



the Promise Remains

A COLLECTION OF LOVE STORIES

the Watermark

TRAVIS THRASHER



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

Visit Tyndale's exciting Web site at www.tyndale.com

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

The Promise Remains & The Watermark: A Collection of Love Stories

Copyright © 2000, 2001 by Travis Thrasher. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph copyright © by Veer. All rights reserved.

Author photograph copyright © 2006 by Barry Smith. All rights reserved.

Designed by Jessie McGrath

This special edition, first printed in 2006, includes the following titles:

The Promise Remains

Copyright © 2000 by Travis Thrasher.

Designed by Timothy R. Botts

Edited by Anne Christian Buchanan

Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

The Watermark

Copyright © 2001 by Travis Thrasher. All rights reserved.

Designed by Julie Chen

Edited by Anne Christian Buchanan

Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thrasher, Travis, date.

The promise remains ; & The watermark : a collection of love stories / Travis Thrasher.
p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-1506-5 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-4143-1506-6 (pbk.)

I. Thrasher, Travis, date. Watermark. II. Title. III. Title: Watermark.

PS3570.H6925P76 2006

813'6—dc22

2006026991

Printed in the United States of America

12 11 10 09 08 07 06

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

the Promise Remains

A NOVELLA BY

TRAVIS THRASHER



To the sweet and adorable girl
who asked me to be her partner
in our high school play and who has
remained by my side ever since.

I love you, Sharon.

Acknowledgments

With special thanks:

To my parents, for loving and encouraging me. To my sister, for putting up with me. To Ron Beers, for seeing so much potential not only in a novel but also in a crazy kid he hired. To Anne Goldsmith, for your honesty and encouragement regarding my writing career.

To Anne Christian Buchanan, for making this story as good as it could be.

To Francine Rivers, for telling me to write the story in my heart.

To Jerry Jenkins, for your insight, encouragement, and friendship.

To Catherine Palmer, for never once doubting this would happen.

To the Macks, Odells, Pehrsons, and Swobodas, for your loving prayers.

And finally, to anyone anywhere who ever listened to my dreams from third grade on—well, you're holding one of them in your hands.



*Love never gives up, never loses faith, is
always hopeful, and endures through every
circumstance.* 1 CORINTHIANS 13:7



Prologue

THE YOUNG WOMAN stood on the deck of the log cabin, looking into the tear-filled eyes of the man she loved. The normal mixture of mischievous charm and boyish confidence was gone. In its place lay emptiness and defeat.

All because of her.

The pain in his face caused an answering wrench in her heart. Yet she still couldn't utter a single word in response to his question.

He countered her silence by asking again, this time with more urgency, "Will you marry me?"

Words she had waited a lifetime to hear. A question she had prayed would one day come.

Another suffocating moment passed. Finally, she gasped her answer. "I can't."

With the simple utterance of two seemingly insignificant words, all the hope and longing held in her heart vanished. The memories forged by years of dreams meant nothing now. Just like that, it was over.

Snow began to fall, reminding her of where she was.

I can't believe I'm doing this, she thought. Dear Father, please forgive me for hurting him. You know I don't want to hurt him.

“There has to be a way,” he said. “I don’t understand.”

“No—”

“I’ll give you time to think. Maybe all you need is time.”

“I’ve had time,” she replied. “I’m sorry.”

“This can’t be happening,” he said. “Not like this. Not now.”

She stopped herself from apologizing again. “I don’t know what else to say.”

“Say anything except no. Say there’s a chance. There has to be, right? Say something. Give me some bit of hope.”

“I don’t know.”

He choked her name out. “There has to be a chance. All these years. You know how I feel, and I know—at least I thought I knew—how you feel.”

“You do,” she said, afraid of what he would say next.

“Then why? Why are you doing this?”

“I’ve explained it to you.”

“There has to be another reason. Something that makes better sense. Tell me you don’t like my sense of humor. Or the way I dress. Or something like that. Give me something that makes sense.”

“I just—” And then came her tears.

“Oh, man, I’m sorry,” he said, his hands cupping hers. “I didn’t mean to say all that. I’m sorry. Please, don’t look away.”

When she glanced up again, she marveled that his smile looked as warm now as it had when she first met him. Even years later, she could still remember it—the carefree and engaging grin that had captivated her. The smile that could still appear anytime she closed her eyes in the midst of life’s little problems.

But this was not one of life’s little problems; this was her whole life. Her whole life shattering before her very eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “I shouldn’t go on like this—I’m just making it harder for you. I do respect your convictions—that’s one of the reasons I love you so much. I just don’t know how to . . . well, I know this sounds corny, but I don’t know how to let you go.”

Her tears began to fall faster now, and she knew she was losing control. She didn’t want to cry—not this way, not if they were saying their final good-byes.

“I’m trying to think of something more to say than sorry,” she said.

“You don’t have to. I just want to hold you and tell you I love you.”

How can you? she asked herself. *How can you say those things after what I’m doing to you?*

As she embraced him, she searched for the right thing to say. There were so many words she wanted to utter, so much of her soul she needed to bare. But the words failed her.

“I’m never going to stop loving you,” he whispered in her ear. “I promise you with everything I have and everything I am that my love for you will never die.”

How can you say that? her mind screamed. *How can you even dare make such a promise?*

She knew if she didn’t leave soon, her resolve would weaken. She would retract her words and reaffirm her undying love, only to resume the battle of heart and mind that had brought her to this point in the first place.

“I have to go,” she said, pulling away from him. “The storm—”

“I know.”

She took a few steps away from him, then turned. “I’m going to make a promise to you, too,” she declared. “I’m never giving up on you. Every night I’m going to pray that you find your place in this world, that you find hope.”

“I’ve already found my place,” he replied, wiping his eyes. “It’s by your side.”

I know, she thought as she carefully stepped down the snowcapped steps leading off the deck. *God, why does this have to feel so wrong—when I know I’m doing the right thing?*

The word *promise* seemed to echo off the surrounding snowbanks.

“Don’t forget this,” he called out behind her. She turned again. He was following her down the steps, holding out something in his hand.

“No, I can’t. Seriously . . .”

“Please take it,” he said as he wrapped her hand around the small case. “I don’t want it. It’s yours. You’re the only one it can ever belong to.”

She walked toward her car, urging her feet and her heart not to turn back. Her fingers still clutched the little box she just couldn’t open. She knew it held a ring.

Will I ever be able to look at it? God, will you ever give me the chance to?

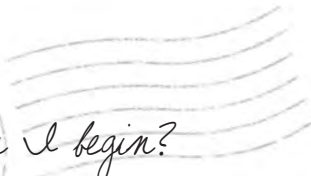
“Don’t forget me,” his voice rose over the howling winds.

With a turbulent heart that mirrored the approaching storm, she believed they would be the last words she would ever hear him say.

THE PROMISE REMAINS



PART ONE



Where can I begin?



Secrets

SARA ANTHONY opened her eyes and wondered where she was. After glancing around the room for a few minutes, she saw a card propped open on the nightstand next to her and then remembered.

It's been a long time since I woke up in my old bed.

Actually, it had been exactly a year since she had last spent the night at her parents' house. Exactly a year since she had taken her mother's suggestion of sleeping over, even though her town home was only twenty minutes away. Mom had asked her again this year, and Sara had found no reason to refuse. In fact, she enjoyed this new tradition of spending the night before her birthday with her parents.

Her birthday . . . *Can I really be thirty years old?* she asked herself. *I don't feel like I'm thirty.*

The date told her otherwise: June 11. Sara rubbed her 8:30 A.M. eyes and read the card.

To Our Beloved Daughter

*No matter how old you are,
you'll always be our little girl.
Happy Birthday.*

Her mother had signed the bottom of the card.

“Sara: We are so proud of you. You are such a blessing to both of us. We love you. Mom and Dad”

Carrying the card, Sara padded sleepily downstairs, where the scent of Mom’s breakfast and Dad’s coffee greeted her. Before even asking she knew the flavors of the day: blueberry pancakes, her favorite, and hazelnut-blend coffee. Birthday-morning pancakes and coffee were an Anthony household tradition.

“It’s the birthday girl.” Her dad sat at the table, smiling over the sports pages of the *Atlanta Constitution*.

“Happy birthday, dear,” her mom added, following her greeting with a hug.

“Thanks. And thanks for the card. But I’ve got to tell you—I’m still in denial about this birthday stuff. So I’m going to try to enjoy some of this beautiful day without being depressed.”

Sara poured herself a cup of coffee—she owed her caffeine habit to her father—and sat down at the table.

“There is nothing depressing about having a birthday,” Mom stated in her firmest, most optimistic voice.

“Unless you’re turning thirty,” Sara said, a bit of sharpness in her morning voice.

“What’s wrong with thirty?” her father asked.

“Nothing if you’re married and have a family. But for us single ladies—”

“Who’s single?”

She looked at her dad and smiled. “Okay, not single. But unmarried. Not that I’m rushing to get married or anything, but still . . .”

“Your time will come.”

“I know. It probably will. But I always thought I’d have a family by thirty. It was one of those unspoken goals.”

“I always wanted to climb Mt. Everest by the time I was thirty.”

“I didn’t know you were a climber,” Sara said to her father.

“Well, I’m not. But you know, that was one of my unspoken goals. Just because you have them doesn’t mean you actually have to fulfill them.”

Sara glanced at her mother and was surprised at her silence. Sara’s unmarried state was one of Lila Anthony’s favorite topics of speculation.

But maybe she was deliberately biting her tongue in honor of the day, Sara reflected gratefully.

“Breakfast smells great, Mom.”

“It’s your favorite—blueberry pancakes. Your father has been nagging me to make them for several weeks now.”

“I have not,” he said, winking at Sara. “I’m fully content with my usual bagel every morning.”

Sara leaned back in her chair and sipped her coffee.

“I’m really tired this morning,” she told her parents. “I don’t know why.”

“You’re an old lady now,” her father said with a laugh.

“What time did you go to bed last night?” Mom asked in a statement that really meant *What time did Bruce leave?*

“About eleven or so,” Sara replied. She did not explain further.

“How’s Bruce doing?”

“Good, as always. We just went to a movie.” Sara proceeded to describe the film, carefully avoiding any further mention of Bruce, dating, marriage, family . . . or any other subject her mother might pounce on.

Being the only child had many benefits, Sara realized, but sometimes she wished she had a younger brother or sister. Then maybe she wouldn’t be so pampered, so cared about, so *scrutinized*. She loved her parents and felt a close bond with each of them. Yet sometimes they still treated her like a little girl instead of a twenty-nine-year-old woman.

Make that thirty-year-old, she thought with a sick feeling. *Thirty years old, and I’m still here being babied and questioned*. She thought of the birthday card: *You’ll always be our little girl*.

She sighed. But then she looked over at the large stacks of delicious pancakes and told herself she really couldn’t complain.

Her mother served the pancakes, starting off with the stack that held the lit candle.

“Mom,” Sara said, rolling her eyes. “Please.” But she had to smile.

“Now we all have to sing.”

And as the three of them sang the corny tune of “Happy Birthday,” Sara felt her morning mood lift. She found herself thanking God—not only for having another birthday, but for having such loving parents.



Sara shifted to fifth gear as she accelerated five miles above the speed limit on the highway connecting her parents' neighborhood of Groveton, Georgia, to her town home in Rex. The white Toyota convertible she drove was her birthday present—a present from her parents, who had helped on the down payment—and from herself. It had only two hundred and twenty miles on it so far, and the new-car smell from the leather seats filled her with delight. It was the first brand-new car she had ever owned—an unaccustomed luxury. Sara hardly ever bought herself anything except the basic necessities and an occasional outfit for school. But outfits that would become stained with paint and chocolate and markers as she taught kindergarten were necessities, too. The car was a bit extravagant, but she figured she would only turn thirty once. Besides, she was thinking that it was time she made some changes in her life. She had been in a holding pattern way too long.

Wind whipped her long bangs across her sunglasses. She listened to a combination of her favorite CDs as she drove past kudzu-covered walls edging the freeway. The Atlanta skyline could be seen in the distance on her left, but today she ignored it entirely. Something about the clear and beautiful summer day made her unaccountably sad.

Sara had lived in the town of Rex since moving into her town home five years ago. She liked having a place she could call her own while still being close enough to visit her parents. She enjoyed her job as a kindergarten teacher at a public grade school only minutes away from home. She also loved the summertime break, when she became more involved with ministries in her church and with the friends in her small group.

Her father, Daniel Anthony, managed the computer technical-services division at a business in downtown Atlanta. He had worked there ever since the move to Georgia during Sara's college years.

The move. The dreaded move. They had lived at the end of Herrington Lane in Groveton for the last ten years. The move from the small town of Maryville, Tennessee, had taken place just before Sara's twentieth birthday. Even after ten years, Sara still did not consider Georgia her home. Home would always be where she had left a part of her heart. She

understood the opportunity the job had offered her father and their family, but the memories of the Smoky Mountains still brought an ache deep inside her, reminding her of a monumental loss in her life.

A loss her parents would never know about.

Sara thought about her mother and dad. She knew they looked forward to the one day she would walk down the aisle and say “I do” to the man of her dreams. Why wouldn’t they eagerly await that moment? Sara certainly did.

I never thought I’d wake up alone on the day I turned thirty.

Sara knew that her sociable, energetic mother was disappointed that her one and only child was still unwed. Lila was one of those dynamic, take-charge women who liked to do things right, and Sara’s unmarried state seemed to make her mother feel strangely incomplete. Besides, Lila positively salivated at the prospect of planning a big, beautiful wedding, and she couldn’t wait for grandchildren. She had talked more and more about marriage as time passed—especially since Bruce had come on the scene.

But Sara found herself hesitant to think about the M-word. Yes, she did want to get married, but she didn’t feel as ready as her mother wanted her to be. And yes, she cared deeply for her boyfriend, Bruce Erickson. But marriage was such a big step. Such an incredible commitment. One Sara had not wanted to face the last couple of years.

In her mother’s eyes, Sara and Bruce were more than ready. Sara knew her mother was already collecting brides’ magazines and browsing in wedding shops.

Could she ever be like her mother? The two of them certainly looked alike—both small and dark—but her mother carried an air of sophistication and confidence Sara knew she could never carry off. Everything about Lila Anthony was organized, structured, efficient. And while Sara had many of these traits as well, she lacked her mother’s energy and drive. When it came to personality, she definitely took after her soft-spoken father.

Both of them loved her so much and only wanted what was best for her. *What is best for me, Lord? Why do I dread getting married like it was some sort of disease?*

She drove on, the late-morning sun bearing down on her and reminding her of past years when she didn’t have a care in the world. Those memories

used to encourage her. Now they only served as reminders of just how much she had failed.



Sara heard the cordless phone ringing but couldn't find it. It took her five rings to finally locate it underneath a small sofa cushion in her living room.

"Hello?" Sara asked in a tone that said, *You'd better not be selling anything.*

"Happy birthday, little lady."

"Hi, Bruce," she said, a smile coming over her lips.

"Has it been a good one so far?"

"Well, besides the fact that I'm thirty—yeah, I guess it has been."

"How's the new car?" Bruce asked her.

"Still as nice as it was when I drove you around."

"You want to drive tonight?"

"Sure. Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise. I just wanted to call and tell you I'm heading over—I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, sounds great."

"See you soon."

Sara clicked off the phone and carried it to her bedroom. The alarm clock on her nightstand informed her that it was 6:45 P.M. Sara knew that meant Bruce would be knocking on her door at exactly 7:00.

Slightly flustered, she rummaged through a dresser drawer for a black slip. She usually ran a little late whenever she went out. Bruce, on the other hand, always arrived on time. Always. Sometimes it was scary how prompt he was. It was as though he sat outside the house waiting to hear his stopwatch go off.

But that's a silly thing to complain about—promptness, she told herself. This birthday just has me in a bad mood. There's nothing wrong with being dependable. Nothing wrong with Bruce. He's a good guy.

Bruce Erickson had first asked Sara out two years ago after a Sunday evening service at church. They had met in the singles' Sunday school class. But unlike many other women in that group, Sara wasn't looking for a boyfriend or a husband. She wanted Christian friends, male and female, and had decided that church would be a good place to find them.

So when Bruce asked her out that first time, Sara told him no. She didn't lie to him or come up with some excuse. She simply told him that at the moment she wasn't ready to date. Bruce never asked her why but simply said okay and tried again two weeks later. Sara said yes that time, figuring it would be no big deal. An actual date with a decent guy might be nice for a change.

After several dates with him, Sara began to enjoy his company. It had been a while since she had gone out with anyone, and Bruce was charming and likable. He was confident and extroverted, never letting the conversation drag or halt, but he was also genuinely interested in Sara. In fact, she could remember him mentioning the L-word on their fourth date. She hadn't said anything in response. It wasn't that she could never love him, but she just wasn't there yet. She wanted to take things slow.

Her mother, of course, had other assumptions. "I just adore him. Don't you?" she asked Sara one day when they met for lunch.

"He's a nice guy," Sara replied with a casual shrug.

"Well, he's certainly handsome, too. Not too tall, nice dark hair—looks perfect alongside you."

"Mom—"

"Honey, you've gone out several times now. Don't you think you should at least have him over for dinner?"

"I probably will. Just not yet."

Mom shook her head. "Why do you have this aversion to fine young men?"

That statement had hurt. Sara had looked at her mother's determined face and had almost begun to cry. Obviously her mother only wanted the best for her, but was Bruce necessarily the best?

"I'll call him, all right? I just don't have time this week."

"I just don't understand you sometimes, Sara." Her mother had walked to the ladies' room and left Sara sitting at the table, wishing she had never introduced her to Bruce.

That was the beginning of it all, the start of The Issue. The dating, marriage, family issue.

Sara could never explain it to her parents—that, as seemingly perfect as Bruce was, something wasn't there. Or more accurately, however

perfect Bruce might be, he could never be someone else. That was the real problem.

And yet, for two whole years now she and Bruce had been dating, and they had even become what her mother called “an item.” It was almost inevitable, when you thought about it. Dating for two years? Obviously, that was serious. With Sara and Bruce both being thirty? That was serious with a ton of implications to it. But Sara didn’t like thinking about those implications—about things like the M-word, meaning marriage. Most of the time she managed to put the possibility completely out of her mind and just enjoy the simple dates and the nice friendship she had with Bruce.

Simple. Nice. Two words she thought about a lot in regard to Bruce. Maybe there’s nothing wrong with settling for *simple* and *nice*.

The doorbell rang at exactly 6:59. Perfect timing as usual.

As Sara headed to the front door in her favorite black dress, she got the same feeling she always got before seeing Bruce. She couldn’t describe it. It was neither good nor bad. It was . . . something.

The words resonated: *Simple. Nice. Simple. Nice.* Then she chided herself. *Sara, you’ve got to snap out of this. Bruce is a great guy, and you know it. What’s your problem, anyway?*

But she knew what her problem was.

She hesitated before opening the door. Yes, she knew why she hadn’t fallen under the spell of Bruce the way so many others had. Others like her mother, who obviously couldn’t wait for Sara to walk down the church aisle.

Her nose wrinkled in annoyance. What was the big hurry, anyway? she wondered. Why couldn’t anyone be patient and understand?

Nobody understood because nobody knew.

Sara opened the front door to the familiar handsome face. “Hi,” was all she managed to say.

Bruce looked at her and grinned. With a flourish he presented her with a single rose. “You look beautiful tonight. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks.”

Sara could hear her mother saying, “What a marvelous flower, Bruce.” Sara found it ironic and even a bit sad that her mother was more impressed

with Bruce than she was. Perhaps mothers were just that way. Bruce always said the right things to her mother. Then again, Bruce usually said the right things to everyone, including Sara. And she couldn't help but enjoy the compliments Bruce always gave her.

They went out to their favorite restaurant, an Italian place called Salvatore's. The restaurant was small and exclusive, and Bruce loved going there. Sara did love the food, but she always found the prices ridiculous. They had actually gone to Salvatore's for their first date. Sara had been a little overwhelmed.

"This is really expensive," Sara had said, looking at a simple bowl of pasta that cost more than thirty dollars.

But Bruce had told her she deserved a nice dinner like this. The fact of the matter was that Bruce owned a successful business employing about fifty people. He could afford thirty-five-dollar plates of pasta—and he told her exactly that. Modesty was not one of Bruce's strong points.

They sat at a small booth off to the side of the restaurant. Soft, romantic music floated around them as usual, yet something was different this night. Sara looked around. There didn't seem to be any other diners in the restaurant. She couldn't be certain at first, but after their meals arrived she could see that they were indeed alone, and she commented on it.

"That is odd, huh?" Bruce said, quickly changing the subject.

This was the first moment Sara suspected something was up, and she began to get a queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. But Bruce said nothing, so she did her best to push her nervousness aside. What was she worried about anyway? Bruce was probably just planning one of his little expensive gestures—a birthday surprise. It couldn't be that bad. It would be nice, she told herself.

It happened after dessert. She ordered her favorite, of course—a slice of rich chocolate cheesecake. She ate it while Bruce drank his coffee. He almost never ate dessert.

"Sara, I've got a surprise for you," Bruce began, scaring Sara even more. "I arranged to have this restaurant all to ourselves."

"You what?" Sara asked with disbelief.

"This was the place we first came two years ago, when I barely knew

your name yet was already in love with you. That's why I would like to do this here."

The waitress came out at that time. She presented Bruce with the bill and Sara with a gray suede box on a porcelain platter. Now Sara knew where this was headed, and all she could think about was escape. *Run, Sara thought. Run now, and don't look back.*

"Sara, would you please open that box?" he was saying as he put a hand on hers.

He really does love me, Sara told herself. Do I deserve that love?

She looked at Bruce and he smiled. His smile made her feel a little better. But her hands still shook as she opened the box to find an exquisite diamond solitaire in a platinum setting.

"Sara Anthony, I have been in love with you for the last couple of years. You know I have dreamt of spending the rest of my life with you. I can't wait any longer. Sara, will you marry me?"

Sara looked down at the sparkling stone and began crying uncontrollably. Of course, an elated Bruce came to her side and took her hand.

"It's okay, it's okay, you don't have to cry," he whispered to her. "I understand. I know you're happy."

But Sara continued to cry. Bruce *didn't* understand. How could he? She barely understood herself.

After a few minutes, she finally managed to control her sobs. Through tear-blurred eyes she saw Bruce kneeling on one knee beside her.

"I'm happy too," he said. "I love you, Sara."

She felt like she might faint any second. *I knew this was coming. But I still don't know what to do. What do I say now?*

"Well," he was asking her, "what do you say?" Strange how he could read her thoughts without having a clue as to what was in her heart.

As if you ever really gave him a chance, she reproached herself once more. Sara took a deep breath and looked at the ring again, then at his happy, eager face.

Bruce loved her, she knew he did. And they were a good match, she had to admit. They could have a good life. Maybe it was time to stop holding out for something that would never happen. All those hopes and dreams—it was ridiculous to hang on to them for so many years. Something like this,

someone like Bruce, might not come again. She had to face reality. And really, it probably wouldn't be so bad. Surely you could learn to love almost anybody . . . and Bruce was not so hard to love.

So with tears of regret that Bruce could not distinguish from those of joy, Sara nodded and spoke a word she didn't want to say but felt afraid not to: "Yes."



To Sara, the evening felt unbearably long, as if she were driving through a deep tunnel with her car lights turned off and the headlights from passing vehicles blinding her. After the proposal in Salvatore's, Bruce took Sara by his parents' house, then to her parents' house to make the grand announcements. Everyone gave them big hugs; the mothers cried, and Bruce's younger sisters all cried and jumped for joy. Sara's mom almost broke down in glorious shock. And Sara, caught up in the excitement, had almost convinced herself it was going to work.

When it was all over around midnight, Bruce gave Sara a tender farewell kiss at the door of her town home.

"I love you, Sara," he said. "We're going to be so happy."

Sara smiled up at him. "We *will* be happy," she replied firmly, and almost believed it herself.

But as she walked to her bedroom, Sara didn't believe her own words. Would they be happy? Would she? Could she be happy with Bruce? Could she ever learn to say the word, the L-word, to him and believe it in her heart?

That was when Sara broke down once again. She examined the ring on her shaking hand and started to cry. *Dear God*, she thought. *What have I done?*

Alone in her bedroom, she could hear the late-night sounds of crickets and cars even through the locked windows. *I shouldn't feel sad, Lord. There's no reason I should.*

The diamond glimmered in the dim light. Sara had always believed a ring like that would mean so much. Now, wearing it felt empty and even wrong.

Forgive me, Lord. I don't know what to think anymore.

For a few minutes she continued to weep, crying desperate tears only God above saw. When she regained her composure, Sara rose and went to her closet. She opened the door and began to rummage around. It took her a while to find what she was looking for.

The shoe box was hidden in a larger box of school memorabilia and old childhood toys that was stuck in the corner of the closet. It had been literally years since she had opened it, but tonight she had to.

Inside the shoe box lay the contents of a life nobody knew about except Sara and one other. Contents of a love and a dream she had held in her heart for so many years. Now that love and those dreams could officially be considered over. She had waited so long for something that wasn't meant to be.

Letters, dozens of them, were bound with a crumbling rubber band. Several trinkets lay beside them—a necklace, a small leather band, a ridiculous pink heart. An envelope full of photos lay inside as well. Not many photos, but enough to stir the hope that had never really left her.

And, of course, the small, square case. She couldn't open it. Not yet. Not now. Not ever.

"I have trusted you, Lord," Sara prayed. "I have remained faithful to my word all these years. So why do I feel so horrible now? Why are you allowing these feelings to remain inside me? Why can't I move on and forget about him?"

She began sorting through the envelopes. Already, tears filled her eyes. How long had it been? How many years? How many lifetimes? How many nights had she dreamed for nothing? How many summer evenings had felt so bland because of remembered nights—remembered promises?

How many prayers had there been? So many—too many to count. "Give me peace, Lord," she whispered.

The letters were as she had left them long ago—in the order she had received them. There were so many.

On the night of her thirtieth birthday and her engagement, Sara Anthony felt miserable. Why did she always do this to herself? Why did she feel more lonely now than ever before?

Because you're angry, a voice inside her said. You're angry at the one whom you've been praying to for years, praying daily for one thing. You're frustrated because those prayers have gone unanswered.

But why? Why had those prayers seemingly gone unnoticed? Sara had searched her heart and her motives when praying. Perhaps she had fallen away from God's will in her life and didn't know it. She could remember the way she had been in grade school and high school—so sure of her faith, so on fire for the Lord. She had never felt lonely or empty then. Certainly there had been times when growing up hurt, but she had always been able to go to the Lord with her needs and her fears. She had always been able to pray to God for peace and for forgiveness.

How long had it been since her soul felt at rest? How long had it been since she prayed to God and felt his gentle calm cover her?

She knew it had everything to do with this box, with these memories. Perhaps the Lord was telling her to forget about them, to move on and get control over her life.

Maybe her prayers had been answered. Maybe God was telling her no.

But something made her believe that wasn't right. Somewhere, deep inside, she still believed. She still held on to a promise made years ago on a wintry day.

Remembering that promise, Sara took the first letter out of its envelope. Her shaking hands held the unfolded paper as she read. More tears fell.

She needed to do this. More than ever now that she was about to give up all hope for what she really wanted.

She began to read.

And remember.



*Every sunrise blossoms
with the memory of you.*

the Watermark

A NOVELLA BY

TRAVIS THRASHER



To my parents,
for never giving up on me.
And to Sharon,
for somehow loving me.

Acknowledgments

With special thanks to the following:

Ron Beers, for your constant generosity.

Anne Christian Buchanan, a remarkable editor I am fortunate to work with.

Francine Rivers, for your encouragement and godly example.

All the people who gave me insight and encouragement in this project—

Anne Goldsmith, Ken Petersen, Becky Nesbitt, Jan Stob, and Danielle Crilly.

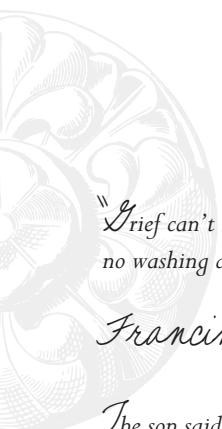
And to M. Zaglifa, whom I had the great fortune to meet the night of

18 May 1993.

WATERMARK :

A mark impressed on paper that is visible only when the paper is held up to the light





*"Grief can't be dissolved like rain washing dust off a roof. Sorrow knows
no washing away, no easing . . . no end of time."*

Francine Rivers, The Last Sin Eater

*The son said to him,
"Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer
worthy to be called your son."*

Luke 15:21



Prologue

I WISH I COULD SAY that before you stands a new man. A changed man. A man transformed by God's grace.

I would like to show then-and-now snapshots, pictures of my miraculous example of healing and heart renewal. I would love to quote the good old songs and verses I heard when I was growing up, about how once I was blind and now I see and all that other stuff.

I wish I could say all this and more, but I can't.

I can say only three simple words: *God saved me*.

I call them simple because I know that for God, it was. I wasn't some magnificent sinner who presented the Lord with a grand challenge. I wasn't someone destined before the beginning of human history to make that much of an impact. I wasn't some Saul who needed to be blinded by the light in order to see, who needed a name change because of the amazing transformation in his life. God simply decided that I would spend eternity with him and a lot more important people in heaven.

Why? I wish I knew. Perhaps that's why I'm writing this—to try to figure out why. He saved a wretch like me. There's another one of those old verses—but one that means so much.

Still, I can't lie and say I feel like a whole new creation or I'm going to

be asked to sign up for the next Billy Graham crusade to tell my testimony. I've only told my story to a few people. I'm not good at public speaking anyway, and I have no idea how to really communicate God's grace. I'd probably fail, just like I have so many times since committing my life to the Lord that long-ago day in fourth grade.

I think if God allowed me to live one hundred years, I still wouldn't be proud of my story. Not a day will go by that I will ever forget how I failed so many people.

How I failed the same Lord who saved me.

But the amazing thing is this: the Lord has never failed me. I stand amazed that he still listens to me. And I know he does. Even now, as I write these words, I know he's hearing them. Even though so many other things are so much more important than my little life, I know God cares about me.

I'm probably sounding like one of those Sunday school songs again. Think I'm going to start singing now?

Jesus loves me, this I know.

I know because he took a little kid into his arms and helped him believe. He made him see how he had died exactly for that kid.

For the Bible tells me so.

It told me a lot more, too, though I closed my heart to its counsel. I grew up and fell further and further away from him. But that didn't mean what he said wasn't true.

Little ones to him belong.

I was one of them, too, but I insisted on running away. For many years, I was a confused and lost child.

They are weak but he is strong.

Only someone so strong and so loving and so incredibly God could allow me to come back to him. Or even more amazing, could seek me out and draw me back—simply because I was marked as his.

Yes, Jesus loves me.

And maybe in this, my story—my fateful account of how I came back to him—I'll be able to give you a glimpse of why I know it's true.

THE WATERMARK

PART ONE

an undeniable past





SEPTEMBER 24

Dear Amy,

I'm not even sure why I am writing.

Today as I walked across the campus grounds I saw someone who looked like you. She passed me on a sidewalk with a smile that didn't notice me. I almost stopped her to say something. But of course, I knew it wasn't you.

All day long I wondered what I would say if I could actually see you or talk to you. I've wondered this for months, years. Perhaps that is why I'm still writing you, even after all this time.

What would I say if I could meet you face-to-face?

I guess above everything else, I would say I'm sorry. I would ask for your forgiveness.

I would ask for one word from you. Any word.

Maybe I'm writing in hope of one.

Sheridan Blake



One

I SAT ON A WOBBLY BARSTOOL in my apartment waiting for the answering machine to haunt me again. The message played, the words already memorized. It was the first time I had actually heard the man's voice. After so many years, he had decided to contact me in person.

I knew he still hated me.

Pressing the delete button on that voice felt almost as good as locking my apartment door and escaping into the October night.

The dark swallowed me as I walked down an alley to the main street a block away. I felt more at ease knowing I was completely alone, unable to be located by ghosts from my past. Yet a voice in my head reminded me I wasn't truly alone. A thousand shadowy memories stuck to my every move. I could never outrun them, no matter how hard I tried.

Chicago nightlife ignored me. I hadn't planned on going out alone again on a Friday. I had told myself I might actually connect with my roommate wherever he ended up, or I might call one of the three guys I was on a first-name basis with at school. But the four-sentence message on my answering machine had changed it all. I needed to go out and forget about that message.

The night felt cool and damp from the earlier rain. I hiked the

twenty-minute distance across busy Chicago side streets to Covenant College and passed under the arches of the arts building on campus. Passing through its front doors always reminded me of entering a church, though it had been years since I had actually set foot in one.

In the auditorium, I sat alone in my usual row of seats. I was half an hour early, but I didn't mind. I would soon be surrounded by students five, six, and seven years younger than me. Funny how relaxed I felt in a room full of people when I knew they didn't expect me to talk with them.

I tried to forget about the message on my machine. But the words continued to play over and over again in my head until a stranger interrupted them.

"Do you know what time it is?"

I glanced up at the figure who had walked to the center of the row of seats in front of me to ask an obvious question. I pointed toward the clock visible on the wall to our right.

"Is that right?" the woman said.

"I think so."

"Okay. Thanks."

The Asian girl with long, black hair pulled back and slim glasses perched on her nose sat down almost directly in front of me. I felt annoyed, the same way I would if someone were to sit by me on an empty plane.

"Do you know what they're playing?" she asked me after a few minutes had passed.

"They never tell you."

"Really? I thought they advertised the movies in the school paper."

"That I wouldn't know," I replied, my tone laced with indifference.

"I've never come to one of these things. Usually I'm out on Friday nights."

She smiled and I nodded, deliberately not looking into her eyes. I neglected to tell her I hadn't missed one since the semester started.

I didn't say anything for a while. The young woman in front of me continued to look around as if she was waiting for someone. The silence made her wiggle uncomfortably in her seat. The only thing uncomfortable for me was noticing her every move and wondering if she was going to turn around again. The nice thing about this particular auditorium was

its big movie screen. Every Friday night there would be a double feature of films tied together by a theme or an actor. So many students came that it had become easy to blend in and get lost in the crowd. Perhaps this was one of the reasons I enjoyed coming.

Students began filing in. I saw it was still almost fifteen minutes until the first movie. Last Friday the whole place had been packed.

“Excuse me. I know this is going to sound strange, but do you have a brother?” the dark-eyed stranger in front of me asked after turning around again.

“No.”

She apologized with a radiant smile. “Oh, I just could have sworn—well, nothing. Sorry.”

“I have an older sister,” I found myself offering.

“No,” she said, “this was a guy.”

“Okay.”

“In a class I had years ago.”

“No brother. Sorry.” That was all I could think of to say.

I searched my memory vaults but couldn’t remember ever meeting any tall, slender Asian girl in any of my classes. I was certain I would have remembered her.

A group of students captured the young woman’s attention—obviously, the people she was waiting for. They filled her row and began talking nonstop. I couldn’t help overhearing their conversation. It was nothing worth noting, except for the fact that they all paid attention to the woman who had been talking to me. A wiry guy with frosted hair and an oversized soccer shirt sat beside her, chatting and whispering and making her laugh. He had an obnoxious laugh I instantly disliked.

Minutes before the first movie, I wondered if the woman was going to turn around again and say something. Yet why would she? And more important, why did I care?

The lights dimmed. So, I assumed, had any more chances of communication with her.

As the opening credits began to roll for one of my favorite movies, the young woman turned around again.

To smile.



The movies that night turned out to be *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Fugitive*. The theme must have been injustice and escape. One guy was in prison and one on the run, but both were desperately clinging to hope.

Had someone known I was coming?

Most of the people around me cleared out before I left the auditorium. The dark-haired woman I still didn't recognize had looked back at me one more time as the second movie's ending credits showed. I saw the brightness in those dark, narrow eyes and knew I could not have seen her before. Surely I would have remembered her. I walked slowly back to my apartment, thinking of the young woman I just had the chance to meet and failed to connect with. Yet was it really a failure? Wasn't that my intention, especially with these Friday night movies—to lose myself in the big screen, to know I could avoid for several hours having to reveal anything about myself to anybody?

Maybe you need to stop living your life through actors on the big screen and simply start living a normal life again.

I knew this. And yet, another voice inside told me that the young woman probably hadn't given me another two seconds' worth of thought after asking me those simple questions. I didn't blame her.

An unseen mist fell outside, and I was soaked by the time I opened the door to my apartment to my old dog's familiar, tail-wagging greeting. Barney wandered over to smell the new and exciting scents on my legs.

I lived with my roommate, Erik Morrison, on the North Side of Chicago, only a short distance from Covenant College. Having lived with Erik since the end of summer, I knew he wouldn't be home—not at such an early hour as half-past midnight.

Maybe it was the combination of the movies and dreary weather and almost meeting a girl I couldn't stop thinking about and probably would never see again. It was that and a lot more, I knew, that made me feel so lonely.

Most of all, it was the reminder of the answering-machine message I had received only hours ago:

“Sheridan Blake. This is Mike Larsen, and I’ve been trying to find your number for a while. We need to talk. Please call me at 312-794-5348.”

The man’s gruff voice. The sharp, harsh tone. The unmistakable words.

I had been gone so long. Seven years. Seven long years spent living with my parents only an hour away in the suburbs, but far enough to make Chicago and Covenant feel like a world and a lifetime away. I never thought I would return, but now that I had, I was feeling overwhelmed.

Minutes later, as I slipped underneath comforting covers, the silence of my apartment allowed my mind to wander past the walled barriers I had erected many years ago. They drifted into areas I hadn’t visited for a while.

Such as God.

The thing was, I knew God was there—watching, waiting. Part of me had always known it. Yet I couldn’t say a word to him. I knew of his forgiveness, of his atonement for sins, of his amazing grace. Yet somehow it just didn’t seem to apply to me. What I had done still seemed too close, too real, too unchangeable.

It had been years, and yet it felt like it all could have happened yesterday.

Talk to me.

And what if I did? another voice answered back in my mind. What if I did finally open the window and begin trying to pray? What could I say? Where would I begin? How could I even try, after so many years?

The words would fail me. I believed this.

I thought of the smile I had been privileged to see earlier that night and wondered when—or if—I would ever have such a carefree grin. I used to carry one around like a puppy, filling those around me with the same enthusiasm my smile showed off. The sort of smile the woman at the movie had displayed.

I could use a friend like her, I thought.

I’m not sure why of all nights I then chose to do the thing I had not done in ages. But I clenched my hands together and breathed in deeply and managed to say two words that had not come out in the last few years. In the last seven years.

“Help me.”



OCTOBER 4

Dear Amy,

I write again, hoping you understand these long-overdue words.

These days, I find myself wandering toward the past even as I plan for the future. I knew it would be a big step, coming back to the city and going back to Covenant. I am so often reminded of it all. Reminded of you.

I carry your picture with me still—I clipped it from the newspaper. A pretty blonde laughing at the camera. A smile so bright it's painful to look at. But I do look. I force myself to look. I deserve these memories.

I only wonder when they'll subside.

Sheridan Blake