heading here.”

She raised a playful eyebrow with a smile on her face and in her voice. “If you didn’t take naps at work, you would be able to get out of there at a decent hour.”

They both laughed.

Henry went on to greet other members of the church near Noelle, including his boss from work who was one of the elders in the church, Paul. After shaking hands, Henry returned to his seat near the back. His eyes still on her, he watched as she talked and laughed with Mary, the woman Terry had introduced earlier. He loved Noelle's personality and the fact that every person who knew her loved to be around her. That was just her. She was dark yet so shiny. She glowed with some sort of spiritual aura that seemed to attract everyone to her. She was everything he wasn’t and everything he wanted to be. He knew he had a lot of head knowledge when it came to God, but she had something different. She had the heart knowledge.

Pastor Jacob spoke again at the pulpit in the front of the sanctuary. “I love to see you all playing and talking, but we’d better get started if you want to make it out of here on time.”

He prayed over the sermon and then asked everyone to turn in their Bibles to Judges, chapter eleven.

“Tonight, we’re going to talk about a man named Jephthah. He’s the perfect example of how God can take anyone, no matter their mistakes or where they are in life, and use them for His utmost purpose. Though I don’t match Jephthah’s beginnings, I have my own rocky past and start. Many of you know I lived the party and club life for many years before coming to Christ, and it wasn’t until late one night when a man found me passed out in an alley behind a bar that my life changed forever. That man was a Christian. I’m not talking about a ‘went to church on Sunday’ Christian, or a fire insurance Christian, but a real Christian. A Christ follower. He helped me get home that night, then he called me daily after that and even met with me weekly for the next six months. He taught me all about God, all about Jesus, and all about a thing called the Bible. He didn’t teach me religion. He taught me relationship. He sat and listened as I told him about my struggles, and that man prayed with me. His name was George . . .” Pastor Jacob paused for a moment. His voice became shaky and his eyes glossy. “Three days ago, he went home to be with the Lord.”

Pausing again, Pastor Jacob cleaned his eyes with a tissue, then he continued. “I’m getting side-tracked. The point is, George shared with me years later that a man whom he didn’t know had done a similar thing for him, which led him to Jesus too. I’m a pastor now, but my start was in an

alley behind The Spark. You see, brothers and sisters, God can use us no matter where we are in life, no matter who we are. Now, let's get into the Word. Judges eleven, starting in verse one."

Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute.

Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away.

"You are not going to get any inheritance in our family," they said, "because you are the son of another woman."

Judges 11:1-2

Henry became uneasy in his own skin as the Bible Scriptures hit him. He could feel the sharpness of the Word of God like it was an arrow tip scratching against his heart. He had known very little about his biological mother and father, but what he did know was that his mother was a prostitute, just like Jephthah's mother. Earlier in his youth, as a young boy, Henry had vivid reoccurring nightmares that terrorized him from the age of three until he was nine. Those nightmares ended, but they weren't forgotten. They consisted of his mother and her having strange men come over to wherever they were living. The men would go with her into the bedroom for sometimes hours. Sometimes, the men were nice. Other times, not so nice. It was only through counseling that he learned those weren't just nightmares but memories. The counselors told him how fragments of memory can sometimes remain in the subconscious. While the nightly occurring nightmares did stop, from time to time, they'd come back to visit and torture Henry.

Pastor Jacob surveyed the congregation as he paused his words. Henry took a few deep breaths and pushed all his thoughts away from him. He didn't want to go to that dark place in his mind. He was far more comfortable anywhere but there.

He was relieved when the pastor finally spoke again.

"The Bible says Jephthah was a mighty warrior. Let me ask you something. How does a person go about gaining strength to be a mighty warrior like Jephthah? Or Samson? It takes training, right? For years now, I've been working on my diet and going to the gym, but it seems to be a constant work in progress for me. Usually, what happens is I become inspired to work out around May, and so I pack my little gym bag and go hit the weights, treadmill, and then of course, the shower. Sometimes, I do it once in a three-month period. Other times, I make it a few times a week for a month or two in a row. But . . . I haven't managed to ever make it a persistent thing in my life. You know why?" He smiled as he rested his arm on the top of the pulpit. "Because those weights are so heavy."

The congregation laughed.

He went quiet, then circled back behind the pulpit, stopping as he pressed a finger against the Scriptures. “The Bible doesn’t detail Jephthah’s training period, but I can say it’s safe to say he wasn’t sitting on the couch eating a package of chips and chicken and skipping the workout sessions regularly like I tend to do.” Another few laughs lifted from the congregation. Pastor Jacob's voice shifted to a more serious tone.

“You know, my father has always been a man who is physically fit and has worked out his entire life. It’s been a constant in his life since he was a young man. You see, my dad had a difficult childhood and a mostly difficult marriage too. Stress was always present in his life with five kids and a job that always left him with too much month at the end of the paycheck. I asked him once years ago how he would manage to stick with working out all his life. He told me it helped him deal with the pain and stress that life had brought to him. You see, for him, it was an outlet. Now when I look at this story about Jephthah, I see pain and hurt mixed in. Then I look at all that the Lord ends up accomplishing with this man and it makes me realize something. Our difficulties, though they are often painful and stress-causing, they shape us into who we are, and it’s that which God can and does use. James 1:1-4 tells us to consider these trials as pure happiness. Why? Because it’s a test of our faith and God is doing a work in us! I know it can seem difficult at times to see it, but what’s God say about those perceptions we have? He tells us to lean not on your own understanding, Proverbs 3:5.”

Annoyance crept into Henry's heart as his mother leaving him still fought for attention in his mind. There was no justification in the world for why she’d had to get rid of him, and it hurt to dwell on it. His mother was a scar on his heart that hadn’t healed. How could God ever use abandonment for a good purpose? The idea was absurd.

* * *

After Pastor Jacob ended the service, the business meeting took place fifteen minutes later. The delay allowed non-members to exit the sanctuary. Pastor Jacob went over the standard monthly budget items, his pay, the utilities costs, and all the ministry costs that were ongoing at the church. Seeing Terry on the edge of his seat in the front bench, waiting for his chance to talk, warmed the remains of anger in Henry.

"All right, and now for any new business?” Pastor Jacob opened the floor. Terry leapt to his feet and took to the front and to the microphone at the pulpit.

“Hi, everyone. As you know, we’ve been working hard and doing good things with the homeless community, especially across the street at Campside Park. Sadly, we’ve run out of money and need to keep it going. What I’d like to propose, if we can get a motion for it, is to make this project an ongoing ministry for First Baptist.”

“Absolutely not!” Henry blurted out. He had expected a request for more funds but not to make it a monthly ministry.

Terry went silent and everyone turned in their seats to look at Henry. His anger had shone through with not only his words but his tone. Heat filled his cheeks as he hadn’t meant to speak out of turn the way he had done. He had lost control. Up until this point, nobody even knew, besides Noelle how he really felt about the homeless project. He shot a quick glance toward Noelle. Her head was down, her eyes covered with a hand as if she was ashamed to call him a friend.

Breaking the silence, Terry positioned his mouth in front of the microphone. “ Do you care to illuminate us on why you think it shouldn’t be?”

Swallowing hard, Henry's entire body trembled. He stood up. Peering at the faces all around, he felt he had to speak the truth.

“I’m just worried that we are attracting more homeless to the park by giving away free food and free stuff. Honestly, I don’t see how this helps.”

Terry cleared his throat and raised his eyebrows. “Henry . . . we are sharing the love of Christ with them. Isn’t that what we are supposed to do?”

“Yes, tending to the needs of the poor is important, but so are a lot of things. For instance, the great commission, which is to spread the Gospel.”

“We are talking to the people at the camp, Henry. Do you think we’re only handing out free stuff?”

Pastor Jacob nodded and stood at the front pew and turned to the members of First Baptist. Raising his voice for everyone to hear, he spoke to all, but his eyes were on Chance. “We are sharing the gospel with people at the camp. Lives are changing. You all saw Mary this evening. She’s a big deal in that camp, and she’s doing great things for Jesus even when we are not there.”

“Okay. What about what is being forfeited because of this project? If we are giving money to these homeless people, it’s coming from somewhere else in the church. I think if people in the church want to keep supporting this project, they can do it out of their own personal pockets.”

Terry nodded and leaned into the microphone. “I absolutely agree with you, Henry. Many of us, including myself, have been supporting and footing the bill for the majority of the project along with the contributions that the church has made.”

Another loose-lip moment slipped from Henry. “But you still have a lot of money to buy a new BMW?” Henry laughed, shaking his head as he gave into how he felt inside. “You must be giving so much!”

Pastor Jacob shook his head and firmly said, “Enough!” He looked at Henry then at Terry.

“We will vote on this matter and then it will be settled.”

As the vote was motioned and the hands went up to carry it, Henry glanced over to see his boss, Paul, raising his hand along with Noelle. Infuriated, Henry grabbed his coat and Bible and stormed out of the sanctuary.

Chapter 2

Heart pounding, Noelle quickly put on her red coat and exited the church in search of Henry. She knew that man better than she knew herself. He had to be hurting after a rejection like that by his fellow congregates. He wasn't the type of person to speak up publicly, so when he did, he had to have been moved with a deep sense of rightness to what he was doing. He had put himself out there and was shot down and rejected.

Noelle walked out the front doors of the church and into the chilly night air. Light snow was falling, and she spotted him beneath a street lamp in the parking lot. He was opening his car door.

"Henry!" Her voice strained as she called out.

He stopped at the sound of her voice and turned. Her heart fluttered and she made her way down the church steps and out through the parking lot over to him.

"What is it, Noelle?" His words came soft and gently as she arrived at his car.

"Are you okay?"

His eyes fixed on the church building behind her. "They don't take me seriously." He then shifted his gaze toward Noelle. His golden-brown eyes pierced right through her, touching the very fabric of her soul. "I might be young, Noelle, but I know what I'm talking about. It's not right what he is doing."

She reached out and touched his arm lightly. She hoped it would help calm him down. "I don't think it was about your age, Henry. It's just this church's passion to help those people who are less fortunate. It's a good thing."

"A good thing. Handouts to keep people from bettering themselves. People keep saying that is a good thing but . . ." He shrugged. "Well, maybe you're right. And maybe this church just isn't for me."

Her eyes widened and her heart felt a slice of pain rip right through it. "You're just going to leave?"

"Yeah, maybe."

A chilly breeze brushed against Noelle's cheeks and sent a shiver through her whole body.

"It's getting cold out. I'll meet you over at Bips for that late dinner."

Turning, he pulled his car keys out from his coat pocket and got in his car. As she walked through the snow to her car on the other side of the parking lot, she prayed earnestly and with an ache in her heart. God, soften that man's heart.

He knows so much about You, even loves You, but his heart is not filled with Your Divine and Perfect love. Soften him, Lord. No matter what it takes. Amen.

Noelle loved Henry dearly, but her patience with him was growing smaller by the day. She knew she couldn't wait forever for a man who couldn't commit. It wasn't because he didn't feel something for her. She already knew he did. The half-dozen times he had almost kissed her had confirmed that long ago. There was also the way he looked at her. It made her insides melt and the world feel like a less lonely place. There was no denying that there was a connection beyond friendship between them, but she was trying her best to stay patient while he figured it out.

* *

Arriving at Bips, she ordered her food and brought it over to the booth where Henry was sitting. They prayed over the food and then started to eat.

Sprinkling fries on his burger, Henry carefully placed each fry side by side as she watched.

Noelle broke though the silence. "I got that job at the newspaper."

Pausing, he peered up at her with raised eyebrows. "Wow, that's great. Congratulations. When do you start?"

"Monday. I have four days of freedom left."

"It's kind of neat how it worked out for you. You lost that job at the nursing home not that long ago, but they gave you enough of a severance to live on for a couple of months."

"God is good. It's not typical for that kind of package when a nursing home closes. And I'm literally on my last hundred dollars, so the job came at the absolute perfect time."

"What did your mum say about it?"

Noelle's heart flinched at the mention of her mother. She and her mother, Sarah, had maintained a strained relationship ever since her father died in Nigeria in an accident and they had to move to the United States when she was a teenager.

"Henry . . . I didn't tell her."

"Oh, come on, Noelle! That's your mom. She would be happy."

Tilting her head as the anxiety rose within her, she shook her head. "Hey, I don't mean to change the subject, but are you really going to leave the church?"

Placing his bun on top of his burger, he respected the shift of conversation and nodded. “I really think I might. I need a change and that’s something very easy to change.”

Her eyes couldn’t help but begin to well with tears. “You can be so selfish sometimes, Henry.”

“What?” He furrowed his eyebrows. “Why?”

“I see you more at church than anywhere else, Henry! And it’s just easy to change?”

“Oh.” He went quiet for a moment. “I didn’t think about that part.”

“Of course, you didn’t. But whatever, Henry. You know, I should expect it by now. Whenever you don’t like something, you run away from it. When you disagree, you make sure someone knows about it.”

He didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then he shrugged. “Sometimes, it’s just time to move on.”

Thinking of how Henry had restarted the search for his mom again a few months ago made Noelle see an irony in his words. “I find that a little ironic.”

“How come?”

Hesitation weighed on her lips and her mind momentarily. She didn’t want to upset him.

What kind of friend am I if I don’t share the truth with him, though? She was emboldened in the moment.

“This search for your biological mom. I mean, I get it. I understood when you did it for two years after turning nineteen. But now? You’re starting it all up again?”

Henry became quiet, even distant as the moment and his words tarried.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything . . .” Touching her forehead, she frowned. “Honestly, I couldn’t imagine not knowing my parents, and I have no right to sit here and judge.”

“Thanks for saying that.” He shrugged. “I won’t try to find her forever, I just feel stuck in my life not knowing who she is.”

“What do you expect to happen if you find her?” Noelle asked.

“I don’t know. I just want to look my mom in the eyes and ask her why. Why did she give up, give me up?” Henry replied.

Sorrow filled her heart to the brim as she could hear the pain in Henry’s tone. Noelle nodded and her voice became quiet. “Yeah, I’m sure you want some answers.”

He picked up his burger. “Yeah. But I worry there’s no answer good enough.”

"Yeah."

They ate their food and shared quiet between them for the next little while. Then Henry inquired, "How's your sister doing with the new baby?"

Warmed by his redirection, she smiled. "Good. I was over there the other day for a few hours. West is so cute. He loves to smile and play. I'm pretty sure that's all he knows how to do at this point. Well, that and nap. He's a perfect baby."

Henry smiled. "Babies are cute. How many did you want again? Ten?"

He remembered that? She thought with joy bubbling up within her. "Yes, Ten"

He shook his head. "You're crazy, Noelle."

"That's actually normal in Nigeria." Noelle chuckled.

"Really?" Henry asked.

"Yes!" Noelle replied.

"Well then, you're in America not Nigeria." Henry laughed.

Heart fluttering as her thoughts drifted to marriage, children, and being a stay-at-home mom with a blog someday, she took a sip of her soda. "It's weird to think, but in a good way, that someday down the road, I'll be a mom and a wife. I like that. I like imagining my future."

"I can't imagine my future without you in it." Henry stated.

A deep and comforting warmth washed over her whole body. It was moments like this, comments like that, that kept Noelle waiting around for Henry to come to his senses. Waiting, but most importantly, praying that the two of them would soon start a life together. Noelle was still holding onto hope for what tomorrow could bring to her and Henry. She knew he had a good heart, a good soul, and would make a fine father and husband one day. The only thing holding him back was himself.

The two of them continued to eat and sip on their sodas for the next hour as they chatted about anything and everything. Each occasion they spent time together only grew the love in Noelle's heart deeper and wider. At the same time this love for him grew, sadness did also. Each day chipped away at the hope she had for the two of them being together. Only more recently had chips turned into chunks as he started back up the search for his biological mother.

Henry was the only man she had ever met in her life who made her feel loved, made her feel comfortable, made her feel heard and not so invisible. He never bullied or joked about her being black or Nigerian. He respected her. In a lot of ways, Henry reminded her of her late father who

had passed away from an accident when she was thirteen. Her father had also made her feel a little less invisible in the world. He too made her comfortable just by being around. Most of all, though, she sensed a distance between herself and her father when he was alive since her father was a doctor, much like she did with Henry.

* *

After their meal, they parted ways from Bips and Noelle headed home to her apartment. As she walked into the apartment, she was greeted by Ruff, her short-hair dog. Frantically jumping up and twirling around, Ruff seemed eager to love on her after not seeing her all day.

Dropping her purse on the coffee table, Noelle sat down on the couch with Ruff. She patted her head.

"You missed me a lot today. Didn't you?"

Ruff promptly moved from Noelle's side on the couch and into her lap. Noelle laughed as she patted the top of Ruff's head again.

"You know what you want, don't you, Ruff?" Thinking about Henry as she said it, she thought about earlier in the night and how he appeared to want to kiss her out in the parking lot after their meal again. She shook her head. "It's not right what I'm letting him do to me. I know that . . ."

Setting Ruff aside, she pulled her Bible from underneath the coffee table and began to read.

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

Psalm 119:105

Stopping, she bowed her eyes and folded her hands. *Oh, Lord, let my heart and life be led by Your Word. Help me to seek You in all things, including this situation with Henry.*

Wiping the stray tear that became loose, she started to doodle on a scrap piece of paper that was holding her place in Psalms as she continued praying for guidance and wisdom in her life.

She didn't want to lose their friendship just because of her desire for something more, but at the same time, she knew things weren't right the way they were. That was beside the fact that she wasn't getting any younger. She loved him, but she also wanted a life. Kids, husband, maybe even one of those white picket fences. She already had the dog.

After praying, she got up and she went into the kitchen and began to load the dishwasher. As she loaded the few cups from the sink, she had Henry's own words from earlier that evening surface to the top of her mind. Sometimes, you just have to let go . . . She swallowed as she realized that the thought now wasn't about his letting go of his mom, but her letting go of him.

Could I really do it, Lord? She wondered and prayed. Fear back-filled quickly into her heart as she contemplated it. She knew God wasn't a God of fear but of power and of love. Perfect love casts out fear, she reminded herself as she placed a glass into the top rack. Letting her mind think once more about letting Henry go, she grabbed another glass from the sink. She asked herself, Why does this scare me so deeply? Her eyes welled with tears as the answer floated to the top of her thoughts, to the very tip of her heart.

I'm not trusting God with my future.

She dropped the glass in her hand, and it hit the kitchen floor and shattered.

The thought sent rippling waves of pain through her entire being. The concept of not trusting God sounded so foreign to her, but she knew in the depths of her soul that it was true. Life without Henry could exist, and God would take care of her. She knew it, but she feared going through that door.

Chapter 3

Walking into his house , Henry tossed his coat on the couch and the corner of his eye caught sight of the blinking light on the device on the kitchen counter. The phone line was attached to a phone number he only used for contact information in regard to his search for his biological mother. His heart hammered in his chest as he hurried over to check it. He pressed the green button.

“Hello, this is Tom Holland. I saw your article in The Olympian, the Olympia, Washington newspaper. Anyway, I think I might know who your mother is. Give me a call back at this number.”

Beep!

Peering over at the clock on the kitchen wall, he saw it was already after eleven. His pulse was racing through the roof, and the possibility of a fresh lead after months of waiting would certainly keep him up all night if he didn’t call the number back. The worst he can do is not answer or get mad.

He can’t kill me.

Picking up the telephone, he called the number back.

“Hello?” Annoyance laced the man’s voice.

“Hi. This is Henry Hart. You left me a message about possibly knowing who my mother is?”

“Oh, yes!” The tone of voice had shifted to a joy-filled one. “First, I wanted to know if there was still a monetary reward?”

Henry’s heart dipped into the pit of his stomach. Was this guy just after quick money or did he have real information about his mother? He wondered.

“Um, yeah, but that’s only if I find her . . .”

“Well, she’s right here in Olympia, working at JK’s diner!”

Henry felt suspicious and wandered over to the couch to continue the conversation there. He sat down slowly. “Can you tell me why you think it’s her, sir?”

“Your ad said that you were found in a manger twenty years ago in Spove, and I remembered hearing about Khloe’s first child she had to give up when she was living in Spove. It wasn’t hard to put two and two together, ya know? By the way, she’s excited to meet you.”

A confusing mixed bag of emotions began to overwhelm Henry all at once. Raking a hand through his hair, he shook his head as he tried to process the fact that the search for his biological mother could possibly be done and he could finally meet her.

Swallowing, Henry nodded. “I want to see her.”

“Of course. Come anytime. I’ll even give you a place to stay while you’re here.” He laughed. “And then, after you meet Khloe, I’ll get paid?”

Again, the man was mentioning the money. It made Henry feel very uneasy and un-trusting. “I’m sorry, but why are you so obsessed about the money? It makes me . . .”

“What? Not trust me?” The man laughed. “I don’t blame you for not trusting me, kid. I would’ve done it even if it wasn’t for the money, but the fact that there is money associated with this . . . let’s just say I’m happy about it, and it’s a Godsent in my life right now. I’m broke! And I could use the money to pay my bills. It’s a tough world out there right now, kid.”

“Okay.” Recalling his remaining days at work, Thursday and Friday, he wondered if Paul, his manager, would let him take Friday off. “I need to chat with my boss in the morning, but I’m sure I’ll be heading over there to Olympia in the next couple of days or so. I have money for a hotel. No worries on that.”

“Let me know. What’s your name? I didn’t catch it.”

Furrowing his eyebrows, He became uneasy once more. “Uh, my mom should know it. She had me and named me.”

“Right, but you know how things are. We weren’t chatting about your name, kid. We talked about reuniting the two of you during the brief moments she stopped by my table at the diner to chat.”

Still not a hundred percent sure this guy was telling the truth, Henry decided to lie.

“My name is Oscar.”

Tom gave Henry his address and the address of JK’s diner in Olympia and then hung up. Though he had felt uneasy about the reality before him and the unsavory fellow who reached out to him, Henry wondered if it was just nerves or a real gut feeling he could rely on. Turning in for the night, he said his prayers, read a chapter of the Old Testament, and then shut off his lights.

* *

Stopping in at his sister, Rachel’s flower shop the next morning to tell her about the lead, he stomped the snow off his boots on the rug just inside the front door.

“Big bro! What brings you into my shop on this beautiful Thursday morning?”

Smiling, he looked up and fixed his gaze on his sister. “Just here to see my little sis. It’s been a while.”

“About a month. What are you up to these days?” Rachel set the scissors and flowers in her hands down, wiped her hands on her apron, and exited from behind the counter. Glancing at the cooler with roses, she raised an eyebrow and asked, “ Are you here to finally get some flowers for Noelle?”

Laughing, he shook his head. “Not exactly.”

Sidestepping her, he continued toward the counter of the flower shop. “I’m here about something else.”

His sister didn’t seem to hear his words but kept on track about Noelle. “Come on! She would love some flowers. I bet she would give you a kiss.”

Furrowing his eyebrows, he shook his head as Rachel came around the counter.

“Noelle is my friend.”

Shrugging one shoulder, Rachel smiled. “Okay, but I wouldn’t be too sure of that being true forever. Girls won’t stick around with a guy who is unwilling to commit.”

A sharpness cut into his heart at the mention of losing her. He raised an eyebrow. “Oh, yeah? You think she’ll stop being my friend just because I don’t want to date her?”

“Yep. Eventually, she’ll wise up and move on. At least the smart ones do. “Wait. Is Noelle smart?” The question was an obvious joke.

“Of course, she’s smart! She’s a beautiful, talented, God-fearing, and all-around awesome girl. I’ve never met anyone like her!”

Rachel squinted and shook her head in a few quick successions. “Then why are you acting like a dummy? Ask her out on a date and lock her down before it’s too late.”

He shook his head firmly, then recalled to himself why he had stopped into the flower shop in the first place. He raised a hand. “I didn’t come down here to get lectured about my dating life. I have some great news.”

Leaning on the counter with both elbows, Rachel rested her chin on the palm of her hands and peered up at her older brother. “Yeah? What is it?”

“I think I found my birth mom.”

Rachel’s facial expression fell and she removed her arms from the counter. She sighed and turned around. Her fingers found her pair of scissors and some flowers and she began to trim the ends.

Craning her neck, she spoke softly over her shoulder toward Henry. “That’s great, Henry. I’m sure you’re happy about that . . .”

“I am, but you don’t seem glad about it . . .” His words trailed off, unpleased to bear witness to Rachel’s displeasure.

She set the flower and scissors down, then turned toward him. Her eyes were now glossy, fixed on him. She paused, her lips opening slightly then closing. She finally spoke. “I think it hurt Mom really bad the last time you ran around looking for her. I know it’s your biological mom and all that, . But is it worth it if you hurt the mother who raised you in the process?”

The distance he had sensed all his life between himself and Rachel grew a little wider and larger in that very moment. He took a step back and shook his head. “What? I’m trying to find the woman who gave birth to me! She gave me life! That means something to me.”

“Yeah. So? This woman might’ve given you life, but our mom gave you a life. Sex lasts a moment, brother, but being a parent lasts your entire life. That’s what our mom has done for you and that woman hasn’t!”

Henry’s lips pursed and he felt his heart hardening to marble. “I thought you’d be happy for me, but obviously, you’re not. I’ll go now.”

He turned to leave, but Rachel hurried around the counter again and caught his arm, stopping him.

“I love you, Henry, and you are my brother. I don’t care about blood. I never have. I won’t sit here and pretend to understand, but don’t forget the family you were raised with, even if we aren’t blood. Okay?”

Glancing down at the floor, Henry remained quiet.

“For what it’s worth . . . I’m sorry. I just worry about Mom. You know?”

His heart softened a measure as he recalled their mother’s cancer scare the last time he had searched for his birth mom. She had breast cancer, but luckily, it was caught quickly enough that it didn’t turn into a big issue. It had terrified them both nevertheless. The fact that she was in remission now did little to ease the lasting worry it had instilled in both Rachel and Henry. They both feared it could show up at any time and they’d be back to worrying about her mortality all over again.

Henry hugged Rachel.

“I’m sorry for overreacting, Rachel.”

“I’m sorry for not showing more care about this. I’m truly happy for you. I hope you know that, and I know it’s important to you.”

"Thanks." Releasing from their embrace, Henry looked her in the eyes. He wanted to give her something to alleviate the stress and worry she was obviously feeling right then and there. "I won't tell Mom and Dad about it. And you don't either. Deal?"

Rachel smiled. "Deal."

* *

Arriving at work that morning, Henry draped his coat over his office chair and powered on his computer. Seeing Paul walk into his office, he quickly made his way over and followed him in through the doorway.

Paul turned as he set his laptop bag down on his desk. He raised an eyebrow.

"Morning, Henry."

"Hey, Boss. I was wondering if I could have tomorrow off."

Paul furrowed his eyebrows and sat down behind his desk. "Everything okay?"

Henry took the seat in front of the desk and scooted the chair closer. He leaned in.

"Everything is fine. I just found a new lead on my birth mom and I want to go check it out. It's in Olympia."

"Olympia?"

Henry nodded. Glancing back toward the doorway, Henry thought about the hot fix that was going out tomorrow. His gaze came back around to Paul. "I can stay through tomorrow if you really need me to do that."

"We should be okay without you here for the hot fix. It shouldn't take more than an hour or two tomorrow night." Standing up from his desk, he walked over to the office door and shut it. Then, Paul returned to his seat and looked squarely at Henry. "Do you want to talk about what happened last night at church?"

Henry had hoped to skip the church talk at work, but a part of him knew deep down that there was no skipping it. Paul, after all, was an elder in the church, and the two of them often spoke about faith in the workplace. He had even been helpful to Henry in providing him with the job as a Quality Assurance software tester.

Adjusting in his seat, Henry sat back in his chair and shrugged a shoulder. "I don't think we need to really . . ."

"Henry, it's me, man. You stormed out of that sanctuary in quite a huff last night. Is there some reason you don't like homeless people?"

Henry gripped the chair's arms and his jaw clenched. "It's not the homeless."

Paul leaned in his office chair and raised an eyebrow. "Terry?"

Just hearing his name made his insides flinch. Sitting upright in his chair, Paul nodded, his gaze falling to his desk for a moment. He peered up at Henry a moment later. "Terry is young. But so are you. Some people can rub us wrong, and we might even be right about them, but we don't have the right to cast judgments. Your comment about his BMW, for instance? He didn't buy it. His grandfather passed away and he inherited it. It's a reliable vehicle so he kept it."

Henry tight grip of disdain for Terry loosened, at least over the BMW. "Wow . . . I didn't know."

"Yeah."

Henry's mind drew back to the topic at hand. "So . . . I can take tomorrow off?"

"Two days. Tomorrow, Friday, and then Monday, if you need to."

Rising to his feet, Henry hoped to prevent any further church conversation from happening. He reached a hand out.

"Thanks, Boss."

Paul blinked a couple of times, making it apparent that he didn't want to stop talking about what happened last night at church, but Henry cared so little for it that he couldn't possibly waste another minute on the subject. Not right now.

They shook hands and Henry left Paul's office and went to the break room to get a cup of coffee. Pouring a cup of hot liquid into his mug, he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. Setting the pot back on the burner, he slipped his phone from his pocket to see who was calling.

It was Noelle.

His heart jumped and he tapped to answer it.

"Hey!"

"Hi." Her voice was quiet and a light sob could be heard in the silence following.

"What's wrong?"

She was quiet and not responsive. Henry's heart cleaved toward wanting to be near her. It was apparent to him that she was upset about something.

"Come on, Talk to me. What's going on?"

Sniffling, she sighed deeply and didn't respond.

"Okay . . ." Taking a sip of his coffee, he shook his head as he smiled and tried to be playful. "You did call for something, right?"

"Can we meet up? I need a friend right now . . . I need you right now."

A deep warmth washed over his chest. "Yes. I need to talk to you too. Can you wait until lunch?"

"Yeah. Usual spot?"

Henry's heart and lips smiled. "Yes."

* *

Walking with his thermos of hot pepper soup in hand, Henry walked the icy walkway through Riverfront Park and over to their spot down on the steps overlooking the Spove River. Sitting down on the quilt she had brought, he sat beside Noelle, then he handed her the thermos. She took a long, deep drink. As she did, he saw her eyes were red and swollen from crying. His heart ached knowing it appeared that she had been crying for some length of time unknown to him.

Rubbing her back gently, he moved closer to her. Lowering his eyes, he turned toward her. His voice was gentle, laced with concern and threaded with love. "What's going on?"

Bringing the thermos into her lap, she sniffled and wiped her nose.

"It's Max."

Max was her younger brother who lived north of Spove in the town of Colville. He had been in and out of the drug scene for years now and a constant worry not only for Noelle but her entire family. Her mom and sister, Mandy, were constantly in prayer and worry over Max and his choices in life. If he didn't call every few days, her mother would call hospitals and morgues.

"I'm sorry."

A long moment passed, only silence filling the air between them. Then, she turned to Henry, a smile creeping onto her soft pink lips as it broke through the sadness. "You always make me feel better. Even when you're not saying anything at all."

Henry smiled warmly. "You do the same thing for me."

She handed the thermos to him. Twisting the cap off the thermos, Henry took a drink of his soup.

Noelle raised an eyebrow. "What's new with you? You mentioned you needed to chat."

Setting the soup down to his side, he raised his eyebrows. "I have a lead. I'm leaving town tomorrow to go track it down. It's over in Olympia."

Shoving his shoulder playfully, Noelle laughed lightly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know . . . What was I supposed to do? Interrupt your sadness over your brother and say, 'Hey, look at me. I'm super excited!' That wouldn't seem right."

She laughed and it brought relief to his soul.

Turning more toward him, she raised her eyebrows. "Is anyone going with you to Olympia?"

Henry looked over at her. "No . . . But if someone wanted to go, I wouldn't mind it."

Crinkling her nose, Noelle smiled. "I'd love to get out of town for a few days."

"Then come with me. I'll pay for a separate room at the hotel and we'll make a mini-vacation out of it. We'll go see the capital and everything!"

"Sounds like a plan to me."

Rising to their feet, Henry took Noelle's quilt and draped it over his shoulder as they walked back through the park toward their cars. The walkways were clear, but everything else at the park was iced over and covered in snow.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Noelle asked, her gaze moving from the iced over lamp post to Henry.

"It is. It reminds me of Jesus's blood cleaning us."

"Mmmm . . . To rest in His goodness. I need to work on praying more and giving my worries in this life over to God. If I prayed as much as I worried, I'd have holes in every pair of jeans and a heart that relied on God."

"It's true." His own guilt over not praying as much as he should weighed heavily on his heart as he let out a sigh. "Giving it all to God can be difficult. Like with my mom and trying to find her. It's like am I relying on my own efforts and only seeking what I want? Or is this a desire God has put in my heart? There's no verse about this topic."

"You're right. There isn't a verse pertaining to that specific topic." Noelle stopped walking and turned to Henry "But it does talk about not letting anything come before God in your life. I'm not saying this is your top priority, but you have to be aware that it could be fighting for that top position in your heart. And if it is, that's wrong and that's according to the Bible. Remember, the devil uses whatever he can get his hands on to distract us."

Nodding, Henry's gaze peered over at a snow-covered tree nearby. Then he looked back at Noelle. "I, too, will up my praying. I'll also make sure I'm trying to be more aware of my priorities. Thanks for being my friend through it all. Don't know what I'd do without you."

She glanced down for a moment, nodding lightly. Then she peered into his eyes. "You're welcome."

Chapter 4

Tears and heartache followed her meeting with Henry at the park. Not so much over her brother Max, but in regard to her feelings for Henry ,She knew the trip wasn't a good idea for her sentimental state at the moment, but she couldn't help the desire in her heart to go. She wanted to be there for him, even though she knew it'd only grow the pain inside her. That evening, she took Ruff out to Swellview to her sister, Mandy's, house. Ruff would have the company of Mandy's dogs, Roxy and Candy, while she was out of town with Henry.

Gabe, Mandy's husband, promptly took Ruff out to the barn to join the other dogs. Mandy and Noelle stayed in the kitchen while Mandy prepared dinner for her family. Little West was asleep in his crib.

"I know you're wanting to ask why I'm going . . ." Noelle's comment came as she sat down on the bar stool in the kitchen while Mandy prepped a salad at the counter.

Letting out a sigh, Mandy stopped slicing the tomatoes and turned, coming over to the counter where Noelle was sitting. Looking her sister in the eyes, Mandy frowned. "Sis, I've tried to tell you about this guy, and you turn a deaf ear over and over again. I'm giving it to God now. I can't do anything else and I finally understand that. It's kind of a relief."

"What if he meets his mom on this trip, Mandy? Maybe he'll finally come to his senses about us and be willing to commit. I know he has feelings for me."

Walking around the counter, Mandy came over to Noelle on the stool and grabbed both of her hands. "You may be right. But you might be wrong. Henry has a lot of anger built up in him, and that bitterness isn't just going to be switched off overnight because he finally met his mom. And so, what if he does meet her? She's not going to be able to give him what he really wants. He wants a good reason for her abandoning him and that doesn't exist. There's no excuse in the world that will make sense to his heart on why his mom gave up on him."

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Discouraged by Mandy's words, Noelle hung her head.

Mandy lifted her little sister's chin with a finger. "Hey. You still have Jesus, Sister. Don't let this man ruin your entire life by waiting forever for him."

"You're right." Noelle furrowed her eyebrows as she nodded confidently. She had had a crush on Henry since she had met him six years ago in high school, and she had let good men come and go out of her life because of him. She couldn't keep waiting for him any longer. "You know what?

This trip is it. No matter whether he meets his mom or not, I'm done for good if he can't commit. I'm going to confront him about us."

"What if he still wants to be friends?" Noelle was testing her with that question.

"Doesn't matter. I can't be his friend when I feel the way I do about this man."

"That's my Abeke!" Walking back over to the counter, Mandy continued prepping the salad. "Who knows? Maybe a good letting alone is just what he needs."

"I'm not going to view it like that. I can't let myself stay hopeful of being with him. I have to have finality in my heart and mind about him."

"Good point. I'll be praying for God's will in both yours and Henry's lives, Sis. You two would be adorable together, but sometimes, what we think should happen or even what we want to happen isn't God's will."

"Thank you." Letting a moment pass, Noelle spotted a family picture of herself, Max and Mandy on the fridge. "Heard anything more from Mom?"

Mandy nodded, her lips firmly pressed together as her annoyance was evident on her expression. "Mom is furious. I wish she could just let go and leave Max alone to do what he's going to do."

"Max's her little boy. She'll never stop worrying. Could you if something like that happened with little Tony, Elly, or West?"

Her sister went quiet for a long moment. "I guess you got me on that one."

Returning inside a moment later, Gabe stomped his work boots off on the kitchen rug and smiled at Noelle " Ruff seems to have missed Roxy and Candy. They were all licking each other's faces."

Warmed at the thought of seeing her pals again, Noelle smiled. "That's so cute. I want to go see her before I head out."

"You're not staying for dinner?" Surprise laced Mandy's words as she turned and her gaze fell upon Noelle.

"No. I can't. I still have to pack and get ready for the trip in the morning. He wants to get on the road early."

"Does he have chains for the pass?"

"I don't know. I'm sure it'll be fine."

Rising from the stool, Noelle headed out the door and toward the barn. Surveying the fields of white snow to her right, Noelle stopped and drank in the view. The rolling hills behind the fields brought a perfect picture of God's excellent handiwork, and she lifted a prayer of thanks.

Thank You, Lord, for the beauty that is all around. In relationships, in creation, in all things. I pray for my brother, Max. May Your hand of protection be over his life. Draw him to the light of Your love and Your goodness. Amen.

Opening the barn door, she flipped on the light. The smell of dust, hay, and manure filled her nostrils. The hanging light swayed with the small breeze that made its way in through the cracks in the barn, and she ventured over to a stall where Betsy, her sister and Gabe's milk cow, was lying down in a bed of hay. Smiling, Noelle approached and bent a knee beside the cow. Rubbing the cow's side, Mandy looked the resting cow over. "Hey, Betty. It's been a while."

Just then, the dogs entered the barn stall from behind her.

"Come here, Ruff!" Opening her arms wide, she embraced her dog. "Be a good dog while I'm gone."

Ruff let out a saddened bark and rubbed her chin against Noelle's neck.

"Aww. You know I'm going, don't you?"

After giving her dog one more hug, Noelle rose to her feet and headed for the barn's exit. Entering back inside the house, she found her sister in the kitchen holding West while Gabe cut up pieces of chicken for the children. Coming closer, Noelle's lips curled into a smile as her gaze met the small child's eyes. She offered her finger to West, and he grabbed ahold of it.

"You're so strong for a little guy!"

Mandy smiled warmly at her. "You be safe on the roads tomorrow. Okay?"

Turning her attention to Mandy, she nodded. "I will be."

Walking over to her purse on the counter, she grabbed it along with her keys. "Take care."

*****

As the hours wound down that evening back in her apartment in Spove, Noelle became increasingly nervous. She began to pack her bag for the trip. As she laid a pair of jeans into her suitcase, she thought about the time she would be spending with Henry on the open road. It would just be him and her alone. The thought both excited and terrified her at the same time.

That evening as she pillowed her head to sleep, she prayed for God's will to happen in her life. A tear-filled confession of her shortcomings in relying on her Savior, Jesus Christ, filled much of her conversation with God that evening.

The following morning, she slipped a finger along the edge of the curtain in her apartment and drew it back. Peering down at the parking lot for the umpteenth time that morning, she sighed. Her anxiety was soaring as she worried about bringing up the conversation of a 'them' during their long weekend together. She had dreamed of him again last night. This time in the dream, he had kissed her passionately in the moonlight beneath the stars as he held her close in his arms. She longed deeply for the day when her dreams of them would become reality. But would they ever? She didn't know anymore. Only God knew, and she had to trust Him and His will in her life.

Slipping her cell phone out of her front jeans pocket, she checked the time. It was a quarter past seven. Fifteen minutes beyond the time he said he'd be there. A honk sounded a moment later, and she glanced out the window again. There he was. Seeing him caused her heart to leap.

Reaching down, she grabbed her suitcase and headed out her apartment door. She set it down and turned around to lock the door.

Henry came up the apartment stairwell.

"Morning, sunshine. Sorry I'm late. There was a detour because of construction."

Why did he have to do that? She wondered as she felt the love come off his lips and shower her heart with warmth. He lifted her suitcase for her, and they walked together down to his car.

As they came closer to the car, she commented, "You seem chipper."

"I am." Opening the trunk of his car, he set the suitcase next to his duffel bag. Shutting the trunk, he turned to Noelle and gave her a look like he wanted to kiss her. "You're lovely for coming with me on this trip. I can't express my joy enough to have my best friend by my side."

You could shut your mouth and kiss me, she thought silently to herself as she smiled.

Recalling her sister's comment about chains and the pass, she raised an eyebrow. "You have chains for the pass?"

"Yep. In the trunk."

"Great. Let's go."

Moving to the passenger side of the car, Noelle let herself in and buckled. As the seatbelt clicked, her pulse ticked up a notch. The first hour into the drive held little conversation as the radio filled the air. Then Henry pulled off on an exit to refuel and get coffee.

Undoing his seatbelt at the pump, he turned toward her. "You want anything?"

Peering into his eyes, she fluttered her eyelashes and decided on boldness. "Only you."

He smiled and let out a light laugh. "I don't think they sell that here."

As he got out and shut the door, she pressed a hand to her forehead and let out a sigh. Leaning the side of her head against the cool window beside her, she set her gaze out the windshield.

I'm going to have to be direct, aren't I, Lord?

An uneasiness blossomed in her heart as she was faced with the painful realization that she'd have to be direct about the discussion she wanted to have with him about the two of them. Fear crept in at the thought of him shooting her down. She just wanted the conversation to be easy and quick but not to exist if it didn't go in her favor. She literally wanted the impossible. The more she dwelled about the idea of bringing it up on the open road, the more she realized it was better left for the ride home.

I don't want to get trapped in a car with him if he's not interested in being together.

After a few minutes had passed and Henry hadn't returned from the gas station, Noelle decided to get out of the car and get a breath of fresh cool air. Taking her cell phone over to a frozen pond off to the side of the gas station, she snapped a few pictures. Seeing an exposed pile of small rocks a few feet away, she walked over and grabbed one, then skipped it across the frozen surface of the pond. It tapped a few times and then slid to a stop.

"Have you ever thrown rocks on a frozen lake?" Henry's voice broke through her thoughts and caused her to turn. He handed her coffee and then she peered back at the water.

"I haven't."

"It's pretty fun. Years ago, when I was a kid, we'd go to my grandpa's cabin up in North Idazo for Christmas and we'd throw rocks for hours. Rachel and I would stockpile rocks under the steps in the summer for that specific reason in the winter."

Taking a sip of her coffee, her insides warmed from the hot liquid traveling down her throat.

"Sounds like fun."

"It was." Looking with fondness on the little frozen body of water, he nodded lightly as he appeared to be lost in his thoughts. Turning back toward the parking lot and the car, he raised an eyebrow. "We should get back on the road."

"Agreed."

Walking together back over to the car, Noelle felt a nudge in her heart that went against her plan to wait. Unable to control herself, she pushed it out.

"Have you ever thought about an us?"

He paused. A look of fear flashed in his eyes, then as fast it showed up, it went away. He turned toward her.

“Who’s Gus?”

Shoving him playfully, Noelle smiled but then forced her smile away as she longed to have a single serious moment. “Don’t try to make it funny, Henry. I’m serious.”

He swallowed hard, his gaze fixed on her. His brown eyes penetrated right to her heart and made her feel weak.With all seriousness and tone, he nodded. “Yes, of course. Right now, though . . . I want to focus on meeting my mom. Okay?”

Relieved to hear it but at the same time understanding, Noelle shot a quick few nods his way. “Okay. That’s fine. But we’ll talk later, right?”

“Yes. I promise we’ll talk later.”

As they walked back to the car, Noelle was warmed by the small glimmer of hope the future now held for the two of them. Her nerves were settling, and a genuine smile rested on her lips and in her heart. She could finally focus on being there for him as he embarked on the big moment of finally meeting his biological mother.

*****”*

Checking into the hotel at two that Friday afternoon, Noelle went with Henry over to JK’s diner. They sat and ate a late lunch but spoke to nobody in the diner other than their waitress. Noelle studied Henry carefully as he sat across from her in the booth that afternoon. She watched as his eyes leapt from one server to another server. He appeared to be carefully analyzing and attempting to eavesdrop on conversations between waitresses.

“Hey, I’m not trying to question you here, but what do you think you’re hoping to accomplish?” Noelle folded her hands in front of her on the table.

Henry’s gaze fixed on her. “I should be able to know who my mother is. My heart should sense it.”

Her eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

Glancing around, Henry leaned across the table and his voice grew quiet. “I was a part of her when I was in her belly. My heart should know who she is by just looking at her.”

Noelle’s heart ached for his far-reaching assumption. “Henry. . .”

He shook his head. His tone sounded irritated. “What?”

“I know this is a big deal to you, and I respect you in this journey, but you won’t be able to sense who she is. That doesn’t make any sense.”

A moment passed, and then it was like a light bulb went on in his head. Smoothing a hand over his face, he raked his fingers through his hair and sat back in the booth as he relaxed. “You’re right. I don’t know what I’m thinking.”

Reaching a hand over the table, Noelle touched the top of his hand.

“It’s okay.”

He nodded confidently then shot a hand up, motioning their waitress over to the table. Their waitress came over to the table.

“Hi. I’m looking for Khloe. Could you send her over to the table?”

“She’s not working today.”

Henry squinted slightly. “Is she coming in today?”

The server appeared suspicious as she adjusted her footing, setting one foot back. “I’m not allowed to give that kind of information out, kid.”

“Okay.” Henry’s jaw clenched, and he pulled out a pen from his pocket and jotted down on a napkin the name of the hotel they were staying at. Handing it to the waitress, he smiled.

“If she comes in, please let her know this is the hotel I’m staying at. Thank you.”

Turning his attention toward Noelle, he shrugged. “I guess we’ll go see this weird guy named Tom now. Maybe he can tell us when she’ll be working.”

“All right. Let’s go talk to him.”

Henry slid out of the booth and put money down on the table for their food and a tip.

Chapter 5

Driving to the address, Henry parked in front of a mobile home and double-checked the address on the GPS—a perfect match. His insides flinched. Something didn't seem right about the whole situation with Tom, and his living in a rundown mobile home didn't help ease the mounting concerns he held.

"Is it the right address?" Noelle's eyes were fixed on the paper in Henry's hands.

"Yeah. You should stay in the car."

Glancing at the other broken-down mobile homes all around them, he looked at her again. "With the doors locked."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I don't know what's going to happen in there, and I don't want you in any danger. I have a bad feeling about this. If I'm not out in ten minutes, call the cops."

Her eyes widened.

Henry held up a hand. "Just in case. Don't get ahead of yourself, please."

"Okay. Are you sure? I could come in with you." Worry shone through in her words as she turned her head, surveying the rough-looking neighborhood.

"No. I don't want you in danger."

Getting out of the car, Henry headed up the snow-covered sidewalk to the unstable and paint-peeling mobile home a few paces from where he parked. As he knocked on the dented metal door, he lifted a prayer up to Heaven, asking for God's protection.

A moment passed and the door opened a fraction.

"Who are you?" the man behind the screen grumbled from the darkness.

"Are you Tom?"

"Oh. Oscar!" The door flung open and Tom stepped through the doorway to hug Henry. The smell of stale cigarettes and alcohol filled Henry's nostrils. "You finally made it. That's great! When'd you get in?"

"Few hours ago. My friend and I stopped in at JK's diner, but Khloe wasn't working."

"Why did you do a thing like that?" Tom's voice dipped and was laced with irritation. It appeared to Henry that he felt some sort of betrayal. "You thought you could just go see her and skip town without paying me?"

Smoothing a hand over his face, Henry searched for words. "Um . . ."

Slapping Henry's shoulder, Tom shook his head and smiled. "I'm just kidding! I'm sure you're excited to meet your mom. Come on in!"

Turning toward his car, Henry had a desire to leave, but he couldn't. He knew he had to see this through.

"Invite your lady friend in! I promise I don't bite . . . Not hard, anyway!" Tom laughed and winked.

"That's okay. She really doesn't need to come in."

Motioning her from the car, Tom was able to coax Noelle out with a smile and a friendly wave. Henry clenched his jaw in irritation. Uneasiness invaded every part of his being, and all he could do to stay calm was keep his eyes fixed on Noelle as she walked toward the two of them. It was in her eyes he found comfort, found joy and calmness for the storm raging inside him.

"I'm Noelle Ojo." She cheerfully stuck out a hand to shake Tom's and then all three of them proceeded inside.

"You two have a seat right here in the living room and I'll call your mom, Oscar."

As he left the room, Noelle flashed a confused look over at Henry.

Smiling, he moved over to the couch she was sitting on and explained to her what he had done and why he had done it.

"Okay. So, you know it's not really your mom if she calls you Oscar."

"Exactly."

Walking into the living room, Tom smiled. "She's on her way over."

Jumping to his feet, Henry rubbed his neck and started to pace. His heart hammered in his chest as he anticipated Khloe's arrival. "Right now? She's coming over here right now?"

"You bet! She's excited."

A dog bark sounded from a back room in the home and Tom shouted toward the hallway.

"Can I meet your dog?" Noelle's question caused Tom to raise his eyebrows.

Henry laughed. "She's a dog lover."

"I guess if you want to meet Tank you can. I'll warn you. His bark is far worse than his bite. Just a second. I'll go grab him."

Tom headed out of the room again and down the hallway, nervous. Noelle stood up, and Henry did also. She turned and grabbed both of his hands and looked him squarely in the eyes. "This all is going to be okay. No matter what."

"What if it's not her ? What if it is her and she doesn't like me? She did get rid of me for a reason . . ."

Shaking her head, Noelle kept her eyes fixed on him with that warmth and love that had held him together for years now. "You'll get through it no matter what. You have God."

A few barks sounded and the two of them stepped away from each other as Tom and a dog entered the room.

Tom laughed. "Meet Tank."

"He looks like a tank!" Henry said with a laugh, worry laced in his voice.

Noelle studied the dog carefully and approached with caution and slow movements. A few minutes passed and she was able to pet him. Then, she got down on her knees and was caressing his sides.

"Most people want nothing to do with this dog." Tom seemed perplexed as he rubbed his chin and watched Noelle show tenderness with the animal.

"The thing about Noelle is anything alive would be a fool not to love her." Henry's comment lifted from his lips as he looked toward her. She flashed him a smile over her shoulder before returning her attention to Tank.

Tom smirked and glanced over at Henry "You called her a friend? Are you sure she's not more than a friend?"

Noelle froze, not turning again.

Henry looked at Tom. "She's something all right. Special."

Just then, a knock sounded on the door.

A smile formed on Tom's lips, and he turned and looked at the door, then at Henry "Ready to meet your mom, Henry?

As soon as Tom said his real name, Henry's heart let go of all the worries and gut feelings he had up until that point. This had to be his real mom in the flesh.

Wiping his sweaty hands on his jeans, Henry turned and faced the door as Tom went over to answer it. Noelle rose to her feet and stood next to him. Her hand found his and he held on tight.

The door opened.

“Come on in, Khloe”

Stepping out of the way, Tom let her inside.

As his eyes fell onto his mother for the first time in his life, his heart ached. It didn’t bring any kind of good, just pain.

“Hey, kid. You want to go for a walk?” Her eyes glanced at Noelle for a second, then back to Henry. “Alone?”

Turning to Noelle, he saw her smile. “I’ll be okay for a few minutes with Tank. Go talk with your mom.”

Walking outside with his mom, they started down the road inside the mobile home community. The broken-down mobile homes and shady neighborhood were the furthest thing from his mind. He had finally found her, the woman who gave life to him.

“You have any questions for me?” Khloe asked five minutes into the walk of silence.

Henry stopped and searched her eyes, bouncing from one to the other. His eyes moistened and his heart twisted inside his chest.

“Yes. I have one question. I want to know why. Why did you give me up, Mom?”

“Henry.”

His heart went from sad to angry. “Why did you give up on me? Why wasn’t I enough, Mom? Huh?”

Tears rolled down his cheeks. He couldn’t control anything inside him.

She glanced away and her words were void of concern. “I don’t know, kid . . .”

Wiping his tears away, he shook his head and walked back the way they had come toward Tom’s mobile home.

She chased after him. “You’re still paying Tom, right?”

Her question cut deeply and straight into his heart. She only cared to reach out for the money. Suddenly, his heart couldn’t focus on anything but leaving. Arriving back at his car parked in front of the mobile home, he got in and laid on the horn to let Noelle know it was time to go.

Khloe came up to his driver side window and knocked repeatedly until he rolled it down. Still crying, he shook his head. “What do you want, Khloe?”

“The money.”

Furious, he leaned to his side and pulled out his wallet and pulled out the twenty crisp one-hundred-dollar bills and threw it at her. “There! Are you happy now?”

She scrambled to pick it up, but as soon as Noelle was on her way out to the car and Tom spotted Khloe grabbing the money, he wobbled quickly down the path and started to help her pick it up. They began to fight with one another over the cash as Noelle got in and buckled her seatbelt.

Rolling up the window, Henry wiped his cheeks of the wet regret that moistened them.

“Henry, are you okay?” His friend’s words were soft and gentle as a summer rain, but all he could feel was anger. All he could feel was rage in his heart. He turned to Noelle.

“No, I’m not okay.” A second passed and the two greedy people headed up toward the mobile home. Henry watched his mother as she didn’t even turn back to look at him. He sniffled and turned to Noelle “I met my mom and I wish I never had. This didn’t help anything. It only hurt.”

Noelle’s chin dipped and her voice softened. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.”

Putting the car into gear, they headed back to the hotel.

Lying on top of the bed covers with Noelle beside him propped up against the headboard, Henry flipped through the channels mindlessly on the hotel television. He hadn’t spoken more than a few words since a couple of hours earlier after the encounter with his mom. He was attempting to process all the pain and heartache that the day had been filled with the best way he knew how, to shove it down deep and forget about it. Suddenly, there was a knock on the hotel door.

Furrowing his eyebrows, he looked over at Noelle with a questioning gaze.

She shrugged.

Rising from the bed, he tossed the remote on the bed and walked over to go see who it was. A part of him hoped it was his mom.

Opening the door, he saw a thin, gaunt woman with jet-black hair pulled into a ponytail. She was wearing a red and white striped JK’s Diner apron and holding the napkin that he had jotted down the name of the hotel on.

“Hey. You’re the one who was in earlier asking about Khloe. Right?”

"Yeah?" Shaking his head, he was filled with confusion. "Why?"

"Khloe and Mac are a couple of scammers. I heard them talking about someone coming to town who is looking for their mom, and they were detailing the setup."

"No, that can't be. They knew my name."

Shrugging, the lady asked, "Was there money involved?"

"Yeah." Reminded of his gut feelings, he suddenly felt duped. Noelle came over to the door.

"Henry," Noelle said. "I just realized I said your name in the living room at Tom's house—I mean Mac's house, I guess. Remember when he went to go get his dog?"

Pondering for a moment the conversation between them, he recalled her saying, 'You'll get through it no matter what,' He sighed and rested his arm against the door frame.

Noelle rested a hand on his back. The action that would typically comfort him did very little to ease the pain in the moment.

"I just wanted to let you know. I'm sorry for whatever they got from you. I was going to come tell you after my break earlier at the diner, but you were gone."

Henry let out a defeated sigh and turned toward the lady. "Thank you for finding me and telling me."

"You're welcome."

As Henry shut the door, he noticed the upset feelings from the encounter with Khloe earlier subsiding. A smile grew on his face as Noelle sat back down on the bed.

"Why do you look happy? You just lost two thousand dollars and that wasn't even your mom. Listen, can we talk about us now?"

Excitement filled him to overflowing, and he went over to the bed and climbed across the bed to her. Grabbing her hands in his, his smile grew even more. "We don't need to talk about me and you. Don't you get it? The search isn't over! That wasn't really her! We can keep looking!"

Darkness filled Noelle's face and her eyebrows furrowed. Pulling away from him, she shook her head. "Really?"

"Yes, really. What's your attitude about right now?"

Getting off the bed, she grabbed her coat and put it on. As she pulled her hair out from her coat, she turned toward him.

"You just went through a terrible experience and fully believed it was your mom. You didn't get the answers you wanted, because you now know they don't exist, but you're going to keep going and ignore us in the process? Don't you get it?"

"But my real mom could give me real answers. I just don't know what they are yet. I can't stop searching for her now."

She paused in the hotel room and nodded softly as her eyes were downcast. Then her gaze lifted to meet eyes. "You may be right about your not being able to stop . . . but I can." Shrugging her shoulders, she shook her head. "I can't do this anymore, Henry. You know, you were right the other day at Bips when you said, 'Sometimes, it's just time to move on.' "

"What are you talking about? We've only been gone from Spove for one day."

Without replying to his words, she walked over to Henry and looked into his eyes one at a time. Then gently, she leaned in and kissed his lips. "Goodbye, Henry."

As she walked out of his hotel room, he brought two fingers up to his lips and touched where she had kissed him with those soft pink lips. That kiss was painful, and yet at the same time, pleasant. That kiss also terrified him. He had often wondered how Noelle's lips would feel against his own, but he had only kept it locked away in his daydreaming of her. A kiss had almost happened on multiple occasions, but this was the first time it had truly happened.

Unsure of what to do, he returned to his bed and lay back down. Flipping channels, he tried to distract himself once more with the TV. But it wasn't long before he was wondering what she had meant by goodbye. Desperate to talk to her about it and the kiss, he finally shut off the TV and put his shoes and coat on to go next door and talk to her about it.

Knock, knock, knock . . .

He took a step back and wrapped his arms around himself to attempt to keep warm as he waited for her to open the door. After a few minutes and more knocks with no answer, he moved to the window to steal a glance into her room between the opening in the curtains. She was lying there on the bed on her side, back facing the window. She appeared to be asleep. Let it go . . . Henry thought, then he returned to his hotel room.

Chapter 6

Blinking tears away from her swollen eyes, Noelle felt relief rush over her as his knocks stopped on her hotel room's door. It wasn't easy what she had to do, but at that very moment standing in his hotel room, she knew it was exactly what she had to do. Those words Henry himself had used about moving on had pushed to the tip of her mind and instantly forced her heart and mind to make the cut. She had been waiting for their talk, but at that moment, she knew it wouldn't ever come. Her flight was now booked for six o'clock tomorrow morning, and she would be on a flight before he even discovered she had checked out of the hotel.

It was a little harsh for Noelle to leave him alone in Olympia without a word, but she knew it had to be that way in order for her to go through with it. Quick and like a band-aid being ripped off, it had to be over. Her heart felt continual waves of sadness lapping against it, and she knew she couldn't stop them by sheer force. With time, though, she felt God's healing would find her and mend her.

Five minutes passed since the knocking ceased and she rolled onto her back. Staring at the white ceiling in the dark of the night in her room, she prayed with silent tears streaming down her cheeks. This man had gotten into her heart in a big way, and she was remorseful to God for how much power Henry had truly acquired over her. She begged God for forgiveness and asked that He would take her pain away. But He didn't, not tonight. No. Tonight, she'd have to lie in the bed she had made and experience the heartache that had unfolded in her life.

Closing her eyes, she tried to sleep.

Tossing and moving most of the night, she eventually kicked the blanket off at five o'clock the next morning. She got up and went into the bathroom and splashed cool water onto her face.

Flipping on the light, she looked at herself in the mirror.

"You only need God in your life. You don't need Henry or any man."

Though her lips said it, her heart didn't believe a word of it. Her corrupted heart hadn't been revealed to her as much as it was at this moment. It was as if letting Henry go shone a bright light on how disfigured her priorities were in relation to God. His grace is sufficient for thee. His grace is sufficient for thee. She kept telling herself the words like a prayer to help herself get through the painful moments that would rush her every twenty or so minutes. Returning to her bed, her eyes and mind finally started to drift to sleep. Then her alarm sounded on her phone.

Inside, Noelle ached as she reached over to the nightstand and shut the alarm off. She sat up. Her eyes turned toward the curtains in the hotel room, and she could see the darkness of the early

morning as it mingled with the lights of the hotel. Closing her eyes, she set her heart and mind on Jesus. Though the memories of last night with Henry lapped against her heart, she kept pressing in to Jesus more. He was the One and only source of joy for her. He had rescued her soul from the depths of Hell. He had given her the gift of salvation and a new life. She was a new creation, and it was time for her to start living like the freed slave she was from sin. Bowing her head, though she was tired and upset about the parting of herself away from Henry, she found gratitude filling her heart. She began to sing a Christian yoruba childhood song.

Oluwa etobi, Etobi o, Etobi!

Oluwa etobi oh, Etobi oh, etobi.

You are bigger than what people say, Jehovah.

You're bigger than what people say, Lord.

I give myself,away. I give myself away.

Take me Lord, I give my myself away.

She got up and packed her things quickly and headed out to the hotel's curb to catch a cab to the airport. As she watched out the window in the ride to the airport, she saw the city of Olympia waking up as it passed her by in a blur. In the distance, she could see the capital building that Henry had mentioned seeing, and her heart ached. Pushing it aside, she attempted to think about her new future ahead, one without Henry. The enemy's attacks soon bombarded her mind, though. Thoughts of Henry with another woman, with a family.

What if it was me all along, not him?

At the airport, she sat in a hard, plastic seat as she waited to board. She watched as a mother fished out a wet wipe to clean her child's face. Noelle smiled for the first time that morning. She wanted that, exactly that. She reminded herself that now that she was placing her relationship with Henry behind her, God would be able to bring the right man into her life who could provide that for her. Though the thought was nice in nature, it didn't include Henry, and that brought a measure of sadness with it.

An older woman sat down beside her a moment later. A few moments passed, then the woman leaned into Noelle's ear. "That mother won't know until she's older how precious those moments truly are."

Surprised and a little bit startled, Noelle turned toward the woman. She appeared to be wealthy, judging by her clothing and finely-groomed salt-and-peppered brown hair. "Really? I look at that and just want to experience it."

The woman nodded, then turned her eyes toward Noelle. “Of course, you do. When you’re younger, you want it. When you’re older, you miss it, but during it . . . that’s when everything is just a blur. I remember being so tired with my littles and longing for the day they grew up and moved out. Now I miss it.” The woman laughed and shook her head. “It’s quite odd how it all works.”

“That is strange. From everything I’ve been through, though . . . I can’t wait.”

Again the woman laughed, and this time it felt offensive to Noelle. “Oh, honey. You’re what? Twenty years old?”

“Twenty-three.”

“You have so much life ahead of you. I’m not trying to downgrade what you’ve been through, dear. But it takes decades to really just begin to understand all that life has to offer.”

Nodding, Noelle acknowledged the point. “I see what you mean. I feel like I’ve only started.”

“It’s because you have only begun.”

Soon, the overhead speaker system sounded, informing all the people near the gate that the plane from Olympia to Spove was boarding. A measure of uneasiness settled in Noelle as she filed into line with the others to board. Peering over her shoulder toward the security gate she had entered through, she thought of Henry waking up without her in the hotel room next to him. A measure of guilt filled her, and she pulled out her cell phone to text him.

Noelle: I’m heading back home to Spove. I think we need some space between us.

Pausing, she deleted the message then typed again,

Noelle: I flew back to Spove early. I can’t be your friend anymore. I need something more, and I don’t believe you can give that to me.

It was a bold statement but one she had to make. She hit Send, then promptly shut off her phone and slipped it into her suitcase. Once to her seat in the plane, she stowed the suitcase above her seat. She hoped to somehow forget about her cell phone.

* *

When the plane landed in Spove, she took another Uber ride, this time to her apartment. As she climbed those same stairs she had walked down so cheerfully only yesterday morning with Henry, she sensed a change within her. No longer did she hold a bleeding heart that would wait forever for him, but now, she was grieving. Grieving for what would never become of the two of them. She had to bury her hopes and dreams she had held onto for years and lay them at the cross.

Opening her apartment door, she walked in and quickly let go of her suitcase on the landing. She had been fighting the temptation to get inside it and power on her phone to see if he had replied yet. Walking over to the counter, she grabbed her car keys and then left, headed to her sister's house.

Arriving to Mandy's house, she spotted her sister out in the yard with her two older kids, building a snowman.

Parking, she got out of the car and approached her sister.

Mandy stood, her face riddled with concern for Noelle's unexpected early return. The expression on her sister's face only drove the dagger already lodged in Noelle's heart deeper. She lost control and composure and finally began to cry.

"What happened? What's wrong, Sis?"

Shaking her head, Noelle tried to keep up with the tears falling, catching each one with her fingers as she tried to explain.

"You were right, Mandy. He's never going to be ready so I . . . I cut him off."

"Oh, Sister. He didn't deserve you!"

They embraced. Her sister's hug warmed Noelle's heart which had been holding a deep chill ever since she had left the hotel in Olympia earlier that day. She wiped her eyes again.

"It's just so sad. You know? It's not like he's some jerk that keeps me in the friend zone. It's Henry!"

"I know, you poor thing. Tell me all the details."

Noelle went into detail about what had transpired. Then at the end of it, she let out a sigh and shook her head. "It's like he just can't let go. I know it's strange that this is what spurred me on to end things with him, but seeing him grow with excitement at searching again for this woman made me realize something. He's not going to be the type of man I need in my life until he becomes the man God designed him to be. God doesn't design men to seek after their own wants but those of others and of God. Psalm 23:1 says the Lord is our Shepherd, we do not want. God doesn't want us consumed by anything. You know?"

"You're right. Come here, Sis." Mandy opened her arms and hugged Noelle again.

"You spent so long waiting for him. You can move on now and find a guy who will appreciate you for who you are, which is an amazing woman of God."

"Thank you."

Hearing dogs bark in the distance, Noelle could make out Ruff's bark in the midst of them. She turned toward the barn in the distance. Gabe was walking behind the group of dogs that were traipsing through the snow toward the yard. Her heart was filled with joy upon seeing Ruff darting in a straight line for her.

Bending at the knees, Noelle opened her arms. Ruff flew right into her embrace and quickly began to lick her face.

"Calm down, Ruff .It was barely a day!" Noelle smiled and patted her dog's head gently, then proceeded to hug her.

Gabe arrived at Mandy's side and planted a kiss on her cheek. He turned toward Noelle. "Man and woman's best friend, eh?"

Peering up at Gabe as she continued to pat Ruff. Noelle nodded. "I couldn't agree more."

"You should stay for dinner." Her sister's invite sounded more like a demand than a request. "We're having firecracker chili."

"Sounds Yummy, but I need to get home and get unpacked."

Mandy shook her head and pulled Noelle up by the hand to her feet. "I don't think I asked, Sis."

Seeing it was important to her sister, Noelle gave in this time. "Okay. I'll stay."

Gathering the little children, Mandy and Noelle headed into the house while Gave took the dogs back to the barn. As they walked into the house, snow began to fall.

* *

After dinner, and then being pressured into staying for dessert, it was finally time for Noelle to leave. The time with her sister and her sister's family had dulled Noelle's aching heart and provided her with a sense that things were going to be okay. As she opened the front door to leave, she was greeted by a cold wind, but it had stopped snowing. Gabe followed behind her with the kennel.

Noelle strode out to her car. Finally making it to the back door of her car, she opened the back door for Gabe to put the kennel inside.

"Drive safe."

Noelle nodded. "I will."

Getting in the driver's seat, she smiled as the inside was already warm. Gabe had run outside to start her car about twenty minutes ago and it was more than comfortable. She put the car in reverse mode.

Not long into her drive, it started to snow again. This time, it was coming down angrily. Proceeding slowly, a knot of anxiety twisted in her chest with each inch forward down the road toward Spove. She had lived in Spove a long time, but this storm was getting worse by the second.

Making it down a windy country road, she was traveling no more than sixteen miles per hour when a truck behind her suddenly laid on their horn. Ruff let out an annoyed bark and Noelle nodded toward her canine friend in the rearview mirror.

"You can say that again!"

Just then, a bump in the road caused Noelle's back wheels to slide slightly. Her heart leapt and she panicked. Not thinking clearly, she jerked the wheel to the right. Then suddenly, the car spun. With snow still coming down hard, the windshield wipers on full blast, everything slowed to a blur. Yanking the wheel the opposite way she was spinning, she attempted to get the car under control but failed to pump the brakes. Instead, she slammed on the brakes, only causing her car to spin more. Heart racing and mind confused, she shouted.

"Ahh!"

The car violently shook as it went off the road, and she gripped the steering wheel harder. Then it dove slightly down a ditch and came to a hard stop. Relief mingled with uncertainty inside her. She felt thankful it didn't roll. Lifting her eyes, she prayed. Thank You. Then she grabbed hold of her door handle and pushed open the door. Climbing out into the darkness, she peered up toward the road. That annoying truck behind her was long gone. It hadn't even stopped after seeing her spin off the road.

Silence. Darkness. Snow.

There was nothing else besides a girl and her dog out in the middle of nowhere.

Turning, she was about to get in her car and grab her cell phone, but then she remembered it was still in her suitcase at home. Her eyes welled with hot tears. What now, Lord?

Ruff let out a bark from inside the car.

Leaning in the car through the driver side door, she looked back at Ruff, whom part of the overhead light was shining down on. Noelle smiled.

"Hey, girl. We have to wait and pray someone drives down this country road tonight."

Noelle went back to the top and stood on the side of the road for nearly an hour in the blowing cold snow, waiting, crying, hoping, and praying that someone, anyone would drive by. When her fingers and body couldn't take the cold any longer, she finally returned to the car and checked the exhaust pipes to make sure they weren't plugged. Then she climbed back into the car and turned it

on for the warmth. Not fully, in case there was a leak somewhere, but partially so the heater and radio could play.

As the air in the car became warm, her eyes weighed heavy with tiredness. She had traveled more and experienced more draining activities in the last twenty-four hours than she ever had before in her life. Falling asleep came easily and quickly, but not on purpose.

Knock, knock, knock!

Startling her eyes open some unknown time later, she jerked her head to the left to see a man standing on the other side of her steamed window. She rolled the window down.

“Hey. I have a rope and I think I can pull you out. I checked out your car and it doesn’t look damaged or anything. Do you want me to?”

“Yeah, that’d be great!”

Doing what the man told her to do next, she got out of the car and latched the rope to the front of her bumper. Then she controlled the steering wheel as he carefully pulled her out of the ditch. This stranger was a Godsend and she couldn’t be more thankful for God’s provision or this man if she tried. It wasn’t long, and soon, her four wheels were back on the icy road. Luckily, it had stopped snowing. Standing out in front of her car’s headlights in the middle of the road, she smiled as she met the man between their vehicles.

“Thank you so much. I don’t know how to say thank you as much as I want to right now!”

He laughed. “How about you go to a fancy party tomorrow night with me?”

“What? Like a date?”

“No, no way. I don’t even know you. I just have a work thing I have to go to, and it’d be nice if I walked in with someone like you.”

Taken aback, Noelle crossed her arms as she became uneasy. “Like me? What’s that mean?”

“Sorry. I just get a lot of beef for not ever bringing anyone to these things. It’d be a nice way to repay me. That’s all I am saying. You can even meet me there. No typical weird date-like scenario where I pick you up.”

Her eyes surveyed him from head to toe. He was attractive and slightly burley as it looked like he wasn’t a fan of shaving. But his eyes were soft and the kindest blue. She felt like she could trust him, and he had basically saved her life that night. “Okay, I’ll go. But what’s your name?”

“Kelvin. You?”

“Noelle, Nice to meet you, Kelvin.”

They shook hands.

“You know, Noelle. I’ll probably need your phone number so I can send you the details.”

She laughed. “How about you tell me where and what time it is, and I’ll be there?”

“Okay, okay. I see how it is.” He laughed and shook his head. “It’s at the Davenportia Hotel at seven o’clock tomorrow.”

“I’ll see you then. Thanks again for literally helping me out.”

He smiled. “You’re welcome. See you tomorrow.”

Walking over to her driver’s side door, she got in and buckled her seatbelt. She thought for a second about God’s will and how this meeting could’ve been fate but then quickly denounced the notion. At home that evening a little while later, she let Ruff out of the kennel but had gone straight down the hallway and to bed shortly thereafter. Her cell phone being tucked away in her suitcase and possibly holding a response from Henry suddenly didn’t matter so much anymore. Was it tiredness, or had this handsome stranger sparked something deeper in her heart?

Chapter 7

Nothing could keep Henry from feeling the despair that was in his soul following his finding of Noelle not in her hotel room earlier that morning. He had spent the greater part of his morning attempting to call her. She had texted him but then appeared to have shut off her phone or was just completely ignoring him. He only wanted to know what had happened to cause her to leave. When he finally tossed his bag into the trunk and headed back toward Spove he was in an emotional mixture of what he didn't know, only had Khloe and Mac duped him, but by all appearances, he seemed to have lost his closest and only friend in the world.

He drove the five hours it took from Olympia to Spove with the radio off and deep in thought and prayer. He thought a lot about Noelle some good thoughts, like that kiss she had planted on his lips the day prior, and some bad thoughts, like the fact that she had left him alone in a strange city without even an explanation, though she did say goodbye. While he was tremendously upset about what she had done, he couldn't hate her for it.

When he finally made it back into Spove, he went over to his sister, Rachel's apartment. She was the closest thing to a friend he had other than Noelle, and he hoped she could shine light on what had happened.

Knock, knock, knock.

Flinging open the door a few minutes later, Rachel, who was wrapped in a pink bathrobe, furrowed her eyebrows at him.

"What are you doing? I was sleeping."

Checking his watch, he shook his head. "It's two in the afternoon. Why are you sleeping?"

"I like naps and it's my day off. Don't judge."

He smiled. "Could I come in?"

"Sure." Stepping out of the way, Rachel held out her hand. As he walked in, she pressed her apartment door shut and double locked the locks. Turning toward Henry as he took a seat on the couch, she moved over to him cautiously. "You're back early and not with Noelle. What happened?"

Henry shook his head. "I'll just say it wasn't my mom. I don't want to talk about that. The real problem I have is the fact that Noelle took off without saying a word to me early this morning or last night. She ditched me and I don't know why."

"Did something happen? You have an argument?"

"No." Henry rubbed his neck as he recalled the conversations between them. "That's the crazy thing about it. There was nothing. I found out it wasn't my mom, and I started talking about the next step in finding my mom, and then suddenly, Noelle kissed me, said goodbye, and then walked out of my hotel room."

Rachel listened and then proceeded over to the couch and sat down beside her brother. Tapping her chin, she looked up at her brother. "At least she said goodbye. How does she feel about you searching for your mom?"

Henry pondered the question, then shrugged. "I don't think it matters a whole lot to her. It's not her mother who is being searched for."

"Yeah, but isn't she not on good terms with her mom?"

"Yeah. Why's that matter?"

Rachel shrugged. "I don't know, but maybe it does. Or maybe she's just a little tired of your obsession."

Shaking his head, Henry searched his thoughts for any kind of impression of that attitude coming from Noelle. "I don't see how or why that would even matter to her. What is it with people being so down on me about this search?"

"I think we've just seen what it does to you. You were a mess when you did this search last time. As for Noelle . . . you know she likes you as more than a friend."

Hearing the words sent an ache that radiated through his heart. He recalled their conversation at the gas station and how she had wanted to discuss the topic. His shoulders slumped, then he raked his fingers through his hair. "Why can't we just be friends and isn't that good enough?"

"Seriously? Women don't want good enough. They want to be loved deeply and cherished."

"I don't want to talk about her anymore."

Rachel let out a sardonic laugh and shook her head. "Yeah? Maybe that's the problem. You don't want to go there, don't want to entertain the thought of anything outside of friendship. You're being selfish, Brother."

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Henry rose to his feet. It had been the second time he was called selfish in less than forty eight hours. He walked over to a bookshelf that held photographs. His heart felt a pinch when his eyes fell upon a family photograph and he spotted his father's face. He had kept this whole trip from his father, Jasper, and it pained him to know his father was in the dark.

"Maybe I'm wrong about Noelle. I honestly don't have the answers. What I do know is you now have exactly what you feared the most by ever dating her—your friendship lost."

He turned toward his sister and raised an eyebrow. "You think she's gone for good?"

Nodding, she got up and slowly walked over to him. "She kissed you and said goodbye, Brother. That meant something."

Henry was silent.

Rachel shook her head, her gaze downcast for a moment, then returned to him. "I'm sorry."

Noelle had been the one constant in his life outside of his family, and he couldn't fathom the possibility of her exiting abruptly from his life.

"I don't believe that." A moment passed and his cell phone rang in his coat pocket. Slipping it out, he saw it was his dad calling. "It's Dad."

Before he had a chance to answer the phone, Rachel asked, "You want some coffee?"

"Yes, please."

Rachel went into the kitchen while Henry walked into the hallway of the apartment. He tapped his cell phone's screen to answer.

"How did it go?" His father's words caused him to stop walking. His insides tingled with a sense of uneasiness mixed with betrayal from his sister. He glanced toward the kitchen. She told him?

"I don't want to talk about this. I didn't even want you to know about it, Dad."

Perplexed, his father responded. "I'm sorry I asked. I thought you wanted me to know. I know you think it's a big deal, Son. But it really isn't."

Furrowing his eyebrows, Henry shook his head and walked out of the hallway and into the kitchen, his dad still on the phone.

Rachel turned toward him.

"How could you tell Dad that I went to Olympia to see my birth mom after our talk?"

Silence invaded the air between all three of them. Then, his father broke the quiet. His voice was shaky and troubled. "I was talking about your business meeting at church with Terry. Wait, you saw your birth mom?"

Cheeks fiery red, Henry was overwhelmed, and he quickly ended the call. "I have to go, Dad."

"Okay . . . bye, Son."

The call ended and slowly, Henry returned the phone to his pocket.

Rachel laughed lightly and then turned to the coffee pot to continue pouring cups of freshly brewed coffee. “Oh, brother.”

Squeezing his eyes tightly together, Henry raked his hair with both hands as he thought about what he had just done, not only to his father but to his mother too. He was filled with anger and frustration, and he had nobody to blame but himself and his quick assumptions. “I’m going to leave. Raincheck on that coffee.”

Taking the extra mug of coffee she had poured from the counter, she promptly dumped it down the drain and forcefully slammed the cup down on the counter beside the sink. Rachel then turned toward him and folded her arms.

“When are you going to stop running from your problems?”

Raising a hand, he shook his head. “Don’t you start with me, Rachel.”

“No, I’m done dancing around your feelings and insecurities, Brother. You must face stuffs and grow up. You’re young, but you have to start learning sometime that this whole world doesn’t revolve around you!”

Exiting the kitchen, Henry headed for the door to leave. He didn’t like where the conversation was headed. As his hand twisted the doorknob, Rachel pushed the door shut, stopping him.

“Come on. Stay and talk. Talk it out, work it out. Let’s get Dad over here, Mom too, and let’s for the first time be real and fully truthful to one another.”

The thought of exposing the pain that tormented his soul over not knowing his biological mother struck fear and paralysis within him. Putting everything out there would be dangerous. He couldn’t help but think of his recent experience at church when he had tried just that with Terry and the others. That didn’t end well and as a result, he had lost the sense of love he once felt with his church family. He turned and looked into Rachel’s eyes as he shook his head.

“Not gonna happen, Sister.”

Grabbing the doorknob again, he twisted it again. She let him do this and so he left.

Tears welled in his eyes as he drove toward Noelle’s apartment. He knew she didn’t want to see him, but he had to try to see her. Her friendship was one of the most important relationships to him, and he couldn’t let it go without putting up at least some sort of fight. She had been with him through some of the most difficult times in his life. He recalled to his mind the night she had come over after he called off the search for his mother the first time. On the couch in his parents’ living

room, he'd laid his head on her lap and she caressed his hair as he wept. He could still feel how it felt to have her right there with him that night.

The tears broke free from his eyes as he turned onto Noelle's street. He wiped the tears from his cheeks and breathed deeply in the hope of retaking control. Pulling into the apartment complex parking lot, he parked. The snow was coming down with a fury and the wind was picking up tempo. He paused and prayed.

Henry got out of his car and wrapped his arms around himself tightly to keep in the heat and dipped his chin to shield his face the best he could from the blowing snow. Hurrying over to the stairs, he made his way up to the door and knocked in three quick successions.

No answer.

He knocked again.

No reply

"Noelle, Please talk to me!" he shouted. A few moments passed and he turned his head toward the parking lot and specifically, her parking stall. Her car wasn't there. His insides faltered.

Turning away from the door, he started to walk slowly. All of his muscles relaxed, and he ignored the painfully cold wind and snow pushing against his face in the moment. He walked down the steps slowly and out to his car with a pace that didn't carry a care in the world. He felt himself finding the end of himself.

* *

Pulling into his driveway, he parked beside his dad's pickup truck. Uneasiness lapped against his heart as he peered through the windshield toward his living room. There was a light on, and he knew his father was waiting inside for him.

Undoing his seatbelt, he was about to grab the car door's handle but stopped.

"No. I'm not doing this. Not after the day I've had."

Buckling his seatbelt with determination, Henry turned the key in the ignition and backed out of the driveway. As he put the car into drive, he turned his head toward the living room window again. He saw his father standing in plain view.

He gassed the pedal and took off down the road and away from the house.

Within a minute, his cell phone rang—it was his dad. He tapped Decline and kept driving. If it wasn't for the hope that Noelle would call, he would've thrown the phone straight out the driver's side window right then. But he couldn't do that knowing that she might call.

Unsure of where to go, he decided to drive to his and Noelle's favorite spot down at Riverfront Park. He parked and hurried to the steps. It was snowing harder now, windy too, but he didn't care. He felt so uncomfortable and uneasy within himself that he had to find somewhere that was pleasant. He sat down on the frozen and snow-covered steps, and his jeans immediately became cold with moisture as he shook his head. Tears began to fall, and he stared up at the almost night sky. He wept. Why, Lord?.Thinking about his father's words about his heart being against the Lord's anointed, his heart ached even beyond the pain it was undergoing at the moment. He wept more.

As he prayed, the story of the Israelites being freed from Egypt came to the forefront of his thoughts. He recalled how their backs were up against the sea and the Egyptian army was closing in closer and closer. It was only when all hope was lost that God showed up. A smile broke into Henry's frozen heart. He returned to praying, he left Riverfront Park and returned home to speak with his father.

Parking once again in his driveway, he peered up toward his home's living room window. Though he had the peace of the Lord with him, he still didn't like the idea of walking through that door and having the conversation he was about to have with his father, but he knew it was the right thing to do. Closing his eyes, he prayed.

He walked up the driveway and to the front door. Wrapping his hand on the doorknob, he turned it and entered the house.

Only a lamp was on in the living room. He hung up his coat on the hook by the door and proceeded from the landing down the hall and into the kitchen. His father was sitting at the kitchen table, his finger on a page in his Bible and his reading glasses perched on the bridge of his nose.

Removing his reading glasses, he set them down beside the Bible then turned his attention toward Henry

"Son."

"I'm sorry I took off. I wasn't ready to talk."

"And now?"

Nodding, Henry went the rest of the way over to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair. He sat down. "I'm ready."

"Okay. I came over after our call because I wanted to talk. So, what's going on? Why did you hide the fact that you started up the search again for your birth mom?"

Hesitation weighed heavily on Henry's heart. It was uncomfortable to expose himself, and especially his worries over his mother, Priscilla, but the Lord strengthened him in the moment. "Dad, I didn't want to worry you and Mom." Biting his lip as he struggled to continue, he shook his head. "I don't want Mom's cancer to come back, and after I saw the way it affected her last time I did this search . . ."

Jasper nodded slowly, his expression one of understanding

"I was just hurt that you didn't even tell me." He shrugged and crossed his arms as he raised his eyebrows. "I thought you felt as if you could come to me with anything."

As his eyes studied his father's hurt expression, Henry felt the desire to run, but he fought against that desire with the Lord's help. Taking a moment to collect himself, he leaned in toward his father. "I do feel I can come to you about anything, Dad. But I saw how relieved you were when I ended the search last time. I didn't want to be a burden to you."

"Oh, my son. You aren't a burden. I understand you want to find that woman. I truly do."

"Rachel says everyone's burnt out on the topic."

Jasper stood and moved his chair closer to Henry and sat back down. Grabbing his son's shoulder, he looked squarely into his eyes. "I will never give up on you. I don't care what Rachel says. She doesn't get it. I honestly don't get it either, but I get you. I love you with all my heart and I know how important this is to you. If you want to spend the next five, ten, or even twenty years searching for this woman, I will stand by your side."

Love pushed over into Henry's heart at his father's words. They were loving, caring, and beyond anything he could fully understand. "But why, Dad? Why would you stick by my side even when it doesn't make sense to you?"

"That's an easy answer. It's because I love you."

Tears broke through and Henry threw his arms around his dad. Though he had lost a friend that day, he had gained a deeper understanding of his father's love. In the comfort of his father's embrace, He felt the working of God's unconditional love living out through not his biological father, but the father God had chosen for him.

Chapter 8

Noelle slept until 9pm the next morning. Waking to sunshine streaming into her bedroom through the window, she tarried a little longer in bed as she recounted last night. The lovely time at her sister's house, the snow storm that sent her car spinning off the road. And then the handsome hero in the night named Kelvin whom she had agreed to join later that day at a fancy function of some sort at the Davenportia Hotel. A smile rested on her lips as she thought about the stranger's gallant efforts in the night. Then it was all washed away in an instant when she thought of Henry. Her cell phone was still stowed away in her suitcase's front pocket.

Scurrying out of bed, she hurried down the hallway and out to the landing near the front door. Retrieving the cell phone, she powered it on. Three text messages, all from Henry For just a friend, he sure seems concerned . . . she thought as she debated on what to do next. Setting the phone on the kitchen counter, she went about preparing herself yogurt, fruit, and groundnut.

Noelle knew if she caved and called, he'd want to meet up and discuss everything and try to smooth it over. She didn't want that, though. She wanted to move on. She asked her dog, Ruff, her thoughts on the matter as she pulled out a kitchen chair, and her dog simply tilted her head.

"I know, Ruff. Why do I let him get in my head like this? I don't know."

Dipping her spoon into her yogurt, she stirred the groundnut in gently.

The doorbell rang.

Her eyes widened and her heart raced. Standing from her chair, she quietly went over to the door and checked the peephole.

It was Henry.

Jerking her head away quickly, she rested her back against the door and her heart began to pound.

The doorbell didn't ring again.

Face the facts, Noelle. He won't let this go. She took a deep breath in, then exhaled it. Turning around, she faced the door and opened it.

He was gone.

Furrowing her eyebrows, she stuck her head out of the open doorway and peered toward the stairs leading down to the parking lot. He was already halfway across the lot. Surprised, her gaze dropped to the slab of carpet outside her door. An envelope with her name lay on the carpet. Bending

down, she retrieved the envelope and went back inside her apartment. Pulling out the tri-folded letter, she sat down at the table and read it.

Noelle

As much as it pains me to write you this letter, I know now that it must be done. When I awoke at the hotel and found your room abandoned, I took it personal in the worst way possible. I know that I have wronged you, and I understand now what you did and why you did it. I'm sorry about all the texts and phone calls from my end. I wanted to write you and let you know that I cherished our friendship and what we had while we had it. It will always be kept in my memories with fondness. I love you, but I also know I can't love you the way you should be loved. You won't have to worry about me bugging you anymore.

Much Love,

Henry

Loosening her fingers from the letter, she let it fall delicately to the table. The oddest sense washed over her. She thought she'd be glad to get such a letter, but it did anything but that. It was as if he was the one done with her. Her confusion fueled anger within her, and she hurried out her door through the snow in her bathrobe to chase his car down before he made his way out of the parking lot.

Spotting his car about to pull out, she screamed. "Henry!"

His brake lights lit up and she hurried the rest of the way over to his car. Her feet frozen in the slush and snow, she hurried to the passenger side and got in.

"You don't get to just drop a letter off and leave!"

He smiled and looked over at her. "I did ring the doorbell. And I tried to call and text."

"Yeah, so?"

He laughed and tilted his head. "Want me to park and we'll chat?"

She nodded and he backed the car up and parked in a stall. The car still running, the air warmed as the moment lingered.

"I am sorry for the way I left Olympia. I should've talked to you directly. I love you too, Henry, but I don't see us ever being more than friends and I can't do it anymore."

"I know." Henry appeared to be deep in thought as he responded with those two short words. Adjusting in his seat, he undid his seatbelt and turned toward her. "I'm sorry too. I know you wanted to talk about us at the gas station and I shoved it off. I'm an idiot for the way I've treated you, and you deserve someone who can treat you right and wants to be in a relationship."

Hot tears welled in her eyes as his words were both touching and yet incredibly painful.

He shook his head and glanced out the windshield. Henry's chin dipped and his voice softened. "I realized last night that I know my parents. I don't need to keep searching for my biological mom. My desire to find my mom is an empty road going nowhere. I need to focus back on Jesus. It's only He who can heal the brokenness that lives inside me."

"But you do need closure. I get that."

He shook his head and looked her in the eyes. "I had closure already. It was at the Cross of Calvary. It's time I start embracing that. My anger and frustration over what happened to me stems from my lack of trust in God."

Noelle's insides tingled as his words were similar to her own experience with the process of letting Henry go from her life. Staying on topic, Noelle shook her head.

"What she did to you wasn't right."

Shrugging, he looked at her again with those piercing brown eyes. "Yeah, there's a lot not right in this world, but Jesus overcame the world. Someone's wrongdoing isn't my problem to solve."

Noelle sensed a deep shift in Henry's perspective. "What happened to you to bring all this on?"

"God parted my red sea and showed me His unconditional love in a single heartfelt moment with my dad last night." He appeared lost in thought for a moment, then he returned. "I have to refocus on Jesus, and I know that now."

She nodded lightly.

"How's Max?"

"I don't know. I planned on jetting over to my sister's to grab a dress for tonight. Maybe my mom called and talked to him."

An ache flashed in his eyes as she uttered the word dress. He raised an eyebrow. "What's the dress for?"

Blinking, she hesitated. She didn't want to hurt his feelings. "I . . ."

He held a hand up. "Never mind. I don't need to know. See? I'm already digging and trying to revert back to being friends."

Her cheeks reddened. "I'm sorry."

"No, no. Don't be sorry. You should be happy, and you should find someone who can give it to you." Reaching a hand over, he smiled. "You deserve the best."

Her phone vibrated in her pocket and she slipped it out to check who it was—it was Mandy

“That’s my sister calling. I’d better get it. It could be about Max.”

Nodding, Henry smiled. “It was nice to see you. Take care of yourself.”

“You too.”

Exiting his car, she hurried to the steps and up to her apartment. She tapped the Answer button. As she watched Henry drive to the end of the parking lot to leave, she felt a part of her heart going away with him. Though the parting was mutual, she sensed things between them would never be the same.

“How did the drive home go?”

Her sister’s question jogged her memory of spinning off the road. Furrowing her eyebrows as she re-entered her apartment, she shook her head. “One word—horrific!”

After hearing Noelle’s explanation, her sister sighed heavily. “You didn’t call me when you got home because why?”

“I was exhausted from the day.”

“Okay. I’ll let you off on that one. So, who was the guy who rescued you ?”

“Yes, his name is Kelvin.” Walking over to her yogurt still on the table, she sat down and took a spoonful into her mouth. “In fact, he asked me to join him for some sort of function tonight.”

“What? You agreed?”

“He did kind of save my life.”

“True. Well, that’s exciting!”

“Yep. Oh, I need to borrow a dress. That blue one with sequins.”

“All right. It’s here.”

“Any word on Max?”

A hush fell across the conversation, then Mandy’s tone changed. “Yes. Mom said he’s in a halfway house over off Heppin Avenue in Spove.”

Relief washed over Noelle.

“At least he’s safe.” Finishing her yogurt and apple slices, she pitched the yogurt container in the trash beside the counter and set her plate and spoon in the sink. Immediately, she began to plan her day around seeing Max before she went out to Mandy’s house.

"I know what you're thinking, and I highly suggest you don't go see him. He's not in a good frame of mind, Sister."

"Whatever. He's my brother, Mandy! I can go see him."

Mandy let out a heavy sigh. "This is why Mom doesn't tell you things and why she's telling me less and less. You always do whatever you want regardless of other people's thoughts or feelings."

"Mom doesn't talk to me much because our relationship is less than the one she has with the bag boy who takes her groceries out to her car at Albertson's."

Choosing to ignore the jab, her sister shifted the conversation.

"Did you hear from Henry?"

Her heart ached at just the mention of his name, and she glanced at her apartment's front door. "Yes. He just left."

"Oh?"

Pressing a hand against her forehead, a smile curled on her lips. "He's doing better mentally. I hate to admit it, but I think cutting him loose is kind of helping him."

"I'm proud of you, Sis. Letting him go probably wasn't easy."

"It wasn't. What I really should say is it isn't easy. But I have to trust that God knows what He is doing with my life and I have to let Him lead me."

"Who knows, maybe this guy who saved you can be a lovely distraction from your heartache?"

"Yes, let's use cute heroes who save us as distractions. I barely cut things off with Henry. I'm not going to instantly love someone else. I don't want a rebound."

Mandy let out a laugh. "Don't make me into a monster! I'm not saying that at all. I'm just saying it's good to get out there and mingle a little bit. Let Henry figure out his way in life."

Going into her bedroom, Noelle pulled out a pair of jeans, a tee shirt, and a hooded sweatshirt. Tossing them all onto the bed, she exited her room and grabbed a towel from the linen closet in the hallway.

"I'm going to jump in the shower and then head over to Max's place. I'll call you when I'm headed out your way for the dress."

Her sister didn't speak for a moment. "Tell Max I said 'hi' and that I love him."

Noelle smiled. "I will."

* *

Parking at the curb outside the halfway house, Noelle shut her car off and lifted a prayer toward Heaven. Her brother, Max, jumped from drug to drug, woman to woman, and place to place. The only constant in his life was the fact that nothing was constant. She had witnessed to him about Jesus every single time she'd had a chance, and yet each time fell flat. This time, she hoped that the groceries she had brought would bear testimony enough that God was still pursuing him, even if he wanted nothing to do with Him.

Grabbing the two grocery bags from the passenger seat, she got out and headed up the sidewalk leading up to the building. The building looked like any of the other houses found on the street, the only difference being the size was far larger than a normal house. Letting herself in through the main entrance, an elderly gentleman greeted her wearing a baseball cap that was black and held the Christian fish symbol on it.

"I like your hat."

The man smiled. "Thanks. You here to see someone?

"Yes. Max."

His eyes couldn't help but widen for a moment, then he nodded. "How do you know Max?"

"I'm his sister."

Frowning, the man nodded. "He's been rather angry since he got here a couple of days ago. He's about to get kicked out if he can't settle down."

"I'll talk to him. Where is he?"

"Up the stairs and the second room on the left."

"Thank you."

Leaving the man, she traveled up the stairwell. The walls were a plain white but held scuffs and dirt on them. It appeared as if a lot of furniture had traveled through the hallway up and down the stairs. Finally making it to his room and his dented door, she knocked lightly.

"Go away."

"Hey, Max. It's me, Noelle."

Quiet fell from the other side of the door, then it opened a fraction. As she pushed the door open the rest of the way, she watched as her shirtless and scrawny brother staggered his steps back over to a mattress lying on the floor. Sitting on the bed, he raked a hand through his long greasy hair.

"What's up?"

Holding up the grocery bags as she entered, she closed the door delicately with a foot behind her. "I brought gifts."

Tilting his head, his eyes studied the bags. Rubbing his goatee with a hand, he smirked. "Gifts from Jesus, I take it?"

"You know it." Walking the rest of the way over to his bed on the right side of the room, she set the bags down on the bed and then proceeded to pull items out.

"Toothpaste, toothbrush, candy, floss."

He laughed, covering his mouth. "You worried about my teeth or what?"

"There's more!" She playfully smiled as she continued pulling items out. "Deodorant, fully-cooked chicken, egg salad."

"Okay, okay. I get it. Thank you." Leaning over the bed, he scooped a stained flannel shirt off the floor and put it on. As he buttoned it up, he raised his eyebrows and looked at her. "You here to preach?"

"No, Max. I'm here to love."

Raising an eyebrow of suspicion, he smiled. "What?"

"I just wanted to see you. You've heard the gospel more times in the past few years than people have in a lifetime. You know what the truth is, and God is pursuing you."

"Yeah." He rolled his eyes. "Almost dead behind a 7-Eleven. What a mighty Savior that is . . ."

"You didn't die though, Max."

Pressing his lips together, he nodded. "That's true. How's Mom doing these days?"

"I don't get out to see her much. But she's okay. Still worrying about you . . ."

"She's not worried about me as much as she's worried about her reputation being tarnished." Snarling, he shook his head. "She'd love it if I died."

It stung to hear the accusation toward her mother, but she set it aside and didn't let herself get caught up emotionally in the turmoil that wrestled inside Max. Noelle knew much of his pains and struggle stemmed from not knowing his dad. Only God could change Max's heart, mind, and spirit, and that would require him wanting it.

"Listen, Bro. I don't want to get caught up in all that drama, but you and I both know that none of that is true. Mom loves you."

"Yeah, why has she never visited me once when I wasn't sober? It's only when I'm behaving."

"I'm sober and I don't get visits."

Nodding, Max dropped the subject. It was known information between him, Mandy and Noelle knew that Noelle had the most distant relationship with their mother, Sarah.

After a moment of quiet passed, Noelle remembered the man downstairs' comment. "What's going on? The guy downstairs said you're about to get kicked out."

"Roger doesn't like me and so he sides with all the thieves in this Godforsaken hole. The guy I share this room with kept stealing my stuff when I'd be out for a walk and nobody wants to believe me. I just want to be treated nicely and fairly while I'm in this junkie house."

Noelle had a lot of advice she could dish out to him right at that moment, things like if he didn't keep making the same poor choices, he wouldn't have to be somewhere like this, but she knew it would be futile.

"You've been here what, two days? Give it some time and don't get kicked out."

"We'll see what happens . . ."

Noelle let out a sigh. It was hard to see Max like this. He seemed so broken and lost. She knew if he would only surrender to God and come to Him, he'd find restoration for his soul and joy in his spirit.

"God is the answer to all of your problems, Max"

"I'm sure He is."

"He is. When we follow His will for our life, life is beautiful. It's not perfect, and that doesn't mean nothing bad ever happens, like what happened to our dad, but there's a peace in it."

"Yeah, be like Dad, who loved God and ended up dead early in an accident in Nigeria."

Noelle's heart felt rattled by her brother's darkened words. She shifted topic. "Mandy says 'hi' and that she loves you. By the way, she had her son."

"I see. Woo . . . so loving." He raked his hands through his hair. "You're the only one who really cares,"

"I think they both care, but it hurts too much." Rising from the bed, she moved closer to him and gave him a hug. "I love you, Brother."

His tense muscles relaxed a moment later and he hugged her back. "I love you too, Sis."

Chapter 9

It was freezing in the late afternoon. It was nearing five o'clock and the usual time at which Henry would. Putting his Bible down on the coffee table, he stretched his arms out. Seeing through the sliding glass door in his living room, he could see a layer of ice had formed across his blue-painted railing. He stood and walked over to the sliding glass door. Peering outside, he saw his lawn chairs on the porch iced over, along with his barbecue and the small outdoor glass table. The coldness had brought on a freeze over everything in Spove.

He turned his attention toward his kitchen and went around the connected spot and over to the freezer. Opening the freezer, he pulled out a frozen dinner. Looking at the back of the package, he read the directions and followed them for the microwave. As his meal turned on the table inside the microwave, he thought about his encounter earlier with Noelle. For the first time in his life, he was starting to see other people's point of view, and see it clearly. The hurt in her eyes practically killed him when he witnessed it for essentially the first time. It was so real he could've reached out and touched it.

God Himself had peeled back a layer of Henry's heart and revealed it to him. It was as if a bright spotlight was shone down over his ugliness. A portion of it he had known about became visible. It wasn't too much to handle for Henry, but it was enough to force Henry to realize just how deprived he was without God at the center of his life. Sure, he had worshiped God, loved God, and was even faithful with his time and resources. But he was beginning to realize there was so much more to the depths of God that he hadn't even considered before last night and that moment with his dad. If his earthly father, who wasn't even connected by blood, could love Henry that much . . . how much more love did God have for him?

His phone buzzed on the kitchen counter. Shuffling his steps over, he glanced at the screen and saw it was his boss, Paul. Hesitation caused Henry to pause, but compassion compelled him to answer.

"Boss-man. What's up?"

Paul laughed. "Today, I'm an elder of First Baptist calling, not a boss."

Henry's heart sank. Memories of what had transpired on Wednesday bubbled to the surface of his mind. What had happened at the business meeting wasn't good, and Henry knew he had acted poorly. His eyes moistened recalling the fool he had made of himself.

"I've done a lot of thinking, and what happened the other night wasn't right. I'm sorry, Paul."

"Wow. Quite honestly, I'm surprised."

Nodding, Henry agreed. “So am I.”

“Mind if we talk it over?”

“Sure. Come on over.”

“Oh. You’re home now?”

“Yes.” His mind shifted to Olympia for a moment. “Things didn’t work out. Came home early.”

“Sorry to hear that. You okay?”

Considering the question honestly, he nodded. “I will be.”

“All right. I’m about to have dinner here in thirty minutes, but I’ll head over shortly after, if that works for you.”

Ding!

“That works for me. Hey, my dinner is ready.”

“Okay. See you in a while.”

Hanging up the call with Paul, Henry set his phone back down on the counter. Things would again be difficult as Paul came over and they spoke. But they were difficult with his father last night and it turned out to be a good thing for him. He now knew that confronting his problems head-on instead of running was not only the right thing to do, but also a way to mature more in the Lord, something he desired deeply. It didn’t matter anymore how uncomfortable the situations or conversations were for him, because from now on, moving forward, Henry was leaning on God for support. He knew in his heart that God’s will would be accomplished no matter what happened.

Taking his dinner out of the microwave, he dropped it on top of the stove and peeled back the film that covered the top. The heated food lifted an aroma up into his nose and caused his stomach to rumble with hunger. Though it was far from one of the delicious home-cooked meals his mother would whip up on a nightly basis when he was a child, it was still a meal, and for that, he would be thankful.

* *

Opening the door at eight o’clock, Henry let Paul into the apartment. Following him over and into the living room, they both sat down on the couch.

“I’m here on behalf of Terry and Pastor Jacob.”

Sparks of anger still lingered within Henry They were all positioned directly toward Terry. Moved with a desire to be open, he spoke candidly. “I want to be very honest with you, Paul. Honestly, I

just feel anger at hearing Terry's name. I know that's not right, but I don't know what to do about it."

Paul nodded. "It's good you're being open about it with me. That's truly the first step here. Second, start praying."

Henry recalled a Bible passage reference and spoke it. "Pray for those who do bad to you."

"Yes . . . but what would you say that Terry did to you?"

Henry blinked, unable to answer.

"Listen. Maybe you feel that you have been mistreated, but we are called to love them who mistreat us. It's in Luke, chapter six."

Reaching out to the coffee table, Henry lifted his Bible and turned to Luke, chapter six. Finger on the verses, he began to read.

Paul leaned toward Henry. "Go down to verse twenty-seven."

Henry read it out loud and clear.

Luke 6:27-30 : But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you,

Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.

And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not to take thy coat also.

Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again.

Sitting back into the couch cushions, Henry's heart welted under the power of the Holy Spirit as it convicted him with Scriptures. He knew in the depths of his soul, he'd needed to read that passage at the exact moment he had done so. He wouldn't have received it the same if it was any other time than right then. It felt to him as if it were designed for that specific moment in time for his life. And though he felt pressure bearing down on his shoulders, he could also sense the love of God right there too.

With tear stricken eyes, Henry turned toward Paul. He glanced down at his Bible still in his hands, then up at the man who had braved the icy roads to come speak with him.

"Terry isn't even a true enemy in my life. But even if he were one, it wouldn't matter. Jesus tells us, tells me, to love." As the word 'love' came off his lips, Henry had a profound moment and realization. Looking at Paul, he said, "I don't think I know what real love is." He thought immediately of his mother and father who had taken him in when he was abandoned by his biological mother. Then he thought about all the moments the two of them had been there for him

over the years and especially the exchange that had transpired last night with his father. Tears broke free and ran down Henry's cheeks. "Wait, I do . . . my parents."

Paul smiled. "That's right. And their love pales in comparison with how much God loves you, Henry. This world all around us has a lot of ideas of what love is. You turn on the TV and it's sex that equals love. You turn on sports and it's fame and the love of self. Politics, it's power and the love of it. Whatever it is, the world says the answer lies outside of God. The world points to anything that isn't God and says, 'This will make you happy and this is love.' God points at Jesus and says, 'This is love.' He points to the Cross and says, 'This is love.' The Cross is foolishness to those perishing. The world will never understand it, but to you and me, Brother, it's perfect love given to us by God. No matter how much I think I can love, it's nothing in comparison to God's grace and perfect love."

Nodding, Henry agreed with every point Paul was making. "Do you understand love then?"

Paul shook his head and smiled. "No. I'm still learning. I feel we are all still learning. I don't believe the depths of God's love for us are discoverable. Romans 11:33 tells us that His depths are unsearchable, and I believe that includes His love."

Uneasiness rose within Henry as he didn't see the pieces connecting fluidly to the situation at hand with Terry. "I don't understand what I should do about this bitterness in my heart toward Terry."

"Keep seeking, keep learning, and keep fighting for truth. Personally, I use Jesus for the template of how I should act, live, and treat others."

Henry let his mind process the situation with Terry with the truths Paul had spoken to him. What would Jesus do? Such a simple and cliché statement that had been overstated over the years, but it was truly a guiding principle that could move mountains and change lives if a person implemented it. A few moments of quiet passed, then Henry's gaze lifted to Paul.

"Honestly, I was thinking about leaving the church. I've realized that is not the solution. I'm going to start helping at the homeless camp."

Paul paused for a moment, then raised his eyebrows. "Yeah?"

Rising to his feet, Henry stuck out a hand to Paul. "I haven't ever been surer of anything in my life. I am going to start living for others the way Christ lived for others. I've made a plan, and God will guide my steps."

Paul smiled and took Henry's hand, letting Henry help him up to his feet. They embraced in a brotherly hug.

"You're going to be okay, Henry."

"I know. God's got me.."

* *

After spending so much time with Paul, Henry felt so determined to help the homeless people across from the church that he decided to take a drive over to the camp that night. He couldn't wait to get started. The road conditions on the way weren't the best, but he managed to drive slowly and make his way there safely. Exiting his car at the curb at Campside Park's boundary, he saw the same tents and burning barrels he saw each time he looked over from the church, yet this time, he felt compassion instead of disdain. He even helped a woman named Janette who was sitting by the side of the road, he gave her some cash and his phone number for reference.

Walking between the snow-covered trees and tents, he entered the camp's main area and approached people huddled around a barrel with contents burning inside it.

"Hi." His greeting came awkwardly to the people there that night. Most looked dirty and rough around the edges, but Henry pushed all his judgments to the side, not letting them reign in his heart. Breaking the silence, Henry put himself out there and asked, "What's everyone up to?"

"Something wrong with you, guy?" a short heavyset guy inquired right before taking a swig from a metal flask.

"No. I'm just here to help. Is there something I could to do to help? I'm from that church across the street." Turning his body toward his car in the distance and the church beyond that, he pointed that direction.

"First Baptist?" A familiar woman's eyes flashed a hopeful stare as she tightened the pieces of ragged fabric that covered her head. "Terry is a great man of God. He led me in the sinner's prayer just last week. I hope my little boy, wherever he is, grew up to be like that man Terry."

"Yeah. Wait, are you the one who was over at the church on Wednesday?"

"Yes. My name is Mary."

"That's right. Sorry I forgot your name."

"It's okay. My name means nothing to me as much as Jesus' name does."

Smiling, Henry's heart warmed. "I like that."

Henry was starting to see in that moment that even if Terry wasn't perfect, he was still doing good and seeking God's desire—to save people and bring people to God. Henry knew he hadn't ever led anyone in his life in a sinner's prayer, and his guilt within him only felt heavier knowing how much bad he had done towards Terry.

“It was nice knowing you, Mary.” Henry commented.

“You too, your name is?” Mary propped up a brow.

“Henry .” he smiled.“Henry Hart.”

“I won’t forget that name.” Mary said with a smile and she walked away.

Henry grinned and his gaze landed on a young boy sitting on the bare floor, dressed in a torn shirt and ripped jeans. He sighed and walked towards him.

“Hello there kiddo.” Henry waved his hand at the young boy.

“Hello.” Came the reply of the boy.

“What’s your name, kid?” Henry squatted in front of the boy.

“It’s Adam.”

“And where’s Eve?” Henry chuckled.

“I am sixteen, geez.” Adam chuckled softly.

“Can I buy you some clothes?” Henry suggested,“If you want it though and if you don’t mind.”

Henry watched as Adam’s face lit up in joy.

“You’re the first person…to ask me that.” Adam smiled.

“So would you love to follow me?” Henry stood up.

“Sure.” Adam said and he rose up on his feet as well.

****””

At Kingsway store, Henry was picking shirts and jeans from the rack while Adam stared around like a tourist.

“Isn’t all that a little bit too much, sir?” Adam asked, pointing at the tons of shirt and jeans on Henry’s left hand.

“It’s not kid, Tell me about yourself.” Henry replied.

“There’s really nothing to know about me. My parents died in an accident when I was eight and I’ve been moving from one foster home to another. I guess God hates me and I also hate him.” Adam responded.

“No kiddo, God loves you. He really does.” Henry said.

“If God did love me, why did he let my parents die?” Adam asked.

“His ways aren’t our ways, Adam. You’ve to know that.” Henry said.

“I know.”

“God loves you and he’s going to do wonders in your life. You’re alive for a reason. Do you have a Bible?” Henry asked.

“Yes, I do but I haven’t touched it in years.” Adam chuckled.

“Then now is the right time for you to open it. Try reading the book of Psalm and let it minister to you.” Henry advised.

“Thank you. I’ll try to do that.” Adam smiled.

“So go change into these.” Henry handed a pair of jeans and a shirt to Adam.

“Thank you.”

And Adam walked into the changing room. Henry suddenly had the most relaxing feeling ever. It was like walking on cloud nine or eating your favorite meal. Henry leaned against the wall and smiled to himself. His thoughts were halted when Adam stepped out of the changing room, looking a lot more different and cleaner.

“I love it.” Adam squealed.

“You look sharp, Adam.” Henry smiled.

“I know right, thank you so much, Pastor.” Adam thanked him.

“I’m not a Pastor, kid. Definitely not a Pastor.” Henry laughed.

“Really, you looked like one. Nobody has ever done this for me before. You’re the first and it means a lot. I thought nobody cared for me but you, a stranger came along and you wanted to buy me clothes and you told me about God loving me. It’s so overwhelming.” Adam explained.

“Jesus cares for you, that’s why he died for my and your sins.” Henry said.

“Do you think God will forgive me for hating him?” Adam asked.

“Of course, if you go to him in prayer. He will, kid.” Henry replied.

Tears welled up in Adam’s eyes, “Then I’m ready. I want to be a Christian again.”

“That’s so nice to hear, Adam.” Henry commented and went to pay for the clothes.

“So why don’t we get back to the camp?” Henry asked, his gaze fixed on his car.

“Yes, of course and will you tell me more about God and Jesus? It’s been so long since I touched a Bible or even believed in God’s word.”Adam said.

“Of course, and by the way, My name is Henry Hart.” Henry beamed.

“I think I prefer Pastor Henry.” Adam beamed.

Henry chuckled and took Adam’s hand in his. He felt so happy that he helped someone, it wasn’t about spending money on the homeless only or trying to help them out of financial difficulties. It was also about preaching to them about Jesus Christ and bringing them closer to God.

Chapter 10

Her hair was done and perfect but Noelle still couldn't shake the nerves she had been feeling in the hours leading up to her friendship with Kelvin. Maybe it had to do with the fact that she hadn't been on a date all her adult life. Even the few times she had gone on dates in high school, they were always casual and just to a movie or dinner. She hadn't worn a dress to any of them. Outside of church, she had only worn a dress to prom and a few other times to various extended family's weddings and funerals.

Looking into the half-length mirror in her bedroom, her eyes traced over the deep red dress she was wearing. In addition to her dress, she had decided to wear her gold heart pendant necklace. Turning her head, she checked the back of her hair to make sure each strand was curled to her satisfaction. She had already done it several times in the moments prior, but another glance couldn't hurt. Could it?

Finally leaving the mirror, she walked over to her bedside dresser and picked up her cell phone. Though she was going out with Kelvin, she couldn't help but think of Henry while she was getting ready. He had been on her mind a lot since their conversation that morning. The new life she sensed in his eyes and felt in his words wasn't something she had ever seen before. He was on a new journey now, one without her, and he seemed better without her.

She set the phone back on the dresser, trying to focus on her life the way it was headed now and would be in the future.

Acknowledging her rising anxiety over the evening ahead, she lifted a prayer up to the heavens and then grabbed her purse from the bed.

Arriving at the Davenportia Hotel, she was sixteen minutes early so she waited in the lobby for Kelvin to arrive. Clutching her little black purse in her hands on her lap, she sat patiently and did her best to admire the beauty of the design all around her. Her gaze shifted over to a pond nearby in the lobby. There was a bouquet of fresh flowers atop the fountain's centrepiece.

"Noelle?"

Someone interupted her train of thought.

She turned her head around, it was Kelvin.

He was clean-shaven and in a tuxedo for the evening's event, which only spurred her curiosity more on what the event was all about. As they walked together through the lobby of the hotel. She asked, "So, what's tonight about?"

“Oh, you know. Some of this and some of that. I’m part of Doctor’s Association. Have you heard of it?”

Raising an eyebrow, she looked over at him. “ Very Impressive, and yes, I have.”

He shrugged it off. “It’s just that type of thing. Thanks for coming. I was a little worried you wouldn’t show.”

Noelle raised an eyebrow. “I don’t break promises.”

“Okay, Elsa.” He laughed.

She laughed too, but it brought an important question to the forefront of her mind. “You got kids?”

He shook his head. “No, but I do have some nieces and nephews who watched that movie a million times. They are completely brainwashed by the songs in that movie. Here we are. Let’s get in there.”

Entering through double doors into the event center, Noelle was doubly impressed to see the entire event was all about honoring Kelvin. He had been so humble by not mentioning how big of a deal tonight truly was to him. She couldn’t help but find herself more attractive to him in that moment.

* *

After the award and all the long speeches, Noelle found herself in need of the restroom and she excused herself from the table to use it. As she walked out of the restroom, she was pleasantly surprised to see Kelvin standing there. His back was leaned against the wall. Her gaze fixed on him.

“What’s wrong?”

He shrugged and shoved his hands back into his pockets. Shooting a quick glance over his shoulder toward the still-packed room, he tilted his head. “ Do you want to get out of here? It’s a little stuffy in there.”

“Sure. You need a breath of fresh air or something?”

He shook his head. “I want to leave.”

“But this function is about you.”

“I know. I don’t like it. I have tons of people I rely on to do what I do. I don’t like all the attention or focus. So . . . what do you say?”

Considering it, she tapped her chin. Seeing behind him an exit door that wasn’t a fire exit alarm, she pointed to it. “Let’s slip out and go, if that’s what you want to do.”

"Yes!" His tone sounded relieved. Grabbing her by the hand, he turned, and they ran out the door and into an alleyway.

Laughing, they fell into step together as they walked down the alley.

"It is cool , I mean all the work you do for people, Kelvin. You have to take some of that credit."

"I can't." Pausing, he turned toward her and lifted his hands and looked at his palms. Peering up at her, he shook his head. "These hands were gifts from God. It's all for His glory, not mine."

Her heart warmed with words praising the Lord. She had been made aware of his faith already once earlier in the night, when during his speech, he outlined his faith in God and how he relied on Him through medical school and even daily at St. Paul's Hospital. He was an amazing man and she was smitten by each new thing she learned.

They continued out of the alley and started walking down the sidewalk. It started to snow. Glancing over at her, Kelvin smiled.

"You know all about me now. So, what's your story? Who are you, Miss Noelle Ojo?"

"It's O-J-O, you missed the pronunciation. I am Nigerian actually." Noelle smiled.

"Cool." Kelvin replied.

Blushing, she shrugged. "I'm a simple girl who wants simple things."

"Yeah? Simple is good. You work or . . . stay at home with your kids?"

She smiled. "No kids either. I'm actually starting a new job this Monday. At The Spokesman Review."

"Wow. Newspaper. Reporter or columnist?"

"Reporter for now."

"That's awesome, Noelle."

Hearing him say her name flashed Henry's face across her mind. She missed him but let the thought of him drift and settle away from her thoughts. She couldn't let him cloud her evening. Things were going well with Kelvin. Smiling, she nodded in agreement. "I'm excited to start the job. Where did you park?"

"A little further. You going to leave your car here?"

"I don't know. What do you want to do from here?"

"Um . . . do you like coffee?"

"No, I don't."

"Oh." Kelvin's shoulders slumped.

"I'm kidding! I love it. Milo's is open late, if you want to grab a cup there. It's just a few blocks over from here."

"Perfect. I'll drive?"

"Sounds great." Noelle walked with him the rest of the way to his car and got in. They drove the short distance it took to get to the coffee shop.

Taking her coat off in the shop, Noelle placed it on the back of the chair. They both sat down. Kelvin took a long drink of his coffee and then rubbed the edge of his thumb against the tip of the cup.

"So. When was your last boyfriend?"

Her heart hammered in her chest as Henry's face resurfaced to her thoughts. "I haven't really had one, but to be honest, I was in love with one guy for a long time. We were friends for years."

"He couldn't commit?"

Frowning, her gaze dropped to her coffee cup as she nodded solemnly. "Exactly."

"Cheer up, girl. He was a fool and he didn't deserve you."

Furrowing her eyebrows, she lifted her eyes to Kelvin's as anger kindled within her.

"Don't call him that. You don't know him, Kelvin."

He lifted his hands and retracted his body. "Wow. I didn't realize it was still fresh."

A blush reddened her cheeks and she raised an eyebrow. "Is it that easy to tell?"

"A little bit. A few separate times tonight, I've noticed you going elsewhere for a moment. You throw in the defensiveness about me calling him a fool . . ." He shrugged and took a gulp of his coffee. "It's easy to see."

Pressing a hand against her forehead, she sighed. "I'm so sorry, Kelvin. I didn't mean to—"

"You don't need to apologize. We're just getting to know each other right now. There's no pressure here."

A smile curled on her lips as she heard him say those words. It was a relief to know that she wouldn't be forced into an awkward attempt at a goodnight kiss or anything of that nature. His

understanding attitude only pushed Noelle into wanting to develop feelings for him. She knew in her heart that she needed to slow down with how she felt about Kelvin.

“Thanks for being understanding.” She raised her eyebrows. “What about you? When was the last time you had a girlfriend?”

“I’m actually divorced. Still fresh also . . . last year.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay. Sometimes, things just don’t work out, and I have to believe that God is in control in every situation.”

Silent, Noelle fought against the urge to ask what caused the divorce by sipping on her coffee.

“You want to know what happened. Don’t you?”

“Yes!” she quickly said but then drew back her excitement. “I’m just curious, but I understand if you don’t want to share.”

“I’ll spare you the grim details.” Kelvin appeared to go somewhere in his thoughts, then said, “Let’s just say she was the one who ended things.”

Quiet filled the space between them for a moment, Noelle smiled.

“What’s wrong, why are you smiling?” Kelvin chuckled.

“You are a doctor, you’re humble, you help strangers out of ditches, and you love kids. I mean . . . you seem perfect. A little too perfect.”

Kelvin laughed and gulped down a drink of coffee before he answered. Scooting closer to the table, he rested both arms on the table and opened his palms as he leaned in. “Honestly, you see what I want you to see. Everybody on this planet only shows what they desire to show. Only God knows the real me, and yet, He still loves me. Sure, you might see a bunch of nice things I do on the outside, but you can’t see my heart. My heart is a sinful and selfish heart. Any good I do is from God. A gift from God, truly. I struggle with one of the sins God hates the most, according to the Bible—pride.”

“You don’t seem prideful at all though.”

He shrugged and sat back in his chair. “I’m actively working against it. When I see a doctor make a bad decision, I get so angry. It ticks me off! And that’s super judgmental and acting out in my pride.”

“But that’s because you only want the best. Right?”

He shook his head. “It’s because I think I know what’s best. That’s pride. We all walk around with the flesh and that’s what we have to do battle with constantly.”

Raising an eyebrow, Noelle nodded. “You really have an acute awareness of yourself, don’t you?”

“I like to think I do, but the Lord reveals layer by layer just how flawed and blind I really am.”

They talked for the next half hour and then headed back to Davenportia. Parking behind her car, he let the car idle.

“It was nice getting to know you, Noelle. I’d love to do this again soon.”

“Me too. Thank you for the evening. All of it.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Good night.”

She jetted down from the car and walked down to the sidewalk. There was a cold breeze that mixed with the snow, and it sent a chill down the length of her spine. She got into her car and started it. As she let the car warm up, she noticed he was still parked behind her. Smiling, she pulled her phone out and texted him.

Noelle: What are you doing?

Kelvin: I’m waiting for a friend to come out. He needs a ride home.

Smiling at the mention of the pronoun ‘he’, she felt cared for by the small gesture he made on purpose. Glancing up through the snow-covered windshield, she hit the wipers.

Scratch.

Ear-piercing scratching caused her to immediately turn them off. Getting out of the car, she went to the trunk and retrieved the long-handled snow scraper and brush. Removing the snow left on the windshield revealed a broken wiper. Her mind was void on a solution.

“Having issues?” Kelvin’s welcoming voice sounded from beside her car.

Turning to him, she lifted the broken piece of the wiper. “Yep.”

Raising an eyebrow, he came the rest of the way over and took it into his hands. Glancing down the block, he said, “Walmart is a few blocks away. We can go get a new one.”

“What about your friend?”

“He’ll be fine for a little bit. I sent him a text when I originally saw you having issues. Shut off your car and I’ll take you over there really quickly.”

Warmed by his kindness, she quickly got into the driver side of her car and turned the car off. Returning to his car with him, she climbed in and buckled her seatbelt. As he drove, a gentle laugh emerged through the quiet in the car from Kelvin.

“What’s so funny?”

A grin from ear to ear emerged from his lips as he glanced over at her for a second.

“ This is the second time I’m solving your car problems.”

She laughed. “Very true.”

* *

After matching the broken windshield wiper to a new one, the two of them walked to the front of Walmart to pay for the wiper. As they waited in line, they fell into light conversation about the current happenings in China with the boom in Christianity when a familiar face fell into line behind them. Peering over, Noelle’s gaze fell onto Henry

A look of horror lit in Henry’s eyes and Noelle’s heart sank.

“Henry.”

Kelvin turned around. After a brief but awkward moment of silence, Kelvin stuck out a hand. “I take it you two know each other? I’m Kelvin, a friend of Noelle’s. You are . . . ?”

Henry shook his hand but didn’t reply.

Noelle chimed in. “This is Henry.”

Noelle’s heart hammered in her chest as she watched the two men shake hands. Being able to read Henry, she knew he was devastated not only to find her with a man but dressed up in the night as well. Henry looked as if he knew Kelvin.

“That will be $11.42.” The cashier’s voice sounded, breaking into her thoughts. She turned and paid with her debit card. As Kelvin and Noelle stood back a few feet from the register and watched Henry pay for a pair of shoes, Kelvin leaned into her ear.

Quiet, soft, and not judgmental, he inquired, “This must be the one you love?”

Blinking slowly, she could feel a blush crawl up her neck and into her cheeks. “How could you tell?”

He motioned with a nod toward Henry “Love is easy to see on a person. It’s written with the eyes and felt with the way they are around each other.”

Swallowing the comment and the reality, she took a step further away from the register. “I’m so sorry. This must be the worst evening for you.”

Kelvin laughed lightly and shook his head. “No, not at all. I love to learn about people and meet them too. I’d rather have this kind of knowledge now than down the line.”

As Henry finished paying, Kelvin let her know he would be outside in the car waiting and would give them a few minutes to talk.

“Here. Thank you. “ Henry handed the cashier a tip

Noelle jerked her sight back to Henry.

“What is going on? Who are the pair of shoes for because I know it’s definitely not your size”

He smiled and nodded. “I’m trying to walk in line with Christ. He puts others before Himself, so I’m doing it by helping someone in the homeless camp.”

“Those people in the homeless camp are criminals, addicts, and deranged. You can’t just take them in under your wing and hope nothing bad happens to you in the process! Don’t test God!”

“Whoa, Noelle” He raised a hand. “Thank you for the concern, but I can handle myself. I bought it for a kid named Adam, he’s a nice boy, he’s even willing to give his life back to God. “

Noelle’s shoulders slumped. Henry was becoming the man she knew he always could be, but without her. Suddenly, she felt responsible for having held him back for all these years. After all, it wasn’t until she made an exit in his life that all this great and wonderful change had come on. Henry must’ve noticed her shift in demeanor because the very next moment, he placed his hand on her back.

Chapter 11

“You look very beautiful and he is a lucky man to be able to take you out. I hope he’s treating you the way you deserve.” Those words were mountains in Henry’s heart, and it was only through the strength of God that he was able to not only utter them but to mean them truthfully. Seeing her like this reminded him of just how much he had messed up when it came to Noelle.

“Thank you.” Her cheeks flushed a shade of red. “But I want you to know that he and I are only friends. Honestly.”

“That’s none of my business, Noelle.”

She glanced down and away, appearing hurt by his words.

“I’m sorry.” He touched his forehead as his insides trembled at the thought of her being with someone else. “I want to be with you, Noelle, I really do. This is so hard for you…to understand.”

“Then let’s try it out, Henry! I don’t understand what the problem is here.” She peered into his eyes with a piercing gaze that went straight to his heart. He wanted more than anything to be with her, but he felt as if he couldn’t ever love her the way she deserved. He felt unworthy. In Henry’s mind, his selfishness had already stolen enough from her.

His chin dipped. “I’m scared I would not be able to love you the right way.”

“Why? That doesn’t make any sense to me! Tell me why, Henry!”

“Because I already have loved you the wrong way. You deserve to have someone who never treats you the way I have already done. I’m not right for you, Noelle. In fact, I’m bad for you, and that’s all.”

She frowned as tears broke free from her eyes and fell down her cheeks. He was hurting her all over again in that very moment. The realization of it only drove the pain deeper within his chest.

Her gaze shifted toward the exit of the store. She wiped her tears.

Henry sensed that she wanted to leave.

“You should go to Kelvin. He’s waiting.”

“And you should go home.”

He nodded. His heart began to pound at the anticipation of what was happening yet again. The space between them was coming again and this time it was wider, and he knew he wouldn’t see her for some time from this moment forward. It worried him. He wanted the moment to keep going

but knew it'd only bring more pain. Looking at her, He hoped earnestly that she would find joy, peace, and most of all, love in her life. Thinking of her new job, he raised his eyebrows as he had conjured a way to make the moment last just a little bit longer.

"Good luck on your new job in a couple of days."

A quick smile escaped from her lips and she nodded. "Thank you."

His gaze fell on her soft pink lips and a desire to kiss her engulfed him. He had to end his time with her now. "Have a good night, Noelle."

"You too, Henry."

Exiting Walmart, Henry's heart stirred. He was in utter pain but in love too. He was confused but confident of his decision. He felt a gaping pot hole where Noelle used to be in his heart. He prayed to God for divine strength.

He entered his car and his phone buzzed. It was Janette, the woman he helped from the roadside. This was the fifth time she had called about Jesus. He needed a distraction so he slid the accept button and he talked to Janette for two hours straight before driving home.

* *

The next morning, Henry spent a great deal of time in prayer and Bible reading. The more he discussed with God, the easier the burden of last night was to tolerate. God rejuvenated his broken spirit with his word.

Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders

Let me walk upon the waters

Wherever You would call me

Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander

And my faith will be made stronger

In the presence of my Savior

I will call upon Your name

Keep my eyes above the waves

My soul will rest in Your embrace

I am Yours and You are mine

Henry sang Oceans: where feets may fail and he wept, asking God for his intervention in his life.

At Church, later that morning, Henry was pleased when he was welcomed with open arms by the same people he had stormed out on the previous Wednesday. None of his fellow congregates appeared to hold it against him. Even Terry approached him and made mention that he was happy to see him. The root of bitterness and shame still had a few spots of residue in Henry's heart, but he sensed it shrinking and transforming into something insignificant. He did see Noelle there that morning too, but he exchanged so little with her outside of a few painful glances.

On his way out of church after services that afternoon, he saw Terry loading the back of a truck with supplies. It had warmed up outside to thirty-eight degrees that early afternoon, and Terry appeared to be overwhelmed with the workload, judging by the sweat on his brow. A thought nudged at his heart.

Go help him.

Knowing full-well that it wasn't a naturally occurring thought, Henry obeyed the command and went straight over to help him.

"You need help?" Henry's question came as Terry hopped down from the truck.

Terry pulled off his cap with his forearm and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Terry's apprehension was evident, and Henry didn't blame him for being too touchy.

"What's your game here, Henry?"

"No game, Terry. I just want to help."

"Okay. This is for the camp across the street. You do know that?"

"I figured it was, and yes, I still want to help."

Terry's eyebrows shot up, and he nodded as he turned his head toward the building. "Okay sure, you can help. Grab some crates of food from the kitchen."

"Sounds good." Henry headed into the open side door of the church nearby and entered the kitchen. Setting his Bible down on the counter, he grabbed crates and headed out to load the truck. As he climbed into the back of the truck and was stacking the crates, he glanced over toward people walking out to their cars. He sighted Noelle and his heart dipped into his stomach.

She turned and caught his gaze. His heart fluttered as she smiled at him, then she quickly dipped her head and continued walking to her car. As the truck rocked from Terry climbing into it, Henry turned around in the bed of the truck.

"Thanks for being here."

"You're welcome."

Continuing to the end of the bed, Henry hopped down and went back to the kitchen to grab more food crates. After loading the truck, the two of them drove over to the park and started to unload the food crates and supplies. After they had unloaded, Henry watched as Terry took a bottle of water over to a little girl in the camp who was lying down in an open-faced tent. The small child sat up, and Terry helped her take a drink. That right there, he thought. That's the hands and feet of Christ. As he was moved with compassion by seeing the love of God in Terry's actions, he was weighed down at the same time with conviction and guilt. Then Henry thought back to his conversation with his father about Terry last week. His father was right. This truly was a heart issue for him. He sensed at that moment a shifting, a transformation taking place. The power of God was cleansing his heart and showing him a glimpse of God's truth, God's heart, God's love.

Leaving the homeless camp a while later, Henry drove directly to his parents' house.

Entering through the front door, he heard their dog, Joe, barking as she hurried down the hall and right for him.

Smiling, Henry lowered himself down and embraced his childhood friend warmly in a hug.

"Heya, boy. It's been a while."

"You can say that again." His father, Jasper, smiled as he entered the living room. Raising an eyebrow, he looked Henry over as he stood upright. "Your mother ran to the store. We were out of food. She'll be home in a few minutes."

"No problem. How was church?"

The two of them sat down in the living room. His father on his favorite brown recliner and Henry on the blue-striped couch from the nineties.

"It was good. Message was on seeds and sowing. You?"

"Good. He spoke about the woman at the well. Hey. You were right about something, Dad."

"I know."

Henry let out a laugh. "What? How do you know?"

His dad laughed and shook his head. "I'm just joking. What happened?"

Henry folded his hands as he positioned himself on the edge of the couch and recalled earlier at Campside. "I've been doing a lot of thinking and praying lately. Ever since we talked the other night at my house."

"Go on."

"I was helping Terry at the homeless camp earlier this afternoon, and I saw him giving water to a little girl. I know it seems little, but it was like God opened my eyes right at that very moment, Dad. I was moved deeply and touched by what I saw, and it was all through Terry. I was seeing God's love through this man." Swallowing hard as tears welled in his eyes, Henry paused and dipped his head. "This man of God whom I loathed was showing God's love to a little girl."

Jasper nodded gently and his words came softly. "That's the Lord Jesus working on your heart, Son."

Nodding, Henry agreed, and a smile grew on his lips as he thought of God's love reaching out and touching his own life with his own two eyes.

"I thought about what you said last week about the heart, Dad. My issues with Terry and it took today for me to truly see that."

"Yep. A lot of issues in life, especially when it comes to relationships and other people, stem from a heart issue. But Son, you're not alone. We all have a heart issue, and Jesus is the answer. Tell me more about the park."

Relaxing into his parents' couch, Henry smoothed his hands over his face and stared up at the ceiling for a moment. All the conviction he felt in the camp earlier that day weighed heavily on his heart and mind in that moment. "One second, I was feeling this good and perfect but intense love coming over me at the camp. Then suddenly, I was feeling convicted. It's the strangest feeling in the world."

"Son. Don't you get it? That's the Lord's correction. He's shaping you and showing you His truth, His love, and His power right in front of your eyes! The book of Hebrews 12:11 says, No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. You're being trained, Son."

"Great." Laughing lightly, Henry looked at his dad. "Your brain is like a reference Bible. Did you know that?"

He laughed. "I don't know about that."

The front door opened, and Henry's mother, Priscilla, walked in with two bags of groceries. Hurrying from his place on the couch and over to his mom, Henry smiled at her as he took the groceries from her arms.

"Hi, Mom."

Leaning in, she peppered his cheeks with kisses. "Hello, Son. I'm so happy you came over. I was just about to make your favorite. Turkey wraps!"

"Yummy!"

Following her into the kitchen, Henry set the groceries down on the counter and helped put some other stuffs away. As he did, he was reminded of how much his mother loved him. She didn't show any hints of condemnation toward him for the lack of visits or phone calls lately. She just seemed genuinely happy to see his face at home again. Her love for him was much like his father's love, but with less instruction and more nurturing. Every time Henry made it over to his parents' house, he chided himself for the lack of time he spent with his mother. He loved being around her but often found it difficult to find the time.

Henry could hear his dad in the living room answer a phone call, but he stayed focused on his mother in the kitchen. She was laying the fresh turkey breast down on the tortilla shells that were layered with mayonnaise.

"How have you been doing, Mom?"

"I'm okay, dear."

"No, really. How are you?"

Pausing, she stopped what she was doing and peered up at Henry. Looking into his eyes, she smiled warmly. Her salt blonde hair was a constant reminder of how fragile she was and how life was fleeting. "Well. Let's see, Henry. I woke up today, my family is healthy, and I am feeling healthy and energetic. So, honestly, everything is pretty great!"

"Good, Mom." He paused for a moment, watching her and admiring her. "Hey. Did Dad tell you about my search?"

She shrugged and grabbed the knife off the counter. Turning, she opened the fridge to put it away and Henry circled the counter to get closer to her. She turned toward him with glossy, tearstricken eyes.

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Mom."

"I know." Her words were strained, and it was easy to see her conflicted feelings about the situation with the search. "I just don't want you, my son, to get hurt. But I get it, and I support you no matter what. I love you, Henry."

"I know, Mom. But I want you to know I'm done looking, and I mean it this time. If God's will includes my meeting her, I will. I must stop focusing on myself and what I think I need or want. This is the only way I can ever truly live my life for Christ."

Jasper walked into the kitchen. "Hey, that was Rachel. She's coming over."

"Wow." Henry raised an eyebrow as he turned toward his dad. "Family reunion?" Smiling, Henry turned to his mom. "You're always begging for family time, and now you'll get it!"

She laughed and nodded. "I must've had some premonition on Friday when I planned for tonight's meal of chicken rice casserole."

"Yes! No TV dinner for me tonight." Henry danced in a small circle in the kitchen. He and Rachel both loved their mother's chicken rice casserole, and he had been living off microwaveable food for far too long.

Laughing, his mother touched his arm gently. "Grab a seat at the table. I'm about finished with your turkey wrap."

Jasper joined him at the table. Continuing their conversation from earlier, Jasper and Henry discussed what they both had been learning in their walks with the Lord. Henry went on to explain how he was beginning to find himself feeling more and more comfortable with this new direction in life where God and others were in front of himself. He had previously thought he understood everything there was to know about God, but he was learning lately that he was dead wrong. He was starting to understand that he would never be able to fully grasp all there was to know about God.

* *

After dinner that evening, Henry helped Rachel with the dishes at the sink. She washed the dishes in the left portion of the sink while he rinsed in the right side and placed them in the dish rack. After their parents went into the other room, Henry placed a cup into the cup rack and then turned to his sister.

"Hey. About the other day . . ."

She didn't stop washing but merely shook her head. "No, it's okay. We don't have to talk about it."

"No, listen." Touching her arm, he caused her to stop. She wiped her hands on the towel that was draped over her shoulder and turned fully toward Henry. "Rachel, you were right. I've done nothing but run from my problems, and I just want you to know that I'm facing them head-on. You were right."

Her eyes studied his eyes and then she raised her eyebrows. "Really?"

Henry nodded. "I've fully stopped the search for my biological mom, and it's not because I felt guilty over Mom and Dad but because I realized something. I was worshiping the idea of meeting her, and it was taking priority in my life over God."

"Wow." Rachel raised her eyebrows. Then after a moment of pause, she looked again into her brother eyes. "And what of Noelle?"

His heart ached at the mention her name. "I've dealt with that too. I've realized I used our friendship for years for my own selfish desires. I was getting what I wanted without giving her what she needed. She deserves someone better than me."

"Hmm." Rachel turned back to the sink and started washing more dishes. Henry turned toward the sink and started rinsing.

"Is there something wrong with what I said?" Henry inquired, glancing over at his sister.

She shrugged. "No, you were correct in everything you said. Especially that part about your being selfish."

"Ouch!" He let out a playful laugh. "That stings. But you don't seem satisfied."

"I just suspect that you've only pushed her away more through this 'selfless' act of yours. I'm not saying it's not genuine. I'm just saying you still didn't commit."

Anger mixed with confusion inside Henry's heart at hearing her words. He stopped rinsing and turned to Rachel.

"What? How could I commit to a woman I have wronged? That wouldn't make any sense."

"Sure, if she doesn't want to be with you, it doesn't make sense. Is that what she told you?"

His heart and words staggered. "Uh . . ."

"Exactly."

Henry's shoulders slumped. "I'm just focusing more on God, and that's what I need to do right now."

"You can do that and still be with the one you love, Brother."

"But I don't deserve her."

"Nor do we deserve God and His love."

"Okay . . . you got me there." Henry let his sister's words run through his heart. As he continued washing dishes, he thought about being with Noelle in a romantic relationship. Scenarios flashed through his mind, good, bad and the downright ugly that can and do go on in a relationship between two flawed people. His heart began to beat quickly as he imagined becoming closer to her, exposing himself fully to her. He had already felt a loss in his life by just losing the friendship

between him and Noelle. He couldn't begin to imagine if it didn't work out in a relationship with her.

"The problem, Sis, is I've already broken her heart once. What if I do it again? What if we fight a lot? What if she leaves me once she finds out who the real me is?"

As the last question came off his lips, his eyes welled instantly with tears. He hadn't realized his deepest fear until that very moment.

Rachel stopped washing and turned to her brother wide-eyed. "Brother . . ."

Somberness filled Henry's heart and face. His breath was shallow and short. "It's a possibility, Rachel." Pausing, he shook his head. "I'm not ready for that kind of risk."

Rachel tilted her head as she gazed at her brother. "Love between two people requires risk because we all sin and fall short of God's perfect love. If we're never willing to take a risk, we'll never understand the truest and deepest form of love between two people. Besides, she's been your best friend forever. She probably knows you better than you think."

Seeking to loosen the tension and thickness hanging in the air, Henry smiled.

"What?"

"My sister . . . the love doctor!" Henry laughed, then Rachel did also. After a moment passed, he nodded. "I understand what you're saying, though, and I'll keep it in mind."

After they finished washing the dishes, they went into the living room to find their parents pulling out an old family board game they used to all love playing in their later years of childhood—Ludo. Seeing the square game box that was falling apart from all the years of use stirred within Henry a warmth he had only felt hints of when recalling memories of his youth. He willfully sat down and joined in on the impromptu family game night.

Chapter 12

A month into her new job and Noelle was already filled with a sense that writing was her calling in life. Focusing on work had been a great distraction from the silence that had come between her and Henry. Her brother, Max was still in that halfway house on Meppin, and she had made it a point to visit him twice a week on her days off. Today was her second weekly visit to see him and she held hope in her heart about the job interview he had with a filling station two days ago.

Arriving inside the house, she was greeted by nobody and she was utterly disappointed. Walking out of the halfway house, she peered down each direction of the road and thought, Where did you run to, Brother? Her heart broke knowing he had progressed so far only to most likely have relapsed again.

Once in her car, she turned the key over and let the heater warm the inside of the car. Pulling out her cell phone, she scrolled the names and almost dialed Henry by accident so she scrolled and dialed Mandy instead.

Hearing baby West crying in the background and sensing the stress in Mandy's voice, Noelle knew what she needed to do. Pulling out from the curb in front of the halfway house, she drove toward her mother's house.

"I will go talk to Mom."

"You don't have to, Noelle. I will call her."

"No. It's okay, I promise. I know she has all the phone numbers of a lot of his so-called friends."

"Want me to go with you, at least?"

West let out another wail.

"No, that's okay. You focus on West, Sis. I will handle Mom."

Hanging up with her sister, Noelle made the drive to her mother's house. She hadn't seen her mother in a couple of months, but the time in not seeing her wasn't due to any complications or feuds in their relationship. They had just never been very close since they relocated to the United States and also since her father passed away. After he passed, she grew distant and so did her mother.

Shutting off the car in her mother's driveway, Noelle's heartbeats ticked up a notch in tempo. Peering through her car's windshield, she could see the wind chimes she had purchased for her for Mother's Day last year. The chilly breeze that February morning blew through the chimes, causing

a light melody to sound. Bowing her head, Noelle prayed to the Lord for the strength to speak to her mother.

She got out of the car and walked the driveway and path up to the door. Giving the front door a few knocks, she took a step back and waited.

The door opened.

Peering into her mother's aging brown eyes, she saw her mom but felt only distance.

"Hello, Abeke ."

Her mother always called her by her Yoruba name which was sometimes endearing and annoying at the same time.

"Hi, Mom."

"Come on inside. Is this about your brother?"

Straight to the point, Noelle thought painfully as she crossed the threshold into her mother's house. Noelle shut the door behind her and hung up her coat on the coat rack. Turning to her mother on the landing, she nodded.

"Max left last night."

Her mother mumbled a curse and headed straight through the living room and into the kitchen. Noelle cautiously followed, but not too closely. Her mother didn't like it when she hovered. She still has that Nigerian mentality after spending close to twenty five years in the United States. Her mom began to thumb through an address book she kept near the home telephone on the counter.

"He's probably with that unsavory girl, Heather again." Her voice carried a sharp vile tone. She stopped turning the pages and pressed a finger against a page as she picked up the home phone. Dialing the number, her lips pursed as she peered up at the cupboards that hung above the counter.

"Heather? Is Max there?"

She was quiet, but Noelle watched her mother's expression. Furrowed eyebrows shifted up in surprise on her mother's face then back down to furrowed.

"Mmmhmm. Well, if he comes by again, tell him to call his mother."

Click!

Slamming the phone back on the receiver, her mother shook her head and placed her little black phone book back into its spot behind the phone. Without sparing a glance at Noelle, Sarah

maneuvered around the counter and to the kitchen sink to run water. She filled the coffee pot with water. Her movements were quick, loud, and full of agitation mixed with anger.

Her mother was upset, and all Noelle could do was steal glances at the front door she had entered just moments ago. She was about to leave when she heard a quiet voice rise within her. Stay. Unsure if it was herself or God, she decided to obey the quiet suggestion and proceeded into the kitchen and near her mother.

“Mom?”

“I just can’t stand that boy! He is such an idiot!” After she poured the water into the chamber in the back of the pot, she shoved the pot onto the heating plate and flipped the switch on.

“Ode!” her mother muttered in Yoruba.

Noelle took a step closer to her. “Mom?”

“I raise him for eighteen years and then he runs away to go do drugs and sleep around. An invalid and a poor excuse for a son! That’s what he is. Maybe I shouldn’t have give birth to him!”

Noelle took another step closer, her voice quieter than before. “Mom?”

“What is it, Noelle? Kini?” She fired off as she turned toward her daughter. Her eyes finally met Noelle’s at that very moment. Anger lit in her mother’s eyes, a fury unmatched to what Noelle had witnessed in years.

Noelle’s eyes welled with tears as her throat clenched shut.

Sarah”s expression softened. She came closer to her daughter and wrapped her arms around her. Then her mother caressed her hair gently. “Mabinu omo mi. I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

“Max is going to be okay, Mom.”

“Honey, you don’t know that.”

“I prayed, and my prayers are heard by God.”

Sarah nodded. “I need to have more faith like you, daughter of mine. I need a lot more praying in my life. You’d think with a son like Max, I would have an amazing prayer life, but honestly, all I can seem to do is worry, worry, worry. When will it ever end?”

“I’m sorry he puts you through this over and over again.”

Releasing from their embrace, her mother seemed to be calmer and even a smidge loving. “I’m glad you’re here. I have something for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes. I have something that belongs to your father. “

Noelle’s heart raced. Her mother hadn’t spoken much about her father since she died Following her mom to her room, she began to wonder what it was that her mother had for her.

Opening the door, she let Noelle go in first. Her mother’s room was clean and pristine. It smelt of perfume mixed with disinfectant. She watched as her mother picked up a box at the corner of her room. Raising her eyebrows, Noelle turned to her mom.

“You . . .”

“I did. It was time to finally clean it up and get rid of the stuff. I know it was a long time coming, but I feel much better about it now. Honestly, just thinking about him was painful for years. Now . . . I’m at peace. I know I’ll see him one day in Heaven, and that alone is enough.” She moved past Noelle and went over to the closet in the room and opened it. She pulled down his wooden treasure box and placed it on the folding table that was in the room. She motioned to Noelle, who could tell her mother wanted her to open it.

She walked over to the wooden box she had only seen glimpses of in her time growing up in Nigeria. It sat on the highest shelf on his book case and was a secret treasure box in her mind for years.

“Your father kept his most precious treasure in that box. I want you to have it.”

“The treasure inside?” Noelle inquired, glancing over at her mom.

“All of it. The box and the treasure.”

“What about Max and Mandy?”

“Don’t worry about them.”

Smoothing her fingers along the engraved patterns on the wooden surface, she moved her fingers to the worn leather latch and unfastened it. Opening it up, she was taken aback to see milestones from her childhood. The first day, her dad bought suya from the Hausa men in Sabo, Ibadan remained crucial in her heart. She remembered eating it and crying at the same time. The pepper was too much and stupidly ,she used the pepper filled hand to wipe her face and in an instant she began wailing. She remembered her Dad, Mom and Mandy laughing while they were at the kitchen sink, trying to clean her face. Max hadn’t been born at that time yet. She remembered those silly bets she had with her dad on her report cards. Noelle remembered so much.

Noelle began to cry as she felt the love of her father wash over her.

Her mother walked up behind her and placed an arm around her shoulders. “He loved us all very much. I removed the items about me and Mandy from the box.” Her mother sighed deeply and held

a longing expression on her face as she continued. “On many occasions, I would sleep on the bed, waiting for your father to come, Mulling over the memories of times gone by. Your father appreciated time, the past, and what each day held.”

“How did I not know about this before now?”

Sarah took a step closer to the cardboard boxes on the folding table and slid her fingers across the brown surface of one of the boxes. “I took the loss of your father very hard, Abeke, I turned inward and became hardened. I hate to admit it, but I could hardly look at you, especially, for a long time. Every time I saw your face, I thought of him and it crushed me. You look so much more like him than the other kids. And I hated seeing the pity look on the neighbors back in Nigeria and even my colleagues at work. That’s why I relocated here in the first place. ”

Noelle could’ve revealed to her mother at this moment that she knew that fact all along, but she knew it’d only hurt her mother and so she resisted telling her. Instead, she listened quietly as her mother talked more about her difficulties following her father’s passing.

“I cried every night after he passed away for two years. My heart melted continually into grief, and I never thought I’d find joy again in this life. But I have in some ways. You girls, for example. Max, though . . .” She shook her head and turned toward the door. “How about that coffee? It should be done.”

“Sure, Mom. I’d love a cup. I do have a question.”

“Yes?”

“Why did I get the box?”

She smiled. “It was yours all along. Look underneath.”

Her mother left Noelle in the room. Turning back to the box, she lifted the box and saw her birthday etched into it. Setting it back down, she peered again inside at what her father treasured the most. She saw herself and more tears flooded in. She knew she was loved by her father, but she hadn’t known his greatest treasure on this earth wasn’t his work or accomplishments but her and his family. Closing the box, she fastened the leather strap back around the top and latched it. Lifting it up into her hands, she turned and left her mother’s room.

* *

Minutes over a cup of coffee turned into hours and a box of tissues. Noelle and her mother kindled the beginnings of a new beginning to their relationship for the first time that day.

“When last did you eat Amala and Ewedu?” Sarah chuckled.

“Well, I don’t know. It’s kind of hard to find it here.” Noelle laughed.

"Or you're just lazy to cook?" Sarah suggested.

"Probably." Noelle agreed.

Taking a drink of her coffee, Sarah set it down on the end table and turned back to Noelle.

"So, you're dating this doctor named Kelvin but still dreaming of little Henry?"

Noelle smiled. "Henry isn't little anymore, Mom. We're the same age."

"Yes, but I remember you two hanging out all the time as teenagers. I can't help it. How does it make you feel to date someone while you dream of another?"

"It's strange. I want to move on from Henry, and that's why I finally started dating Kelvin, but it's hard. I can't shake him from my thoughts. Kelvin is amazing on the other hand. I want to like him more than a friend, but Henry is still holding my heart hostage."

Nodding, her mother smiled. "You still love him, Abeke."

Her heart flinched inside her chest as her mother said what she already knew she felt. "You're right."

Noelle and her mom kept talking and discussing more of Noelle's life. By the time two o'clock that afternoon rolled around, Noelle had cried and laughed more with her mother than she had ever done before in years. And though her eyes were red and sore from all the tears, her heart was full to the brim with love. She had let her brother, Max slip completely from her mind until the home phone rang and her mother's eyes went wide.

Following her mother into the kitchen, she eagerly stood by her side as she picked up the phone. Her mother pressed the speaker button on the home phone, and the two of them listened.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Mom. It's me, Max."

Relief washed over Sarah's face, and it did also in Noelle's heart.

"Why did you leave home?"

"I'm sick of it there, Mom. Jeez. Why do you have to disturb so much? I'm an adult. Maybe you forgot that."

Her mother's hardened expression returned, leaving behind that airy and light-hearted way she'd carried herself for the past few hours.

"Maybe if you started acting like an adult, I could treat you like one!"

"Maybe if I were raised by one, I could be acting like one of your perfect little angels! I'm not like Mandy and Noelle. I didn't even get to even see Dad. You don't get that though. You never have and you never will."

Noelle saw something in her mother's eyes in that moment that wasn't anger but guilt. Her voice softened as she continued the phone call with her son. "Max, I'm sorry that your dad is gone, you never got to see him and you missed out on that. It's rough, I get that. But I love you and I just want you to get the help you need."

"There's no helping me. I'm an addict. Always have been, always will be. You got what you got when it comes to me."

She paused for a moment, unable to go on. Her eyes glistened and welled with tears. Noelle stepped closer and took the phone from her hands.

"Max?"

"Oh, yay. You're there too? What is it with you people?"

"Us people are your family, Max. We care about you."

"Sure. I'm sure you showed up to see me and freaked and went straight to Mom." He sighed.

"Yeah, you're right. I went straight to Mom because she's a constant in all of our lives. I want to see you. Where are you?"

"Sorry, Sis. That can't happen."

"Why?"

"I'm on my way to New Mexico right now with Heather. We found a nice little place in a town called Cuba."

Noelle turned just in time to see her mother escape down the hallway, obviously upset by the latest development. Noelle let out a sigh. "Sometimes, I think you want to see Mom upset, Max."

He laughed lightly and sarcastically. "Yes. You figured me out, I just love having my mommy call all over and try to find me every time I'm outside of her watchful eye."

"I can't do this with you, Max"

And Noelle hung up the phone.

Leaving the counter, she went down the hallway and found her mother in her room.

Pushing the door open a fraction, she peeked in to see her mother with her head down, looking at something in her hands. Walking into the room, Noelle came closer to see what she was holding.

It was a picture of her father.

She placed it on top of one of the boxes, then turned to Noelle. “You know what still hurts about your father being gone?”

“What, Mom?”

“I know Max wouldn’t be the way he is if his father were still here.” Walking over to the window, her mother peered out at the ice-covered apple tree in the back yard. “I still wonder why God would allow it when it resulted in Max being who he is now. What good came of this?”

Touching her mother’s back gently, she gave her mom a hug. “I think sometimes, we don’t understand, and that’s okay.”

Quietly they stood together and stared out at the apple tree.

Chapter 13

Turning his chair at the sound of Paul's office door opening at a quarter after five o'clock, Henry raised a hopeful eyebrow, hoping his boss would finally be leaving for the day. Paul's leaving signaled to the rest of the employees that it was okay to head home. Without punching a clock, there was an unwritten rule around the office that you waited until the boss left to call it a day and never a moment sooner.

Seeing Paul emerge and tip a nod his direction, Henry knew he could leave. He started to close the open windows on his computer screens.

His phone vibrated in his jeans pocket.

Slipping it out, he glanced at the screen.

Terry: Adam's not doing so well. Are you almost here?

Henry's heart dipped and he slid the phone back into its place. Henry had started going to the homeless camp and helping six days a week. He had developed a stable friendship with Adam. He loved how quick witted and intrigued the boy was about the word of God and Jesus Christ, most especially.

He finished shutting his computer down and headed for the stairs to leave.

A lot of his time spent at the camp was side by side with Terry. Henry quickly learned through spending time with Terry that he had a heart for helping others in the name of Jesus. Yes, he had certain tastes that were a bit flashy for Henry's style, like the BMW and Under Armor clothing, but Henry realized that was only outwardly appearances and it paled in comparison to Terry's heart.

Arriving at the park at almost six o'clock, he turned off his car and got out. He hurried between the trees and maneuvered by the tents, heading straight for Adam's tent. As he was almost to the tent, Terry grabbed his arm, stopping him.

"Hey. That doctor guy I talked to came by and said he won't make it through the night. Adam refused to be hospitalized."

Henry let out a heavy sigh, then nodded. " That doesn't sounds like Adam to me."

Nodding, Terry patted his shoulder. "Go talk to him, brother."

"I will."

Unzipping the tent door, Henry stepped in and lowered himself down to his friend's side. Ignoring the chilly ground beneath his knees that was instantly wetting his jeans, he peered into Adam's eyes.

"I heard you're being stubborn, kid. " Henry said.

"Until the day I die . . . which I guess is coming up pretty quick!" He laughed, then started to cough. He let out a sigh and placed his hands together on his stomach. "I've lived a wonderful life. It's time to meet Jesus, my Savior."

"No, it's not. You're still a kid. You still have a life ahead of you." Henry shook his head.

"Do you know the nature of my sickness?" Adam asked.

Henry shook his head.

"It's Cholera." Tears welled up in Adam's eyes.

"I know I should have told you, the first day we met but I didn't want to look at me the way, most people do. I don't want you to feel sorry for me." Adam sniffed. "Let me tell you something. There are two types of people you come across in this world—the people who enjoy life no matter what, and those who get sobered up into thinking they're victims of circumstance. I'm one who enjoyed it. You should too." Adam continued.

Cheeks moistened as Henry recognized his words of farewell.

"I've only gotten to really know you for a month, Pastor Henry, but you saved my soul."

"No, God did."

Adam laughed. "Well, yes. But you know what I mean.."

His eyes moistened. "I love you too, Adam."

"I'm wearing the shirt you got me, sir." Adam chuckled with tears staining his eyes.

"Don't call me, sir. You can keep calling me, Pastor Henry." Henry replied him.

"Of course, you taught me a lot about Jesus Christ and that he has forgiven my sins. Did you know that I used to steal in the camp?" Adam asked.

"No, I didn't." Henry replied.

"I stopped…when you began preaching to me. I stopped when I started reading the Bible again." Adam continued, his voice quaking.

"That's good, kid." Henry commented.

“You are a good man, Pastor Henry. You know that?” Adam admitted.

“I am just hearing that for the first time.” Henry chuckled.

“You came to the camp everyday, giving me food and water. You talked to me till the sun went down. Do you realize that you were like a father to me?” Adam responded.

“I’m just realizing it.” Henry said and immediately tears gushed out of his eyes.

“Why are you crying? I’m not scared of death. I’m going to be with the Lord, Jesus.” Adam spoke confidently.

“I know.” Henry’s chest heaved.

“You are making me cry.” Tears gathered themselves in Adam’s eyes.

“I’m sorry.” Henry apologized.

“Please, hold my hand. I want you to pray for me.” Adam smiled, stretching forth his weak and thin hand.

Henry took his hand and began praying, “God, thank you for being with us right now. We confess that we don’t understand why things happen the way they do. We don’t understand why illness comes into our lives, but we do know that you walk every path of life with us. Remind Adam that you are walking with him right now. Remind Adam that you love him, no matter what he is going through. God, we thank you that you never leave us, that you never forsake us, but you love us. We trust you, and pray this in your name. Amen.”

“But now I think that we should go to the hospital, maybe find out what state you are in and how you can get….”Henry stopped talking when Adam’s hand slipped out of his.

It couldn’t be.

Adam’s eyes were closed. Henry took the initiative to shake him but Adam didn’t bulge awake. He began to panic.

“Kid, wake up!” Henry commanded, holding Adam’s cheek.

“Please!” Henry begged.

Tears formed in his eyes and he held the boy to himself. He couldn’t hold it in anymore. He remembered when he brought a chocolate cake for Adam and Adam jokingly asked if it was his birthday. He remembered playing in the snow with Adam, throwing snow at the young boy’s face. He remembered how well Adam smiled. He smiled as if he bore no pain in him.

Henry screamed and continued weeping, “Dear Lord, why did you take him away? Why Lord?”

Terry walked into the tent and on realizing that Adam was dead. He patted Henry's shoulder.

Henry turned with tear stricken eyes and looked at Terry, "He was just sixteen, Terry. He hadn't even begun life yet. He told me that when he grew up…he wanted to be a doctor. Terry, he…..."

"I know." Terry bent his head.

Henry stood up, wiped his tears and hugged Terry tightly before releasing him. He turned back and noticed that Terry had covered Adam from head to toe with a cloth.

Henry sniffed and walked out of the tent. He walked towards his car with an heavy heart, thinking of Adam. When he entered his car finally, he couldn't drive. He placed his fingers on the steering wheel and cried mercilessly. The tears came out freely like the ocean. He kept asking God the same question, over and over again. Why Lord?

Henry had barely known this kid for a year and death had taken him away from him. He banged the steering wheel repeatedly, trying to drown the ache and pain he felt in his heart. A few minutes later,his phone buzzed and he slid the accept button

"Hello Janette."

"I want you to explain why Jesus died for me?" Janette replied.

"Okay." Henry replied and in that instant, he began to preach to Janette.

Chapter 14

The following morning, Noelle got busy finishing up an article about good housekeeping tips .It wasn't what she wanted to write about, but it was writing regardless, and for that reason, she enjoyed every moment of it. As she was typing up the article, her boss, Alex, approached her halved cubicle.

"Hey, Noelle."

"Morning, Boss!" Pausing her typing, she glanced up at him. Alex was a middle-aged man with a wife and three kids. He was a nice guy who was always friendly and supportive of his employees. "What's going on?"

"You've been a good sport about these little housekeeping stories. How about a real story?"

Her heart warmed and her lips curled into a smile. " I would love a real article! I mean, these are real, but it'd be awesome to do a story. What do you have in mind?"

As he walked around the side of her cubicle, Noelle swiveled in her chair, eager to hear.

"There's a homeless camp across from that little Baptist church you go to. At Campside Park."

Her heart dipped. She knew full-well Henry's involvement in the camp would guarantee her seeing him. Her mind raced with ideas on how to avoid an awkward encounter with the man she stilled dreamed of at night.

With no response from her other than the plastered look of worry, Alex raised his eyebrows. "Is there a problem?"

She quickly responded, "No. Not at all. What's the topic and when is it due?"

"I want to run it early next week, and the topic is the homeless epidemic that is sweeping the city. Let's make your deadline Saturday night. In four days."

"Sounds good! Thank you for this opportunity."

"You're welcome. Thanks for working hard around here. Gives your Jesus fellow some good credit." Tapping the top of the halved cubicle wall, Alex walked away. Being left to her thoughts, she didn't like the idea of sitting and talking with Henry when her feelings were still so strong for him. I still need to finish this article, she thought, knowing it'd be an easy way to distract herself from thoughts of him.

A little later that afternoon, she met with Kelvin for lunch at a café. As they sat near a window and shared light conversation about their day, she thought more of Henry. He was like a lingering thought that she couldn't get to go away. The more she tried to shove him away from her mind, the more he dwelled there, stronger than ever.

"You seem a little distracted." Kelvin forked a bite of his steak salad and popped it into his mouth.

Glancing out the window, she bowed her head. Her voice was soft, humble. "I am distracted. I have to do a piece on the homeless camp across from my church."

"Hmm. That seems like a good thing. You love the involvement your church has over there. Isn't that why you had me go over there this morning to check on those homeless people? Plus, it seems like a great opportunity to do a story like you've been wanting."

"Yes, but still . . . you know who is working a lot with the camp lately."

Adjusting in his seat, Kelvin's demeanor shifted. Noelle knew Kelvin was aware at least somewhat of the hold Henry still had on her. She refused to let herself date him without making him aware of the situation in her heart. "This is why I went this morning and not later in the day, like you mentioned. It's simple. You go in the morning when you know he's not around. He's at work, and you can get in and get your story and get out."

"You're right," Noelle agreed with a nod, but what she didn't reveal was a part of her wanted to see him. A part of her still wanted to talk to him, to be with him. The small sips of seeing him in passing at church over the last month had been difficult. Not calling Henry yesterday when she had found out about Max was trying at first too.

Grabbing his cloth napkin from the table, he finished his bite then dabbed dressing from his lips. Laying a hand out, palm up, he tilted his head as he looked into her eyes. "Why are you with me when you're still thinking of him? Even after this time apart?"

"What? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Listen, I get it, Noelle. You two have some history and a past clearly. I'm not a complicated man and I'm not vengeful either. We tried this, but . . . your heart is wrapped up with Henry. I don't think you like me nearly as much as you've been trying. You still want Henry."

"Please don't do this."

He frowned. "Don't make this weird. You're pretty obvious in your feelings, Noelle. I want us to be friends, though. You're a nice woman of God."

"I don't want to be friends with you, Henry!"

Awkwardness filled the atmosphere between them. Noelle's eyes watered immediately. Kelvin slowly set his napkin down on the table.

"Thank you for this lunch, Noelle. I wish you the best in your future, whatever that may be."

Pushing out his seat from the table, Kelvin stood up and dropped money for his meal and left the café. As she watched him walk out to his car and out of her life through the window, she thought of Henry once more. This time, there was no desire to see him, no desire to be near him. There was only sadness, and there was only pain. Though they weren't talking, he was still influencing her life, and Henry's influence had just made a great guy walk out of her life forever.

* *

The next morning, Noelle headed to the homeless camp across from First Baptist in order to get the gears moving on the story she needed to write. Arriving early, just fifteen minutes past seven o'clock, she found a group of people huddled around a small fire burning amid the tents. As she approached, people turned to see her. She recognized a few of them from church.

"Hi, Mary." Noelle's wave was met with a somber expression from Mary. "What's going on?"

Mary approached. "Adam's dead. "

Noelle's heart dropped into the pit of her stomach as she turned and looked at the tent that people were hovering over. She then remembered Henry. He had befriended Adam last month when he started helping. Her eyes stayed fixed on the tent as she asked the question she feared she already knew the answer to.

"Is Henry . . . ?"

"He's in there. He's been in his tent since morning. He didn't even want the body to be shifted anywhere else. I feel so bad for that kid." Mary said.

"Can you tell me which one is Adam's tent?" Noelle asked.

"Right there." Mary pointed.

"Thank you, Mary." Noelle thanked her and walked away.

Walking into Adam's tent, Noelle saw Henry standing completely still. His eyes swollen and red, he looked broken and grieved beyond what words alone could describe. Letting down her defenses, she approached him with open arms. All the anger she had been holding since yesterday's lunch with Kelvin melted into oblivion and all she could feel was compassion.

They embraced.

His arms around her, he wept.

"He's gone, Noelle . . ."

Noelle was overwhelmed with grief, not for Adam directly, but for the impact it had on Henry, and she teared up along with him. "It's going to be okay, Henry."

She hadn't seen this side of Henry before. He was so vulnerable, so gentle and soft. He hadn't even acted like this when he lost his grandmother a couple of years ago with whom he was close. It was as if the layers beneath the surface of him she'd only sensed during their friendship had finally been revealed. All the hardness was peeled away, and all that was left in Henry was compassion, love, and a deep caring for other people. Noelle's tears warmed and flowed harder knowing that there was a real change that had taken place in his heart.

After a long moment of hugging, they separated.

"This is just so heartbreaking." Noelle shook her head as she could hear the sobs in the camp begin to grow all around her as she suspected word about Adam's passing circulated. Her cell phone rang in her purse and she checked the caller ID. Her eyes widened seeing her mother was calling. "It's my mom. I have to take this. I'm so sorry."

Walking away from Henry, she tapped the Answer Call button and proceeded out of the camp toward her car in the parking lot.

"Update on Max." Her mother sounded upset but not angry toward her.

"What's wrong?"

"He's with Heather in some hotel in Colville. He never went to New Mexico! He lied to us."

Noelle's sorrow grew at hearing it. Turning toward the camp, she saw people standing outside the tent and weeping. She shook her head. "Max has no idea what he is doing to you, Mom."

Her mother was silent on the other end of the phone call.

"I'm going to see him. What hotel is it?"

"No, please don't go. He's in Colville. That's all I wanted to tell you."

"Does Max know that you care about him?" Noelle asked.

"No." Her mother paused for a long moment before speaking. "He's not in the right mind. He'll never care the way he should care!"

"I disagree. He needs to know people care about him, Mom. I'm not a drug addict and I needed that in my life. Listen, can I come by and get the items that relate to Max? And please tell me where he is."

Hesitation hung heavy on the call for a whole minute. “Fine. He’s at the Colville Inn, but I’m trusting you not to give him these items, only show them to him if you think it’ll help. One is a very expensive gold watch I do not want Max to have right now.”

“I understand. Thank you. I’ll see you in a few. And Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for calling me.”

Hanging up with her mother, Noelle headed back toward the camp as she shot a text message off to her sister, Mandy. As Noelle re-entered the camp, She spotted Henry still standing beside Adam’s body

Noelle touched his arm.

“Hey.”

He turned to her. “Hi.”

“Max’s in Colville in a hotel with Heather. I’m going to go talk to him.”

Henry hesitated like he was about to speak but then held back.

“What did you want to say?”

He shrugged. “This might be a little strange of me to ask, but do you want a road companion?”

Noelle’s heart felt as if it stopped. Tilting her head as she studied his eyes, she wondered what to do. “What about all these people, Henry?”

“Terry is here. He can handle it. I need to get my head out of this place for a bit. That is, if you don’t mind. . .” He held his hands up. “It’s up to you.”

She couldn’t help but smile inwardly at the thought. It had been a while since they’d spent some time together, and maybe it’d be a good opportunity for her to fully understand what exactly had happened to the Henry she knew, who had stormed out of a business meeting at church not that long ago. What happened to the guy who was obsessed over finding his biological mother and every little incorrectness he saw in others? Was that Henry truly gone and this new caring, loving, and compassionate Henry here to stay? Or was this all a façade? A trip north for a day would solve that puzzle.

“Okay.” Her eyes stayed on his brown eyes, begging that he’d be delicate with her heart and not break it all over again. “You can come.”

As soon as she granted him permission to join him on the road trip, a part of her regretted it. Had she been so dumb as to forget what had happened on their last road trip? Peering up toward Heaven as Henry went to say his goodbyes in the camp, she prayed.

An hour into their journey down the highway after stopping by her mom's house to grab some items. Henry shut the radio off. Noelle figured it was to chat again, something they had been doing throughout their time together, but maybe this time, it would be more than just about the weather and their work lives. He then proceeded to stare in Noelle's direction as she drove.

When she turned her head to make eye contact with him, he broke into a grin. Everything about this guy seemed different. Even his demeanor carried a different beat, one of lightness and joy. It was the same Henry, but all she could see were the best parts of him now.

"You've changed a lot, Henry. You seem happier."

"I discovered something I never knew I was without." His eyes and head turned, staring out his window at the snowscape.

"Oh, yeah? What did you discover?"

His smile grew wider but his eyes stayed fixed out the window. "The joy of the Lord."

"Hmm."

"What?" Henry turned and looked at her again, letting out a short laugh. "I'm serious."

"You just lost a friend. You can't be that joyful."

"Oh, love. My joy relies on God alone, not on the circumstances going on in my life."

Did he just call me . . . love? She wondered. Confronting him, she asked, "Love?"

"Sorry. Was that too forward? The truth is I haven't stopped loving you since that night you let me pillow my head on your lap as I wept over not finding my mother. I was a fool to have strung you along like I did for so long. You're a beautiful woman inside and out, and I love you. I made the mistake of letting you go. This last month has been hard without you."

Warmth washed over her whole being, and her eyes stayed fixed on the road ahead. She could feel heat radiating up the sides of her neck and into her cheeks. A part of her wanted to pull the car over and kiss Henry right then and there, but another part was fearful. He had so easily hurt her in the past. What guarantee was there that he wouldn't hurt her again? And what if all this wasn't real on his part? Things could just be good in life for him, but what if a real issue arises in his personal life? Would he revert and go back to his old ways like the dog returning to its vomit?

The moment in which she could respond slipped away and was left behind the car, staying back on mile marker 67.

“I need to focus on what I’m going to say to Max right now. Can we talk about that later?”

It was an easy way to not answer or respond to Henry. He simply nodded and then retrieved the box from her mother’s house that was on the passenger floor between his shoes. Bringing it onto his lap, he opened it. Noelle glanced over to see Henry smoothing his fingertips over the family picture. His expression was soft and his eyes glossy.

“What are you thinking about right now?” Noelle was too intrigued not to ask.

“Adam.” Shaking his head, he set the picture back into the shoe box. “He missed out on a lifetime’s worth of opportunities of living. He was so young, Noelle. Just sixteen. Sure, he’s going to Heaven, but he missed out on so much in life. I’m glad I got to know him. I’m happy I preached to him about God.”

Noelle didn’t see bitterness in Henry’s face. Instead of being focused on not knowing who his biological mother was, he was focused on the gift of life God gave to him. Her love for him grew in that moment.

“You’ve really changed, Henry, and for the better.”

Wiping a stray tear, he nodded. “I thought I knew God, but. . .” Shaking his head as he paused, he let out a sigh before he continued. “But I never knew His heart, His love. I’ll never understand the full depths of His love for me. It’s radical and life-transforming. Without knowing God’s heart, you can never know God.”

“That’s true.”

Noelle was now only a few miles away from her brother, and she didn’t have a clue what she’d say to him to convince him to come back to Spove. Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. Was there anything she could say? Anything she could do? Probably not, but she knew God could, and she was trusting in God and committing the upcoming minutes to Him.

Chapter 15

Staring at a donut in a nearby bakery a block away from the Colville Inn, Henry contemplated his existence. It didn't take more than a few minutes of being alone for Adam's death to hit him harder than it had done previously. He had always viewed himself as rock-solid kind of guy, but now he felt as if he was no more than a glazed donut with a gooey center. He wiped his eyes. He had watched a kid take his final breath on this earth.

"Would you like that donut, sir? You've been staring at it for about ten minutes now."

Henry shook his head and took a step back from the glass. Glancing at the clock behind the counter, he saw it had been almost an hour since he left Noelle at the hotel. She'd asked to speak with her brother alone, and he obliged.

Exiting the bakery, he walked down the sidewalk, further away from the hotel. He pushed his hands deep into his jeans pockets. There was a slight breeze in the air which gave the chilly weather a bite. Coupled with the fact that he was exhausted from staying up all morning with Adam, all Henry wanted to do was lie down somewhere and sleep.

A headache started coming on as he rounded a corner in downtown Colville. Lifting his eyes, he saw a woman and a small child leaning up against an old brick building, wearing ratted clothing and dirty, and his heart was moved with compassion for the two of them and he approached. His heart toward homeless people would never be the same after meeting Adam and the others. He felt drawn to them.

Bending his knees, he pushed aside his cares about the cold and his headache and even the exhaustion as he smiled at the little girl. The girl couldn't be more than seven years old.

"Hello, Princess."

The sad-faced little girl lifted her downcast face. Her voice was sad and void of hope. "I'm not a princess, Mister."

Henry glanced over at the woman sitting nearby and she gave him an approving look to continue the conversation.

He tapped his chin. "That's strange, because I could've sworn you were a princess. I was told by the King that you would be here . . . and here you are!"

"King?" A glimmer of hope lit in the little girl's eyes.

"Yes, the King."

The little girl adjusted herself as she became excited by his words. Sitting crisscross, she leaned toward Henry "Tell me more about this King."

Pulling out his wallet, Henry pulled a fifty-dollar bill out and slipped it into the mother's cup sitting beside the girl. Then he continued to speak with the little girl.

"First, tell me your name, little princess."

"Nadia."

"Oh, Nadia. Let me tell you about the King. This King loves you very much. In fact, He gave up His life for you!"

The little child's eyes grew wide. "He died? Why would He do that?"

"Because He loves you so much! You are precious to Him, Nadia. Don't worry about His dying, because He has risen!"

"Tell me this King's name, sir. Please tell me this wonderful King's name!"

"Jesus Christ. Do you know Him?"

"A little bit. When my daddy was still alive, we would go to Jesus's house on Sundays. I went to Sunday school."

Hearing a sniffle, Henry stole a glance toward the woman beside Nadia. She was weeping. Pulling out a small package of tissues, he handed them to the woman.

"Sir?" The woman's voice was fragile as glass as she spoke. "My husband passed away three months ago, and our house just foreclosed a few days back. Our life is in upheaval, and I was praying for the last two days that God would send a word of encouragement and then . . ." She stopped speaking and wept. "Then you showed up."

Tingles washed over Henry. Even though he had lost Adam hours earlier, here he was, still experiencing joy, still experiencing God's goodness and love. "I'm sorry for your loss, ma'am. I just lost a good friend this morning. Meeting you two was a God thing for me also."

The woman smiled as more tears streamed from her eyes and down her cheeks.

"What is it?" Henry inquired.

"It's just so beautiful that God could use both of our circumstances at the same time to bring us to each other even for a moment."

Nodding, Henry glanced down the sidewalk from the way he had come. He thought about Noelle, then about Adam, and he nodded. “God is always working. He never sleeps. He never has to think about anything, He is always doing.”

“Amen.” The woman nodded.

“What are your plans?”

“I have a brother in Spove. I hope to get down there soon.”

“Well, I want to stay in touch. I know this guy in Spove who might be able to help you two out. His name is Chuck. I’ll give you his number too.” Reaching into his back jeans pocket, he pulled out his wallet and retrieved a business card. Jotting down his numbers on the back, he handed it to her. Then, he gave her the rest of his cash in his wallet. “Get a hotel. Get cleaned up. God’s got you today.”

“I can’t take this.” She tried to hand it back. “I didn’t earn any of it.”

“Keep it. Please?”

“ God Bless you, sir. Bless you.”

Rising to his feet, he moved back over to Nadia and bent back down in front of her. “Hey, Princess. It was nice meeting you.”

“It was nice meeting you too.”

Rising to his feet, Henry headed back toward the corner he had come around. His heart felt lighter and he realized God’s joy had wrapped itself around his heart and was ministering to his deepest need now—comfort.

* *

Henry took a short nap in the car while he waited for Noelle to exit the hotel. After he awoke, he sat up in his seat and peered out the windshield at hotel room number 337, where she had entered over two hours ago. Concern weighed heavily on his soul, and he slipped his cell phone out from his pocket. He texted her.

Henry: Everything okay?

Glancing through the windshield again at the door, he wondered if he should’ve been concerned sooner. A moment later, a text.

Noelle: Sorry.

A moment passed and Noelle exited the hotel room with the box from her mom's house under her arm. In a flurry of steps, she hurried down the cement stairs and out into the parking lot, wiping tears from her face as she approached the car. Henry's heart dropped into his stomach.

She got in the car and slammed the door shut.

"Coming here was a mistake!" Noelle's fingers trembled as she tried to place the key into the ignition.

Henry reached a hand over and stopped her.

"You shouldn't be driving right now. Talk to me. What happened?"

Relaxing her shoulders, she sighed and shook her head as she glanced at the ceiling of the car.

"He's gone, Henry. He's so far gone mentally. He kept checking the blinds and thinking you were a cop and muttering all this nutty stuff about the FBI."

Raising his eyebrows, Henry wondered to himself exactly what took two hours to figure out, but he felt it'd be insensitive to ask. Instead, he shook his head solemnly and peered toward the hotel.

"There's still hope."

"No." Noelle's eyebrows furrowed, and she smacked the steering wheel. "I've hoped and wished and have invested so much time into Max, and he just spits it out like it's nothing. I'm sick and tired of caring about him and wondering if he's going to show up in a morgue. I'm over it, Henry. I'm truly over it!"

A few seconds passed, then the hotel room door opened.

It was Max.

"What's he doing?" The question wasn't really a question for Noelle to answer, but she did.

"I don't know. Probably going to find Heather. She took off after I got there. Of course, she hates me. You know . . ."

"Yeah, darkness hates light."

Noelle smiled for the first time since they arrived in town. "I was thinking something different, but that's true also."

Walking down the cement steps, Max approached them in the parking lot. Noelle shifted toward Henry.

"Please talk to him. I can't do anything more."

Glancing out the window at Max, Henry knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to pummel the guy for hurting Noelle, but then a quiet reminder surfaced in his soul that about crushed him in the moment.

Suddenly, Henry didn't see him as just a drug addict but instead as a human being who had made mistakes. "I'll talk to him."

Getting out of the car, Henry jogged over to Max and cut him off on his way to his sister at the car. When Max tried to move past him, Henry pushed him back with a hand.

"I want to talk to you."

"That's my sister!"

Nodding, Henry raised an eyebrow and nodded. "Yes . . . that'd be a response to, 'How do you know Noelle?' "

"What're you doing, boy? You trying to get with my sister?"

"What? Listen, I don't think you really want to hurt your sister any more than you already have today."

Max's shoulders slumped and his posture softened. He shook his head. "No, man. I never meant to hurt her."

"Then listen to me when I tell you this, Max. God loves you." Seeing a cross tattooed on his neck, Henry continued. "You might not have your earthly father anymore, but you still have a Heavenly Father, and He will never leave you."

"I don't believe in God."

"Why do you have a cross tattoo on your neck?"

"Young and dumb mistake. I used to believe, but then I grew up and understood that if God were real, He wouldn't put me through what He did. And if He is real . . . well, bro, that's just messed up."

Henry avoided the rabbit trail of a conversation. "I won't sit here and try to tell you I understand what you went through when you never saw your father, Max. But you can't argue with what God has done in my life. He has shown me that what I think isn't what He thinks. How He loves isn't how I love. Sure, there are things I'll never fully understand about God. But there is a beauty in that lack of understanding. You see, man, if we could wrap our minds around God with our little brains, how big of a God would that be? Not very big at all."

Nodding slowly, Max seemed alert and understanding. There was no discussion of the FBI or anything nutty like what Noelle had experienced. Henry believed that God gave Max clarity for this very moment. Henry was compelled to continue.

“I lost a close friend this morning, Max. Have you ever lost anyone?”

Max bit his lip as he glanced toward the street. “Too many to count.”

“See that pain? God wants that pain to go away forever. That’s why He sent Jesus Christ to die on the cross for us, man. To give us another way to live, to do life. And one day, He is coming back and setting up a new Heaven and a new Earth. There will be no more pain, no more heartache.”

“Noelle used to talk about that a lot right after I realized that I am never going to know my dad , but it all seems so fuzzy. How do I get that?”

Washed with tingles over his whole body, Henry took a step closer and placed a hand on Max’s shoulder. “You have to believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Confess it with your mouth and believe it with your heart that He died, was buried, and rose again on the third day. He is the only way to life.”

Tears started down Max’s cheeks. “I did believe it.”

“Do you still?”

“Yes.” A relief washed over Max’s expression. “I still believe.”

“Then you should rededicate your life to God. Give Him control. He loves you more than any person on this earth will ever love you. He will take care of you.”

Nodding, Max wept bitterly. “What have I done?”

* *

Max rode with Noelle and Henry back to Spove. After they checked him into a rehab facility, they were walking out to the car in the parking lot when Noelle grabbed ahold of Henry’s hand, stopping him. He turned fully toward her and saw her eyes lit with not only joy over the direction of her brother’s life but with something else too.

“Henry.” His name on her lips ignited the burning desire in his soul for her. “Today was a miracle.”

“Yes, it was.” Pulling her toward him, he held her close and then kissed her. As Henry held Noelle in his arms, he felt as if his soul were melting into her. It was like nothing he had ever felt before in his life. He hadn’t ever made himself this vulnerable before, and though it scared him, it also felt exhilarating and so very right.

She kissed him back, and as his lips pressed against hers, he felt warmth crash over him that was all-consuming and powerful. Wrapping his arms around her, he continued to kiss her. It wasn't long and he knew the kissing had to cease.

He stopped, smiling as he set her back from him.

"We have to stop."

Noelle, being the good girl she was, nodded in agreement and they continued to the car, but now they were holding hands. He held the driver's side door open for her as she got in, but not before stealing another kiss from her. Her lips were like a drug he couldn't have enough of, and he knew it'd take an incredible amount of self-control to keep things on the straight and narrow.

Pausing, Henry let the cool air outside wrap around him with a chill before he got in.

He took a deep breath and go into the car.

"You can drop me off at the camp. I want to check in on everyone, and my car is there."

"All right."

Once Noelle pulled up to the curb at the homeless camp, she put the car into park. "Thanks again for today, Henry."

Smiling warmly at Noelle, he was thankful for their time together. He knew deep within his heart if it was God's will for the two of them to work out, they would. He just had to wait and trust in the Lord.

"I had a good time hanging out with you. I want you to know that Kelvin is not an issue."

Leaning across the arm rest, Henry smiled and kissed her. "Good to know, and I had a lovely time today too. Have a good night."

Getting out of the car, he shut the car door and headed through the opening in the tents in the park. Making his way to the center of the camp, he found a very distraught Mary. She fell into his arms immediately and he held her.

"Rough day at the camp, eh?"

"More than you know, Henry."

"Where's Terry?"

Pulling away from Henry, Mary turned toward Adam's tent and pointed.

Henry furrowed his eyebrows, disgust filling his face. "He's in there with Adam?"

“Oh, heavens, no! They took Adam to the morgue a long time ago.”

Raising his eyebrows, Henry looked at the tent and then back toward Mary. “He’s still here?”

“Yep. He’s been waiting for you to get back all day. He’s with a woman named Janette who wants to talk to you”

“What? Me? Why?” Henry recalled that she was a woman he preached to recently on the road. Somehow she stuck to him like a glue, asking for his phone number and calling him in the middle of the night. She wanted to know everything about him which was odd and very weird but he still told her about himself. Maybe she wanted to talk about Jesus That must be it. Smiling warmly, he proceeded toward Adam’s tent.

Terry emerged from Adam’s tent moments later, and when his eyes fell on Henry, he looked uneasy.

Henry proceeded toward him.

“What’s going on? Why is Janette here?”

Terry shook his head and glanced behind him at the tent.

“She was waiting for you.”

“What?”

A man in the camp grabbed Terry’s attention and led him away to deal with an issue. Henry proceeded into Adam’s tent. Finding Janette sitting and weeping into her hands, Henry moved in closer but was cautious as he did so.

“Hey. You are still struggling with your faith, Janette?”

Peering up at Henry with reddened and swollen eyes, she nodded.

He sat down beside her. “It’s going to be okay. How did you know about this camp and how did you know I would be here?”

“I have a friend here and she tells me about you.” Janette replied.

“Henry, I need to talk to you.”

“I keep hearing that. About Jesus?”

She shook her head. “No.”

Perplexed, he shrugged. “Then what?”

Grabbing Henry's hands, she pulled them toward her. Uneasiness rose within him, and then she peered into his eyes. "I'm your birth mom."

Jerking his hands away from her, Henry jumped to his feet. Pulse racing, he shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm your mother, Henry. I gave you that name because I wanted you to have a real chance in life. It's why I eventually put you in that manger too. I knew the church had a patrol every thirty minutes."

Backing away from her, Henry kept shaking his head. "No."

Leaving the tent, he hurriedly walked from the camp and through the open grassy area to make it to his car on the far side's parking lot. Wiping tears as they fell, Henry prayed. God, what is wrong with this woman? Why or who did she get that information from? Clenching his jaw, he kept moving toward his car.

Janette came running through the park. "Henry! Stop! Please don't go!"

He started to run faster.

Arriving at his car, he could hear the woman saying his name repeatedly. His hands trembled as he dug in his pocket for his keys. Finding them, he pulled them out and was about to stick the key in the door when he suddenly saw her face illuminated in the street light. Like a flash of lightning, the memories-turned-nightmares shot across his vision. It was her.

Janette slowed her pace as she arrived at the car. He put the keys back into his pocket and walked over to the sidewalk she was standing on.

Out of breath and crying, she shook her head as she rested her palms on her hips. "I have no reason to lie to you, Son."

Closing his eyes firmly, he shook his head. "Don't call me Son."

"Fine. I won't. But can we talk?"

"What is it you think we're doing right now? Talk."

"I did what I thought was best for you, Henry. I knew I couldn't give you the life I wanted to give you. My mom was dead, my dad was also homeless, and I was nothing. I had no idea who your father was, and I was living on the streets. What do you think I should have done?"

Lips firmly pressed together, Henry shook his head. His heart was breaking just like it did with the woman in Olympia. "Why didn't you ever come find me? Or reach out? Or anything?"

Janette took his hands in hers once again. “I did find you, Henry. Remember when you would walk to the convenience store when you were in sixth grade?”

“Yeah, the one a block away from the house on Wall.”

A smile surfaced on her lips for a moment then fell away as she nodded. “Yes. That’s the one. I saw you. You were happy. You were just a normal kid with a normal life. I didn’t want to mess that up. And you saw me by the roadside and you helped me.”

Henry knew he couldn’t have had this conversation with Janette even two months ago. But after all that had happened in his life, in his heart, he knew it was nothing short of God’s perfect timing. Looking at Janette, a woman in rags and covered in dirt, he knew she was really his biological mom, and he began to weep.

“Please don’t cry, Henry.” Tilting her head, she touched his cheek gently. “Please?”

“I’m not crying because of what you did. I’m crying because of what God did.”

Chapter 16

A flury of knocks landed on Noelle's apartment in the middle of the night, startling her awake. Glancing at the time on her cell phone, she saw it was almost one in the morning. Who could that be? She wondered as she slipped out from her bed and wrapped herself in her pink bathrobe. Rubbing her eyes, she cautiously proceeded down the hallway and out to the living room. Checking the peephole, she saw a distraught Henry on the other end.

She quickly opened the door.

"What are you doing, Henry? It's one o'clock in the morning."

He rubbed his neck and shook his head as his gaze met hers. "I met my biological mother."

Noelle could've been knocked over with a single touch in that moment. She hadn't expected that. "What? Come in."

Moving out of the doorway, she let him enter. As he hurried over to the couch and sat down, she flipped on the light switch that turned on the lamp in the corner and joined him on the couch.

"Janette. She's my mom."

Raising her eyebrows, Noelle asked, "Who? I don't know her, never heard of her before."

"I know, I met her a month ago by the roadside when I was returning home from the camp.I helped her, gave her some money and she asked for my phone number. And I never knew she was my mother. Can you imagine that?"

"I couldn't imagine."

Henry nodded as he wrung his hands. "I don't know what to do now. I tried to go home and sleep, but that was impossible. I tossed and turned. I thought I was fine when she told me at the camp, but I think that was just shock."

"And now you're here?" Noelle flashed a confused look.

He took her hands in his and nodded. "You're the only one I wanted to see."

Her heart melted at his sweet words, but her worries came rushing back in all at once. "Noelle, I can't do anything for you. This is a door you have to walk through alone."

Henry stood and walked over to the bookshelf in the living room. He was quiet as he looked at the glass cube with her baptismal picture in it. "What's this?"

Rising to her feet, Noelle smiled. “That was when I was baptized. My mother gave it to me. It was one of the items from my father’s box.”

“Oh, your father looked like you a lot.” Henry chuckled.

“I know.” Noelle commented.

“And he was darker than you.” Henry laughed.

“Oh shut it, Henry.” Noelle joked

He raised an eyebrow as he lifted the cube and inspected it. “Your father loved you all dearly, didn’t he?”

“He did.” Noelle came closer to him, and he set the cube back in its place on the bookshelf, then he turned toward her.

“I don’t know how to feel about my mother.I am so confused.”

“There’s no right or wrong way to feel, Henry. How do you feel?”

Walking back to the couch, he sat down. “I honestly don’t feel much about it.”

Surprised, Noelle traversed her living room and sat down beside him. “Really? Then why did you frantically knock on my door in the middle of the night?”

“I want to be mad and hold it against her. Honestly, I’m hurt by a lot of what she had done, but I can’t hold it against her. Even though it’s so fresh and new and a part of me truly wants to hold it against her, I can’t do it. It’s like the Spirit of God inside me won’t let me.”

Shrugging, Noelle opened her hands and said, “Then don’t.”

He smiled. “I guess it’s that simple, isn’t it?” Letting out a relieved sigh, he relaxed into the couch and looked over at her with those piercing brown eyes. “I feel so much better just being here with you.”

Smiling an exhaustive but supportive smile, Noelle nodded lightly. “I’m glad you came over.”

Flashes of earlier cascaded through her mind and a smile curled on her lips, prompting Henry “What are you thinking about? You just got this big grin on your face.”

“Earlier . . .”

He smiled and stood up from the couch. “That was nice.”

“You going to work tomorrow?”

He shook his head. “I had vacation time stored up, and Paul let me take it off. You?”

Noelle stood up. “Yes.”

“I should go and let you get back to sleep.”

A hopeful grin broke across his face and he came closer to her. Sliding his hand along her waist and to the small of her back, he pulled her in closer to him. Delicately, he kissed her and then released her.

Walking together to her front door, Noelle loved the way Henry hadn’t tried to take the kissing too far, but just far enough to remind her how much he cared about her.

Stopping just outside her door, he turned to her.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Just being you. I know we were friends for a long time, and then we weren’t friends, and now we’re together, but I think there is something special about that. Our friendship was a foundation.”

“I think it worked well too.”

Henry gave her a peck on the cheek, said his goodbyes, and then left.

As he walked away and started down the steps leading to the parking lot, Noelle leaned against her door frame and watched him. Her dreams were finally becoming reality and her heart was full to the brim with thankfulness to God.

* *

Stopping in at the homeless camp the next morning, Noelle spoke to a few of the local residents and jotted down notes on a notepad. An hour into the conversations, she spotted a woman speaking with Mary near Adam’s tent. Her mind thought about Henry and wondered how he was doing. Pulling out her cell phone, she texted him.

Noelle: How’d the rest of your night go?

Slipping her cell phone back into her pocket, she went over to Mary.

“How are you holding up?”

Mary forced out a smile as she shrugged a shoulder. “It hurts.”

“I bet.” Noelle’s eyes followed the woman who was discussing with Mary earlier as she went over to one of the children in the camp and bent down to talk to them. “Who is she?”

“She’s Janette and well… Henry’s mother.”

Noelle's heart ached at that instant, why didn't she realize it earlier? How could she not know, that it was Henry's mother?

"Uhm, how is she?" Noelle asked.

"I think she's okay."

Mary's eyebrows shot up, her eyes catching someone or something behind Noelle. Turning, Noelle saw Henry walking into the camp with his father, Jasper. Noelle's heart pounded as she walked up to the two of them. Her eyes jumped from Jasper and over to Henry.

"What's going on?"

"My dad wants to meet the woman who gave birth to me. Depending on how this goes, maybe Mom this afternoon!"

"Yeah?" Her gaze shifted to Jasper.

"I'm as surprised as you are, but when he told me this morning over coffee at Milo's about his mom being here, I had to come meet her." Jasper became emotional and put his arm around Henry. "This boy was a blessing to me, and my family and I have to meet the woman who brought him into this world."

"That is awesome, Jasper."

Smiling, Noelle watched as Henry took his father over to Janette. Though she wasn't close enough to hear, she could see the fearfulness in Janette's expression at first, but then it was replaced with joy.

Noelle's eyes teared up as a once in a lifetime memory unfolded between the three of them.

Her phone buzzed in her purse with a notification and she retrieved it. A message from her sister.

Mandy: Want to do lunch today? Mom is coming too, and Gabe is watching kids, so it'll just be us three girls.

Excited to have lunch with her mother and sister, Noelle replied right away.

Noelle: Yes!

* *

Arriving at The Onion on Division Street, Noelle slipped into the booth where Mandy was sitting.

"Mom's running late. She'll be here soon. How's everything going?"

Touching her forehead, she laughed lightly. "Where do I start?"

Her sister laughed and took a sip of her tea.

"Henry and I are together."

"What?" Setting the iced tea down, she shook her head. "How'd that happen? Oh, wait. That's right. He was with you in Colville yesterday."

"Yep."

"You two are so too funny. Throw some open road at you and your relationship changes. I would be nervous to get married if I were you."

"Why?"

Mandy laughed. "I was kidding, Sis. Get it? By the honeymoon, you could be divorced."

"Ha-ha. Very funny." Noelle thought of Janette. "Oh. There's more!"

"More?" Her sister appeared perplexed.

"Yeah. He met his mom!"

"What? His biological mom?"

"Yep."

"When did this happen?"

"Yesterday. I dropped him off after we took Max to rehab. And a woman was waiting for him in camp, he had helped her earlier by the roadside but she then confessed that she was his mother, so sweet. "

"Yes."

Thinking on last night and how he had come over in the middle of the night, a smile grew on Noelle's lips. "He came over in the middle of the night. It was the cutest thing."

"I would punch a guy for waking me up."

Noelle let out a laugh. "It was romantic. He needed to see me."

"Aw . . ." Mandy was quiet for a moment as she looked away, then she returned her gaze to Noelle. "I remember when Gabe was romantic. I miss those days."

"He's still romantic! I see him kissing you and putting his hand around your back all the time."

"That's not romance, Sis."

Just then, their mother arrived at the table. Noelle figured she would sit by Mandy on the opposite side of the booth, but she didn't. She slid right in beside Noelle and her heart warmed at her mother's kindness.

"Sorry about my lateness. I was talking to the doctors over at the rehab facility. He's in detox for now, so he can't have visitors until he's out of that."

"How long does that take?" Mandy inquired.

"It just depends." Sarah let out a relieved sigh and smiled at each of her girls as tears welled in her eyes. "He hasn't ever been willing to do rehab. I know the chances are high for relapse, but this is a big step in the right direction. And that re-dedication to the Lord that little Henry got out of him. I mean, Henry."

Noelle placed a hand on her mother's back and moved it in a circular motion. "Thank God for God's goodness. Right, Mom?"

"Yes! He has a plan, He always has a plan. Even if it's storm clouds from our perspective, the sun is still shining."

Picking up their menus, they began to browse over the lunch options and discuss Max, their father, and the new beginnings that were unfolding inside their family.

Chapter 17

That evening, after Henry and his parents and Janette had gone into the living room to continue their conversation, Rachel hung back with Henry to clear the table and do dishes. As she lifted a stacked pile of plates, she smiled over at Henry.

“I can’t believe you finally found her, Brother.”

He laughed lightly as he nodded. “Me either, and it didn’t happen until I finally stopped caring.”

As they set the plates down into the sink, she turned to him. “That’s pretty amazing that you were friends with your mother for a whole month without even knowing it.”

“What can I say, it was a gift from God.” Henry said

“That’s neat.” Rachel glanced toward the living room for a second, then back at Henry. “That was selfless of Janette to give you up the way she did.”

Raising his eyebrows as he recalled her story over the dinner table, he couldn’t help but agree. She had detailed out how she had to prostitute in order to keep food on the table. While he disagreed with the fact that she had to sell herself for money, he couldn’t disagree with the fact that she had put his life ahead of her own by giving him up like she did.

“She has made mistakes in her life, but who hasn’t?”

Rachel’s eyes welled with tears, causing Henry to shoot a questioning gaze in her direction.

“Why are you getting teary eyed, Sis?”

“You. You’ve changed so much, Henry. I thought you’d search for her until the day you died, and you didn’t. You gave it all up and then the Lord brought her into your life.”

“It’s true. Honestly, I wouldn’t have been able to handle meeting her if I had done so any sooner. I was a wreck.”

“I agree.” Rachel took a step closer, smiling as she playfully teased him. “And now you’re finally with Noelle and can buy her some flowers from my shop.”

Henry let out a laugh.

After finishing with dishes, they joined their parents in the living room. Seeing a baby book out and open on Janette’s lap, his heart was moved with compassion as he saw the pain in her eyes. Without his selfishness in the way, Henry was able to see how much she had lost in giving him up as a child. He sat down beside her on the couch, and she turned to him.

"I know I keep saying it, but I'm so sorry."

Shaking his head, his gaze met hers, then went to Jasper and Priscilla for a moment, then back to her. "Don't be sorry. You put me before yourself that night you laid me in the manger. I can never thank you enough for doing that, Janette."

"We were talking to Janette about getting her into an apartment, but she didn't like the idea of having everything paid for."

Nodding, Henry recalled someone's mention of the converted hotel that now served as a stepping stone for those who wanted to be rehabilitated into society.

"What about a shelter?"

She shrugged. "I don't know about that. I've met a lot of addicts in those and I can't be around that."

"This one is different. They really help people get their lives moving, and it's run by Christians. At least check it out?"

"Okay."

"I'll call and set it up."

Standing up from the couch, Henry walked into the other room and phoned over to Frankie for the number. Calling the number, a woman answered. It turned out they had a vacancy for their middle-aged block of rooms and could see her tonight if she was willing. Hanging up, he went back into the living room.

"I don't know . . ." Janette seemed uncomfortable with the idea and Henry could sense it.

"Let's table it for now."

Continuing with the photo album, they continued to thumb through the memories and explained each photograph to Janette. It was a difficult time, but he could tell it was beneficial to Janette. She had seemed to glean a deeper understanding of her selfless choice twenty years ago.

* *

A month later, while unloading supplies at the camp from the pickup truck, Henry saw Mary approaching and stopped.

"Henry?"

"Yeah, Mary?"

"She left this morning back to the West Side camp."

"Okay." Returning to the pickup truck's bed, he climbed up and started moving more supplies. Mary moved to the side of the truck and stared up at him.

"Okay? That's all you have to say about it? I thought you two were building a relationship and she was thinking about going to that shelter."

"That is true, but I can't do much about her leaving. I am thankful for the month we had together, and she might come around some day. Until then, I'll keep praying for her and see her when I'm at the camp over there."

Picking up a box, he walked to the bed of the truck and hopped down. Walking over to the tables, he set it down. Mary stopped him with a touch on his arm.

"That's your mom, Henry"

"Yes, but He is my God." Pointing up, he smiled and then his gaze met Henry's eyes.

"He sustains me and gives me life, joy, and peace. I suspected she wasn't going to stick around long-term when she declined the open slot at the shelter a month ago. I've learned we can't get upset when people don't do what we want. What we can do, and should do, is trust God in every circumstance."

"You're a wise man, Henry."

As she walked away, Henry peered up at the partly cloudy sky and prayed.

After he finished unloading the truck, he drove it back across the street to the church and went inside to drop off the keys in Pastor Jacob's office. As he entered the foyer, he found Paul placing flyers into bulletins for tomorrow's service.

"Hey, Henry"

"Heya, Paul. How are you?"

"Good, good. Listen, I got that woman and child placed over there with Tyler in the shelter like you suggested. Luckily, they had a family room open."

"Thanks again for running up to Colville to get them. When she called and said she still needed out of her brother's house, I panicked. I couldn't get away to go do it."

"No worries. It went smoothly. By the way . . . that little girl, Nadia?"

"Yeah?"

"She was asking about you a lot on the car ride over to the shelter. You must've had some impact on her."

Smiling as he recalled their conversation about the King, he nodded. “She had an impact on me too. Hey, do you know if Pastor Jacob is in his office?”

“Yeah, he should be.”

Tipping Paul a nod, Henry said goodbye and continued through the foyer and down the hallway to the pastor’s office. As he walked, he thought about his date later that night with Noelle. The last month they had dated, Henry realized something that was profound. Though they had been friends for years, being in a relationship wasn’t a whole lot different. The only difference was allowing himself to be vulnerable enough to let the love flow through him. Outside of that, nothing had changed, and they were still the best of friends. Tonight, he would do what he should’ve done a long time ago.

Knocking lightly on the partially open door of Pastor Jacob’s office, he walked in.

“Henry. Just the man I wanted to see.”

Rising to his feet, Jacob walked around his desk and struck a handshake with Henry, Confusion filled Henry’s mind as he waited for him to continue.

“If you’re up for it, the church would like to sponsor you to attend Moody Bible College.”

Henry felt tingles wash over his entire being. He had let go of his dream of going to Bible college, and now here it was, being given to him. It was nothing short of a gift from above.

“Chicago?”

“Yep. The church took a vote on it last Wednesday night at the business meeting when you were working late. We’ve known about the calling that was placed on your life at a young age from what you’ve told us. Taking into consideration all of your head knowledge you’ve had for a long time, combined with your newfound heart knowledge of God, you’re a perfect candidate for the ministry.”

Raking a hand through his hair, he nodded. “Thank you so much. Can I get back to you on it, though?”

“Of course. You should pray about it. Talk to Noelle. It’s a life-long commitment you shouldn’t take lightly.”

“Thank you for being understanding.”

Handing him the truck keys, he left the pastor’s office and walked down the hallway to leave. Paul had already left.

Slipping out his phone, he texted Noelle.

Henry: Have time to meet up?

Noelle: I'm at my mom's house, but I can. Can't wait until our date tonight?

Henry: I don't want to wait.

Noelle: Okay. Usual spot?

Henry: Perfect.

Noelle: Give me twenty. Xoxo

* *

Staring out at the thawed Spove River, Henry waited on the cement steps for Noelle to arrive. Peering down at his open Bible on his lap, he read.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

To make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,

And to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church

Ephesians 5:25-29

Henry had been reading this passage over and over again since that first kiss he shared with Noelle. He had no desire to string her along like he had done for so long in their friendship. Either he would marry her, or he would move on from her. This passage was his role as a husband given to him by God Himself. If he could follow this passage and obey its command, he knew he could be the husband that Noelle needed and deserved.

Checking the time on his cell phone, he received a text from her indicating she was at the park. Immediately, his insides trembled, but so did his excitement along with it. This day would be a marker in his life. She could run away from him or decide to be his wife. Did she feel the same way about him? Did she feel as if the friendship they'd had for the last six years was enough to know they were right for each other? Peering up to the sky, Henry knew only God knew.

"Henry."

His heart dipped and he turned on the steps to look at her. She smiled as she walked down the steps and he closed his Bible. Setting it to the side, he rose to his feet to meet her as she came closer. Kissing her, his lips quaked.

"What's wrong, Henry?"

He laughed out of nervousness and shook his head. "Nothing. I'm just a little nervous."

"Why?"

Here goes everything, he thought as he dropped to a knee and retrieved the little black box from his pocket. Bringing it in front of her eyes, he popped it open. It wasn't just any ring inside the box but the one that her mother had worn when her father was alive. He had gotten ahold of Sarah a week ago, and after asking permission to marry her daughter, he was given the ring by Sarah.

"Noelle Ojo, Abeke. You've already made me the happiest man in the world. Would you do me the honor of continuing that for the rest of our lives?"

Covering her nose and mouth with her hands, Noelle let out a squeal of joy. "Yes! Yes, I'll marry you!"

"And it's pronounced A-B-E-K-E." Noelle smiled.

"Just give me your hand, Noelle." Henry chuckled.

Fingers still trembling, Henry pulled the ring out of the box and slid it onto her finger. He rose to his feet, they embraced, and he kissed her deeply.

As they released from their embrace, she wiped her eyes and shook her head. "I can't believe my mom gave you that ring! How did you . . . ?"

"She insisted that you have it." Henry smiled, warmed by the memory of the conversation at Sarah's house.

"I can't believe this is happening! We're getting married!" Jumping up and down, she launched toward him and planted another kiss on his lips. "You've made me the happiest woman on earth!"

"And you've made me the happiest man on earth!" Remembering his conversation with the pastor earlier, he realized he needed to inform her of the developments. Placing her a step back, he raised his eyebrows. "I do have something we need to discuss."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"First Baptist wants to fund me to go to Moody in Chicago."

"I know."

“What? You do?” Relief filled Henry and he opened his palms. “How?”

“I was there at the meeting. Do you know who motioned it?”

He shook his head.

“Terry did, Babe.”

Henry’s heart melted. The man continued to radiate nothing but pure goodness from above, and it was still touching Henry’s heart in the deepest of ways. “Wow . . .”

Jumping back toward Henry , Noelle made him catch her.

“When do you want to get married?

Chapter 18

July sixteenth, The date of their wedding, was soon upon Henry and Noelle. Standing in her dressing room, Noelle stared into the long mirror as her mother, Sarah, sister, Mandy, and soon to be sister-in-law, Rachel, all gabbed on and on about this and that. Noelle's heart was full, and her dream of one day marrying Henry was finally here.

"Noelle?" Sarah held a slight irritation in her voice saying her name.

Turning her head, she looked at her mother with a raised eyebrow.

"I asked if you needed another water bottle. You seem nervous."

Smiling, she shook her head. "I'm just trying to enjoy every second of today. I've dreamed of this for years."

Rachel swiped a hand to push the crumbs of a cookie from her yellow bridesmaid dress. "Usually, bridesmaids' dresses aren't this cute. That was nice of you to get us decent-looking dresses."

Glancing over her shoulder at Rachel, Noelle nodded. "I figured you should enjoy your outfits too."

Mandy laughed. "Rachel, you are the one who picked out the yellow dresses. I know that was months ago, but come on. Your memory can't be that short-term."

Rachel laughed. "That's right! Ha! I did forget."

Noelle's mother walked over to Rachel and complimented the dresses. "You picked out the dresses and all the beautiful flowers in the church. You've got an eye, don't ya?"

Smiling, Rachel shrugged. "God's gift to me, I guess. Well, and to all of you to enjoy."

Laughing, Noelle turned to the mirror again. In moments, the room would be clearing out and then in minutes, she'd be at the front of the church, marrying the love of her life. How could this day be any better? The sharp pain from the loss of her father suddenly invaded her heart and her eyes began to water.

Sarah approached and touched her hand gently. "What's wrong?"

"Dad . . . I miss him today."

Sarah turned to the other girls and asked them to leave the room for a moment. As the door shut, Sarah returned to Noelle and held her hand in hers.

"Your father would be proud of you, Abeke. I know it."

“Thanks, Mom.”

“I know it’s not your dad, but I brought someone other than Gabe to walk you down the aisle.”

“Who?”

Smiling, her mother motioned with a finger for her to wait and then exited the room.

Noelle was all alone and all she could feel was sadness. Peering up at the ceiling, she prayed with tears in her eyes.

Looking into the mirror again, she smiled. She was happy to marry Henry, but it was hard to know her daddy couldn’t walk her down the aisle today. Not even her brother, Max, could get out of rehab for the day in order to attend the wedding. Her heart was hurting.

A knock sounded on the door across the room and her mother came in and shut the door.

“Listen, I know you were under the impression that he couldn’t get out for a few more months, but that wasn’t true.”

Opening the door, Noelle’s eyes landed on her brother, Max. Her heart shot wide open with overwhelming joy and she rushed over to him.

Her mother continued to clue her in. “He had done so well in the first few months of rehab, they moved him over to help other addicts at an outpatient rehab. He’s still being monitored, but since he chose Jesus, he has found freedom.”

“Heya, Noelle”

“Max! I’m so happy you’re here!”

“Me too.”

* *

At the reception that followed the ceremony, Noelle joined Henry for the first dance. As they twirled and swayed to the music, they smiled and looked deeply into one another’s eyes. Noelle knew all along that Henry was the one for her heart. Only, it took longer than she could have ever predicted. It was in his golden-brown eyes that she would find rest from the weariness of the world, and it was in his eyes that she could see a future and a life and children. God had given her not only a spouse but a friend, and for that, she’d be forever thankful.

“What are you thinking about?” Henry asked as he swayed with her.

“How blessed I am to have you.”

He smiled and dipped her. Pulling her upright, he placed a hand on the small of her back and continued dancing. Peering over at Nadia in her cute little pink dress, he smiled. “I’m glad Nadia and her mother could come. They’ve come such a long way.”

“It’s amazing she already has a car and a job. She’s really moving forward in a life for the two of them.”

Henry nodded, thinking about the fact that if he hadn’t been there that exact day and at that exact moment, they could’ve had a different life. “God really does use us, In amazing ways.”

“Amen to that . . . Husband.”

Just saying husband sent crashing waves of warmth and security throughout her body. She knew this man of God would be her rock to weather all the storms in this life. He would never replace her Savior, Jesus, but he’d be able to hold her on those dark and trying days and wipe away those tears when they came her way.

“I like hearing you call me ‘husband’, Mrs. Hart.”

“Say it again!” Noelle didn’t think she could ever get tired of being called that.

“I love you, Mrs. Hart!”

“I love you too, husband!” They shared a kiss as they danced, and then Henry turned Noelle fully around and her eyes fell on Janette. She smiled at Noelle.

“I’m glad Janette came.”

Raising an eyebrow, he glanced over at Janette and nodded. “Me too.”

“She still at that camp on the West Side?”

Henry tipped a nod. “That’s where she wants to be. I can’t understand it, nor do I even try.”

Resting the side of her head on Henry’s chest, Noelle nodded. “Some people just don’t want to change anything.”

“It’s true.”

“I bet you’ve been missing Adam a lot today.”

“You know me well, love. He’s been on my heart since I woke up this morning.”

As the music came to a stop, everyone in attendance clapped and a fast-paced song came on. Children and adults flooded the dance floor and started moving and grooving to the music. Taking a break after a few songs, Noelle walked over to get a refill on her punch.

Pulling down the nozzle, she filled her cup and then walked over to a table where Henry's father was sitting.

She sat down and took a drink.

He looked over at her and smiled, then his gaze fell back to Janette and Henry dancing with Nadia and Rachel and Max.

"You two are a cute couple. You know that?" Jasper took a sip of his water.

"Thanks."

"I'm proud to call you my daughter-in-law, Noelle. I've dreamed of this day."

"So have I."

They exchanged smiles, and soon, Henry walked over to the table to sit down. As he pulled out a seat to sit by his bride, his father tipped him a smile and went to speak with Henry's mother, Priscilla.

Henry looked deeply into Noelle's eyes and kissed her.

As they released from their kiss, Noelle asked, "Do you have any regrets?"

He shook his head. "Wait, I do have one."

"What's that?"

"Not marrying you a long time ago."

And the song by CeCe Winans flooded the entire wedding reception and Henry and Noelle stood up once more, gazed into each other's eyes and danced to the song that went thus

"I could tell by the way you smile

I could feel it in your touch

And I knew this heart of mine

This time would fall in love"

"All the hopes and promises given

And the pain that life can bring

Will build our will and commitment

To face anything"

"I will love you faithfully

Forever unconditionally

And my love, I promise"

"Everything I have is yours

You're everything I prayed and waited for

And my love, I promise you..."

"Now we begin our life today

And though we've only just begun

The quest until we're old and gray

Is the vow to live as one, one, yeah"

"I will love you faithfully

Forever unconditionally

And my love, I promise"

"Everything I have is yours

You're everything I prayed and waited for

And my love, I promise you"

"Through the desert winds that blow

I'll walk you through the winters cold

I'll be there to keep the fire alive"

"And when each passage we endure

We will stay strong, we can be sure

Our love survives"

"And my love, I promise

Everything I have is yours

You're everything I prayed and waited for

And my love, I promise"

THE END

Thank you for reading: The Space Between You and I