

Chapter Nine

Sunday, April 16, Easter Sunday

Saturday evening, after dyeing a reasonable number of eggs and trying in vain to explain to my granny why we didn't need a big meal tonight, Uncle Nolan and my mother took a long walk. I've never wanted to eavesdrop on a conversation so badly in all my life, not because I thought they might reveal some deep, dark secret. Actually quite the opposite. They are the two most genuine people in the world. Each of them is unafraid of searing honesty. There are no pretensions or hidden agendas. My father was the same way, but his position as a pastor caused him to temper that authenticity with some discernment. He was very careful about who he allowed to see his vulnerability. That's just wisdom.

Stacy is not much for vulnerability, either risking it or being entrusted with it. Stacy prefers perfection and she has a way of making you believe that if you do everything she says, you'll achieve it. Once you did, you would be rewarded with her favor. For seven years, I tried my very best.

So yes, I would concede that my relationship with my wife had all the marks of worship, but Nolan neglected to tell me how to untangle myself. I'm at least smart enough to grasp that it will take more than a divorce. I was afraid it would take a series of angry confrontations even worse than the phone call this afternoon. I wasn't sure I had the resolve for that.

But this was Easter. Hope and new life and fresh starts and all that stuff, right?

Easter Sunday morning was exactly the kind of perfect spring day you'd expect it to be. I dressed Christopher in the outfit his mother bought him—a navy blazer with short pants and white socks and oxfords. He looked like a kid from a catalog, which was probably what she was going for. He didn't seem to mind his fancy clothes, so I was sure he'd forgive her for dressing him that way when he was older.

I took dozens of pictures, and so did Mom and Granny. Then we all trooped outside and squinted and smiled until everybody had pictures of everybody else in every possible family grouping.

Before we all loaded up to go to church, I sent a couple of pictures to Stacy. Almost immediately, she called, gushing over Christopher.

I seized on her goodwill and said he looked more like her every day, then I wished her a happy Easter. I stood there until the silence grew heavy. "I've got a lead on a job." That is, if a lead meant I told my uncle James I wasn't interested in it.

"That was fast," Stacy said. Clearly, she didn't believe me. She wasn't entirely out of line.

"Yeah, it's managing a municipal water plant."

"For a whole city?"

"Yes."

"You know, you could ease right into politics from a job like that."

"I'm not sure I'm the political type."

"No, you're probably not." Then she added, "I'll be anxious to have my boy back tomorrow."

I put my phone away and tried not to think about that.

Allen County was old-fashioned enough that nearly everybody went to one of the churches for services. Old ladies and little girls wore white gloves and hats. Boys had their shoes shined and their hair slicked down so that it might stay put through the preaching. A few of the older boys struggled with their first real neckties. Nearly all the kids had sneaked a handful or two of candy into Sunday school.

Now Granny Lucy was out of town, spending the holiday with Aunt Kathleen and Uncle Tom, so I sat with Mom, Granny and Uncle Nolan in the worship service. He enjoyed the whispers that followed him down the aisle. Once we sat down, he leaned over to me, "We should be safe here when the roof falls in." For someone who said he didn't care what people thought about him, he sure found a great sense of entertainment in it.

The sanctuary was filled with the fragrance of the Easter lilies placed there by families in honor or in memory of someone. I think my heart forgot to beat a time or two when I saw my dad's name listed among those who had lilies placed for them.

I think the last time I had been in church for Easter was my freshman year of college. After that, it seemed there was always a fraternity thing going on that weekend. After Stacy and I got married, we visited her folks. Her parents

were social Christians, and never pressured us to attend services with them, especially after the drive from Memphis.

We weren't four notes into the first hymn when I was overwhelmed with missing my dad, and I started to cry right there in the middle of church. At first, you can mostly hide that, but before long it breaks right out in all its ugliness. Mom took my hand, Nolan slipped his arm around my shoulder, and they cried with me. We were quite a sight I'm sure. I suspect a few of the old gossips were pleased that the Lord had finally broken through my hard and impenitent heart.

This wasn't the first time the Grants had been in this situation of crying in church, however, so there were handkerchiefs and tissues all around. I even had one. Carrying a handkerchief was something my dad had drilled into me from the time I was twelve.

Uncle James had a similar preaching style to my dad's. He rarely raised his voice, so the times he did, you took notice. They both believed all the answers a person would ever need were on the pages of Scripture and God would reveal those answers to anybody who looked for them. But as they preached, you got a distinct impression they had some kind of special Bible, one with stuff in it yours didn't have. My dad could wring more truth out of a prepositional phrase than some preachers could from the third chapter of John.

This morning James preached out of John 20, about Peter and John running to the empty tomb. The word "saw" is in there three times, but the last one is a different word in the Greek. Nolan probably already knew that. John saw the grave clothes and he put two and two together. He understood the implications. James said most of us stop with just an agreement that, yes, the facts are correct. The tomb is empty. Yes, Jesus died for our sins, but we never grasp what that means for us, personally. Mom and Nolan both nodded like they knew.

After the service, we stood around and talked, mostly to my other aunts and uncles, even though they were all headed for Granny's house for lunch. Mom was the oldest after David Lee so my uncles Wayne and Gary were closer to my age than hers. They tell me Wayne used to like to babysit me just so he could pick up girls. I was like a magnet, he said. My aunts Gail and Linda were sweet, just like my mother, and I loved them dearly. But Mom, Nolan and Ellen were all in high school together when David Lee was killed and I think that tightened them up. Because they were closer, David and I saw more of Nolan

and Ellen. Sometimes, Mom's family made me wish she and Dad hadn't stopped at two.

I was brazen enough to speak to Andrea again, just long enough to say hello and say how beautiful she looked. She blushed and thanked me.

Nolan walked out to the car with me and Christopher which meant very slow baby-sized steps. "I reckon folks will sleep better tonight knowing God answered their prayers for that heathen Nolan Grant." He grinned. "That is not to say I didn't enjoy the service and I wasn't glad to be there."

"I'm glad you were there," I said.

"Thank you." He clapped his hands and Christopher grinned but shook his head. He was walking. "Good man," Nolan said. "Walking on your own two feet is a great thing."

"Nolan, why do you think God took my dad right when I needed him the most?"

He sighed deeply. "The mentor always dies before the hero can complete his task."

"What?"

He nodded. "It's true. Every story is that way. It goes all the way back to the very first stories. Yours is no different."

"I expected a more Biblical answer."

"Oh, but it is. God is the greatest of storytellers. Moses had to die before Joshua could defeat Jericho. David had to die before Solomon could build the temple. Elijah had to be taken from Elisha. Even Jesus Himself had to die, before Peter and John and the rest of them could achieve their quest. God knows you're ready. It was time to take the mentor."

"I don't think I have a quest."

"Then you are the first man alive who doesn't."

"What's your quest?"

"To slay the dragon. To win the heart of the fair maiden. To prove myself worthy of the fight."

"You confuse me sometimes."

“I could say the same thing about you. And it’s obvious you weren’t listening this morning either.”

We got to my car, but I wasn’t about to end this conversation. “Don’t move,” I said. I got Christopher in his seat and handed him a cup of juice. That would buy me another ten minutes anyway. “Now, I was listening to James this morning.”

“You are at the first ‘saw’. You’re observing the things around you. You comprehend them.” He raised his fingers. “I’m getting a divorce. I need a job, and on and on, but you don’t see what is going on. You don’t understand the implications.”

“I thought the implications were that I got married for the wrong reasons to the wrong person—”

“Michael, I can’t answer that for you. If I do, that makes me a mentor and I know what happens to mentors.”

“You are no help.”

“I am more help than you realize. The thing is, you don’t want a man’s answer. You want an answer from Almighty God. But I will tell you this much, you are a warrior—”

“I am an engineer. An unemployed one at that.”

He shook his head. “That’s part of your problem. A warrior always suffers a terrible defeat, one so great it causes him to question his very identity and calling. Michael, you have laid down your sword, you have taken off the armor and turned your back on the battle.”

“I think you’re a little overly dramatic.”

“What’s your name?”

“Is this a trick question?”

“Maybe. Do you know your name?”

“It’s Michael.”

He shook his head and smiled. “Who is like God?”

“You got that off a bookmark at Cracker Barrel.”

“I got it from the Hebrew.” He rolled his eyes, and muttered, “Cracker Barrel.” Then he looked at me with fresh intensity. “Who is like God? I’ve told

you to listen, and James has told you to open your eyes. You know enough now to be a dangerous man. The only question that remains is, will you?"

"I thought dangerous was bad."

"Evil is bad. Right now, dangerous is needful. For Christopher. For Stacy. But most of all for you."

There were aunts, uncles and cousins in every nook and cranny of my granny's house, with the bigger kids spilling out into the yard. We gorged ourselves, and then had seconds, and then chased that with dessert. It made me wish my dad, and Papa Tom were here to see it all. I could tell Mom and Granny wished the same thing.

Late in the afternoon, folks began to slip away. James stood and announced he needed to get ready to preach again. He hugged Granny and Mom and shuffled toward the front door. He looked at me and nodded. I took my cue to follow him. "Michael, we're praying for you and Stacy."

"Thank you. This was a good weekend for me. A good break. I think I'm ready for the battle ahead."

"Just don't rush into it unarmed and alone."

"I won't."

That was all he said until we got out to his car. He swung open the driver's side door and leaned on it. The entire car listed. "You know, I think a lot of Nolan. He's probably a good one to talk to since he's been through a divorce."

"He's helped a lot over the last few days."

"I wish he'd find a church."

"I don't know many that are ready for him."

James smiled. "You have a point." He sighed deeply. I braced for his pronouncement. "Michael, it is far easier for us to come up with policies and procedures and black and white guidelines than it is to deal with individuals in their unique situations. However, Jesus always dealt with people as individuals.

While it might be convenient for me to ignore that by saying I don't have the wisdom of Jesus, the fact is, I could have that wisdom if I had asked for it."

He straightened up and he looked me in the eye. "I owe you an apology, Michael."

"What for?"

"You came to me for counsel and I very sanctimoniously delivered a one-size-fits-all Band-Aid of a solution. That was wrong, and I apologize."

"It was good advice. I understand that God hates divorce and saving the marriage is the best-case scenario."

He smiled gently. "We throw that around an awful lot, don't we? 'God hates divorce.' Unfortunately, our lack of compassion toward people who have divorced has turned it into, 'God hates divorced people, and frankly so do we.'"

I admit I had gotten that impression more than once.

"God has a very tender heart, and He knows the pain that divorces causes people. He hates it for the pain and suffering it causes. He hates it because it destroys the picture of Christ's love for His church. But He doesn't hate you. Or Stacy, or anyone else who's gone through it."

"I needed to hear that."

"I needed to say it. And I feel certain that if your dad were here, that's what he'd say."

I could feel my throat tightening again. "I missed him a lot today."

"I know you did." James smiled ever so slightly. "When you and David were little he'd try to imagine what kind of men you'd turn out to be, and he used to tell me, 'I don't worry about Michael. He's a thinker and he has a good heart.'"

"I disappointed him though. Tremendously."

"Not disappointed. That's the wrong word. Disappointment is about shame, and I promise you he was never ashamed of you. Ever."

That was contrary to nearly every idea I had.

"He hurt for you. He knew that your situation was going to cause grief and pain. He knew there was nothing he could do to stop that. He felt helpless." The corners of his mouth lifted. "Men aren't designed to be helpless."

No, we aren't.

"Last year, right after Thanksgiving, your dad sent me a letter."

My dad actually wrote letters to people and put them in the mail. He was one of the few. Sure he phoned and emailed. He even texted, but he thought there was something about a handwritten letter. He believed if you had something important to say, writing it out longhand gave it more weight. He was right.

"I think maybe it's time I gave it to you." James got the suit jacket laying in the driver's seat and pulled a folded piece of paper from the inside pocket and handed it over. The sight of my father's neat block letters caused a fullness in my chest. I had to blink just to make out the letters.

JAMES,

WE'VE HEARD FROM THE DOCTOR. HE SAYS THERE ARE SEVERAL CLOTS, AND HE FEELS THAT THEY ARE UNSTABLE AND LIABLE TO MOVE AT ANY TIME. HOWEVER, SURGERY IS NOT WITHOUT ITS RISKS EITHER. HE'S PROPOSING ANOTHER ROUND OF DRUGS TO TRY AND BREAK UP THE CLOTS, BUT IF THAT DOESN'T WORK, WELL THEN, WE HAVE SOME HARD DECISIONS TO MAKE.

THE BOYS WILL BOTH BE HERE FOR THANKSGIVING, AND WE PLAN TO TELL THEM THEN. I'M INCLINED NOT TO HAVE THE SURGERY EVEN IF THE DRUGS DON'T WORK. I'M NOT WISHING FOR DEATH AT ALL, BUT I'M MORE THAN READY TO GO IF HE CALLS ME. OF COURSE, DONNA MAY CHANGE MY MIND FOR ME, AND I SUPPOSE THAT'S ALL RIGHT, TOO. UNDOUBTEDLY, THERE ARE A NUMBER OF DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS AHEAD AND I WOULD WELCOME YOUR PRAYERS FOR WISDOM IN ALL OF THEM.

I'M SURE YOU CAN UNDERSTAND HOW A MAN MIGHT BEGIN TO REFLECT ON HIS LIFE HEARING NEWS LIKE THIS. I FEEL LIKE I'VE ACCOMPLISHED EVERYTHING GOD GAVE ME TO DO . . . EXCEPT WITH MICHAEL.

IT IS MY GREATEST FAILURE THAT I NEVER GAVE THAT BOY A COMPELLING REASON TO FOLLOW AFTER CHRIST. I'M CONFIDENT HE'S A GENUINE CHRISTIAN. I'VE PRAYED FOR THAT ASSURANCE, AND GOD GRACIOUSLY ANSWERED ME. BUT SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDST OF ALL THE MINISTRY, I LOST MICHAEL.

I GUESS I EXPECTED HIM TO ABSORB IT. HE'S NOT THAT WAY, THOUGH. HE'S NEVER BLINDLY FOLLOWED ANYTHING. AFTER THAT MESS HIS SENIOR YEAR, HE SEEMED TO GIVE UP ON THE CHURCH AND ON FOLLOWING GOD'S CALL.

AND I LET HIM GO.

WHEN HE CONFESSED TO ME ABOUT STACY, HE WAS MOSTLY SORRY THAT HE HAD DISAPPOINTED ME. I APPRECIATE THAT HE RESPECTED ME THAT MUCH, BUT I FAILED TO GET HIM TO UNDERSTAND THERE WAS A REASON BEHIND GOD'S STANDARDS.

I FAILED HIM.

I BELIEVE WITH ALL MY HEART THAT SOMEDAY MICHAEL WILL BE READY TO COME HOME, ON HIS OWN, NOT BECAUSE HE FEELS OBLIGATED OR SHAMED, BUT BECAUSE HE HAS A HUNGER AND A PASSION FOR CHRIST. IF I DON'T LIVE TO SEE IT, I'M ASKING YOU, JAMES, AS MY OLDEST FRIEND, WHEN THAT DAY COMES, HELP HIM FIND HIS WAY BACK.

"I count it my deepest privilege to honor that request," James said.

I had to read the letter two more times before I could speak. "He was wrong. My dad didn't fail me, Uncle James."

"You understand why he might have felt that way?"

"Of course I do, but . . ." I would have given anything on earth to talk to my dad again for five minutes. "I didn't . . . It wasn't because he failed me or because he didn't teach me."

"Then why'd you leave?"

As if there was a simple answer. Every reason I had sounded more and more like the excuses of a spoiled brat. "I was disillusioned . . ."

"With Jesus?"

"He let my dad down, James."

"Your dad would disagree."

I'm sure he would.

"What should He have done differently?" James asked.

"Excuse me?"

"How should Jesus have handled things? You said He got it wrong. I'm sure you have an idea what He should have done. I'd be interested to hear it."

Those should have been fighting words. If David had spoken them, they would have been. But I could hear them in my dad's voice. And that was all it took. "I . . . He shouldn't . . ." I was going to cry in front of James. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, hoping in vain to hold it all back. "He shouldn't

have taken my dad. He shouldn't have, James. I need my dad. I need his wisdom. I need his forgiveness . . .”

“Bless you, son,” James whispered, and he tried to put an arm around my shoulder. I twisted away.

“When's it going to stop?” I was demanding answers James didn't have. “I've lost my dad, my wife, my job . . . I did everything God expected of me for ten years—”

“So when God didn't reward you for being a good boy, when He dared let some hardship come into your life—”

“That's not what I meant.”

“Isn't it? You're not telling me that because you went to church when you were young, and you put up with the inconveniences of being a preacher's kid, that should insulate you from the heartaches that touch everybody else?”

It sounded downright ugly the way James phrased it, but yes, I admit I believed that.

“Michael, I'm sure you were a model young man, and I have no doubts you were a good husband and a good manager, but this is not about merit.”

“Then it's arbitrary and I'm not sure I want any part of it.”

“Are those the only two options?”

Heaven help me. Now James sounded like Nolan, too. I stood there trying to think, trying to come up with a counterargument, when I realized I was still holding my father's letter. My father . . . He thought he failed me. He died thinking he was a failure because I . . . because I turned my back on everything he taught me. My hands shook, and great tears spilled out of my eyes. “I want to come home, Uncle James. I'm tired . . . tired of all of it. I want to come home.”