

A STUDY IN LOVE

by

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Major Department: English

This thesis contains three original short stories all centered around the theme of love. Through this theme, I explored what it means to love yourself, love others, and love as it relates to Christianity.

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A Thesis

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by

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This thesis is dedicated to Aunt Bessie, Ka'Liyah, and Isis.

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Reflections

“Today is going to be different,” Raymond said; he stood in front of his bedroom mirror. He tucked in his white dress shirt and pulled the zipper up on his navy-blue suit pants. He reached for his burgundy tie and wrapped it around his neck.

You really think you look good, don't you? No one is going to compliment you on what you're wearing; nobody cares. Raymond looked up and saw Ray's reflection in the mirror.

“What do you want?” Raymond questioned. He straightened the knot of his tie and walked over to the shoe rack housing his dress shoes.

Hey, I'm just pointing out the obvious. No one has ever cared about you, Ray said. Raymond didn't have to look at Ray to know that he had a lopsided grin on his face.

“I'm not wearing this to look good for anyone else,” Raymond said. “I just want to look professional.”

Keep telling yourself that. Anyway, you should wear your burgundy shoes instead of the navy-blue ones. Only a stupid person wouldn't match their tie with their shoes. Look at this.

Raymond clenched his fists at his sides and inhaled deeply. After a few seconds, he turned around and looked at Ray.

How do I look? Ray asked. He spun around slowly with his arms outstretched at his sides. Raymond studied Ray's identical navy-blue suit and burgundy tie. When Raymond looked down at Ray's burgundy shoes, he knew he was right. Ray was always right.

“I guess I’ll wear the burgundy ones,” Raymond said. He pulled the pair of shoes off the rack and placed them on the floor.

I’m glad you’re finally realizing that I’m never wrong. You should stop being stubborn and let me run the show.

Raymond ignored Ray and stepped into his shoes. Once he was fully dressed, he returned to the mirror and studied the final look.

We’ll be able to fool anyone with this look, Ray said. Raymond made eye contact with Ray in the mirror and saw the same lagoon-colored eyes that he despised since he was a child. Seeing and hearing Ray every single day was enough to drive him over the edge.

“Yeah,” Raymond said after a slight pause. Ray’s left eyebrow rose in question.

We don’t have all day, Ray said. *Let’s get moving.*

Raymond grabbed his wallet, cell phone, and checkbook off the nightstand. He picked up and pocketed his keys from the small dish on the table beside his front door and exited his apartment. Raymond didn’t bother locking it as he wasn’t planning to return. When he reached his small red 2003 Kia Spectra, he yanked the driver’s side door open and got in. Raymond buckled his seatbelt, put the key in the ignition, and cranked the engine. Looking to his right, Raymond came face-to-face with Ray.

There’s no turning back now, Ray said.

Raymond pulled out of his parking spot and headed in the direction of the highway.

Fifty-three minutes later, Raymond parked his car in front of Hendrick Lexus Charlotte. He checked the time to make sure it was after seven-thirty in the morning.

You know, I have to give you credit, Ray said. Raymond noticed he had his feet up on the dash, and his arms were crossed over his chest. *I still can't believe you quit your job yesterday and went to the bank to transfer money.*

“Weren’t you the one who told me to do it?”

I did, but this isn't the first time I've told you. You're not one to listen.

“Well, let’s just say I’m tired of fighting with you,” Raymond said. “We’re both getting what we want now.”

Ray hunched his shoulders and removed his feet from the dash. He vanished without a word.

Raymond shook his head and pulled down the sun visor. He scrubbed a hand over his face and ran his fingers through his chestnut-colored hair. Before he closed it, he checked his teeth and practiced a friendly smile.

“I’m ready,” he whispered to himself before getting out of his car.

“Good morning, sir,” the young, black-haired man said when Raymond entered the dealership. “What can I do for you today?”

“Good morning, Mr. James,” Raymond responded after seeing James’ nametag. He flashed his lopsided smile. “I’m interested in purchasing a 2019 Lexus LC 500. I talked with one of your salesmen on the phone yesterday and was told that you had one on the lot.”

Raymond saw James’ eyes glance in the direction of his old Kia. James cleared his throat. “Is that so?”

“Yes, sir,” Raymond said.

He doesn’t think you can afford it, Ray whispered into Raymond’s ear. Even with your fancy suit on, you still don’t fit in.

Of course, he doesn’t think I can afford it, Raymond thought. Two days ago, I wouldn’t even be standing here.

He knows you’re pathetic, Ray said.

James cleared his throat once more. “Mr....”

“Raymond Kirkland.”

“Mr. Kirkland, I’m not sure if that’s the right car for you.”

“What a shame,” Raymond said. “And to think I was planning to purchase in full.”

James was attacked with a fit of coughs. “Purchase in full?”

“That’s right, but if you don’t think the car is for me, I’ll just have to reconsider and take my business elsewhere.”

“No, sir, Mr. Kirkland,” James quickly responded. “That’s not what I meant at all. Why don’t we take this meeting to my office?”

Raymond knew a phony smile adorned his lips. “That sounds more like it.”

It certainly does, Ray said.

James led Raymond through the showroom with white marble floors and took him to a medium-sized office with glass windows all around. Raymond glanced at the framed pictures of James presumably with his wife and children.

Sucks that you’ll never have a family, Ray said from behind him. Raymond took the seat on the opposite side of James’ desk.

You remind me of that every day, Ray, Raymond thought. *You don’t have to keep doing it.*

It’s better if you don’t cling to false hope, Ray said.

“So, Mr. Kirkland,” James started. “What made you want to purchase an LC 500?”

“It has been my dream car for some time now. I figured now would be the perfect opportunity to treat myself to something nice.”

Why don’t you tell him the truth? Ray questioned. *What would he think if he knew your actual plans?*

“You know, I aspire to be like you in the future,” James said. He began pulling out forms and placing them on his desk.

HA, that’s total BS, Ray said.

“Would you shut up?” Raymond whispered.

“Excuse me, sir?” James said.

“You would be surprised what I had to go through to get to this point.”

“Of course, sir. Only a hardworking and determined man would be able to come to a dealership and purchase a car of this caliber out of pocket. I can only hope to do something similar in my 60s.”

He shouldn't pump your head up like that, Ray said. He's only saying it to make the sale.

“I almost forgot to ask,” James said, half laughing at his neglect. “Would you like to test drive the vehicle before you make your final decision? I can go get the keys.”

“That won't be necessary,” Raymond responded. “I'm in kind of a hurry.”

“Of course, sir,” James said. “Let's get these papers signed.” He pulled out two pens and continued adding papers to the stack. “Since you're paying in full, we won't have to run a credit check or calculate figures. I'll need your insurance information and a valid driver's license.”

Raymond began gathering the documents. “Is there anything else you'll need?”

“Will you be trading in your Kia?”

Despite James' best efforts, Raymond didn't leave Hendrick Lexus Charlotte until after one. Now, he flew down the highway with the top down on his brand-new LC 500. He'd entered Topsail Island into the GPS and was on his way.

This car drives like a dream, doesn't it? Ray said. Raymond scoffed at Ray wearing the same aviator sunglasses as him.

"I wouldn't have bought the car if it didn't," Raymond said.

Are you getting smart with me? Do I need to remind you who—

"That's uncalled-for," Raymond interrupted. "You're me."

If we're being technical about it, I'm the better part of you.

Raymond looked into his side-view mirror before switching lanes. "I wouldn't say you're the better part of me."

I'm the strongest part of you. You wouldn't know how to function if I weren't here.

"Without you, I wouldn't have contemplated committing suicide for most of my life," Raymond said.

Ray turned his head and looked at the passing scenery. *I just tell you like it is. Why should I lie to you? Why would you want me to create a false sense of happiness?*

"What's wrong with me being happy?" Raymond countered. "Why should I be depressed?"

I don't have an answer for you, Raymond.

Raymond and Ray sat in silence. The wind whipped Raymond's hair haphazardly around his head, and he inhaled deeply.

"Will it ever get easier?" Raymond asked no one in particular.

You won't have to worry about it after tonight. We won't even remember.

"You're right," Raymond said. He nodded his head and added a bit of pressure to his right foot on the gas pedal. "After tonight, we won't have to think about anything else."

Raymond continued driving down the highway. He turned up the music and bobbed his head to the beat. Ray shot him a crooked smile and rested his head on the headrest.

Daddy Mac's Beach Grille? Ray asked after Raymond pulled into the parking lot and flipped the switch to put the top back on the car.

"It looks like a decent restaurant. Figured I'd at least have my last meal." Raymond rolled up the windows and exited the vehicle. The air was cooler now that he'd arrived on the island. The sun slowly sunk and caused purple hues to dance over the water. Raymond breathed in the salty air and enjoyed the evening breeze.

It's too bad that I can't eat anything. I should be able to participate in our final festivities.

Ignoring him, Raymond entered the restaurant and waited to be seated. The small building was packed with people, and the sound of laughter vibrated against Raymond's skin. Jealousy hit him so hard that he unconsciously balled up his fists. He stared at the small family having dinner in a corner booth.

"Welcome to Daddy Mac's Beach Grille. Would you like to be seated indoors or outdoors, darling?" A small woman with short blonde hair and baby blue eyes stood behind the waitress stand.

Focusing on the waitress, Raymond answered, "Outdoors. I'd love a nice view of the beach."

"You got it, hun," the waitress said. She grabbed a menu and led Raymond to the outside deck. Finding a suitable table, the waitress placed the menu on top of it, grabbed silverware from her apron and sat it down, and retrieved her pen and notepad. "May I take your drink order while you decide on what you'll have?"

Raymond sat down and quickly flipped to the beverage section on the menu. "Sure, can I just have an iced tea with extra lemons?"

"You don't want to try our Sea Turtle Mojito? It's a crowd favorite."

Why not get drunk tonight? Ray asked, appearing in an empty seat at the table. *We don't have anything to lose.*

"No, thanks," Raymond said. "As you can see, I'm here alone and don't have a designated driver."

“Ah shoot,” the waitress said. “There I go running my mouth again. I’ll go get you that sweet tea. Take your time with the menu, sug.” The waitress scurried to the door and disappeared behind the glass.

See, you made her feel awkward, Ray said. You probably ruined the rest of her night.

It wasn’t that serious, Raymond thought. I wasn’t trying to come off as rude.

You should apologize to her once she comes back, Ray said. That’s why people don’t like you.

Raymond opened up his menu but didn’t focus on the words. Instead, he thought about what Ray had said.

“Here’s your sweet tea, sweetie,” the waitress said. “Are you ready to order?”

Her sudden return made Raymond jolt in surprise. “Actually, I wanted to apologize for earlier. I hope I didn’t make you feel uncomfortable.”

The waitress laughed. “There’s no reason to say ‘sorry,’ hun. I should’ve used my brain.”

See, she believed that you called her dumb, Ray said while he shook his head. How can you live with yourself?

Raymond laughed nervously and randomly pointed to the first thing he saw on the menu. “I’ll take this, please.”

The waitress craned her neck to see what Raymond had selected. “Shrimp and Grits? Great choice!”

You hate grits, Ray said with a snicker.

“Can I get you anything else?”

“No, thank you,” Raymond mumbled, causing Ray to start laughing harder.

“All right, darling. It should be out in fifteen or twenty minutes. If you need anything else, just give me a holler.”

“Thanks,” Raymond said to her retreating back.

Let’s see how much you’ll enjoy your final meal, Ray said; his eyes gleamed under the fluorescent lights.

You mean our last meal, Raymond thought. He watched as the smile slowly slid off of Ray’s face, and Raymond felt a twinge of pleasure in his heart.

At eight-thirteen, Raymond drove to one of the many beaches and illegally parked his Lexus near the shore. He watched as the dark waves ebbed and flowed; the few remaining seagulls squawked in the distance and many beachgoers were headed home. Raymond pulled out his cell phone and halfhearted looked through his notifications. He already knew that no one had tried to contact him—no one ever did.

Why don’t you check Sammie’s profile one last time before you go? For old times’ sake.

“It’s like you want me to suffer,” Raymond said.

You said you love her. Don’t you want her face to be the last thing you see?

Obliging him, Raymond opened his Instagram app and searched for the all too familiar account. He instantly regretted it when the first picture he saw was Sammie smiling lovingly at her new husband. Her wheat-colored hair flowed in waves down her back, and her husband had his arms wrapped around her waist.

Look at how happy she is, Ray began. Remember when she told you you made her miserable? Remember how much that hurt you?

“She never said the word ‘miserable,’” Raymond said, thinking back on Sammie and his final conversation. “She said she didn’t know how to help me or make things work, which in turn made her unhappy.”

Same difference, Ray said, tscking at Raymond. It hasn’t even been a year yet and she’s already moved on. You’re easy to forget.

Raymond dropped his phone in the cupholder and got out of his car. He emptied his pockets and took off his shoes and suit jacket.

Just think about how free you’ll be, how liberating the water will feel.

Raymond slowly walked to the edge of the shore and let the water soak through his dress pants. His feet sunk into the squishy sand and he wiggled his toes.

“You’re coming with me, right?” he asked Ray.

I told you I would, Ray said. I’m the only one you can depend on.

Raymond took a step into the water. Moving forward, he didn't stop until the water was at his waist.

If we're lucky, no one will find us, Ray said. What's the point in having a funeral when no one would even show up?

Raymond exhaled deeply and continued walking. When the water reached his neck, Raymond began swimming. The waves were hard to swim through, but he managed. He didn't bother looking back at the shore because he feared he'd want to go back. Ray floated beside him.

You should swim further out. Keep going until you can't feel the bottom of the ocean. Keep going until there's only you and me.

Raymond pushed forward; he didn't stop swimming until his chest burned and his arms ached in protest.

That's it, Ray said. Now, let the waves take you.

A wave crashed over Raymond and caused him to hold his breath. The weight of it pushed him down, and he began swimming upwards. When Raymond broke through the surface and gasped for air, Ray stared at him in disbelief.

What the hell do you think you're doing? Ray yelled.

Raymond coughed and flailed his arms and legs about. Another wave shoved him down before he had a chance to hold his breath.

Don't fight it, Raymond heard Ray say. Fighting is useless; you're useless.

Still throwing his arms around, Raymond felt his lungs burning from the exertion. He thought about his mother when she had bought him a red velvet cake for his fifth birthday. Raymond struggled to blow out the candles and she had laughed until her stomach hurt. Her laugh was his favorite sound.

Finding the strength to resurface, Raymond heaved and tried to breathe.

You think you can renege on me? Do you think I'll let you live after everything we've been through? Ray disappeared and Raymond was jerked harshly underwater. Panicked, Raymond looked down and realized Ray was dragging him down by his right foot. Ray sent him a menacing smile and tightened his grip on his leg.

I'll be the anchor that keeps you here.

Raymond let out a silent scream and fought to free himself from Ray's grasp. He repeatedly kicked his feet. Visions of his mother and Sammie devastated at his funeral made him strain. *How could I leave them with that guilt?* he frantically thought. *Don't I love myself enough to want to live? I want to live!*

Using the last bit of energy he possessed, Raymond kicked out his foot and broke the connection. He swam until he broke the ocean's surface for the last time. Raymond turned over on his back and floated until he'd conserved enough energy to find and swim to a nearby buoy. He climbed onto it and prayed that someone would find him. Exhausted, he fell into a fitful sleep.

The blaring sound of a horn startled Raymond awake. He nearly threw himself off the buoy before he remembered his surroundings. The sun's rays reflecting off of the water caused him to squint his eyes.

“Hey, mister,” someone on a boat said through a megaphone. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?” The boat came closer, and Raymond realized that it belonged to the local lifeguards.

“I-I'm fine,” Raymond croaked. His throat felt like the inside had been rubbed with sandpaper, and all of his limbs were as limp as the seaweed floating beside the buoy. Even in this state, Raymond was thankful to be alive.

One of the lifeguards reached out his hand, and Raymond clutched it as though it was last his lifeline. When he was safely on board, he dropped to his knees and remained on all fours; he marveled at the sensation of having something solid underneath him.

“Sir,” someone else said, “I'm going to check you out, okay? Are you hurt anywhere?”

Raymond expected to hear Ray's voice criticizing him, but it never came. Stunned, Raymond searched for Ray's ominous presence. The feeling was completely gone.

“I'm free?” Raymond whispered.

“Sir?”

The corner of Raymond's lips lifted upward, and a toothy smile settled on his face. “My pesky reflection is gone.”

Anchor Leg

“On your mark. Get set.”

At the sound of the pistol, Destiny experienced a familiar adrenaline rush that made her knees weak and her fingertips tingle. Shaking her hands and jumping in place, Destiny inhaled deeply through her nostrils and exhaled through her mouth. She grabbed the toe of her left Nike sprinter spike and pulled her foot up until the heel touched her butt. She ignored the dull pain she felt in her knee and proceeded to do the same thing with her right foot.

“Golden Gate in lane two has successfully handed off the baton,” the female announcer said. “Hampton U in lane three is close behind.”

“One,” Destiny whispered to herself as she watched the handoff between Tara and Kimberly. She stretched to her left, careful to stay in her lane. Peering at the runner in lane one, Destiny noticed the tension in her shoulders. Feeling the tension in her own shoulders, Destiny rolled them down and felt the muscles relax. She blew her black bangs out of her face and focused once more on her teammate. She caught a glimpse of Kimberly approaching Whitley in the changeover box.

“Golden Gate still in first after the second handoff,” the commentator said.

“Two,” Destiny whispered. She dropped down and lightly placed her hands on the track. The muscles in her legs bunched as she braced herself and got into position. As Whitley approached her, she pushed off the ground and used the momentum to begin running. Reaching

backward with her right hand, Destiny wrapped her fingers around the baton Whitley offered and clutched it.

Me, she thought as she went into a full sprint. Destiny couldn't hear anything but the sound of her own ragged breath and the *slap, slap, slap* of her sprinting spikes hitting the ground. Keeping her eyes on the finish line, Destiny completely tuned out the runners to her left and her right. She pumped her arms and ran as fast as she could, and she didn't stop until she knew she had crossed the finish line. Slowing down to a jog, Destiny let the cheers from the crowd wash over her. She checked the scoreboard to confirm what she already knew: Golden Gate had won the semi-finals, and they were headed to the national championship. She placed her hands on her hips and fought to catch her breath.

"We did it," Destiny heard Tara exclaim before she felt the increased weight on her back. Tara wrapped her arms around Destiny's neck and locked her legs around her hips.

"Tara, you're going to smother me," Destiny said. She laughed while she struggled to pry Tara off.

"You know," Kimberly started to say from behind, "if you kill our anchor, we'll definitely lose the championship, right?" Destiny and Tara both craned their necks around to see Kimberly approaching with Whitley. Kimberly forged a scoff and looked directly at Tara.

"You do have a point," Tara said, releasing Destiny from her grasp. "Our anchor is pretty important."

The four ladies laughed and gathered into a celebratory group hug. When they finished, they made their way over to Coach Peterson.

“Hell yeah, ladies!” Coach Peterson said. “That’s what I’m talking about.” She high-fived Whitley and placed her arm around Destiny’s shoulders. “That was one hell of a handoff between you two.” She turned her attention to Tara and Kimberly. “You two were in sync with each other. I couldn’t be prouder of the work y’all put in as a team today.”

“Thanks, Coach P.” Whitley used her arm to wipe the sweat from her brow.

“Thanks, Coach,” Tara said, “I tried to do what you showed me during practice.”

“I did notice a few areas that require a bit of improvement before the championship,” Coach Peterson said, “but we’ll discuss that on Monday.”

Thank God, Destiny thought. With the adrenaline rush dying down, the dull ache in her knee had turned into a persistent throb. She had to force herself to apply pressure on her left side. She pretended to examine the half-empty stands so that no one would see her grimace.

“We’ll also go over your individual and team stats on Monday,” Coach Peterson continued. “In the meantime, Tara and Kimberly, you two should get warmed up for the hurdles.” She studied her clipboard. “Hampton U’s runners are pretty good, but your individual times are faster than theirs. I’m expecting good results from both of you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tara said. She grabbed Kimberly’s wrist and tried to drag her away.

Kimberly dug her heels into the ground which caused her box braids to whip in her face. She looked down at Tara’s fingers clamped around her wrist. “What did I tell you about physical contact?”

“Argument incoming,” Whitley whispered to Destiny and Coach Peterson when Tara released her hold on Kimberly and took a step back.

“We’ve been roommates since freshman year,” Tara said. She blew a stray brown curl out of her face. “Look at Destiny and Whitley. They get along just fine.”

“What do we have to do with this conversation?” Destiny questioned. Whitley agreed with her.

“Last time I checked, I’m not Des or Whit,” Kimberly stated, examining her red fingernails.

Tara pouted and went to grab Kimberly again. “Oh, c’mon Kim. Des and Whit seem more like sisters than roommates. I just want us to be as close as them.”

Destiny walked over to Whitley and lightly punched her in the arm. “Tara does have a point there, Kim.”

“Ladies, ladies,” Coach Peterson interjected, “sorry to interrupt this ‘family’ moment you’re having but Tara and Kimberly need to get ready for the hurdles.” She pointed to the section of the track where the metal hurdles had been carefully put into position. “Let’s go.”

Tara’s pout deepened when Coach Peterson stood between her and Kimberly. Destiny laughed at their retreating backs.

“Want to go sit in the bleachers over there?” Whitley pointed to the navy blue stands across the track. “We’ll be able to watch them compete.”

Destiny felt her knee ache in protest. “Actually, I think I’m going to have to miss their race. I didn’t get to use the bathroom between the sprint or the relay, and you know how weak my bladder is.”

Whitley scrunched up her nose. “Yeah, you use the bathroom every fifteen minutes.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Whatever you say, Des,” Whitley said. “I’ll be over there in those stands. Find me when you’re done.”

Destiny agreed before turning and making her way to the locker room entrance. Opening the door, she hobbled her way inside and flopped down on the bench closest to the locker her stuff occupied. When she placed a hand on her left knee, she could feel the heat and knew that it would soon swell. Destiny opened her locker and grabbed her red and gold track bag. Reaching inside, she found her iPhone and dialed her father’s phone number.

“Destiny,” her father said, answering on the second ring. “How was the race? Did you work on your blind handoff with Whitley? Did you pump your arms the way I showed you the last time you came home?”

Destiny sighed. “Hello to you too, Dad.” She took the phone from her ear, turned the speakerphone on, and placed it on the bench beside her. Destiny heard her father chip his teeth.

“How was the race?” he asked again.

“We came in first place.”

“I knew you would. I knew you would make it to the championship.” Destiny heard her father clapping in the background. “Next step is winning the championship and applying for the Olympic Trials.”

Not this again, Destiny thought. “But Dad—”

“This upcoming week is going to be a busy one,” her father continued without hearing her. “Should I come and talk to Coach Peterson? Should I hire a personal trainer? Do you need new sprinting spikes?”

“Dad,” Destiny said a bit louder. “We have to win the championship first. Don’t get too ahead of yourself.”

“Too ahead of myself? We’ve been dreaming about this moment since you were five.”

You’ve been dreaming about this moment since I was five. “Yeah,” Destiny said while rubbing a hand over her face. “I guess you’re right.”

“Just imagine how proud your mom would be watching you make the Olympic team. How proud she would be knowing that you’re following her footsteps.”

Destiny didn’t realize she had begun to cry until she felt the first tear land on her arm. She knew that her mother would be proud of her; Destiny believed that no matter what she decided to do, her mother would have supported her. What would her mother have done if she knew Destiny didn’t like running; if she knew that Destiny only ran to please her father?

“Destiny,” her father said after the long pause, “are you still there?”

“Yeah, Dad, I’m here.” Destiny wiped away her tears with the back of her hand.

“You must be tired,” he said. “I’ll give Coach Peterson a call on Monday. You just worry about resting and getting ready for the championship.”

Defeated, Destiny said, “Sure thing, Dad. I’ll talk to you later.” She hung up the phone and let the conversation play over in her mind. Forgetting the pain she felt in her left knee, she

pulled both knees up to her chest and rested her chin on top of them. She let the tears flow freely and wondered why things turned out the way they did.

On Monday morning, Destiny arrived at the Golden Gate University track and field complex thirty minutes early. Practice wasn't scheduled to start until seven o'clock, but she wanted to do some extra stretching and warming up. Saturday's relay and sprint had left her knee swollen and sore. After competing and returning to the hotel that night, Destiny had soaked her knee in the bathtub for two hours (which Whitley had questioned) and took her trusty painkillers. When she was sure that Whitley was asleep, Destiny had hurriedly put on her worn black knee brace and an icy-hot patch. By Sunday night, Destiny had managed to get the pain down to a tolerable level.

Just one more week, Destiny thought as she sat down on the ground and spread her legs apart. She reached for her right foot. *I just need to make it through this last week*. She winced and said "ouch" when she reached for her left foot.

"Des, you're here early," Whitley called out from down the track. Destiny's head snapped up when she heard her voice.

"So are you," Destiny said, trying to cover the pain with a smile.

Whitley dropped her workout bag on a nearby bench. "Are you okay? Is something wrong?"

“Of course not,” Destiny lied. “I’m fine. What’re you doing here so early? I thought you were still asleep in your room.”

Whitley eyed her before saying, “I wanted to clear my mind and reflect on Saturday’s competition. I feel like I do my best thinking out here on the track.”

“Same,” Destiny said. She pulled her legs in and did the butterfly stretch. While she held her position, she watched Whitley begin lunging.

“Hey, Whit,” Destiny said after a few minutes of silence.

“Yeah?”

“Why did you start running?” Destiny questioned. “I don’t think I’ve ever asked you why.”

Whitley paused mid-stretch. “Why did I start running? I guess I started because of my older brother.”

“Does he also run track?”

“No,” Whitley replied. “When we were younger, we would also race each other. He didn’t believe me when I said I was faster than him. Even though I wasn’t, I was determined to prove him wrong. Honestly, I ended up loving the race and now I’m here.”

Destiny twisted her body to stretch her back muscles. “I would’ve never guessed that’s how you got started.”

“What about you?” Whitley asked.

“Running is all I know,” Destiny said matter-of-factly. “My mom ran in high school and college. It was her dream to make the Olympic Team.”

“Was?” Destiny heard the pity in Whitley’s voice and avoided her eyes.

“She was killed in a car accident a couple of months before the trials. She didn’t get to fulfill her dream, so I’ve decided to do it for her.” Destiny grabbed her right elbow and pulled it across her chest.

“I’m so sorry, Des. We don’t have to talk about it anymore if you don’t want to.”

Destiny smiled at Whitley and reached over to pull her brown ponytail. “It’s fine, Whit. I’m just trying to make my parents proud. After my mom died, I wanted to make my dad happy. Running seemed to mean a lot to him so I feel like I’m helping our family.”

Whitley pulled Destiny into an unexpected hug. “That’s why you’re my best friend.”

Destiny playful pushed her off and continued with her stretching. “Alright, alright. Enough of all the mushy stuff.”

Whitley laughed. “Feel like doing some partner stretches?”

“Y-yeah,” Destiny said after a moment of hesitation. “Sure, I’m down.”

“Why don’t we start with a hamstring stretch?” Whitley suggested. “I always find it hard to stretch mine on my own.”

Oh no, Destiny thought to herself. *What am I going to do?* “Sounds like a plan,” she said.

Whitley sat down beside her. “Des, lie down on your back and give me your left leg.”

Destiny reclined until she felt the track against her back. She kicked her left leg up until it rested on Whitley's shoulder. Destiny involuntarily balled her fists when Whitley placed a hand on her knee and applied pressure. Whitley began to slowly push Destiny's leg in the direction of her head. The movement caused tears to gather in Destiny's eyes, and she bit her bottom lip to keep from yelling out in pain. It wasn't until Whitley put more weight on Destiny's leg that she shrieked and repeatedly tapped her shoulder.

"Oh my god," Destiny screamed. "It hurts so bad."

Shocked, Whitley carefully placed Destiny's leg on the ground. "What did I do? Should I go get help?"

"No," Destiny said while she gripped her knee. "Just give me a minute." Destiny squeezed her eyes shut and willed the throbbing in her knee to stop. The pain had her on the brink of passing out.

"I should tell Coach P," Whitley said, standing to her feet. "We need to get the team doctor to look at you."

"I said no." Destiny let go of her knee and lunged for Whitley's legs. "If you tell anyone about this, I'll never forgive you. I told you I'm fine. I know my body better than anyone."

Destiny's outburst surprised Whitley and she lapsed into silence. It took her some time to process what was said. Whitley looked down at Destiny's arms wrapped around her legs. Destiny dropped her arms and stood to her feet.

"Trust me, Whit," Destiny begged. "We're so close to winning the national championship."

“But–,” Whitley started before being cut off by Destiny.

“I swear I’ll get my knee checked after the championship. The team needs me, and you know it. I’m the best anchor that we have.”

Whitley shook her head. “Honestly, I don’t think you should run if your knee is hurting that bad.”

“But it was my mom’s dream. It’s all my dad talks about. I can do this, I swear.”

“I’m not in a position to tell you what to do, but I’m your best friend and I care about you.”

“I know you do,” Destiny said. “As my best friend, you should support me no matter what. If you were in a similar situation, I would do the same for you.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I’m dead serious.”

Whitley stared at Destiny before taking a step back. “I won’t say anything to Coach P.”

“Thanks for understanding, Whit.” Destiny held out her arms and tried to hug Whitley.

“But I won’t be responsible if something happens to you,” Whitley, crossing her arms.

“Destiny, Whitley,” Kimberly called from the entrance of the field, “you’re both here already? Where’s Tara? I thought she was here since she left the suite before I did.”

“I haven’t seen her,” Whitley said, still staring at Destiny. “Practice is about to start. I’ll help you go look for her.” Whitley turned without saying another word to Destiny, and Destiny watched her walk away.

By Friday night, Destiny had had just about enough of the tension between her and Whitley. Whitley had been giving her the silent treatment, and Destiny was sure the rest of the team had noticed that something was off between them. Things were considerably worse at practice; Whitley and Destiny were having a hard time communicating and successfully passing the baton to one another. Blind handoffs were an absolute nightmare and for the first time, Destiny found herself dropping the baton. As the team practiced on the track for the last time before the championship, Coach Peterson threw her clipboard and timer to the ground.

“What the hell are you two doing,” she shouted from the sidelines. A few members from opposing teams looked in their direction. “You call that a handoff?”

Destiny stopped running and jogged back to where the team huddled in a loose circle. She bent over and tried to catch her breath.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into the two of you, but this is unacceptable,” Coach Peterson said. “Where’s the chemistry? The communication? Where’s the teamwork?” Coach Peterson looked at the girls expectantly. When no one responded, she continued. “When I ran

track, we relied on teamwork and if I was having problems, I went straight to my teammates and coach. We're supposed to be a family."

When Destiny finally stood up, she saw Whitley eyeing her. She stared back.

"I don't know what it is," Kimberly spoke up, "but I'm getting sick of it."

"Me too," Tara agreed. "The championship's tomorrow and we're going to lose if you two keep this up."

"Who says you're going to lose? You know losing isn't in our vocabulary."

"We're not going to lose if Whitley hands me the baton like she's supposed to," Destiny countered. She sent a pointed look in Whitley's direction.

"Really?" Whitley retorted. "Well maybe if you ran faster, we would actually place tomorrow. You and your knee—"

"Need to win the championship is placing high expectations on the team." Destiny quickly interrupted Whitley and went to stand at her side. "As team captain, I know that I can be intense at times."

"That's not what I was going to say," Whitley said, turning to Coach Peterson. "She's—" Destiny reached down and secretly pinched her arm. Whitley scowled at Destiny and she stopped talking.

"Whatever the problem may be," Coach Peterson said, "I expect you two to put it aside and perform like you're supposed to tomorrow. Your team is counting on you and so is the Golden Gate community. I don't know what else to say to you all. Practice dismissed." Coach

Peterson reached down and picked up her discarded clipboard and timer. “Destiny, I’d like to have a word with you before you go.”

“Okay,” Destiny said, following behind Coach Peterson. When they walked far enough away from the rest of the team, Coach Peterson cleared her throat.

“Your dad has been talking to me about the upcoming Olympic Trials.”

Destiny felt a knot form in her stomach. “Has he? Isn’t it still a bit too early to be discussing that?”

“I did tell him that, but he was pretty persistent.”

“That’s my dad,” Destiny muttered.

“I’ve been watching your stats for this season and I think you have a strong chance of qualifying. If you’re serious about trying out, I’m more than willing to help.”

“I haven’t given it much thought,” Destiny lied. “I don’t think I’m ready to compete in the Olympics.” She shifted her weight from foot to foot.

Coach Peterson placed an encouraging hand on her shoulder. “I wouldn’t be saying this to you if I wasn’t confident in your abilities. I’ve seen your growth as a runner, and I can see your passion for running. How about you start thinking about it after the championship is over. We’ll discuss it then.”

Destiny shook her head. “That works for me.” *Maybe I’ll be able to find a way to get out of doing it. Would my knee be able to handle all that?*

“Why don’t you head back with the team? I’m going to go talk to Staton U’s coach before we go back to the hotel.”

“Okay,” Destiny said. She turned around and walked back to her teammates. When she reached them, Tara immediately questioned her.

“Spill,” Tara said, looking from Destiny to Whitley.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Destiny said, plastering on a fake smile. “It’s just the stress of knowing that the relay is tomorrow.”

“Destiny,” Kimberly said. “You must think we’re stupid.”

“I’m serious,” Destiny replied. “I’m headed back to our hotel room so that I can rest. See you tomorrow.” She left the group and went to go pick up her things. She turned around and waved at her teammates before leaving.

On the day of the championship, the team silently changed into their red and gold uniforms in the locker room. Destiny pulled out her headphones and listened to music until it was time to go to the track.

“This is it,” Coach Peterson said to the team as they waited to get in position. “We’ve spent all season preparing for this moment. I can’t go out there and run this race for you. You have to want this win for yourself. You have to rely on each other.”

“Runners to your positions,” the announcer said over the loudspeakers.

“Bring them in,” Coach Peterson said before placing her hand in the center of the circle.

The girls hesitated before following suit.

“One, two, three, Devils,” they chanted.

Destiny made her way to the anchor position. For a quick second, she relished in the sound of the crowd and welcomed the charged atmosphere.

“On your mark. Set.”

Time for Destiny seemed to pass slowly as she bounced up and down on her tippytoes. She felt her heartbeat knock against her chest; the blood drained from her head and left her feeling lightheaded. She shook her hands to get rid of the chill she felt in her fingertips. When she glanced to her right, the runner took her time stretching her body to the left.

“One,” Destiny said to herself as she watched Tara and Kimberly make a clean exchange. She lunged forward and stretched her hip flexors.

“Staton U is in first, Golden Gate in hot pursuit,” the announcer said.

“Two,” Destiny whispered when Kimberly reached Whitley. Her knees buckled when she bent down and touched the ground. Just like she’d practiced countless times, she began running when she knew Whitley was close. Blindly, she reached back and grasped the baton that Whitley shoved into her hand.

“Me,” she said as she broke out into a full sprint. In the corner of her eye, she saw Staton U’s anchor coming up beside her. Forcing herself to run faster, Destiny completely shut out the

agonizing pain that attacked her knee every time her left foot smacked the ground. All she could see was the finish line and the bright yellow ribbon that marked her goal. As they drew nearer, Destiny leaned the top half of her body forward and swung her arms behind her. This time, she didn't have to see the scoreboard to know that she had won the race. Continuing with her forward momentum, she ran a bit farther on the track. She smiled at the crowd and waved at the Golden Gate fans.

Destiny felt her left knee pop. Pain gave way to a numbing sensation that traveled up and down her leg. She fell to the ground and rolled until she hit something hard. The back of her head smacked the track.

When Destiny finally came to, she found herself lying in a hospital bed. She heard someone crying softly to her right, and someone tightly gripped her left hand. She protested and tried to pull it free before slowly opening her eyes.

“Des?” Tara said, letting go of her hand. “Let me go get the doctor.” Tara ran from the room, and Kimberly took her place.

“What were you thinking?” Kimberly said with tears in her eyes. “I should really kill you.”

“No,” Coach Peterson said. “I should be the one who kills her. Thank God you're alright. How could you do this to yourself?”

“Sorry, Coach,” Destiny whispered. She couldn’t look her in the eyes.

“Do you know what you put me through?” Coach Peterson continued. “Do you know how hard it was to call your father and explain to him how you ended up in the hospital with a concussion and a busted knee? He’s eight hours away from here.”

Destiny grabbed Coach Peterson’s hand. “You didn’t call him, did you? Please tell me he doesn’t know.”

“Of course, she called me,” Destiny's father said from the door.

“Dad,” Destiny whispered.

He walked over and pulled her into a hug. Coach Peterson ushered Kimberly and Whitley out of the room.

Once he let her go, her father said, “It was incredibly irresponsible for you to run when you knew you were in pain. You know that right?”

“Yes,” Destiny said.

“What was the purpose? The doctor said that from your x-rays, your knee has been torn for months. Months, Destiny.”

“I wanted to make you proud. I knew that running was the only way you felt close to mom. I didn’t want you to give that part of her up.”

“Do you think you suffering injuries is worth something so meaningless? You shouldn’t be sacrificing your body to do something just to please me.”

“But the Olympics—”

“Mean absolutely nothing to me,” her father said. He squeezed Destiny’s hand.

Destiny began to sob. “Oh god, Dad. What did I do?”

While Destiny cried, a doctor in a white lab coat came in and stood at the foot of the bed.

“Hello, Destiny,” said the doctor. He offered her his hand. “My name is Dr. Shelton.”

Destiny placed her hand in his and shook it.

“There are a few things I’d like to discuss with you and your father,” he said.

The tone of his voice sent a wave of nausea through her stomach. Destiny responded by shaking her head.

“How long has your knee been hurting you?”

“A few months,” Destiny said. Dr. Shelton shook his head while looking at his notes.

“I see,” Dr. Shelton said. “From the looks of your x-ray, your meniscus has been torn for quite some time.”

“So,” Destiny’s father said. “What’s going to happen to it? Now that the season’s over, she’ll be able to rest as much as she needs to.”

Dr. Shelton looked at Destiny’s father and then look at Destiny with an unreadable expression. “Destiny, an injury this severe is going to require surgery and months of rehabilitation.”

“S-surgery?” Destiny stuttered. “Rehabilitation? But I’m the captain of the track team. Next year is my last year at Golden Gate. I need to be on the field.”

Dr. Shelton took her hand in his. “Destiny, there’s a possibility that you’ll never be able to sprint again.”

Destiny looked towards her dad. “What are we—”

Her father laid a hand on top of her head. “Forget about sprinting, Destiny. *We* don’t need to run anymore. All we need is each other.

Faith of a Mustard Seed

Two years ago, I never would've imagined myself sitting on this unfamiliar couch with Michael's ashes in a small moss-colored urn on the mahogany coffee table. I would've laughed if someone had told me I'd be wearing all black, mourning the loss of my newlywed husband a week after his funeral service. As I stared at what was left of Michael, I felt someone slightly squeeze my hand.

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry this happened to you. Michael was such a nice young man."

I looked at the face that I had only seen a few times at church and Michael's funeral service last Friday. I whispered something along the lines of "Yeah, he was," and looked down at Michael once more.

"You poor thing," I heard the older woman say. Her grip tightened on my hand, and she quickly shook her head. "I always tell my Richard to stay away from those risky sports. I'd just die if I heard he was snowboarding down some mountain."

A sharp pain stabbed at my heart and caused me to jerk in response. If the older woman had noticed my reaction, she ignored me and continued her unknown personal attack.

"Honestly, I never understood why someone would willingly throw themselves down a slope," she said. "You may be wearing a helmet to protect your head, but what about the rest of your body? What's going to protect it?"

I had been the one that begged Michael to spend our honeymoon in Aspen. I was the one that wanted him to try snowboarding with me. I was the one...

“Excuse me, Mrs. Brown,” someone called out from behind. The older woman turned around. I glanced at the slender figure standing in the doorway before focusing on the square window to my right.

“Ah, Casey,” Mrs. Brown said. Although she still had my hand in hers, I couldn’t feel the warmth. “I was just telling Erica how sorry I was about her husband. Isn’t it just so tragic?”

“Yes, ma’am, it is,” I heard Casey say. “That reminds me. Didn’t you tell Pastor Bennett you could only stop by for a few minutes since you have to attend choir rehearsals this evening?”

Mrs. Brown checked her wristwatch. “Oh dear, I completely forgot about rehearsals.” She stood up from her position on the couch and looked down at me. “Listen here. If you ever need anything, and I do mean anything, come see me at church.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” I whispered. Mrs. Brown *tsked* and gave my hand what I knew she thought was a reassuring pat. She let go and shuffled through the doorway.

“That poor, poor, thing,” I heard her say before disappearing out of sight. With Mrs. Brown’s absence came a wave of hysteria. I tried to inhale deeply, but I could only manage short and shallow breaths. I hesitated before picking up Michael and grabbing the rest of my belongings. Pushing past Casey, I darted towards the exit of the small funeral home. When I reached my small Prius, I sat Michael’s urn in the front passenger’s seat and awkwardly strapped him in. I scurried to the driver’s side and slid behind the steering wheel before starting the car. Unable to stop the sudden flow of tears, I rested my head on the steering wheel.

Someone tapped on my window. “Mrs. Doddridge.”

Startled, I sat up and wiped my face with my shirtsleeve. Casey smiled, and I rolled down my window.

“Yes?”

“I don’t think we’ve had the chance to formally meet,” she said. “My name is Casey Cullen, and I’m a member at Walking by Faith.” She bent down and offered me a slim hand.

“I’m Erica,” I said, taking her hand in mine.

“I wanted to apologize on behalf of Mrs. Brown. We’ve all kind of learned to overlook the things that she says. Majority of the time, she doesn’t realize when she’s being inconsiderate.”

“It’s fine really,” I said. “I’m sure she wasn’t trying to be offensive.” In all honesty, Mrs. Brown was the least of my worries.

“I’m glad you’re not taking it to heart,” she said. “Pastor Bennett asked us to stop by and lend you some moral support.”

“How thoughtful of him,” I mumbled.

Casey cleared her throat before saying, “I’ve seen you and Michael around. Being that you all were new members of the church, everyone paid attention to you. It’s a small town, so seeing new faces is always interesting.”

I knew that most of the saints were curious about Michael and me. We had received stares and had heard the occasional whisper.

“Anyway,” she said, “I’m one of Walking by Faith’s therapists.” Casey reached inside her purse and pulled out her wallet. “If you’d like to stop by and talk, you’re more than welcome to. Sessions are completely free for church members.”

“Thank you for letting me know,” I said.

“Here’s my business card. You can make an appointment before you decide to come.”

I silently took the card from her and read the information. When I looked at Casey, I smiled weakly. “I’ll be sure to give you a call if I need a bit of guidance or just someone to talk to.”

“Great! See you around, Erica.” Casey pulled out a pair of black sunglasses and cover her green olive-colored eyes. As she walked away, the ends of her dirty blonde hair floated in the cool February breeze.

I didn’t want to go home, but I couldn’t bring myself to leave Michael in the car. I parked in front of our small ranch-style home painted in a mustard yellow. Although it was getting dark, I could faintly make out the lilies in the window boxes. Michael asked me to plant them to symbolize us “putting down roots.” Blowing out a breath, I reached over and unbuckled Michael’s seatbelt before grabbing him. I exited the car with my keys and purse in one hand and the urn in the other. An eerie silence was what I was met with when I opened the front door.

“We’re home,” I whispered before placing Michael on the countertop. “We’re home.”

The kitchen was in disarray; dirty dishes filled the sink, takeout containers and empty water bottles covered what available counter space the small kitchen offered, dirt was visible on the off-white tiles. I imagined Michael scowling at me.

“I know you’re probably disappointed,” I said. “I just haven’t had any motivation to clean.” I sat on the worn sofa in the living room. Michael and I had just moved to Asheville three months prior. The house was still substantially bare. I glanced over at one of the few pictures we were able to hang up before the accident. Michael wore a simple black three-piece suit, and I wore a basic white A-line dress with my copper-colored hair in a sweeping updo.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Michael asked. He peered out his driver-side window and looked at the brick courthouse.

“You’ve asked me this same question four times since we left the house.” I put my hands on the sides of his face and stared into his mocha-colored eyes. “I’ve never been surer of anything in my life. I want to do this.”

Michael smiled and moved a stray lock of black hair from his forehead. “I know you said that you didn’t want to have a ceremony. I just want to be sure that you won’t have any regrets.”

I dropped my hands and sat back in my seat. “We’re the only family either of us has. We only need each other.”

“You’re right,” he said. He got out of the car and rounded the front. Opening my door, Michael offered me his hand. “Right this way, future Mrs. Doddridge.”

I smiled up at him and took his hand. Michael pulled me into a hug, and I could smell his woody cologne. We jogged up the steps and entered the building. I could still hear Michael's distinct laughter.

Thinking about that now, tears streamed down my face, and I could barely make out the couple in the picture. Was I really that happy? Happiness seemed like such a far-fetched emotion now.

"How could You forsake us in this way?" I yelled to the ceiling. "What did my Michael ever do to You? Why did You take him from me?" My cries were met with a deafening silence. If someone was listening from above, they didn't give me the satisfaction of responding. I got up from my spot on the sofa and stumbled down the hallway to the small bedroom. Stripping down to my underwear, I threw my clothes into a haphazard pile. I grabbed one of Michael's undershirts from the wooden dresser. Crawling into bed, I buried my nose into the shirt and pictured Michael being there.

A few weeks later, I entered a dingy bar not far from my office. The stench of the bar was strong enough to make me intoxicated even before taking one sip from a beer bottle or shot glass. Loud, unfamiliar music poured out of the bar's sound system, and the bass made the floor vibrate under my feet. A few couples were dancing, and a group of men was over in a corner throwing darts. I made my way over to the bar and sat down on one of the available barstools. Unbuttoning my

violet suit jacket and taking off my work lanyard, I made myself comfortable. Without wasting a single minute, a bartender stood in front of me. His nametag read “Tim.”

“What can I get started for you, Miss?”

“May I have a—” I quickly glanced at the menu. “Coors Light, please?”

“Will that be in a bottle or mug, ma’am?”

“A mug.”

Tim reached under the bar into what I could only assume was a minifridge and pulled out a bottle. I watched him pop off the top and pour the contents into a thick glass mug. He slid it to me before turning to help another customer. I wrapped my hands around the mug and felt the coolness against my palms. What would Michael think if he knew I was inside an actual bar? Would he be upset to see his wife trying to drink her sorrows away?

“What is a pretty young thing like you doing sitting here by yourself?” a brown-haired man drawled on my left. When I turned and fully looked at him, he shot me a lopsided grin.

“Minding my business,” I said before turning away and picking up the mug.

“You think I’ll leave just because you want to be rude? Tim, how about giving me a bottle of Budweiser.” The brown-haired man sat down on the barstool next to me. I paused before taking a sip.

“Ah,” I said. The amber liquid made me cough and burned my throat. I could feel it settling into my empty stomach.

“Don’t tell me this is your first time drinking,” the brown-haired man said.

“So what if it is,” I retorted before taking another sip.

“I find it better if you take large gulps. Who sips a beer at a bar?” The brown-haired man laughed and slightly tilted his beer bottle in my direction. As if to demonstrate, he took six gulps before saying “ah” and slamming the bottle on the bar. “Now, that’s how you get shit done.”

I threw my hand up to shoo him away. I continued to take small sips until I finished the entire beer. The brown-haired man smirked before waving Tim over again.

“How about getting this little lady another beer on me?”

“I didn’t ask you to buy me another one,” I said.

“You shouldn’t turn a nice guy down,” the brown-haired man said.

“I don’t even know your name.”

“I don’t know yours.”

Hunching my shoulders, I grabbed my refilled mug and took a pull. The brown-haired man pretended to clap. Although I wasn’t looking at him, I could feel his gaze on me. He clinked his bottle to my mug and started drinking.

About an hour later, I could barely feel my face. The brown-haired man said something funny, and I laughed and playfully slapped his arm. He caught me by my elbow and repositioned me on the barstool before I could melt to the floor.

“Hey,” he said, “be careful before you hurt yourself.”

“Tell that to my husband,” I said before clamping my hand over my mouth. “Oops,” I said, snickering. “Michael is dead.”

“Uh, are you all right?”

“Oh, I’m peachy. Michael isn’t since he died on our honeymoon.” I couldn’t stop myself from laughing. “What kind of husband dies on their honeymoon?”

The brown-haired man looked sort of disturbed. His left eyebrow lifted in question, and his expression seemed serious. I picked up a peanut from a bowl Tim had brought over and tried to toss it into my mouth. When it sailed over my right shoulder and hit the guy sitting behind me, I patted his head and said sorry.

“Maybe you’ve had enough to drink,” the brown-haired man said.

“Maybe I should have one more,” I said. “Yoo-hoo, Tim! How about another round on me?” I winked at the brown-haired man and gave him a thumbs-up. He didn’t look too impressed.

“Tim,” he said, “that won’t be necessary.”

“Did talking about Michael make you uncomfortable?” I slurred.

“No.”

“Want to know the worst part about the whole ‘my husband dying thing’? We believed that God meant for us to be together, but instead of blessing us, He made sure we were permanently separated. I guess He wasn’t satisfied until I was left alone again.”

The look of pity on the brown-haired man's face had me on the verge of vomiting. I slid off the barstool and stumbled. Gripping the edge of the bar, I held on until I felt steadier on my feet.

"Woah, little lady. Where are you going?" The brown-haired man stood up and placed an arm around my waist. His unwarranted touch repulsed me.

"Let go of me," I bellowed. I clawed at his arm, and he released his grip and held up his hands in surrender.

"At least let me call you a taxi."

"I don't need you feeling sorry for me. I don't need anyone." I kicked off my black heels and bent down to pick them up. The brown-haired man caught me before I could faceplant on the floor. After I snatched the heels up, he led me to the entrance of the bar. Although I was drunk, I was acutely aware of my audience. A woman shook her head at me, and I stuck my middle finger up at her. Who was she to judge me?

When we finally made it outside of the bar, the brown-haired man frantically waved his free hand until a taxi came to a stop in front of us. He placed a hand on the top of my head and shoved me into the backseat before shutting the door. "Take her to wherever she needs to go," he told the taxi driver through the passenger's side window and passed him a twenty-dollar bill. I heard him hit the top of the taxi and watched him stride back to the bar.

"Where to, ma'am?"

"Unadilla Avenue, please."

I pressed my forehead against the cool glass of the window and imagined that it was Michael's broad shoulder. He would've caressed my cheek and mumbled that everything would be all right, that we would be all right. He would have told me to trust in God. I was dozing off when the taxi driver announced that we had arrived at Unadilla Avenue. Instead of giving him my house number, I asked him to drop me off at a nearby gas station and let him keep the extra change (it wasn't my money anyway). I walked barefoot into the store and picked up a six-pack of Budweiser. The cashier looked surprised when I tossed the beers onto the counter.

“Would you like to donate a dollar to the Salvation Army?”

“Would the Salvation Army like to donate a dollar to me?”

The cashier's mouth dropped open before she cleared her throat. “Ma'am, that'll be five dollars and ninety-five cents.”

I struggled to pull my card from the inside of my lanyard and handed it to the cashier. She completed my transaction and thrust my card back into my hand. I snatched the beer off of the counter and marched outside. With my heels in one hand and my six-pack in the other, I planned to have a long, solitary night without interruption.

On one humid evening in June, my doorbell rang. I had just gotten off of work and was having my second can of beer. Annoyed, I got up from the sofa and walked over to the locked front door.

“Who is it?” I yelled. I didn’t even bother to peek out the window.

“Hi, Erica, it’s Casey.”

“What is she doing here, and how did she find my house?” I whispered. I turned around and surveyed the state of my home. I could see the clutter in the living room from the doorway, as well as the pile of trash and empty cans taking over the kitchen.

“I know that I’m here unannounced, but I really wanted to speak with you. Do you mind if we talk inside?”

“Just a minute,” I said through the door. I carefully placed my beer can on the table beside the door and sprinted to the bathroom. I quickly pulled my hair up into a messy bun and attempted to get rid of the alcohol scent by brushing my teeth. I tucked my dress shirt back inside my skirt and slid on a pair of flats before returning to the front door. When I opened it, Casey smiled at me and began walking forward. I blocked her path with my body and quickly scooted past her, closing the door securely behind me.

“Oh,” she said, taking a hasty step back.

I smiled awkwardly. “Sorry about that. My house is not suitable for company at the moment.”

“I completely understand. I did show up expectantly.”

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

“Actually, I’m here to check on you,” Casey said. She tucked a stray blonde hair behind her ear.

“To check on me?” I asked.

“I, as well as some of the other ladies at church, was worried about you. I haven’t talked to you since that day at the funeral home, and you haven’t been attending Walking by Faith.”

“I haven’t been in a good place recently. Since Michael’s passing, things haven’t been the same.” The corners of Casey’s lips turned downward, and this caused me to look away. I watched as a black and orange butterfly landed on one of Michael’s lilies.

“Erica,” Casey started after a brief pause, “we want to be there for you. We want you to trust us enough to let us in.”

“But you don’t understand—”

“Although we’ve all experienced death in one form or another, I know we couldn’t possibly understand what you’re going through. None of us have lost our husbands in the same way that you did.”

“So, why are you making this more difficult than it has to be?” A stubborn tear escaped from the corner of my eye, and I hurriedly wiped it away. Why do I always end up crying in front of her?

“Because I don’t want you to drown in your sorrow. I know what it’s like to feel helpless.” Casey’s admission left me speechless. The few times I had seen her, she had worn a friendly smile. As if sensing my confusion, Casey looked at me pointedly and said, “We’re all dealing with our own problems, Erica. Most people are trying to overcome their own inner struggles.”

“How do you manage it?” I whispered.

“I trust that God will see me through. I remember that He’s doing something greater in my life.”

This was the last thing that I wanted to hear. I crossed my arms over my chest. God wouldn’t have to “see me through” if He had simply saved Michael.

“No matter what you’re experiencing, God is always with you,” Casey said.

“I used to think so,” I said, “but that’s certainly not the case now.”

“Would you be willing to come back to church?”

“No,” I said. “I no longer feel like I belong there.” I saw Casey shift her weight to her right foot. Maybe she was starting to get annoyed with me.

“What about attending one session with me? I know I offered it once before, but I think it’s worth offering again.”

I stared at Casey’s Ford. She seemed like the type that would be persistent. The quickest way to get her and the whole Walking by Faith church out of my life would be to comply.

“Come on, Erica,” she said, holding up one bony finger. “One session and if you don’t like it, you’ll never have to come to another one again.”

“Fine,” I said. “If that’s what you want.”

“Fantastic!” Casey swiftly pulled me into a friendly embrace and then let go. “Would you like to set up an appointment now?”

“I’ll have to check my schedule first.”

Casey stepped off the porch and made her way over to her car. “How about sending me a text once you’ve decided? My cell number is also on the business card I gave you last time.”

“Sure thing,” I said, mentally trying to remember where I’d tossed that small piece of paper.

Casey stuck her hand out the window and waved as she backed up. I stayed out on the porch until her car vanished down the street. Walking back inside, I closed the door and leaned against the wooden frame. I picked up my half-empty can of beer and guzzled the rest. My eyes immediately went to the urn now sitting on the top shelf of the medium-sized bookcase in the living room.

“What am I going to do, Michael?”

Michael didn’t say a word.

The gray leather chaise lounge chair creaked in protest when I sat on it. I stared around the small office and studied the abstract paintings adorning the walls. It was a stark difference from what I envisioned a traditional therapy office would look like; bright pink and teal pillows covered the couch situated on the other side of the room, the bookcase had a mixture of scholarly and popular books on its shelves, a large flower rug covered the middle of the floor, and random trinkets sat in a large antique dish on Casey’s desk. Casey held out a soft pillow and instructed me to lie back. I kicked my feet up and positioned the pillow behind my head. While I got comfortable,

Casey went to get me a glass of water. She placed it on the end table beside the lounge chair and reached for her pen and notepad.

“How have you been, Erica?”

“I’ve been surviving,” I said without really thinking about it.

“What is your definition of surviving?”

“I guess...I mean—” I gave it a bit more thought. “Existing without Michael.”

“I see,” Casey said. She scribbled something in her notepad. “How did you and Michael meet?”

The question caught me off guard. I was sure she was going to dissect what I had just said about surviving and my existence. When I glanced at Casey, she gave me an encouraging nod. “Um, we both grew up in the same orphanage.”

“Neither one of you had a family to call your own?”

“No,” I said. Involuntarily, I began wringing my hands in my lap.

“No?”

“What does any of this have to do with me losing Michael?” I snapped.

“Erica, I’m just trying to better understand your relationship with Michael. If these questions are making you uncomfortable, we can always come back to them.”

I blew out a breath and tried to calm myself. “Let’s just go ahead and get it over with.”

“We were discussing your family situations,” Casey continued.

“Michael’s parents died in a car accident when he was around three years old. None of his surviving relatives were willing to adopt him, so he was placed in the foster care system.”

“What about you?”

“I was told that my parents were teenagers and wouldn’t take responsibility for their mistake. Giving birth to me was the only good thing they intended to do.”

“Do you resent them for giving up their parental rights?”

“Honestly, I hated them when I was younger.”

“And now?”

“Now that I’m older, I’m more appreciative,” I said. If my parents hadn’t left me at Mother Sinclair’s Holy Orphanage, there’s a huge chance I wouldn’t have met Michael. “Their selfishness allowed me to meet the most selfless person I’ve ever known.”

“Michael,” Casey said matter-of-factly.

I smiled before saying, “That’s right. Michael was willing to do just about anything to make the ones he loved happy.”

“What have you been doing to cope with his loss?” Again, Casey’s sudden change in questions caused me to hesitate.

“Excuse me?”

“How have you been coping with Michael’s death? Remember, this is a judgment-free zone,” Casey said when I still didn’t answer right away.

“I’ve been drinking,” I whispered and peered down at my hands.

“Alcohol?” Casey asked, and I nodded my head in agreement. “Have you always drunk alcohol?”

“I was never interested in it before.”

“How does drinking alcohol make you feel?”

I sat up a bit in my seat. “I don’t feel anything once I start drinking. It’s like nothing in the world matters anymore.”

“You feel numb,” Casey stated.

“So numb,” I said. “It’s easier for me to visualize Michael being here when I’m intoxicated.” I fell silent, and Casey picked at her lower lip.

“How about we switch gears?”

“Okay.”

“What brought you and Michael to Asheville?”

“Michael received a job offer, and we both thought it was a great opportunity.”

“What about your aspirations? Your career goals?”

I hunched my shoulders. “We figured I would find something once we arrived in town. Michael was big on having faith in God and letting Him provide for us.”

Casey twirled her pen between her fingers. “You don’t hold that same sentiment?”

Did I really have faith in God? Between the two of us, Michael had always been the more spiritual one. “I did before. Now, I’m not entirely sure what I believe.”

Casey made a final note in her notepad before closing it shut. She checked her wristwatch and then clasped her hands together. “Erica, I already feel like we’re on the right track.”

“We’re not going to talk about anything else today?”

“I wanted to use our time today to gain a better understanding of you and your situation.”

“And you believe you’ve learned enough about me in this short period of time?”

“Yes,” Casey said. Smiling, she rose from her seat and did a quick stretch. I gawked at her, and she laughed. “Seriously, Erica, you have to loosen up.”

“Well,” I said, “what’s next?”

“If you’re willing, I can set you up for another session in two weeks. How does that sound?” Casey walked over to her desk and began flipping through an appointment book.

Did I want to come back for a second session? Admittedly, the appointment wasn’t as difficult as I thought it would be. It felt nice to talk to someone and have them listen without really imposing.

“Erica?”

“Do you have anything available on a Wednesday?”

When I heard Casey honk her car horn, I turned off the vacuum and hurriedly put it back into the hall closet. I checked my sleek ponytail, bootcut jeans, and plain black sweater in my bedroom's full-length mirror before grabbing my satchel and keys off the kitchen counter. I touched Michael's urn before picking up the tied garbage bag by the front door and exiting. Tossing the bag in the larger bin on the side of the house, I got in the car and greeted Casey. Instead of attending one of my regular therapy sessions, she had thought it would be a good idea to volunteer at a community outreach program Walking by Faith had planned for the evening. I was reluctant to go at first, but she convinced me to give it a shot. Afraid that I would decide not to go after our conversation, she picked me up in her Ford, determined to get me there on time.

“Reaching out to others is a great way to forget about your own problems,” she said. We sat at a red light.

“Is that why you're a therapist?”

I saw Casey rub her bottom lip (a tell-tale sign that she was thinking). “I've always felt that being a therapist was God's calling for me.”

“I've never really thought about my calling,” I said. I watched a man walk a small dog on the sidewalk.

“What are you drawn to?” Casey asked. “What are you passionate about?” When the light turned green, she made a right.

“For a long time, I thought my only ambition was to be a dutiful wife and mother.”

I felt Casey side-eye me. “That’s still a possibility. It’s never too late for you to get remarried.”

“We’re not going there.” It was a conversation Casey had brought up in one of my sessions, a conversation that I had immediately dismissed. We both knew I wasn’t ready to move on. I couldn’t even entertain the idea.

“Well,” Casey said, “I guess we’ll just have to figure out where Erica Doddridge fits as an individual then.” She parked the car in the parking lot of a Salvation Army soup kitchen.

“We’re here.”

I peered out the window and observed the tiny building with its white siding and red roof. “Walking by Faith volunteered to feed the homeless?”

“It’s something that we try to do at least twice a month,” she said. We both stepped out of the car and entered the building. Casey said hello to almost everyone we came in contact with, and I waved awkwardly at the strangers. When we arrived at the kitchen, Mrs. Brown rushed to our sides.

“Oh, Erica, it’s good to see you,” she exclaimed, pulling me into a tight hug.

“Hello, Mrs. Brown.”

“All of the ladies at church have been worried about you,” Mrs. Brown said. “Casey, did you let her know?”

“I did, Mrs. Brown,” Casey said. I looked at her with pleading eyes, and she gave me the “okay” signal with her fingers. “Mrs. Brown, how’re the preparations coming along? There’s already a line forming inside the eating area.”

“My, my,” Mrs. Brown said, “I almost forgot. Mrs. Meyers called in sick, and she was supposed to be in charge of things today. She also forgot to coordinate with the kitchen staff.”

“Bless her soul,” Casey said. She used both her hands to push back her hair, and she paced over to the large industrial sink to wash her hands. “Erica, we normally wouldn’t ask a newcomer to work as a server on the frontline, but we’re pretty shorthanded right now.”

“No problem,” I said, walking over to the sink to wash my own hands. “What do you need me to do?”

“If you could set up the food trays and burners, that would be great. All the equipment you need should be over in the pantry.”

“All right,” I said. While she assigned positions for each of the volunteering Walking by Faith members, I entered the closet and searched for the required equipment.

Forty-five minutes later, I was standing in front of a ginormous pot of vegetable soup. Mrs. Brown and two other members from the church were further down the line manning fried chicken, biscuits, and cornbread. I made sure my apron was tied in the back and adjusted my hairnet before sliding on a pair of clean gloves. When the first woman and small child walked over to grab a bowl of soup, I offered them a friendly smile.

“I’m so sorry that you all had to wait,” I said. “We’re a bit understaffed this afternoon.”

“There’s no reason for you to say you’re sorry. It’s a blessing that you’re here to feed us.” The woman smiled before nudging the little girl. “Go on, Cassandra. What are you supposed to say?”

The little girl grinned, showing off her two missing front teeth. “Thank you!”

“You’re so welcome,” I said, on the verge of tears. I took their bowls and poured two ladles of soup in each. Watching their retreating backs, I realized just how blessed I was. Casey walked by and sent me a knowing smile. She had been right all along.

On the anniversary of Michael’s death, I sat his urn in the front passenger’s seat and carefully buckled the seatbelt. Pulling out of the driveway, I drove the short distance to the French Broad River. After choosing an appropriate parking space, I quietly watched a family of ducks lazily float across the river. My cellphone rang, and I checked the caller ID before answering the call.

“Hey, Erica,” Casey said, “have you made it there yet?”

“I have,” I said. “I’m sitting in the car trying to mentally prepare myself.”

“Are you sure you want to do this alone? You know me and a few other church members offered to go with you.”

I looked over at Michael’s urn and knew that he would want me to do this alone.

“Although I appreciate your thoughtfulness, I feel like I need to be the one to do it.”

Casey paused before saying, “All right, call me if you need me. I’ll see you in church on Wednesday.”

“Thanks, Casey. See you then.” I hung up the phone and blew out a breath. Reaching over, I picked up Michael and left the car. I retrieved an orange blanket from the trunk and

strolled over to the river. Spreading the blanket out a few feet from the river's edge, I sat down and placed the moss-colored urn beside me.

“You know, I never imagined that our lives would end up this way, Michael. You dying was never supposed to happen.” I plucked a piece of grass out of the ground and tossed it away. “When we moved to Asheville, we had plans of starting a family, of growing old together. We wanted to put down roots.”

A cool breeze made me bury my chin into my buttoned cardigan. “I didn't understand why you wanted to move here, but I'm starting to realize that it was all in God's plan.” For so long, Michael was the only family I had; he was the only person I was willing to let in. “It took moving to Asheville for me to see that I was wrong to isolate myself.” Standing up, I took a hold of Michael's urn and removed the lid. I knew that without God's guidance, I wouldn't have met the wonderful people at Walking by Faith. They wouldn't have become my family.

I slowly made my way over to the river's edge, careful not to slip on rocks. I rolled up my sleeve and slowly stuck my hand inside the urn. Grabbing a handful of ashes, I removed my fist and held it a few centimeters above the water. “Michael, I will always love you. No matter where God and life take me, I will keep your memory alive. I'll carry you with me everywhere I go.” I lowered my hand and released Michael's ashes into the river. I allowed the water to completely cleanse my hand before picking up the urn and slowly dumping out the remaining ashes. After a few seconds, the scattered ashes were no longer visible, and Michael was gone. Walking back to the blanket, I placed the discarded lid back on the urn and hugged it to my chest. I placed it on the ground while I folded the blanket. When I went to pick up the urn, an

orange and black butterfly rested on its lid. The butterfly fluttered over to the river and disappeared into the wooded area nearby.

