

CHAPTER ONE

Monday, January 30

It is no fault of the shepherd when he ends up with a black sheep. That doesn't make it any easier on him, though. My father was one of the greatest men who ever lived, but through no fault of his own, Phil Shannon ended up with a black sheep. Me. I spent my adult life, up until the time my father died, convinced that he was disappointed in me.

I wasn't exactly the model preacher's son. That was my brother, David. David was a hard act to follow. He was always the first one to learn the memory verses. He memorized the books of the Bible when he couldn't even pronounce most the Minor Prophets. He followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather to the pulpit. His theology was impeccable. His haircut piously conservative, and his suits were appropriately dull.

I've stood beside him when my dad would introduce us, and even while folks were shaking my hand, they'd say things like, "We never knew you had *two* boys." My father, to his credit, would always follow that with a comment about how well I did in math or about my gentle nature. He'd look me in the eyes and smile, and that would let me know he understood.

Being a pastor's son, I learned to watch his eyes. They told the real story regardless of what his mouth was saying. Not that my father was a liar, but he was a consummate diplomat. And a doormat.

I accused him of being a doormat anyway. When he asked me why I'd quit going to church, I told him I'd seen enough. I saw the toll it took on him, on my mother, and I said I was through with it. That's when I saw the disappointment. It didn't matter how many times he told me he understood, not that he agreed, mind you, but he understood. It didn't even matter how many times he told me he loved me or when he stood with me at graduation and told me he was proud of me. I saw his eyes. Even in the snapshots my mother took, I could see a hint of it.

I'm glad nobody was around to take pictures the afternoon I told him about Stacy and me. I didn't have to tell him, and there was no way he would have ever known if I hadn't confessed it. But I don't think I could have slept otherwise.

He and Mom had come to visit me in Knoxville, and my dad and I took a long walk while Mom visited with my uncle Nolan. I can remember the exact rock I was looking at when I said, “Dad, Stacy and I have been together.”

He took a long slow moment while it sunk in, then he said, “Do you love her?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Do you intend to marry her?”

“If she’ll have me.”

For a long time, he didn’t say anything. Then he raised his eyes to mine and he said, “I’m glad you thought enough of me to tell me.”

I saw failure in his eyes.

“Michael, there’s very little I can tell you that you don’t already know. You’ve chosen to make things more difficult, more complicated than they needed to be. You have forced your relationship with Stacy out of the place where God can bless it and protect it.”

“I don’t think it’s as big of a deal as you make it out to be.”

He raised his eyebrows. “That’s fairly obvious.”

Those were the first words I thought of as I stood in the baby’s bedroom the day after my father’s funeral. Stacy looked at me and said, “I’m not going to Stinson with you for the memorial. I want a divorce, Michael.”

The only surprise was the timing. I figured she would have said something months or even years earlier. Clearly the marriage was a mistake from the beginning. There are so many wrong reasons to marry someone—for money, for loneliness, for prestige, for adventure, even for sex. But there’s only one right reason. When you think of it like that, it’s a wonder anybody is happily married.

We made such a beautiful couple everyone said, there was no excuse for us not to get married. We *looked* like we belonged together. I know you’ve heard more than once about looks and how deceptive they are.

Starting out, the excitement of the engagement, the mind-numbing intricacy of wedding plans and the giddiness of being newlyweds was enough to blunt the nagging dissatisfaction, the second thoughts, and the gut instincts that we had made a colossal mistake.

I suppose David would contend that it was my punishment for violating God's commands to spend my life trapped in a marriage neither of us really wanted. For a while I would have agreed with him. It was bad enough telling my father that I planned to marry Stacy after being with her. I don't want to imagine that conversation if I hadn't married her.

Of course, then our careers took over. Stacy reveled in her job as a sales rep for a pharmaceutical company. She loved traveling. She loved the wardrobe. She capitalized on her innate charm and she was very successful.

I trudged back to school three months after the wedding. I followed my Uncle Nolan's example and went after my PhD in mechanical engineering. For four years Stacy and I were roommates, roommates who occasionally slept together. She had her life and I had mine. It wasn't bad, and there are plenty of people who had it much worse, but I'd seen my parents. I knew it could be, it should be, much better.

To hear our friends talk, this wasn't unusual. We were a generation that had difficulty committing to a cell phone agreement, after all. But as the miracle of parenthood visited each of them, even I could tell Stacy was unsettled. We took an extended weekend in Atlanta, and she and I talked over a long dinner. We both admitted that our marriage wasn't what either of us wanted or envisioned. However, we weren't comfortable with the idea of splitting.

"Maybe we need a greater purpose to focus on." She meant a baby. Now, Stacy is a brilliant, attractive, successful woman. She is *not* the mothering type. Not at all. For the rest of my life, I will stand by my suspicion that the real reason she wanted a baby was that it would mean some extra attention for her. You're free to write that off as bitterness towards my ex, but I know her.

We found out three weeks later she got her wish that weekend. She was officially an expectant mother. She spent the next eight months glowing, accumulating "darling little clothes," and all the latest technology and gadgetry guaranteed to help us sail through parenting.

Five months in, we learned she was carrying a boy, touching off the frenzy of choosing just the right name. The middle name was easy—John, after her father. I pointed out that my grandfather, the fire and brimstone preacher,

was named John. She smiled and went back to her book of unique, trendy names determined to find one that projected power, yet gentleness, dignity with a hint of playfulness but would also carry him from nursery school to the nursing home. She settled on Kristofer. Not Christopher, the way people have been spelling it since they learned their letters, but Kristofer.

I dug in over that one. She could spell it however she wanted to, but legally the boy's name would be Christopher. I thought I had won, but I had unwittingly revealed my weakness. My son. She saw right there that I would do anything for my son. And she became extremely adept at using that against me.

So we stood there in the half light of Christopher's room where she had pronounced the end of our marriage and the most intelligent thing I could come back with was, "Seriously?"

"You can't be surprised," she said. As she walked out of the bedroom, she unpinned her hair and ran her fingers through it until it cascaded to her shoulders.

I followed her like I was supposed to. "Only that you would be so insensitive as to drop this on me right now."

"There would never be a good time." She went to the kitchen and pulled a crystal stem from the cabinet. She poured it half full of red wine, gulped it down, then refilled the glass. "I thought this would be better than lying to your whole family. I mean, I suppose I can go and act the part of the dutiful wife supporting her grieving husband there in Hicktown."

"Hicktown? What are we? Seven year olds?" She glared but didn't respond. I crossed my arms and leaned against the counter, "It's always been just playing a part for you. You never loved me. You never wanted to. I fit the look you wanted to achieve."

"The whiny martyr bit isn't becoming, Michael."

"I'm not a martyr. I'm not dying over this. I just think we need to be honest about ourselves and where we stand." Now she was sipping her wine. That meant she was waiting on me to open the negotiations. "I'm taking Christopher with me."

"I expected you would want to." She said it like she was doing me a favor by 'allowing' me to take my son to my father's memorial service and burial. We both knew that if she had to spend a straight week alone with him, she'd lose her mind.

“I guess the big question we need to answer right now is who moves out,” she said. That meant me. She wasn’t about to give up her dream house. I wanted one outside of town, with some acreage. She said anyone who had made manager before he was even thirty was clearly a rising star and needed a place suitable for that lifestyle.

I never wanted to be a manager. I was content to sit in my office there in Nashville, and design and size compressors. Nobody hassled me, and unless we were under a deadline, it was predictable and manageable. My kind of job.

Then somehow she found out about this job here in Memphis. “Send them your résumé,” she said. I tried to explain that I didn’t have enough experience, and that I knew nothing about management. Then I gave her a half dozen other reasons not to pursue it. She wouldn’t hear it. Two weeks later I interviewed and a month after that we moved.

“I can’t very well look for a place while I’m gone,” I said.

“I didn’t expect you to move out the day you got back.”

“No, that would be cold and cruel. Almost like asking for a divorce today.”

“Can we get past that, please?”

“All right, well, I will leave in the morning. If you would be so kind as to pick up a Sunday paper, I will get to work on that as soon as is comfortable.”

“I won’t be here when you get back. I have a ten-day swing through Georgia and Alabama.” We moved, but her territory didn’t change. It meant an extra travel day on each end of her trips. This particular trip was news to me.

“When are you leaving?”

“Sunday. I’ll be back Thursday the sixteenth.”

I’d come home to an empty house. “You asked for the divorce. I assume you’ll file.”

“Sometime this week, yes.”

So we took our marriage off life support and let it die quietly, alone and unmourned.

Tuesday, January 31

I got up bright and early after a night's rest in one of the three extra bedrooms we never used. You'd think after a fellow agreed to end his marriage that he might lose some sleep, but that night I slept. Maybe it was because the pressure was off at last. Maybe it was because the fight was over, and we didn't have to pretend. Maybe I was simply exhausted.

Last night, it was a distraction from the grief surrounding my father's sudden death. This morning, it was an amplifier. I had chosen Stacy over my dad, and now I'd lost them both. Stacy never knew, never understood what it cost me to marry her. That sacrifice meant nothing to her.

The only thing that kept me from pulling her out of bed and telling her so was that my son was two doors down, and today and for the next two weeks, he was all mine.

Now Christopher was not used to me getting him up in the morning, and he grinned from ear to ear when I came in his room. Most days, I kissed my hand and put it on his cheek before I left and caught him right before his last bottle when I got home, and that was it. The boy needed a schedule, his mother said.

Thing is, I had no idea what the schedule was. Nor did I care to find out. My mother always said it was easier on everyone if you followed a child's natural rhythms. I trusted my mother's wisdom over almost anything Stacy got from her friends, from the armload of books she never actually read, or the internet.

"Come on, boy. We're gonna do some man-things." I lifted him out of his bed and held him high over my head, then let him drop into my arms. He squealed, and pointed up at the ceiling. "Once more, but then we gotta eat breakfast and pack. We're gonna go see Nana, Granny Lucy, Granny Maridell, and the rest of the aunts and uncles, and I'm not even gonna start on cousins." I lifted him up once again, and he squealed louder than before. I got him changed and into his high chair, then scrounged around the kitchen until I found some jars of the only kind of baby food Stacy would feed him.

He devoured his breakfast, and just as I was cleaning up, Stacy came in the kitchen. She was dressed in a teal green pantsuit that set off her eyes. She tilted her head and flipped her hair back so she could slide her earring in, then she put the other one in. "Did you get him up early?" she asked.

“He was awake.”

“But if it wasn’t time, he’ll end up spoiled and thinking he can manipulate us.”

I swear I could taste the blood from biting my tongue.

“Stacy, maybe you’ve already thought about this . . .” I hoped she hadn’t. I hoped I’d catch her flat-footed. “Christopher’s very first birthday is coming up. How are we going to manage the celebration?”

“Seeing that you’re taking him out of town, I suppose we’ll have to wait and celebrate when I get back.”

“You didn’t have some extravaganza planned?”

“I did, but your dad died and I had to cancel everything.”

My father’s sudden stroke interfered with her plans. Of course. How inconsiderate of him. “When would it have been more convenient for you?”

She shook her head slowly, with nothing but patronizing pity in her eyes. “I know you would never say anything so hateful if you weren’t grieving.”

I took a deep breath. “We should decide on a date. Mom will want to be here.”

Stacy sighed. “Tell her that Saturday.”

“The eighteenth?” That was my father’s birthday. I didn’t expect Stacy to remember or even know that, but it seemed cold and unfeeling to ask my mother to celebrate anything that day.

“Whatever. I’m not looking at a calendar.” She dumped a scoop of coffee in her coffeemaker and filled the pot at the sink. “She won’t want to stay will she? Mama and Daddy will come over and I’m not sure I’ll be up for that many guests on top of everything else. You understand?”

That many guests . . . It would be one extra person. “Mom can stay with me.”

Stinson, Tennessee, was an easy ninety miles or so from Memphis. It was the county seat of Allen County and my mom and dad's hometown. Mine too, I guess. I was born there, and lived there until I was eight and my father took the church in St. Louis.

It's a small Southern town with nothing much to distinguish it. The city limits sign was emblazoned with the names of all-state athletes from thirty years ago. Other signs declared the Kiwanis Club welcomed you to town along with the churches of Allen County. My uncle James pastored one of those churches. He was married my mother's sister, Ellen. My mother is the oldest surviving of Granny Maridell and Papa Tom's eight kids. Her brother, David Lee, was killed in Vietnam. Papa Tom died in May just a few months after we moved to St. Louis.

If my father's memorial service was just Grants, Shannons and Boyds, it would be full. By the time you add in all the extra folks from the extended family connections and the fact that everybody in the county knew my mom and dad, it would likely be a very heavily attended memorial service.

In some ways, it seemed cruel to make my mother go through another extended ritual of grief, but she seemed to draw an unearthly strength from seeing and hearing from the folks my dad impacted. I could count on one hand the number of people I had affected and have fingers left over. I'd count it a victory if I managed not to mess up that one little guy entrusted to me.

I glanced back in the rearview at Christopher. He had his pacifier and was almost hypnotized by the world passing outside the car window. "We'll have to take extra care that you don't get chafed from everybody holding you."

He didn't seem to hear me.

"It's a different world, isn't it, Christopher?" His grin stretched out past the edges of the pacifier. A very different world. And that wasn't a bad thing at all.

We pulled into my granny's driveway right at lunchtime, which was my plan. I was fortunate to have both my grandmothers still alive. Granny Lucy, my dad's mother, was very reserved, very proper, always a lady. She was perfectly suited to life as a pastor's wife. My mom's mother was a different story.

Maridell Grant was right at five feet tall except when she just had her hair done. She'd raised eight kids, and been widowed for over twenty years. She was nearly eighty years old and she said what she thought. I expect my mother will end up just like her.

Granny met Christopher and me on the porch and hugged me tightly. "Oh sugar," she said, "this is a hard, hard thing. We're going to have to be brave and strong for your mama."

"She did well," I said. "I was proud of her." Neither of my grandmothers came over for the St. Louis funeral. Almost all of the aunts and uncles did though, both sides, married and blood relatives. Except for Aunt Gail's husband and Uncle Nolan's ex-wife. At least Nolan's ex sent flowers.

"I'll tell you, sugar, I just don't understand God sometimes. I know what I know. I'm sure about what I believe, but I don't understand why He'd call your daddy home and not some good-for-nothing."

"I'm sure I don't know." I was no theologian, and never claimed to be, but I admit it had crossed my mind more than once since Thursday that the reason God called my father home was to punish me.

Granny clapped her hands and reached for Christopher. He smiled and hesitated for a moment, but then he leaned out for her to take him. And here's one of the things I love most about my granny. She never once asked me where Stacy was. I didn't have to explain it or justify it or anything. The mere fact my wife chose not to be here with me at this moment told Granny all she needed to know.

I followed her back to the kitchen. "Have you heard from Mom this morning? Have they left?"

"I expect them in the next hour or so. Nolan and Gary are bringing your mama, then David and Jan were coming with the kids."

She sighed and handed Christopher back to me while she pulled an old high chair around. I slipped Christopher into the seat, and Granny belted him in with a dishtowel and a safety pin. "This is going to be a hard, hard evening and day tomorrow." She pulled a lid from a pot on the stove. "I've got chicken and dumplings. He ought to be able to eat that."

"Well, there's something wrong with him if he doesn't."

She smiled gently as she filled a bowl and handed it to me. "How long has it been since your feet were under my table, Michael Thomas?"

I'd been here once since we got married. "I'm ashamed to say."

"Now maybe you won't be such a stranger." See, right there. That one sentence was all it took for me to understand she knew Stacy was the reason we didn't visit, not me.

I know it hadn't sunk in yet what I'd lost either with my dad or my marriage, but sitting in my granny's kitchen, eating food she'd been working on all day, listening to my son giggle while she fed him, I felt better, more at peace, than I'd felt in . . . I can't remember how long. Of course, David was on his way, so that would all change.

My mother was the first to ask where Stacy was. I explained that it was her job, an unbreakable commitment. Then I laughed to myself. Last night, I had been informed that Stacy had no unbreakable commitments. My mother looked at my granny, and in that wordless exchange, she seemed to know the whole story. She hugged me and whispered, "I'm so sorry."

"It's been coming for a while," I admitted. "I'm glad . . ." There was more emotion in me than I was ready for. I coughed and swallowed. "I'm glad Dad didn't see it."

"I think I'd like some fresh air," she said. "Would you care to walk down the lane with me?"

"But Christopher—"

"Will be just fine. Granny will be more than happy to watch after him." So Mom slipped on her coat and we took a walk down the lane. The lane was what my granny and grandpa Tom called the road from their house to the spot where it became Butler Street instead of an Allen County road.

The sky was bright blue, and the air was brisk. Mom walked slowly, which meant this was about talking and reminiscing and not about walking at all. "Your daddy was so proud of you, Michael."

I had my doubts but I wasn't about to dispute her right then.

She slipped her arm around mine. "Some people are idiotic enough to believe that if you're not a minister of some sort, then you must be a second-

class Christian.” She shook her head. “I believe God calls mothers and teachers and doctors and engineers, and on and on, just like He calls everybody else.”

“Are you trying to tell me something?”

“I’m trying to protect you. There are well-meaning people who are simply wrong. I don’t want anyone tonight or tomorrow to give you the impression that your daddy loved you less or was disappointed in you because you didn’t go into the ministry.”

“He had plenty of other reasons to be disappointed. If not, there will be a new one very soon.”

“Stacy?”

“She asked me for a divorce.” It was official now.

Mom took a deep breath and pressed her lips together the way she did when she was choosing her words very carefully. “I am so sorry. And her timing is very cruel.”

“She didn’t think it would be right to pretend in front of everybody.”

“That hasn’t bothered her for six years.” Then she clamped her hand over her mouth and her eyes twinkled. “Oh my goodness, I said that out loud.”

I had to smile. “More like Granny every day.”

“Can I be very honest with you, Michael?” That was the key difference between Mom and Granny. Mom would still ask for your permission.

“Of course.”

“Your daddy and I have always thought Stacy was a beautiful, wonderful girl.” She stopped walking for the rest of it. “But not the girl for you. She doesn’t share your values, or your dreams or most importantly, your faith.”

My faith. I didn’t have any faith. “Having a common belief system doesn’t guarantee a good marriage.”

“No, but if you share that framework, you have a much greater chance.”

“So am I going to hell because I’m getting a divorce?”

She laughed. “Goodness no. Has somebody told you that?”

“Not yet, but I still have to tell David.”

She laughed again. "David is going to need some grace one of these days. You wait and see." We reached the end of the lane and she steered me in a wide circle to turn back to Granny's house. "I can't give you all the counsel you need right now, but I will tell you who could, and it would be almost like talking to your daddy himself."

"Uncle James?"

She nodded. "He's kind, and wise and he knows God's heart."

Unlike my brother, David. "I'll try to talk to him before I leave town."

"How long are you staying?" she asked.

"Oh through the weekend, I think."

"What a coincidence. So am I."

"You just decided that, didn't you?"

She grinned. "Maybe." Then she squeezed my arm and gave me the greatest compliment I had ever received. "You are much more like your father than David. You have his gentleness and his thoughtfulness. You carry your burdens like he did. I could always see in his eyes, and in the way his shoulders dropped when he dealing with a grief of some sort. When we walked in at Granny's, you reminded me so much of him."

"Thank you."

"I will need your strength and your support, Michael." It's unnerving to see your mother cry unless it's because you've given her a hand-drawn card. "I depended so very much on him, and I feel utterly alone and adrift."

I didn't think I could be much help. "Maybe we can help each other."

That evening I kept a watchful eye on my mother, but she graciously received everyone who came through the line at the funeral home. Time and time again, she recited the same speech about how we knew back at Thanksgiving that things were serious so, no, this wasn't entirely unexpected. Folks would nod knowingly, clasp her hand, and remark how we are all

appointed to die someday if the Lord doesn't come back before then. That's called mourning with those who mourn, I guess.

The older the folks were, the more likely they were to bring up how my granddad, John Boyd, died of a stroke, too. Then they'd turn to David and admonish him to check his blood pressure. He always smiled and assured them that he did. Nobody worried about my blood pressure. One time, it got the best of me, and I chimed in that my blood pressure was just fine, too. My mother smiled.

Christopher spent the evening being passed around among aunts and cousins. He thrived on the attention. He blew kisses and grinned. He pointed and laughed and proved the single bright spot in the heavy evening. I lamented out loud how I'd never get him to sleep, but my granny assured me he was in for the best night's sleep he'd had. She was right, of course. However, it was during one of my periodic checks to see exactly who had my son and where he was that I noticed a woman walk through the front door of the funeral home.

Stacy was the kind of girl who commanded attention. She had an elegance and style about her that you couldn't miss. I've watched heads turn when I walked into a room with her, and I admit I was proud to have a beautiful blonde on my arm. She glided everywhere she went, even in her heels, which she wore everywhere, including to every Tennessee home football game. Her game-day uniform consisted of heels, jeans and a Theta Nu sweatshirt, and then eventually my jacket.

This girl at the funeral home commanded a different kind of attention, and she probably wouldn't need my jacket. It's dangerous to guess a woman's age, but I was pretty sure she was my age, because I had the vaguest, faintest notion that I knew her.

And that I liked her.

She stopped first and talked to my dad's sisters, Barbara and Kathleen, and Granny Lucy. I watched her take each of their hands. She tilted her head, and nodded as she spoke, always with a kind sadness in her eyes. It wasn't a fake or contrived display of sympathy. Believe me, I knew a fake and contrived display when I saw one. This girl, this woman rather, obviously knew my aunts and my granny, and she was genuinely heartbroken for them. She hugged Granny Lucy, then she moved on to the other aunts and uncles on my mom's side.

“Andrea Maddox,” my mother whispered. “She teaches fourth grade. You went to—”

“School with her before we moved. I knew I knew her.”

“She never married,” my granny said with her eyebrows raised.

“I hardly think the funeral home is the place to—”

Suddenly she was standing right in front of me. “Michael, I don’t know if you remember me—”

“Of course I do, Andrea. Thank you for coming. It means a lot.”

“I thought a lot of your dad.”

“I didn’t realize you knew him that well.”

She smiled. “I suppose it would be more accurate to say that I knew of him. He was something of a legend around here.”

“That’s news to me.”

“Well, he went off to college and got his PhD, and so did his boys—”

“David doesn’t have a PhD.”

She smiled broadly. “My sincere apologies, Dr. Shannon.”

Dr. Shannon. “They don’t even call me that at work.”

“And where is that?”

“In Memphis. I manage a design division for MRI. It’s an industrial equipment manufacturer.”

“Not a medical imaging company?”

“No. Yes, it’s a dumb name. I didn’t pick it.”

“I’m glad you’re closer to home.”

“Thank you,” I said. After my granny’s eyebrow-raising, that struck me as an odd thing to say. And it was also the kind of thing that made a natural break. It was an exit line. Except she didn’t exit. Not that I was complaining.

“Is your family here?” she asked.

“The room’s full of them.”

She had beautiful eyes, especially when she smiled. “I kind of meant your immediate family.”

“My son is being passed around. I haven’t seen him in twenty or thirty minutes myself.”

“Little guy in a navy sweater vest?”

“That’s the one.”

“He blew me a kiss. Quite a charmer.”

“I’ll have to speak to him about the proper time and place for flirting.”

“Most men aren’t aware there’s a distinction.”

“Most men weren’t raised by Donna Shannon.”

“I’m glad you were.” She held out her hand, and I shook it very slowly. “I don’t mean to monopolize you,” she said. “I won’t be able to come to the service tomorrow because of school, but you and your family are in our prayers.”

The way she said it, I could envision her bowing her head, saying those prayers, and God Himself stopping to listen. “Thank you.” I genuinely meant that, because I believed she was sincere, that she wasn’t just saying it because it was the polite thing to say.

I watched her walk away, then my granny was in my ear. “You neglected to mention you were married.”

“I’m wearing a ring.”

“That’s just a piece of jewelry.”

Long after nine o’clock, the last of the folks who had come to pay their respects to my dad trickled out the door. I had Christopher once again, and I changed him then packed up to go back to Granny’s. I guess David had endured as long as he could. “Is Stacy all right?” he asked with the utmost concern.

“Far as I know.”

“But she didn’t come with you?”

I decided that much like ripping off a Band-Aid and uncovering your wound, it would be easiest just to tell him, in spite of the appeal keeping him in the dark might hold. “Stacy asked me for a divorce last night.” Last night? Had it just been a day? It seemed like a lifetime ago.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

This was the part where I was supposed to tell him all of our problems so he could solve them in twenty verses or less.

“Thank you. We’d appreciate your prayers.” I thought he’d like that.

“Of course. Jan and I will certainly be praying.” He slipped his hands into the pockets of his suit pants. “You know, I have some really good books—”

“Thanks, but I really need to get through Dad’s funeral before I can begin to deal with my marriage.”

“The problem won’t get any better if you ignore it.”

“I’m not ignoring it. I’m here alone. That’s hard to miss.”

“It’s going to take a lot of hard work to restore your marriage to the place where God wants it. The sooner you begin making the changes—”

“I have to change? It’s my fault?”

“You are the man. As the leader of the household, everything is ultimately your responsibility.”

“Your compassion is touching.”

“I’m just saying you can’t be passive about this.”

I stepped in a little closer because I knew it would make him uncomfortable. He was four and a half years older than I was, and a little broader. Too many church dinners, I expect. His wife, Jan, was a cardiologist’s nurse and a complete fanatic about eating healthy. I was surprised she allowed him to carry any extra pounds, but maybe that’s how leadership worked in his house.

“Before you say anything else to me,” I said, “take a minute and ask yourself if Dad would say it. Because if he wouldn’t say it, I’m in no mood to hear it from you.”

“Dad would be truthful.”

“You’re right. He never, ever compromised the truth, but he had enough wisdom to speak the truth in grace and love. The way he delivered it made you want to embrace it rather than rebel against it.”

“That’s why you left the church, right Michael? Because you were embracing the truth?”

I walked right into that one. Stupid.

“I left because it’s shallow, and pretentious and fake. It’s about putting stars on your attendance chart and feeling good when you drop your change in the offering.” I knew my voice was rising, but it was too late. I pointed back toward the casket where my father lay, where my mother and both my grannies still stood hanging on to each other. “I watched him pour his life out for people who never cared what it cost him. They didn’t care how much sleep he lost or how many meals he missed. I left the church because it’s infested with vampire consumerism.”

David raised his eyebrows. “Vampire consumerism?”

I was pretty sure I came up with that myself, and I thought it was fairly clever.

“Yes, it just gorges itself until it bleeds the life out of you.” I slung the diaper bag up to my shoulder. “I don’t need that.”