



When Forever Stays

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Category: Romance

Description: A surfing accident brought them back together. Only obedience to God can guarantee their happily ever after.

Dana

Taking on the role of a “Christian influencer” should have pushed me deeper into my relationship with Jesus, but instead, it brought more questions. Especially when it came to finding love. I shouldn’t have felt like a spinster at twenty-four but as the self-proclaimed Last Bachelorette Standing, I wondered if my desire for a husband was truly from God.

Then Rhett Stryker—the gorgeous guy who ghosted me—literally washed onto my shore and threw me for the biggest plot twist of my life.

Rhett

Waking up with memory loss was jarring, to say the least. Yet even without my missing memories, I knew Dana Swann—the beautiful woman who rescued me—was someone special. She claimed we were just a fling, but flings don’t produce the deep connection we shared. More than anything, I wanted to prove to her we were more. Then when my memories returned, including the huge secret I kept from her, I realized there was no piecing together the shattered remains of our delicate relationship.

Will Rhett and Dana claim their forever? Or will Rhett’s deception tear them apart for good?

Total Pages (Source): 68

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

ONE

DANA

Social media engagement announcements make me want to rip my eyeballs out. But could this specific one make me nauseous because of the man who posted it? Probably.

Less than two months ago, this now engaged man—Dr. Mitch Hastings—was posting pictures of him and me... several of them with the caption I caught a good one.

If this was the first time it happened, it wouldn't bother me so much. But it didn't happen just this once. Not just twice. It's happened thrice! Yes, three times in a row, the guy I dated broke up with me and got engaged before our break-up hit the six-month mark.

I flip my phone over, unable to stare at the engagement announcement any longer. Then I ask myself why? Why am I the final step before they fall into their future wife's arms?

Just to torture myself further, I look back at my phone. Even on my screen, his fiancée's diamond sparkles so bright it hurts my eyes. I close out of the app, set my phone on the table, and pinch the bridge of my nose as the beginning prickles of tears tease the corners of my eyes. I take a breath of fresh ocean air that helps release some of the emotional pressure in my chest.

I woke up to a beautiful day full of potential. After a quick breakfast, I came out onto

my porch to spend some time in the fresh air and try to read my Bible.

Everything was moving in a great direction until I opened that social media app instead of my Bible and saw the straw that broke my camel's back—my most recent ex's engagement.

As if the wind can sense that my blood is boiling, it breezes through my porch, helping to cool me off.

Despite the brewing storm inside me, the sun shines bright and warms the air, almost as a promise that things can only go up from here.

My mind wanders back to the picture of that ring and my stomach churns.

I huff a short breath and stand from the chair, stretching my arms over my head and twisting side to side. My joints crack and pop, releasing the tension I've been holding in my neck and back. As I turn in the direction of the ocean, it beckons to me. I listen to its call, slip on my flip-flops, and slide my phone into my pocket, heading toward the slice of sand that extends from my front yard. The sun beats down on me, and I relish the feel of its warmth on my skin.

Most of the time, walking along the shoreline helps calm my racing thoughts. It doesn't seem to be heading that way today, though. Despite this ideal weather and the beauty surrounding me, I don't feel tranquility like I had hoped to. Usually, the ocean is a place of comfort, but looking toward the public part of the beach and seeing the couples holding hands forces me to face my insecurities, and the struggles I've tried—and failed—to lay before God. The main one: restlessness in my singleness.

I've been begging God to remove my desire for a husband and family. When He didn't, I jumped into relationship after relationship, hoping that one would stick. None have. This most recent engagement announcement is my final straw. Now that

I'm at three attempts and failures at reaching my happily ever after, it's time for me to give up. Maybe accepting this as my fate will let me overcome my restlessness.

Twenty-four isn't old to be unmarried to most people, but Amber Island has its own unique culture. Many of the long-term residents got married right out of high school and are having their second kid at twenty-four years old.

Well, hand me my crochet hook and call me a spinster because I am nowhere near that stage in life.

Watching each of my exes meet their soulmates right after breaking up with me is only pushing me closer toward bitter spinster status. My skin heats as a strange mix of anger and embarrassment burns hot in my veins.

I stop, release a deep breath, and send up a quick prayer for guidance. Marginally calmed, I pull out my phone and open the messenger app to think about something, anything else. My finger swipes down the screen through all my messages until I find the name Rhett Stryker. I swallow the lump in my throat and scroll to the first message he sent.

Rhett: This is Rhett Stryker, the guy who will sweep you off your feet ;)

The rest of the messages are snapshots of our short-lived whirlwind romance. He was my vacation crush, and he did exactly what he said he'd do in that first message. He swept me off my feet despite my intention of him only being a momentary distraction.

In our messages, we flirted, sent funny memes, and wished each other good night. The very last text was the one that broke my heart and sent me into my downward spiral.

Rhett: We're sorry. The phone number you are trying to reach has been disconnected.

Have I read that text after every breakup? Maybe. Even though it's like taking a sledgehammer to the chest. It's as if the masochist in me wants to be reminded of what I had with Rhett. Even though Rhett and I were only together a week, we shared a connection. One he made clear he felt too even when I shared my reluctance to dive into a real relationship. I have to give the guy props—when he does something, he goes all in. Wooing, flirting, kissing...and unfortunately for me, ghosting.

After switching mental gears and sending my sister, Olivia, a quick message asking how things are going, I tuck my phone back into my pocket and wipe away the unauthorized tear from my cheek. I pull off my sandals and continue my walk barefoot, enjoying the feel of the white sand between my toes.

My mind wanders back to the week I spent with Rhett. He was a gentleman, sweet, kind, attentive, and funny. Proving to be the whole package on our date. After an enjoyable evening and a mind-altering kiss, Rhett wished me a good night, placed a final kiss on my forehead, and then he was gone. We may have only shared one date, but every word, touch, and kiss has branded me. I've dated three other guys since moving to Amber Island, but that single week with Rhett Stryker set up all of my future romantic relationships for failure.

After that amazing week, Rhett became nothing more than a ghost from my past that has followed me into each relationship I've jumped into since. The bitterness I feel toward him is affecting me more than it should. I need to let it go. I need to let him go. But like so many other things, I'm failing.

I'm failing in areas I used to thrive in with no idea of how to rectify it. Bringing new people to church was like second nature, but it's been months since I invited anyone. The excitement I once felt about sharing God's word has dwindled. Something that has become a big problem in my line of work.

I blow out a long, frustrated breath and kick up some sand. “What could you possibly be teaching me in all of this, Lord?” I ask out loud.

There’s no loud voice that answers. But as my gaze shifts to the water, I’m struck by the vastness of God as the Creator of the world and I’m reminded of a verse from the Psalms.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

What is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?

Tears burn my eyes. It's so hard being caught between trusting that God knows what's best for me while also wondering how playing the main character in my real-life version of *Last Bachelorette* Standing is part of God's grand plan for my life.

Is holding onto Rhett keeping me from following God's will? Because I've prayed countless times for God to help me let Rhett go. But my stubborn heart remains steadfastly bent on him.

Even if I delete his messages I know the echo of him will remain. No matter how hard I try to move on, I'm stuck on Rhett Stryker.

As I walk further down the beach, a thought strikes me: Maybe I haven't been able to let Rhett go because God has something unexpected up His sovereign sleeve when it comes to Rhett.

I shake my head at my ridiculous thoughts. Something on the sand catches my eye and I almost trip over it.

Not just something. Someone!

It takes my brain a few seconds to process everything in front of me. This isn't just a large lump of seaweed or ocean debris like I've encountered before. It's a human. The broad back with a tapered waist tells me that this is a man. Tattoos cover his

skin, and even from here, they look beautiful and intricate. That's all the detail I can make out though because my mind is reeling with the thought that I may be staring at a corpse.

His back rises and falls, and my nervous system floods with relief. The breath I had been holding comes out in a long whoosh.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

I inwardly cringe for asking such a stupid question. This man just washed onto shore from who knows where. Of course, he's not okay.

He turns his head, and I come face to face with my ghost.

No, not me in a spiritual form. And no, not a literal ghost.

Remember when I said Rhett ghosted me? Yeah, he's not a ghost anymore.

TWO

RHETT

An angel stares down at me.

"Are you okay?" she asks. Her voice is soft and full of concern.

I open my mouth to respond, but my insides squeeze and my stomach contents rise up my throat. I turn away from the angel to hurl over the sand. The salty water rises up my throat again. I cough, trying to clear my throat as the water and bile threaten to spill out with each exhale. I'm barely able to ease the tension squeezing my lungs. My skull throbs as if it's been slammed against a boulder, and my entire body aches.

I slowly turn back to face the angel. The sun is perfectly hidden behind her hair, masking her face in shadows. Vanilla and lavender swirl around me, the scent sweet, feminine, and comforting.

“Am I in heaven?” The words are out before I can think them through.

“You’re on Amber Island,” she answers. Her voice is familiar, but I can’t place it.

“Is that a suburb of heaven?”

“I don’t think heaven works that way.”

“And you know that how?” I don’t let her answer before adding, “It’s because you’re an angel, isn’t it?”

A cloud works its way across the sky and covers the sun, lifting the mask and revealing a beautiful woman who looks as confused as I feel.

Her eyes narrow. “I’m not an angel. Do you not know who you are?”

I shake my head, ignoring the trepidation filling my being. I should know who I am. What else don’t I know?

She stares down at me, almost as if she’s waiting for me to sort through my limited thoughts to answer the most basic question.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

Nothing comes to me. Instead of dwelling on my growing fear, I focus on what I do know and ask the first question that comes to mind. “Are you a siren?”

She lifts an eyebrow. “No, I’m not. You must have hit your head. Give yourself some time.”

I nod. Closing my eyes, I try to sort through the muddled waters of my mind. But it’s empty. Blank. My nostrils flare as fear threatens to consume me.

After a few more moments, she asks, “Anything?”

“No.” My voice is thick with emotion but I can’t put my finger on which one. Fear? Anger? Frustration? Most likely, all of the above.

“Okay.” She nods. “That’s okay. Sometimes it takes days for memories to return.”

I hear what she doesn’t say: Sometimes the memories never come back.

The throbbing in my arm increases and distracts me from the fact that I have no memories. I look down and notice a slice in my bicep that burns. Blood both dry and fresh covers the skin surrounding it. My stomach rolls at the sight, but with nothing left in it, I dry heave. She gently rubs my back.

“Why can’t I remember anything?” I ask rhetorically. I don’t know who I am, where I am, or how I got here—let alone how I got this nasty cut. I sober as that realization hits me full force.

The angel-siren must read the look on my face. “It’s going to be okay. I can get you the help you need. Tell me what hurts.”

I flip over onto my back and cautiously sit up. “Everything hurts but the worst part is that I can’t think straight.”

Her expression morphs into one of concern. “Are you able to breathe okay?” she asks.

Taking a deep breath, I wince as my lungs scream at me as if that simple action overexerted them. “My insides feel tight when I breathe, but it’s not a struggle.”

“If you don't have trouble breathing that's a really good sign,” she says.

She drops down to her knees and urges me to lie back down. My head spins, so I close my eyes and breathe deeply, in through my nose and out my mouth.

Once the world stops spinning, things come into sharper focus. Specifically, the feel of two of her fingers pressing against my wrist. I open my eyes and ask, “What are you doing?” My voice comes out gravelly and I allow myself to enjoy the feel of her soft skin pressing against mine.

“Right now, I’m taking your pulse.” Her voice turns clinical, and I notice she’s glancing down at her watch. She nods as if she’s satisfied with what she sees after removing her hand from my wrist. She assesses me with a critical eye. When she looks at the gash on my bicep, she doesn’t even flinch at the blood. “You have a pretty nasty cut on your arm, and your torso is bruised and covered in lacerations.”

“Are you a doctor?”

“No,” she says. “But I have active CPR and first aid certifications.” I’m not sure if I

should be surprised by this or not. Either way, I'm grateful she's the one who found me.

She stops what she's doing and looks directly into my eyes. Something like a memory trickles through the fog of this same woman sitting across from me at a table, her smile wide and her hand in mine.

The serious woman checking me over and the one in the memory—at least, it feels like a memory—do not match up. The girl in my memories is all warmth and sweet smiles; this woman is coming off as cold and callous. Yet I'm somehow almost positive they are the same person.

“Do I know you?” I ask.

The question appears to catch her off guard as her hands halt and her gaze snaps to mine. “The more important question is one I've already asked. Do you know who you are?”

I try to think of my name, occupation, anything, but come up empty. Unease and frustration simmer as I try to remember something as simple as my name. I finally say, “No.” Something about her is familiar. Even if I did seem to catch her off guard with my earlier question. There was something there in her eyes, a hint that she does know me. Either way, I'm hoping she can give me some insight into who I am so I ask, “Do you know who I am?”

“Not anymore.” She doesn't give me a chance to respond before asking, “Do you remember how you got here?” She motions with both hands to our surroundings.

I sit back up, hoping the new position will help clear my head enough to answer what should be simple questions. I'm grateful when the world only sways and doesn't spin. Once my equilibrium is mostly balanced, I search hard for the answer. The harder I

think, the more I realize my mind is more blank than I thought. All short-term and long-term memories are non-existent. I grind my teeth in frustration.

“No.” My tone is gruff. She knows me, and I know her, but I can’t place her. “Do you know what my name is?”

She blows out a breath and stands. “Your name is Rhett Stryker.” That name sounds and feels right. Dusting the sand off her tanned legs, she says, “We better get you to the hospital.”

“Why?”

“Well, let’s see.” She places a hand on her hip and raises her brows. “You have a gash on your arm that probably needs stitches, your torso is black and blue, and you have no memories or knowledge of who you are.” She’s silent for a moment before she asks, “What’s the last thing you remember? If anything.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

It should be another easy question, but I draw another blank. My heart starts to pound frantically as the silence stretches.

“Being in the ocean?” I’m not confident in my answer, because I can’t actually remember, but it does make sense. She narrows her eyes. I try to come to some sort of understanding of my circumstances by piecing together what I can see. I’m in swim trunks, with no shirt or shoes, there’s a strap around my ankle with frayed edges as if it was separated from whatever it was attached to, and I’ve been washed up on shore. “I was surfing,” I say, and as the words come, it sounds right. But I can’t tell if my imagination is conjuring up the image of me paddling into deeper waters or if it truly happened.

“Okay, that’s a good start.” Her brows pucker as if in thought. “Do you think you can walk?”

“Maybe?”

“Let’s give it a go, but first, I’m going to give you a list to remember. Then we’re going to try and get you to walk to my car to get you to the hospital. If you can’t, I’ll need to call the paramedics. Sound good?”

The thought of being placed on a stretcher does not appeal to me, so I mentally prepare for whatever happens when I get to my feet and nod my agreement. “How about you tell me your name and that will be part of my list?” The corner of my lips lift.

A gentle smile breaks through her serious expression.

“That’s fair.” She taps her chin as if in thought. “Okay, here’s the list. My name is Dana. Your name is Rhett. This is Amber Island, and my favorite food is pineapple. Repeat it back to me.”

“Your name is Dana, my name is Rhett, this is Amber Island, and your favorite food is pineapple.”

“Perfect. I’ll ask you again in a bit.”

“Dana.” Her name is out of my mouth before I can stop it.

“Yes?” she asks.

“I just wanted to see if saying your name again sparked any memories.”

She tilts her head to the side, her brow scrunching adorably. “Why did you think that would spark a memory?”

“Because when I looked into your eyes just a few minutes ago, it felt like you’re someone who’s important to me. Is that a crazy thought?”

Her sharp intake of breath brings more questions to the surface.

“So we do have a history, don’t we, Little Siren?”

Her wide eyes immediately narrow into slits. “Little Siren?”

“You don’t like it?”

“It doesn’t fit. Sirens are deadly.”

“Well, my siren is life-ly.”

“And that’s not a word.”

“It is now.” I wink. I don’t know if this is how I usually act or if it’s something about this woman, but I can’t help myself. These little moments between us help me push down my pain and frustration.

“Okay, Webster, let’s get you to the hospital before you spout more nonsense you’ll regret.”

I’m confused again. “Webster? I thought you said my name was Rhett.”

She tries to hide her smile with her hand, and that minor action has the tension draining out of me. “You know, Webster’s dictionary?” She wrinkles her nose. “Or maybe you don’t remember. Either way, Webster’s dictionary is what most English-speaking people use to define words or check if a word is actually a word.”

I mutter, “Clever girl.”

A slight blush blooms on her cheeks before she drops down low enough that I can sling one arm over her shoulders. She stands, and I force down the numbness in my limbs. The tingling sensation in my legs becomes nearly unbearable, but I grit my teeth and propel myself up until I’m standing at my full height. My choices are to press past my limits or be taken in by the paramedics. Dana gives me a few moments to adjust, then we shuffle along, and I allow this little siren to take me to safety.

“How far is your car?” I ask.

“At my place. Not far from here. Besides, I want to take you there first anyway to?—”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

“So, you’re already taking me home? You haven’t even bought me dinner.”

Any playfulness in her expression vanishes. “I have antiseptic and bandages to treat your arm back at my cottage. It’ll hold you over until we go to the ER.”

“What if I don’t want to go to the ER? What if I’d rather just stay with you?” I wince as the pain in my sides protests.

“See?” She lifts an eyebrow, and something tells me that when I knew this little angel-siren, I liked her sass. “You need the ER. I’m not giving you a choice. Less than ten minutes ago, I thought you were a corpse.”

Her cavalier tone surprises me and I trip.

“Sorry.” She grimaces. “That came out a lot more insensitive than I meant it to.”

“It’s fine.”

We walk in uncomfortable silence. Well, she walks, and I limp. Seagulls fly above us as the waves lap at the shoreline.

“This is me,” Dana says as we approach a light purple bungalow.

She leads me up to the covered porch, and I sit on the wicker loveseat. She grabs an afghan from her porch swing and tucks it around my shoulders. When she enters the house, I assume it’s to grab medical supplies. I take in my surroundings, hoping that maybe something will look familiar. A half-empty mug of coffee sits on a small table

next to an open Bible.

She's made highlights and notes in the margins. Something inside me tells me that the Bible is important to me just like it appears to be important to her.

Before I can think more about it, Dana comes back out with a first aid kit and a towel. She kneels in front of me and sets out her supplies. After arranging the blanket so she has access to the cut on my bicep, she meticulously cleans and bandages it.

"This looks deep. You're going to need stitches."

"Great." I grimace.

"This is all treatable. You'll get back to yourself in no time. Hopefully, your amnesia is only temporary." She brushes my hair away from my forehead and looks me over. Her face is mere inches from mine, and I have to ball my hands into fists on my lap as the overwhelming urge to touch her takes over me. I don't know what our history together looks like, but I can't deny the pull I have toward her now.

I close my eyes and try to concentrate on something else.

"I lost my surfboard," I say suddenly as that memory returns to me.

"But you still have your life. Why did you go out alone? You could have been eaten by a shark with all this blood." She winces again. This time when she speaks, there's no accusation in her tone just a new gentleness. "Sorry, I keep sounding a lot more insensitive than I mean to. Do you remember anything else?"

"No." It's still frustrating not having many memories, but remembering losing my surfboard gives me hope that things are looking up.

“The waves have been rough the last couple of days,” she says. “More than likely, they got the better of you and took you into some rocks.” She runs the tip of her finger over a tattoo on my uninjured bicep. “I don’t remember you having this.”

Her touch on my skin ignites something primal. Instead of focusing on that, I try to recall anything about how or why I got the tattoo. As expected, no memories surface. “I wish I could tell you something about it. But I’m drawing a blank.”

Clearly, she used to care about me. There’s a pull deep inside me that says she was—is—someone important to me. Yet she’s acting guarded around me. “What were we?”

Her eyes snap to mine. She clenches her jaw and that same frigid attitude from before seeps into her expression. “A fling.” She makes a face as if it hurt to say those two words.

Even without my memories, I know there is no way what she’s saying is true. Emotion clogs my throat.

I grab her hands. “Dana.” The moment our skin connects, warmth spreads up my arms and through my chest. She pulls away, her eyes widen, and I know she felt the same spark of electricity I did.

Her eyes widen before those soft pink lips pinch closed and she goes back to tending to my injuries.

Dana carefully places a large bandage over the nasty cut on my bicep. I don’t miss how her hands tremble or the slow breath she releases as if she’s trying to regain control of her emotions. She has the same effect on me that I appear to have on her.

“Tell me the list,” she says, her voice shifting from shaky to professional in the span

of four words.

I try not to dwell too much on the slight flush on her cheeks or how incredible she smells. Instead, I focus on my answer. My memories prior to twenty minutes ago may be gone, but thankfully, my brain has been sharp since laying eyes on this little siren.

“Your name is Dana, my name is Rhett, we are on Amber Island, and your favorite food is pineapple.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

“Good, your short-term memory seems to be working fine so far.” After tending to the rest of my injuries, she says, “Okay, that will do for now since the bleeding has mostly stopped. But we should probably get you a shirt...” She trails off, appearing to take me in as if it’s the first time she’s seeing me.

In an attempt to impress her, I tighten my abs and flex both arms, immediately regretting the latter when I feel the drying gash on my bicep crack. It’s worth it as I watch her eyes go glassy and her attraction to me becomes almost tangible. The burn of my freshly opened flesh wound pales in comparison to the inferno her gaze leaves behind as it travels across my skin. She pays special attention to my shoulders. From my peripheral, I can see what looks to be the tips of a black wing on each shoulder. The longer her eyes travel, the harder I find it to keep my hands to myself.

“Dana,” I say, my voice husky.

Pink tinges her cheeks. “I’m going to get you a shirt,” she says, though it sounds like it’s more to herself than me. She darts back into her cottage for a few moments, then comes back out carrying a shirt.

“Here.” She hands me a navy blue button-down shirt that obviously belongs to a man. She eyes it, then my arms, and rips both sleeves off.

“Is this an old boyfriend’s shirt?” I try and fail to sound nonchalant as I shrug out of the afghan.

“Who’s to say it’s not my current boyfriend’s?”

An unexpected jolt of jealousy thrums through me. “Is it?”

Dana makes a noncommittal sound and ignores my question as she carefully slides the shirt over each of my arms and up my back. Her fingertips graze my ribs and waist, leaving goosebumps in their wake, before pulling the shirt around my torso and trying to button it. I wince. The shirt is too tight. The boyfriend must be closer to her size than mine. And for some reason, that’s a small comfort. Then I realize she hasn’t yet answered my question.

“Dana, do you have a boyfriend?” I repeat my unanswered question.

She steps back, raising one of her perfectly sculpted eyebrows.

“Dana, I’m not in any shape to block blows from a jealous boyfriend.” I point to my arm.” I don’t think he’d take lightly to me wearing his clothes.”

She rests her hands on her hips. “You don’t need to worry about someone getting jealous.” Then she mutters something under her breath that sounds like, “There’s no boyfriend.” But I can’t be sure I heard her correctly.

I’ve been in Dana’s presence for less than thirty minutes, yet she’s found a way to shake me to my very core. I shouldn’t be jealous or feel so possessive or territorial, but the thought of Dana with another guy has my blood pressure rising.

I have no business entertaining these thoughts or embracing these emotions. Especially when I can’t even remember her.

Dana watches me quietly for a few moments then stands.

“Are you ready to go?” she asks, grabbing her keys and wrapping her arm around me.

“Yeah,” I mutter.

I limp down the steps relying on Dana for extra support. We get in the car, and all the way to the hospital, I hope that no matter what happens I can keep Dana in my life. I don't need my memories to recognize what an amazing person she is. That she's not someone I ever want to take for granted. But something in my gut warns that I may have done just that in the past.

THREE

DANA

If someone told me yesterday that I was going to find Rhett Stryker washed up on the shore during my spur-of-the-moment walk, I would have told them they were crazy.

Yet here I am at an all-night big box store grabbing everything I think he'll need while the doctor runs some tests. After checking out, I head back to the hospital.

Rhett's smile greets me as I walk back into his room with my arms full of supplies. I set the bags on the extra chair and sit in the one next to his bed.

Rhett is donned solely in a hospital gown. His dark hair stands in contrast against all of the white in the room. From the floor to the bedding to the ceiling is all white. The once comforting smell of sea musk is now muted by the scent of disinfectant.

Despite this being one of the strangest situations I've ever experienced, something inside me knows being here with Rhett is a God thing. It was far too random, and I don't believe in coincidences. Maybe my urge to take a walk was so I would find him and get him the medical attention he needs. Even more strange was the fact that I had just disregarded the thought that God might have something more up His sovereign sleeve when it came to Rhett Stryker. God has a purpose for this, so I will do my best

to walk in obedience and pray the Holy Spirit guides me to follow this uncertain path.

A nurse comes in and greets Rhett. “Hi, I’m Felicity. I’ll be your nurse tonight. How are you feeling right now?”

“Sore and confused,” Rhett answers honestly.

She gives him a sympathetic smile. “I heard about what happened, I’m sorry you experienced that and lost your memories.”

Rhett shrugs. “I’m grateful to be alive.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

“Me too,” she says. There’s an odd flirtiness to her tone that has my hackles rising. “Don’t worry. We’ll take care of you.”

She clicks around on the computer until a screen pops up where she can enter her notes. Felicity gets the blood pressure cuff on him and bats her eyelashes like it’s an Olympic sport.

I grab my phone and scroll through social media to distract myself from his nurse’s unprofessional behavior. I respond to a few comments on my most recent Bible study videos and ignore the creepy messages from military dad bots. When I scroll through my newsfeed, there’s a post about RJ Hemlock, the lead singer and guitarist of my favorite band, Phantom Echoes. I wonder what it could be about because none of the band members have been in the spotlight for years. Naturally, my curiosity gets the best of me.

The post shows a super blurry picture of a man lying on a bed in the hospital wearing an oxygen mask and a woman standing at his side. It looks like they’re holding hands.

The caption reads:

Pictures have just surfaced of RJ Hemlock at JSPC Hospital, where he provided a life-saving transplant to his fifteen-year-old son. According to our anonymous source, the life-saving procedure took place at least a year ago. The specifics of the surgery are unknown. His wife, who he is rumored to have married in a private ceremony after falling from stardom, is pictured beside him. Both RJ and his son are reported to be doing well.

My heart sinks a fraction at the thought of my teenage crush being married. Not that I ever had a chance with him. I silently laugh at myself for even having the ridiculous thought.

Rhett grunts and I drop my phone back in my purse, turning back to face him to make sure he's okay. I already feel overwhelmed with this unexpected chain of events, but with Rhett's pretty nurse giggling and blushing every time she touches him, Nurse McFlirty is on my last nerve. My only minor comfort is that Rhett's gaze never strays far from me. It's a stupid feeling, especially since Rhett and I are nothing to each other. Not anymore. Maybe not ever.

"Dana, sweetheart," he calls for me in a voice that sets my insides into a frenzy and removes the bitterness creeping in.

"What?" I ask, tentatively stepping over to him.

"I just need you near me." He searches my eyes so tenderly I almost melt into the floor. My hands move on their own accord as I brush his hair from his forehead. The movement feels far more natural than it should.

Nurse McFlirty must get the message. She purses her lips into a fake smile and tilts her head to the side haughtily. "Doctor Woodhouse will be in shortly."

Once she's out the door, I practically leap away from Rhett, mentally scolding myself for giving in to my jealousy. It's time to remember why I need to keep my distance and not get pulled into this burning desire to be near him. I need to raise my defensive walls, regardless of how weak they are.

Trying to hide how flustered I am, I bolster my tone. "Well, that took an unexpected turn." I move my hand to rest on my hip, and his eyes track the motion. A half smile rests on his lips as if he likes seeing me all riled up.

“You didn’t seem to mind coming to my rescue.” That ridiculously attractive smirk pulls up one side of his lips.

I open my mouth and then close it, unable to form an appropriate response.

He gives me a smoldering look, and his voice drops an octave. “And I am not complaining.”

I swallow hard and attempt to calm my racing heart.

Rhett must sense my unease because he says, “She was too flirty for my comfort. Besides, there’s only one woman I want flirting with me.” He winks, then adds, “I figured if she thought my sweetheart was watching it all unfold, she’d back off.”

“You realize I’m not your sweetheart though, right?” I need to make this abundantly clear, to him as well as to myself. I am not Rhett’s. Not now and technically not before. We were just two people wildly attracted to each other with amazing chemistry.

Rhett lifts a shoulder. “Maybe you should be. I may not have my memories, but from where I’m standing, you are exactly the kind of woman any man would want.” His gaze takes me in slowly from head to toe. Equal parts confusion, irritation, and allure spread through me. “I can confidently say I’m interested in exploring what we could be.”

My face catches fire, so I turn and find my purse on the chair to try and find something to keep my mind occupied. Because the flirty version of Rhett is still in there. The one who speaks his mind without holding back. The one who was and continues to be irresistible. I have to find a way to ignore this magnetic pull between us. His abandonment sent me on a downward spiral the first time, and I don’t think my heart could survive that fall again.

“You’re only giving me another pretty side of you to view, Little Siren.” His words push into my thoughts, chasing away my defenses, and brings a deeper burn to my cheeks.

Does he still feel the connection we shared? Is that why he keeps saying things that leave me melting? I shake my head at the thought. There’s no way. It's just my stupid heart aching to be wanted.

Doing my best to ignore his magnetic pull, I ask, “Are you sure you lost your memory? I’ve never heard of a person with amnesia being this flirtatious.” I look at him over my shoulder. Which is a mistake, because the heat in his gaze...well, it reminds me of things I shouldn’t be remembering. Like how good it felt to be held by him and how amazing his lips tasted.

Just when my mind starts wandering back to the night he kissed me senseless, Dr. Woodhouse comes in. As he gives me a knowing look, I pray he doesn’t say anything to make this any more awkward. Many people in the church felt as though Rhett abandoned them too, including Dr. Woodhouse, who’s an elder at my church.

“Well, Mr. Stryker, it’s nice to see you again, just not in these circumstances.”

Rhett’s brow furrows. “You know me?”

“Of course, I know you...” Dr. Woodhouse flips open Rhett’s chart and scans through his papers. “That explains it! You’re my amnesia patient.”

“Dana, could you step out—”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

Rhett interrupts him, “I want her here.”

Dr. Woodhouse nods in acknowledgment, then takes a few more moments to check through Rhett’s paperwork. He looks Rhett over and jots down some notes in the chart. “Well, you don’t need me to tell you you’re banged up, but I’m happy to report you don’t have any broken bones. Your concussion is concerning, but you could have gotten into a lot more danger out in those waves.” He clicks his tongue. “I will never understand why people surf alone.”

“Trust me, I won’t make that mistake again.” Rhett motions for me to come closer and then takes my hand. “I’m just grateful Dana found me.”

Dr. Woodhouse raises a brow but stays quiet. After he finishes his assessment, he says, “Tell me exactly what happened today.”

Before Rhett can answer, Nurse McFlirtly rolls a cart into the room with thread, needles, and other supplies. Dr. Woodhouse thanks her, and she scurries out the door.

Dr. Woodhouse sits on his stool and rolls over with the cart. “Now tell me exactly what happened.”

Rhett and I team up and give him a play-by-play of everything that transpired, from me finding Rhett on the beach to our arrival at the hospital. As we talk, Dr. Woodhouse stitches up Rhett’s bicep. He places a bandage over the raw skin, snaps off his gloves, and tosses them in the trash.

He jots something else down in Rhett’s paperwork.

“You’re a lucky man,” Dr. Woodhouse says.

Rhett is silent for a long moment as he stares into space as if lost in thought. “I don’t believe in luck. I believe in God, and God set this plan in motion for a purpose. He’s the One who protected me and brought me to shore instead of further out to sea.”

Excited, I ask, “Are you getting your memories back?”

“No. I just know God is a crucial part of my life.”

“That’s a promising sign,” Dr. Woodhouse says, scribbling more in Rhett’s chart before sticking the pen back in his pocket. “I hope to see you in church this Sunday, then.”

Rhett nods. “I’d like to be there.”

Dr. Woodhouse declares Rhett safe to go home.

“Dana, can I speak to you for a minute?” Dr. Woodhouse asks, then pulls me out into the hall and pulls Rhett's door closed.

“I’d prefer if he stayed with someone, at least overnight. All his test results look good, but his amnesia and the concussion are concerning. I want to make sure his symptoms don’t worsen over the next couple of days. Would you be able to take him in?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to help him, but do you think it’s appropriate? What kind of example would I be setting for the teenage girls in my group if they found out a man I’m not married to is staying with me?” I fiddle with my necklace, running the pendant back and forth on the chain. My heart races as I imagine Rhett sleeping in the room across from mine.

“Then you tell them about the Good Samaritan.” When I give him a disbelieving look, he adds, “It’s late. I’m not sure where else he could stay.”

Dr. Woodhouse is right. It’s after midnight and the only other person who could potentially take Rhett and is still awake is Crew, and he’s only awake because he’s on a shift at the fire station.

I release a resigned sigh. “I’ll talk to Crew. He’s on shift right now, but maybe he can come over after he gets off.” I’m already dreading the conversation. I made the mistake of spilling my history with Rhett during one of my low points. Needless to say, Crew has some strong feelings toward Rhett.

Dr. Woodhouse shrugs nonchalantly. “If Crew says no, at least you know you tried. In the morning, call my wife, and explain the situation so it doesn’t look like you were trying to hide anything. I’ll talk to her when I get home too.” As the women’s ministry leader of our church, Nancy is who I need to speak to if I want to keep all of this above reproach.

That gives me an idea. “Maybe someone from church is still awake.”

Dr. Woodhouse releases an uncomfortable laugh. “I hate to break it to you, but most of the congregation’s bedtime was hours ago.”

“Can’t he stay here for one night?” I plead.

“Dana, taking in a man in need for one night isn’t going to ruin your reputation or set a poor example for your small group girls. Especially if you have Crew come and stay after his shift.”

I check the time and breathe a sigh of relief. Crew gets off in less than an hour.

I rest my hands on my hips and straighten my spine. “Fine. Rhett can stay with me, and I’ll have Crew spend the night too.”

He gives me a triumphant smile. “I knew we could work this out.” Something passes over his expression, and he says, “If you have time over the next few days, take Rhett to places he frequented. Maybe see if you can meet up with some of his previous coworkers. It may help trigger a memory.”

I chew the inside of my cheek, trying to rein in my tumbling emotions. Yes, I’m very much drawn to Rhett. But the pain his abandonment brought on is still strong. The empathetic part of me wants to help Rhett get his memories back. But the bitter part of me wants to wash my hands of him.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

“I’ll talk to Mrs. Woodhouse in the morning. Then I guess we’ll go from there.”

Dr. Woodhouse tucks Rhett’s chart into the folder on his door and turns to me, placing his hands on my shoulders.

“I know this isn’t easy for you, but I agree with Rhett—God has set this all in motion. Nothing in this world happens by coincidence.”

Dr. Woodhouse’s words choke me up. I’ve experienced too many unbelievable situations that God has worked His hand in. Not that God needs to prove Himself to me, but I’ve seen Him work in ways I never could have imagined. What Dr. Woodhouse said is yet another confirmation that God is working in this situation too.

“I know,” I say with a nod.

“You’re a great woman, Dana. I’m proud to know you and even more proud of how you’re handling this. I can almost guarantee Nancy will understand and say you’re doing the right thing by taking him in. I wouldn’t suggest it if I thought otherwise.”

I muster a smile. “Thank you.”

“His nurse will be in with the discharge paperwork soon.” My heart sinks. The last person I want to see again is Nurse McFlirty.

“Okay,” I say. When Dr. Woodhouse walks down the hall, I give myself a moment to breathe. And pray.

As I walk back into the room, Rhett asks, “Are you okay?”

“As okay as can be expected.”

“You don’t have to take me in. I’ll find another place to stay.”

“You overheard us?” I thought we were out of earshot, but I was apparently wrong. Guilt pinches my chest. I hope he understands my reluctance to let him stay at my house.

He nods.

“It’s not that I don’t?—“

“You don’t need to explain yourself. I get it. Like I said, I’ll find another place to stay.”

“Do you know where you live?” I ask.

“No.”

“Have you gotten any memories back since I stepped into the hall? Like maybe one of your old friends?”

“No. But?—”

“No buts; you’ll stay with me.”

A slow smile pulls up both sides of Rhett’s mouth. “I knew it.”

“Knew what?”

“My little siren is also an angel.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to stifle my grin. Rhett already figured out how to make me smile again, even without his memories. It was something he was able to do from the moment I stepped foot on his tennis court over a year ago. His effortless flirtation put me at ease and had me laughing before I swung the racket. It appears to be the same way this time around, even without his memories.

Grabbing my phone, I try not to let his sweet talking get the best of me. Which is difficult since his words and the glimmer of promise in his eyes make my heart race. I focus on sending a quick text to Crew, telling him I'm at the hospital and that he can let himself in after his shift if I don't make it back to my house before him. My phone vibrates not even a few seconds after I hit send. A picture of Crew in full fireman gear and posing like a superhero pops up on my screen.

“You're at the hospital? What happened? Why didn't I hear about it on the scanner? Are you okay? I'm on my way.” Crew's voice is full of concern as he rattles off his questions.

“I'm fine!” I say before he can spout off more questions. I realize now that I shouldn't have sent it without further explanation.

“I'm here with Rhett.”

“Rhett?” Crew's voice hits a new decibel, and I pull my phone away from my ear. “You mean that no-good?—”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

I give Rhett an awkward smile and shuffle out of the room and down the hallway into an empty waiting room.

“That same Rhett, yes,” I explain every minute of my crazy day as quickly as I can to prevent Crew from making any further comments about Rhett without knowing the full story.

“Rhett’s claiming that he lost his memories? Right,” Crew says in an irritated tone.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” I say.

“Have you eaten? When will you be home? I’ll bring some food for everyone.” Crew sounds more like a doting grandmother than my cousin and best friend right now. He’s always been protective of me, but this feels like a bit too much.

I’m quiet for too long, and since Crew knows me too well, he asks, “What aren’t you saying? You’re not letting that scumbag stay with you, are you?” I’m glad I made sure to put plenty of distance between me and Rhett’s room when Crew raises his voice once again.

“So what if I am?” I ask, feeling defensive of Rhett. “Besides, he’s not a scumbag,” I whisper into the phone.

“He ghosted you! You! Why would anyone ghost you?” Crew sure does know how to stroke my ego.

“I’m not sure, but God is telling me to take him in, and Dr. Woodhouse said Rhett

should stay with me for at least a night to be monitored.” I wish I could talk to West and ask for his advice since he knew Rhett. But since West and my sister are still on their honeymoon, I’m stuck navigating this situation without my brother-in-law’s input.

“Really? God is telling you to live with a man?” He scoffs.

“I’m not living with him! He’s only staying for one night. If you think that’s a problem, will you take him in?” I ask, my voice rising.

Crew grunts. “No.”

“He doesn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Do you really think he has amnesia?” Crew’s tone is full of disbelief.

“I do,” I answer. When he started flirting with me, I questioned if his amnesia was a ruse to make me move past his abandonment. His inner flirt has been out full force. “I mean, Dr. Woodhouse seems sure that Rhett has amnesia. And other than his flirtation with me, Rhett has shown no signs of having any memories.” I’m not sure who I’m trying to convince more, Crew or me.

“He’s already flirting with you?” Crew asks.

I facepalm. There is no reason why I needed to share that tidbit, but I blame it on my overtired brain. “Yes.”

“How do you feel about that?”

Well, he makes my heart pound like a drum and my insides turn to goo. “Angry.” Also true.

“Good. Don’t forget what he did to you.”

“I won’t.” The last thing I’ll do is let Rhett back into my heart only for him to rip it out again.

Crew releases a heavy sigh. “Fine. Do you know if he has any food allergies?”

“Not that I know of.” I tap my lip with my finger, trying to remember things he ate during our few lunch breaks together. “Pepperoni pizza would be good.”

“I’ll pick it up on my way,” Crew says then we hang up. I look at the clock on my phone and realize it’s almost two in the morning.

I take a moment to compose myself and send up another prayer for guidance before going back to Rhett’s room.

He greets me with a sad smile. “You don’t have to do this.”

His words send a new feeling of purpose through me like I was designed to take care of this man. Forever. But I don’t allow myself to dwell on it. I cannot allow myself to get more wrapped up in Rhett than I already am. My beach walk was supposed to help me dispel these desires, not turn them into a life purpose.

“I do. Right now you’re my responsibility.”

His face falls. I inwardly cringe at how callous I sound.

“That’s not what I mean. I just—I want to help you.” I pull out all the clothes I bought while out on my late-night-necessity run. I hand him the jeans, black T-shirt, and pack of socks that I bought at an all-night supercenter. When I get to the boxer briefs, I blush and drop all the clothes onto his bed. Then I grab the grocery bag of

toiletries and lift it.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

“I also got you some deodorant, a toothbrush, and toothpaste.”

“You’re even more of an angel than I originally thought,” Rhett says with such tenderness that I almost melt on the spot.

A thought invades my mind. Maybe there’s a reason it’s never worked out with anyone else. But then I remember what he did to me. How he left me without a word and turned me into a hopeless bachelorette.

“Don’t flatter me.” I drop the bag of toiletries on his bed. “If you need help getting dressed, I’ll?—”

“Could you?” he asks, pointing at the bandage covering his stitches and giving me an imploring look.

“I’ll help you with your shirt, but you’re gonna handle your underthings and pants on your own.”

He smirks and wiggles his eyebrows. The stupid organ in my chest goes wild. He’s forgotten everything, but somehow his flirtatious personality has stuck like gum under a desk. I step away from the curtain and pull it shut to give him privacy. I hear his grunts and mumbled frustrations.

“I’m decent,” he says, sounding breathless.

There’s a pained look on his face as I open the curtain. His chest heaves up and down as if the effort he put into getting partially dressed has drained him.

I carefully slide the neck opening over the bump on his head and tug the fabric slowly down. Once his face comes into view, he carefully slides his arms through the openings, and I pull it down over his ribs, my fingers accidentally brushing against his sides as I try to avoid his scrapes and bruises. He inhales a sharp breath and his jaw ticks but he doesn't flinch away.

"Sorry," I whisper, feeling my cheeks heat. Despite my curiosity about his inked skin and the scar I now notice on his abdomen, I do my best to focus on the task at hand and not ogle my charge.

My eyes lift to meet his, and I find him staring at me beneath hooded lids. "You did that on purpose, didn't you?"

"I-I..." I stutter.

He cracks a smile, then grabs my hand and tugs me forward. "I like having your hands on me, my little siren."

Rhett places his hands over mine, pressing them further against his rock-hard chest. I should say, "I'm not your anything," but all I get out is "Oh."

"We had something pretty amazing, didn't we?" His eyes search mine as if he'll uncover some buried truth if he looks long enough.

I swallow hard. "It was a fling." The practiced lie is bitter on my tongue.

His gaze doesn't stray, and I get lost in the depth of his eyes, transported back to our date. He looked at me from across the table with this same intensity. Tears spring to my eyes without my consent and I turn away. His calloused hand gently tugs on my wrist.

“There is no way it was a fling for me.” His voice is deep and rich, washing over me like my favorite song, familiar and comforting. Rhett tugs me closer, and despite the pain I felt just moments ago, I can’t fight the pull I have toward him. “I can’t tell you exactly what happened, but I am sorry,” he finishes.

Rhett’s Adam’s apple bobs. The beeping machinery and hum of the air conditioner are the only sounds in the room. Despite the building moisture in my eyes, I don’t look away. He clings to me; his hand slides down my wrist even further, and he laces his fingers between mine.

If I continue spending time with him, I won’t have a choice but to let the past go and forgive him for hurting me. Because Rhett without his memories is already digging his way back into my heart. Then it hits me. Rhett with his memories is the one who left me. Eventually, Rhett will remember why he left and do it again. My foolish heart can hope all it wants, but I need to keep it guarded—I will keep it guarded. I swallow the lump in my throat and give his hand a soft squeeze, then pull away.

“The nurse will be here any minute with your wheelchair. I’m gonna go get my car and I’ll meet you out front.”

FOUR

DANA

The entrance to the hospital is empty except for the muscular hunk in a wheelchair. Well, the muscular hunk and his flirty nurse.

The sky is an inky black. The streetlights cast a glow around Rhett, reminding me that he’s a living miracle. The scene is ruined by the look of pure disdain on his nurse’s face. Nurse McFlirty hasn’t tried anything since Rhett called me “sweetheart,” but she still looks at me as if I invented sunburn. She helps him stand,

and I open the passenger door as he carefully makes his way over and slides in. I give the nurse a curt nod, and Rhett mumbles a “thank you” as he gets situated.

With a fake smile, she pushes the empty wheelchair back into the hospital with her nose tipped in the air.

I don’t have a moment to get into my car before I hear “Dana!” from a familiar voice.

My heart sinks. The voice belongs to Mitch, also known as the straw who broke my camel’s back—my most recent ex who just got engaged.

“Hey, Mitch,” I say with a smile despite the uncomfortable churning in my gut.

“Long time, no see.”

I try hard to bite back a snippy remark, but, “Well I figured reaching out to my now-engaged ex wouldn’t be the wisest idea” slips through.

Mitch at least has the decency to look uncomfortable as he rubs the back of his neck. “Yeah,” he grunts.

I look around at everything but him, unsure where to take this awkward conversation. When I look up at the sky, waiting for Mitch to explain why he’s outside the hospital so late he says, “Two late shifts this week.”

“I see,” I reply, taking a step backward.

He was the stereotypical bachelor doctor, living in a huge, sterile home. He wore expensive suits and cologne and he took me to the fanciest restaurants. We had fun together, and there was a spark, but no chemistry. His words, not mine.

There’s a rustling behind me, and Mitch’s gaze shifts to my car. His blond eyebrows practically touch his hairline. “You found yourself another bachelor?”

It’s clearly a dig at my disaster of a dating life.

Rhett steps out of the car with obvious difficulty and limps over to me, putting an arm around my shoulder. “Everything okay, sweetheart?”

My heart warms to a volcanic measure as I stare up at him. “Y-yeah.”

Rhett looks Mitch up and down, then looks back to me. The possessiveness I find in Rhett's eyes sends a shiver of delight down my spine.

Rhett leans down and whispers in my ear, loud enough for Mitch to hear, "I think it's time I get you all to myself." Then he slides his hand down my side and rests it on my hip. My pulse skyrockets and I forget about my disdain for both men. Actually, I forget Mitch even exists for a moment when Rhett presses a tender kiss to my temple.

Mitch coughs and I'm reminded he's still there. He looks shocked and maybe irritated as he glances between Rhett and me. Rhett didn't introduce himself and barely acknowledged Mitch's presence. Which is not something Mitch has ever taken lightly. He was always the center of attention when we were together. He wanted to be the most well-respected man in the room, and he usually was. This has to be a solid hit to his ego. I probably shouldn't feel as good about it as I do.

"See you around," I say, giving Mitch a small wave. Rhett removes his hand from my hip and takes my waving hand in his, lacing his fingers between mine. Then he raises my hand to his lips and presses a kiss to it, locking his eyes on mine. The warmth I see there has my heart skipping beats until I remind myself that this isn't real. It's an act to escape an uncomfortable encounter with an ex. I'm not surprised that Rhett stepped in or that our chemistry is still strong, but I have to remember that this is temporary. I have to remember what he did and how he hurt me, not how great it feels to be with him again.

Rhett slides back into his seat more smoothly than before. Once I'm in and settled, I can see the pained expression on his face.

"Thanks for stepping in back there." I reach across the console and pat his fist that's resting on his thigh. He flexes his hand and pulls each of my fingers between his. They're the perfect fit.

“It’s the least I could do after all you’ve done for me.” He lifts my hand again and presses a kiss to the back. There’s not a hint of hesitation with his touch, and it leaves me reeling. I suspect he’s doing it to keep up our ruse, but when I look toward where Mitch was standing, he’s no longer there.

My throat tightens, and I cough to clear my airway. “How are you?” I remove my hand from Rhett’s to place it on the steering wheel. His skin against mine causes too much brain fog.

He answers without missing a beat. “It may be a bit before I can move without wincing, but my ribs are only bruised and not broken, so I’m thankful for that.”

“Me too.”

After buckling my belt, I turn up the heat. Amber Island is always warm during the days, but the nights during this time of year can be chilly. Standing in the cold air talking to Mitch has me shivering. I glance over and catch a glimpse of Rhett staring out the window. I use the opportunity to take him in, chiseled feature by chiseled feature.

Despite spending only God knows how long being tossed in the waves, his bruises and injuries are minimal, and he manages to still look more delicious than a freshly baked cinnamon roll. When he turns to face me and catches me in the act, he lifts an eyebrow. I expect one of his smirks, but he looks at me as if I hung the sun...or whatever the saying is, and it has my weak walls cracking again. My walls may as well be made of tissue paper with how easily he’s tearing them down.

I need to rebuild these walls with stone. I need to protect my already bruised and completely vulnerable heart. Seeing Mitch again and comparing him with Rhett—even in his current state—confirmed that the brief but intense relationship I had with Rhett ruined me for any other man. Sure, seeing that Mitch got engaged

shortly after our breakup hurt, but it's almost as if finding Rhett and being in his presence revealed how superficial things were with Mitch and my other two recent exes.

But that same feeling from earlier reminds me that this is my responsibility and not something I should try to pass off to someone else. It may go against propriety, but I know this is the right thing to do.

We've been shamelessly staring at each other for too long. I need to pass Rhett off to another member of my church, or good Samaritan, or anyone else before he can hurt me again. I blow out a puff of air and face forward, it's time to get on the road.

"I can't tell you how thankful I am that you're doing all of this." There's something different about his voice—it's deeper, hoarser. As if his voice is reflecting the same raw emotions I've been feeling.

I nod. "It's what any decent human would do."

"Well, I want you to know how much I appreciate it." He clenches his jaw, almost as if he's fighting the next words. "I know I hurt you, and yet you're going out of your way to take care of me." He's quiet for a moment, but then asks, "Can you tell me what it is that I did?"

I shake my head. "It doesn't matter."

His expression turns more serious than I've ever seen it. "It does matter to you. I can see it in your eyes. And if it matters to you, it matters to me."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

His words hit their mark, and I find myself believing them despite my freshly built defenses. This isn't the time or place for this, and there's too much to process. I'm exhausted, and he needs rest to recover.

"I'm not ready to talk about it yet." The words are true but still choke me up.

He nods. "I understand. But just know I will make it up to you. Whatever it is."

"What's done is done. It's in the past."

"Then I will focus on our future." He takes my hand and presses a kiss to my palm.

The breath catches in my throat. These small kisses feel so natural as if this is how life is meant to be. It makes it impossible for me to push him away. My head tells me I have to, but my heart begs me to drink him in deeper and deeper until I am drowning. Never mind. Bad analogy.

This isn't the real Rhett. This is the Rhett who doesn't even know who he is.

"Let's just focus on the now where we work on getting you healed up and your memories back." I pull my hand away, face forward, and put my car in gear to head home.

We drive in uncomfortable silence. Probably because the man who ghosted me is my newest house guest and I have no idea for how long.

I slow down as we drive past The Golden Sands where Rhett used to work.

“Does this spark anything?” I ask, glancing over at him with an encouraging smile before I focus back on the road.

From the corner of my eye, I can see him shake his head. “Maybe? Or maybe it’s just my mind conjuring up memories to try and brush off this amnesia.” His jaw tightens and he closes his eyes as if he’s trying to force the memories to the surface. His tension tangibly increases.

I reach across the space between us and gently pat his leg. “It will come back to you.”

“I hope so,” he says in a dejected tone.

Thankfully, it’s not long before we arrive at my cottage, and the discomfort of the short trip dissipates as I park.

After turning off my car, I turn and face him. “Let’s get you to bed.”

His lips slowly lift up at the corners. “Get me in bed, huh?”

My mouth drops open. “Inappropriate, Rhett. You know what I meant.” Before he can say anymore or cause the heat in my cheeks to totally ignite, I get out of the car and make my way to his door.

He swings his legs out and I help him stand. I grab his arm and drape it over my shoulders.

“I can walk on my own, but I much prefer this.” He pulls me in, and I too easily melt into him. His breath is a soft whisper against my ear, and I can’t mask the shiver of delight that courses over me.

I clear my wandering thoughts and arm my heart’s walls—this time with something a

little bit stronger than tissue paper. “This is just so you don’t overexert yourself. Don’t get any funny ideas, Stryker.”

His responding chuckle comes straight from his chest and flows through me. “I wouldn’t dream of it, little siren.” I bite back my smile at his unique term of endearment for me.

As we step onto the porch, my phone vibrates, notifying me of a text. I remove my arm from around Rhett and take a step away.

I pull out my phone and see a text from Crew.

“Who’s that?” Rhett asks, a hint of something I can’t quite decipher in his voice. Then he shakes his head. “None of my business. Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. Just a friend.” I type out my response to Crew and then unlock my door.

I flip on the light and then cringe, remembering why I left him on the porch earlier today. Organized chaos fills my living room. Bibles, pens, notebooks, and highlighters are scattered around the space.

“What’s going on here?” Rhett asks as I lock the door behind us.

“I’m leading the youth group girl’s retreat.”

“And you bought all this stuff for the kids? There’s a whole bookstore’s worth of Bibles here.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

He's slightly exaggerating—it's not quite a bookstore's worth—but the number of girls who have signed up for the retreat is astounding. Our small, private island church may not have a huge congregation, but the girls who attend youth group regularly have also invited friends—friends who follow me on social media and message me to tell me how excited they are to learn from me in person.

“No, everything was donated by different companies I work with.” The last thing I expected when creating my social media account teaching women about Bible study was getting noticed by big brands for promotion. This ministry has been more than I ever dreamed of, and I thank God every day for it. Even if my faith has grown stagnant over these last few months.

“Really? Those are some generous donations. What exactly do you do?” He eyes the piles of chaos warily.

“I create Bible study videos for women and in them promote faith-based brands and their products.” As the words fall out, the sensation of utter unworthiness grips my chest. I've become a fraud, unable to apply my own teachings to Bible study. It's going to make leading this upcoming girl's retreat even more daunting than it'd usually be.

About four months ago Mrs. Woodhouse asked if I'd be the retreat's main speaker. I'm supposed to walk the girls through various scriptures and teach them how to dissect, study, and apply the verses to their day-to-day lives. My lesson plans should be almost done by now, but I haven't been able to get a single thought down. Finding Rhett on shore has thrown another wrench into my plans.

Pushing down that consistent unease, I give Rhett a tight-lipped smile and nod. To thwart his questions, I ask, “Are you up for the grand tour? Or are you too tired or in too much pain?”

He wraps his arm around my shoulder and whispers, “I’d like the grand tour if you can be my crutch.”

My heart speeds up at his words and I do my best to school my expression.

We shuffle through my small home. I point out the kitchen, combo living and dining room, bathroom, and the three bedrooms, turning on the lights as we go. I only let him get a short peek of my bedroom and bring us to a halt before we step through the door.

“This room is off limits.” I look up at him and hope he can see the seriousness in my expression.

He winks but doesn’t try to push me.

When we reach the bedroom at the end of the hall, my book-nerd heart turns giddy like it does every time I open the door and get a glance into my favorite room of the house. A very generous gift from my billionaire brother-in-law made it possible to turn my sister’s old bedroom into my dream office. The work just wrapped up a week ago.

In the center of the room, my white desk and wingback desk chair wait for me to film videos—if I can ever get past this block. The wall behind my desk is the perfect backdrop with an entire wall of bookshelves, only partly full with my current collection. Many of the empty spaces are reserved for my sister’s future books and any others I collect along the way.

“I see a lot of books by Olivia Swann. Is she your favorite author?” Rhett asks.

Pride fills me as I answer, “She is.”

Ever since Olivia and West have gotten together, her book writing has taken off at a record pace. She puts out a book every two months, at least. Her editor can barely keep up, and I know several of those shelves will be full of her Christian romances in no time. She decided even before they got married that she’d keep her maiden name as her pen name. It makes everything easier for her and her current readers since that was the name on her debut novel. She also wants to make sure any success she sees is from her talents and not because of her billionaire husband.

Rhett releases me, slowly makes his way into the room, and surveys my favorite space. “This is amazing. It fits you.”

Resting my back against the doorframe, I ask, “What do you mean?”

“It’s feminine and fresh with the perfect dash of sass.” He motions to the hints of purple and cheetah print decor sprinkled around the room.

For several long seconds, I stare at him open-mouthed, unable to form a coherent thought. Finally, I say, “I don’t know if I should take that as a compliment or not.” How could he know that if he doesn’t remember me? Do I wear my personality that boldly that he’d have that impression of me in less than a day?

“Definitely a compliment.” Rhett bites the corner of his lower lip and raises both eyebrows.

I shake my head and lead him to the spare bedroom.

“This is where you’ll be staying.” I open the door and sweep my hand out as if I’m

presenting him with a grand prize. The room is sparsely furnished with a single bed, nightstand, and short dresser with a mirror hanging over it. Several paintings the children's church made for me hang on the walls. Their artwork surrounds my favorite Bible verses, all written in calligraphy.

I look from the bed to Rhett, then back to the bed and wince. "I'm sorry if it's a little small for you."

He eyes the bed, then turns to me. "It's perfectly fine." He walks over to it and eases himself down, laying his head on the pillow and stretching his legs to their full length making them hang over the end of the bed. "See, it fits like a glove."

"If by glove you mean a normal glove that needs to be turned into a fingerless glove to fit your frame."

The bed creaks in protest when Rhett sits up. He grimaces and holds his bruised side as he walks back to the door.

A rush of sympathy washes over me. "Are you okay?" I motion to his hand on his ribs. "Maybe this little tour was too much for you."

He shakes his head. "I'm fine."

I have to tilt my head back ever so slightly to meet him eye to eye. He brushes a strand of hair behind my ear with his free hand. "Thank you for caring."

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

My eyes flutter closed. I force myself to picture the message I received that told me his phone was no longer in service. He left me without a goodbye or even a backward glance. I need to keep these memories at the forefront of my mind when it comes to Rhett. Otherwise, history will repeat itself, and I'll be back to being the girl who was heartbroken over a ghost.

I grit my teeth and take a step away from him, gently shaking my head. "Don't—"

"Dana..." His voice is rough as if he feels the same turmoil I do.

I open my mouth to say something, anything, but before I can utter a word, I hear my front door knob jiggling like someone is trying to unlock it.

Rhett's eyes narrow and he wraps a protective arm around me as he slides me behind him.

"Stay here. I'll go check it out."

"No, it's fine." I try to step around him, but he holds his arm out to block me from exiting. The door creaks open. "It's just?—"

Rhett launches into action. A single blink and he's in the living room with his forearm against Crew's throat, pushing him against the wall, and mumbling something too low for me to hear.

"Rhett! It's just Crew!" I exclaim, jogging up to them.

Rhett doesn't step back, doesn't lower his arm, but when he turns to me, his face takes on a new expression. "Who's Crew?" he practically growls.

I break the tension with the first thing that comes to mind: "He's the one who brought us dinner."

FIVE

RHETT

I just pinned Dana's best friend to the wall. Even though my first impulse was to protect her, my second was a feeling of pure possessiveness. There is not a single ounce of me that should feel possessive over her, but I was. I still am.

Just like at the hospital when that jerk in the parking lot called her over. I didn't like the way he looked at her or how condescending he sounded when he said "another bachelor." It took everything in me to play it cool. Dana's entire countenance changed when she was in his presence. As if merely sharing a space with the man brought down her mood. He clearly hurt her in the past.

If only I could remember what I did to hurt Dana.

Something tells me it was pretty serious. Yet she's done everything she can to help me without question or complaint.

Since the moment I woke up on the beach, I've felt drawn to her. Her sparkling eyes, smile, and sass draw me in like a moth to a flame. Or more accurately, a sailor to a siren. My siren didn't lure me to my death, though; she gave me a second chance at life. My siren was an angel sent by God.

When Dr. Woodhouse told me he wanted me to stay with Dana, it was a relief

because it meant I got to spend more time with her. It's selfish, but I can't help it. Everything inside me feels right when I'm with her. She said we had nothing more than a fling, but I don't believe her. I can't. My reaction to her is electric. And superficial flings don't produce electricity. I don't need the memories to know we were more—or on our way to much more.

Dana hands Crew a bottle of water, pulling me from my thoughts.

"I'm sorry again," I say as Crew massages his neck.

"It's all right, man," he responds, then guzzles his water. Crew must read the disbelief on my face because he adds, "You thought you were protecting Dana. I can't hold a grudge for that."

"I appreciate it."

As if my nervous system realizes it no longer needs to be on high alert, all adrenaline leaves my body in a rush and a sharp ache spreads across my ribs. I hold my left side, the side that hurts the most. My eyes find Dana, whose expression is full of pity.

"Let me get you some ice," Dana says before leaving me and Crew alone in the living room.

Crew eyes me skeptically, then shakes his head. He drops his voice to a snarled whisper as if he doesn't want Dana to overhear him. "You have a lot of guts showing back up here after what you did to her."

"I thought you said you couldn't hold a grudge."

"That's a whole different grudge. You were trying to protect her then. This grudge is about you hurting her."

My brows knit together, and I respond in a frustrated whisper. “What did I do to her? She refuses to tell me.”

His nostrils flare. “Don’t play stupid with me. Dana is the last person who deserves to be taken advantage of. I don’t buy this whole amnesia thing.” Crew puts amnesia in finger quotes.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

Despite understanding his point, I can't keep the anger from simmering in my words. "I'm not 'playing stupid.' I have no memories of who I am, let alone what happened between me and Dana. Believe me, I wish I did. Because then I'd do whatever I could to make things right with her."

Crew puts the cap on the water bottle and sets it down on the side table. He takes a menacing step toward me. Despite the man's smaller stature, the look of pure hatred in his eyes has my spine stiffening, and I prepare myself for his wrath.

"Maybe you're not playing stupid now, but what you did was the most idiotic thing I've ever heard of."

"Tell me what it is so I can try and fix it." I have to fight the desire to shout.

His jaw ticks, and I can see that he's contemplating whether he should or shouldn't tell me. I can hear Dana rummaging around in the kitchen before Crew finally says, "Over the course of a week, you managed to work your way into her heart and break it when you ghosted her."

"I ghosted her?" I shake my head. Even with what little I know about Dana, I can't imagine ghosting her.

"Maybe you're just an idiot. It would explain why you left that girl without a word." He points toward the kitchen, where Dana is getting me ice, completely unaware of what's going on in her living room.

The pull I have toward her now, even without memories of our time together, is too

strong to ignore. If I spent a week with her, and from what he's saying, a week where she fell for me, why would I walk away? We've been together for less than twenty-four hours, and not a single cell in my body wants a break from her. The mere thought of being away from her brings severe dread. It's sort of pathetic, but being with her is the stability I need while my life is on unsteady ground.

"I wish I could remember. I really do."

He stares me down, and it takes everything in me to not shrink away. Even being almost a head shorter than me the guy is intimidating.

"Dana is the absolute best person I know. Any guy would be lucky to have her. If you so much as cause her to sniffle, you'll have me to deal with." He pokes my chest.

Before my brain can fully process his words or come up with a response, Dana walks back into the living room and gives me a bag of ice for my side.

Crew sits across from me. His dark glare vanishes when he looks at Dana. Her eyes shift between us, obviously seeing the dissension there.

"What did you two talk about while I was in the kitchen?" she asks.

"Guy stuff," Crew replies, looking at me with a challenge in his expression.

Considering he and Dana are clearly close, I need to make sure I get on his good side. So instead of telling her that he threatened me, I agree with him.

"Yeah, guy stuff."

She looks between Crew and me, clearly not believing us shown by the expression she wears but she doesn't push any further.

Crew prays, and the second I lift the pizza up to my mouth and the scent of pepperoni and melted cheese hits my nose, my stomach releases a loud grumble. I practically inhale the first two pieces and eat another two before my stomach feels satisfied. I gulp down my water, then take all of our dishes to the kitchen and load them in the dishwasher.

It's late and my body is exhausted, but my mind needs a minute to wind down before I can fall asleep. Besides, I'm starting to feel the side effects of my concussion, and sitting helps with the dizziness.

Dana sits between me and Crew and puts on a documentary. After she presses play, Crew rolls his eyes. I have no interest in the history of wheat, so I use this opportunity to try and piece together what little I know about myself and what Crew says happened with Dana. When we drove past the resort Dana says I once worked at, a few scattered puzzle pieces of memories fell into my blank mind. But I can't put them together. The snippets are there but they're not enough to make sense of anything. Especially everything with Dana.

If we dated, why in the world would I have left her? Am I the type of guy who would walk away from a good thing just because? Or is there more to the story than what Dana and Crew know? Maybe there's something I kept from Dana that explains my actions. I'm hoping and praying that I had a legitimate reason to leave—especially without a goodbye.

Hopefully, my memories will eventually come back, but the past few hours have confirmed that remembering is something I can't force. It's time to focus on the here and now. I sink deeper into the cushion. Crew's arm is casually draped across the back of the couch behind Dana, but he doesn't touch her.

More questions fill my mind: Are Dana and Crew more than friends? Nothing either of them has done makes me think they are, but what would I know? Will Dana ever

forgive me for what I did? Will I ever understand or remember whatever it was?

We're only ten minutes into the documentary, but all of these thoughts and questions are draining me. The more the narrator of this documentary drones on, the more my mind wants to give in to the need for sleep that my body is begging for.

"I really should get to bed," I say, rubbing my face and standing.

Dana raises her arms over her head and stretches. "Me too." She gives me a sleepy smile. "This documentary never ceases to put me to sleep."

"Well, then get out of here, because you're on my bed," Crew says, stretching out his legs.

With a severe eye roll in response, Dana disappears down the hall and comes back into the living room carrying pillows and blankets, handing them over to Crew before bidding us goodnight.

"Do you stay here often?" I ask Crew.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

He smirks. “I wouldn’t say often. But once you eat one of Dana’s breakfasts, you’ll understand why I use any excuse I can to stay here.” As if he remembers he hates me, his smile vanishes.

My brow furrows. “Sorry if this is a dumb question. But I think I heard Dr. Woodhouse say you’re Dana’s cousin. Is that true, or are you guys...”

He eyes me for a long second. “As much as I’d like to make you sweat, you heard Dr. Woodhouse right. Dana is my cousin. She also happens to be one of the most important people in my life. So I’m staying here tonight because I want to make sure you aren’t lying about your injuries or going to try anything funny.” He eyes me suspiciously, almost studying my face. “Something about you is off.” His bluntness takes me off guard even if it shouldn’t surprise me at this point. Sure, I only have bits and pieces of my past to go off of, but something in my gut tells me Crew may be onto something. “I don’t know what it is. But I will figure it out.”

“Well, if you figure it out, let me know.”

“Trust me. I will,” Crew replies, his tone once again threatening.

SIX

DANA

Screams come from across the hall. I throw my blankets off and sprint to Rhett’s room, bursting in without knocking. The comforter and top sheet lay in a heap on the floor. Rhett tosses and turns on the bed.

I stand frozen when he shouts, “Don’t do it! Please! Put it down!” He thrashes wildly, and I run over to him, praying I reach him before he throws himself off the bed.

“Rhett! Wake up!”

He reaches up toward the ceiling, then he screams, “NO!”

“Rhett!” I shout right back.

He stills, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Then I see the tears streaming down his cheeks. He curls in on himself as he cries silently.

He’s having a nightmare. A painful, heart-wrenching nightmare.

I kneel next to the bed, brushing his hair off his sweat-soaked forehead. His body visibly relaxes. I stroke his jaw, enjoying the feel of his scruff against my palm. Swarms of emotions build inside me until I feel like I could burst. This is too much, too fast. Just like before.

I silently beg God to help me guard my heart, because somehow, this beautiful, confusing man is even more appealing this time around. My heart is too quickly falling back into its old habit, and I fear that I once again won’t be able to stop it.

My hand lazily pushes through his hair that’s just a touch too long, and I give him the comfort I’d want after such an awful nightmare. His five o’clock shadow has gotten thicker through the night, and he’s starting to resemble someone...someone I can’t place. I’m too tired to dwell on it, so instead I try to console him in his sleeping state.

Once his breathing has evened, I pull my hand away and prepare to take my leave. Rhett whimpers and reaches for me. His large hand circles my wrist, and he pulls me forward until I’m perched very awkwardly on his bed. He releases my wrist and

wraps his arms around my waist, his head nuzzling into my side. Frozen in place, I sit perfectly still as he visibly relaxes. The rapid rise and fall of his chest slows and his breathing deepens. But his hold on me doesn't loosen.

"Dana," he mumbles. "Let me keep you."

My eyes go wide and I stiffen. "Rhett," I whisper, but he doesn't respond. Instead, his deep, even breaths fill the otherwise silent room. I don't know how much time passes, just that I've been sitting here with a gorgeous man's arms wrapped around me, and it's turning me inside out.

Exhaustion begins claiming me, but I can't sleep here in bed with Rhett. Having him in my house is already pushing the boundaries.

I stare down at him, again brushing a rogue strand of hair away from his face. He's truly gorgeous to look at. A slight wince is on his face, though, as if he still remembers the terror he experienced during that nightmare. It breaks my heart to see him like this.

I slide my finger across the crease in his forehead, and as it releases, a sigh slips from his lips.

My chest tightens. "You shouldn't be able to do this to me again," I whisper. I peel his arms from around me and slide a pillow into the space I recently vacated. He clutches it tightly.

His voice stops me just as I reach the door. "Dana?"

After closing my eyes and blowing out a puff of air, I turn to face him.

"I was just checking on you," I say, making sure he knows I wasn't just wandering in

his room at night.

Moonlight spills into the room, casting just enough light for me to take in every defined muscle of his chiseled torso as he sits up. As I scan him, my mouth goes dry. The raven wings he has across his upper back aren't his only tattoos. The left side of his chest has a flock of black birds with a faded background of a forest. I've never been big on tattoos, but the way Rhett wears them helps me understand why some women would be obsessed with men who have them.

Thankfully, Rhett doesn't seem to notice my perusal. "Did I wake you?" he asks.

I debate whether I should tell him why I'm really here. He may not remember the nightmare, or he may be embarrassed by it. Although he shouldn't be. I decide to be honest since there's no reason for me to lie or sugarcoat what just happened. "It sounded like you were having a nightmare."

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

He nods solemnly as if he's not surprised by this.

"Do you remember what it was about?" I walk over to where the blankets are pooled on the hardwood floor.

He's silent for a long moment, and I urge him to lie back down. I pick up the sheet, tuck it beneath the mattress, and pull it over him. Rhett stares at a spot across the room. After I toss the quilt over the bed and fold it down, he finally answers.

"Every detail. I think it's a memory."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"At some point. But not tonight." His eyes search my face, and I notice a vulnerability that wasn't there before.

"Okay, well, I'm going back to bed."

He dips his head, and I turn to walk out the door.

"Dana?" he asks.

"Yeah?" I respond, not turning around, trying to keep myself from going to him again.

"Thank you."

“You’re welcome.” I look at him from over my shoulder. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

I shut the door behind me and tip-toe across the hall to my room. Good thing Crew sleeps like the dead when he’s off duty. I can’t imagine how awkward it would have been if Crew walked in and found Rhett in the middle of a nightmare. Or worse, found me perched on Rhett’s bed.

For the next long while, I stare at the ceiling and pray for the man across the hallway. As I do, I can’t help but ask God why He chose me for this.

My eyes fill with tears. Rhett hurt me. Bad. The fact that he doesn’t remember doesn’t change that. I can’t let him back in, and I can’t fall for him again. I need to hang on to those memories instead of basking in the sweetness he’s showing me now. The Rhett who left me is still in there. Which means he could break me all over again.

There’s not a doubt in my mind that God set our reunion in action even if I can’t figure out why. Sure, I’ve been feeling more and more hopeless and helpless living as a single woman with a burning desire to get married and have a family. A burning desire that may never become my reality. Maybe this is God’s way of giving me closure so I can finally move on.

The voices of those annoying busybodies in my church echo again through my mind. For some reason, they can’t believe I’m not married yet.

The wiser ones told me to dig into God’s word and fall deeper in love with Jesus, and I have. At least, I’ve tried. My hope has been that this stagnancy is just a small bump in the road to a firmer faith.

But this whole thing with Rhett has taken the small bump and turned it into a

mountain. Something that feels impossible to scale or overcome. It feels as though God is dangling my past relationship in front of me. Making me wonder—hope—that this could be my second chance with Rhett because the desires of my heart remain steadfastly bent on choosing him.

My gaze lands on my Bible. The moon casts its light over it as if to say, “You’ll find everything you need in here.” I get up and turn on my desk lamp, closing my eyes and silently praying I open it to a passage that will help me overcome my struggle. It opens to the end of 1 Corinthians, chapter 15:

“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

I sit and read through the full chapter, trying to figure out what God wants me to pull from it. No matter how hard I try, I cannot concentrate enough to put all the pieces together. Much like it’s been for the last many weeks.

I rest my head on my folded hands.

“Sorry, Lord, it’s not in me tonight. I don’t get it. I don’t get any of this.” I pause for a long moment. Too many times lately, my prayers are me rattling off requests and concerns, and not enough of me sitting and trying to listen. Not that I hear God’s voice audibly. Sometimes, He speaks to me through a song or hymn that I’ve listened to, or a Bible verse I’ve read. Not tonight, though. My mind is a blank void. After a few more minutes of waiting in silence, my eyes grow heavier and I can’t keep them open.

“Help me to trust You more. Increase my faith and help me grow stronger in You.”

Even though I didn’t get an answer like I hoped I would, peace washes over me, and it feels like I can take a full breath for the first time in hours. I get up and shuffle my

way back over to my bed. Crashing into it, I immediately fall asleep.

SEVEN

RHETT

I jolt up in bed, startled by the violent clanging of pots and pans.

The moment I open the door and stumble down the hall to the kitchen, the smell of something savory hits me.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

“Good morning, sunshine,” Crew says dully from the dining room table as he sips coffee and flips through a book. He doesn’t even bother to look my way. “Lover boy is up!” he shouts toward the kitchen.

Dana emerges wearing a purple apron. Her hair is in a messy knot with loose strands framing her face and it’s held in place by what looks like a knitting needle. “Good morning,” she says brightly.

Dana’s eyes widen as she notices me standing in the living room. She scans me up and down, and a slow blush creeps onto her cheeks. That’s when I realize I forgot to put a shirt on in my rush to find out where the noise was coming from.

“Sorry, I’ll be right back.” I dash to the bedroom and grab a shirt.

I start pulling it down but stop when I look in the mirror and find a scar on my abdomen. Running my finger over the puckered skin, a memory trickles through the fog of my amnesia. Unease fills me, and I quickly head back to the living room, needing to be near Dana to alleviate those feelings.

As soon as she’s back in view, comfort chases away the unease. She smiles my way, and an entirely different sensation overwhelms me. It’s an illogical yet unsurprising emotion. The feeling that I’m home. With my safe person. That she’s my person.

She shyly looks away from me to Crew who, thankfully, seems unaware of my moment with Dana.

“I’m going to go home, shower, and get some stuff done around the apartment,”

Crew says, more to Dana than me.

“All right, we’ll see you later,” Dana says, giving him a quick hug.

Crew turns to me. “I’ll see you around.” I’m pleasantly surprised when he reaches his hand out to shake mine.

“It was nice meeting you,” I say.

He grunts and gives me a nod in response before disappearing out the door.

Dana bites her lip. “Sorry about him. He doesn’t open up very easily.” She twirls a loose strand of hair, and I have the sudden urge to pull the item I now realize is a crochet hook from her hair and run my hands through the strands.

I stare at her, imprinting her features into my brain so I never forget her again. I must take too long to memorize her because her soft smile turns into a frown.

She pulls off her apron and hangs it on a hook on the wall. “Well, I’m going to go for a run. Breakfast is in the kitchen. Help yourself to whatever you want. And you know where the bathroom is, so feel free to get a shower while I’m gone. I left a towel and washcloth on the counter for you.”

Her slightly wrinkled nose gives off the impression that it was more of a request than a suggestion, I turn my head and sniff myself. Yeah, I could definitely use a shower. I probably should have taken one last night.

She stares at me, almost as if she’s trying to figure something out. Maybe I have drool on the side of my mouth that I missed when fixing my hair in the mirror. I lift my hand and pretend to scratch my chin to check. All clear. But her focus doesn’t waver.

“What is it?” I ask.

“You just look a lot like...” She shakes her head as if breaking free of a trance. “Never mind. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Before she reaches the door, I call to her, “Dana, wait.”

She turns and faces me. Her curious expression tells me to go on.

I swallow hard. “I’m sorry you had to deal with me last night. Well, all day, really. And I’m sorry that all this stuff has fallen onto your shoulders.” A shiver races down my spine at the memory of the nightmare that woke her up last night.

Dana waves me off as if taking on the role as my caregiver is no big deal. “It’s fine. I’m just happy I found you and that you’re on the mend.”

I see nothing but sincerity when I search her eyes. I know I hurt her in the past, but she doesn’t appear to be holding a grudge. Maybe she was a little gruff when she first found me, but it didn’t take her long to soften toward me. Again, I go silent, unable to form a reasonable response.

She takes a step toward me.

“Are you okay?” She releases a breath before she continues. “Last night, when you woke up?—”

I cut her off, not wanting to tarnish her life with my darkness. “I’m fine.” I smile at her, trying to portray the same sincerity she gave me.

Dana gives me a closed-lip smile that tells me she doesn’t believe me, but she doesn’t fight me on it. “Okay. Make yourself at home.” She motions to her living room. “I’ll

see you in a bit.” And with that, the door closes softly behind her.

I walk to the kitchen and grab a breakfast sandwich off the plate on the counter. After sending up a prayer of thanks, I take a bite and practically moan. Crew wasn’t joking, Dana’s cooking is amazing.

As I eat, I wander around her space, taking in the little details I wasn’t able to last night. Maybe this way I can learn at least a little bit about her.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

Her living room is simple and feminine with its white walls and the accents of purple found in the drapes and throw pillows. The shelf next to her television houses DVDs. Tucked in the corner is what looks like a record player. A shelf beside it holds albums that look like a mix of older and newer by the wear on their covers. I find myself drawn to the music for some reason. I pull out a couple of records. Bon Jovi, Puddle of Mudd, The Verve, Awestruck, and Phantom Echoes are just a few of the bands I find. As I go through them, an odd sensation of déjà vu comes over me.

I shake my head, mentally ridding myself of the bizarre feeling, and decide it's time to get cleaned up.

For some reason, the remnants of my nightmare come back to me after wandering around Dana's cottage. I hate that I can remember each moment vividly but can't remember anything prior to waking up on shore yesterday. The hot water rains down, and I scrub as hard as I can, trying to rid myself of the haunting visions without inflicting pain on my various scrapes and bruises. It wasn't just a nightmare; I can feel that it's a memory. A terrible memory I wish I could permanently forget.

I lean my head back, and the water rinses the shampoo from my hair. I flinch as the cut on my scalp burns.

"Lord, please guide me and help me to seek You through all of this." It's a short prayer, but it's all I have. One thing I know with unshakable knowledge is that God is an integral part of my life. Praying to Him has brought a comfort I've desperately needed since I woke up on shore. My faith is foundational to who I am. The other thing I know without a doubt is that Dana means a great deal to me. I don't need my memories to tell me those two truths.

A wave of dizziness crashes over me the second I turn the water off. I sway on my feet and press my hands against the wall, closing my eyes and taking deep breaths. Thankfully, the dizziness doesn't last too long.

Getting out of the shower, I dry off the best I can, then slide on the boxer briefs Dana picked up for me. I drape my towel over my shoulders. I'm running too hot to put clothes on and need a few moments to make sure this bout of dizziness is gone. I'm grateful for Dana giving me privacy. Now I can cool off before getting dressed—not that I plan on going anywhere except my bedroom.

Steam pours from the bathroom into the hallway as I step out.

“Did you forget all about me?” a woman calls from somewhere in the front of the house. I stop dead in my tracks.

Footsteps grow closer. I should take the three strides to my room, but I'm frozen in place.

She walks into view at the end of the hall, and I take her in, scanning my minimal memories to see if she's someone I once knew. I'd put her in her mid-to-late sixties. She's at least a foot shorter than me with wild curly brown hair with silver highlights, oversized glasses, and a floral print dress that almost brushes the floor. Nothing sparks to tell me she's someone I used to know.

“Oh my!” she exclaims, placing her hand over her heart. Her eyes widen and she asks, “Who are you?”

“Rhett.”

She sucks in a sharp breath. “Rhett? You mean the Rhett?”

I think the question is meant to be rhetorical, so I only grunt in response.

“I’ll take that as a yes even though you sound more like a caveman than the man Dana has told me about.” Before I can apologize for my lack of manners, she rambles on. “Rhett, why don’t you go get some clothes on? I have a few questions for you.”

“Sorry but...who are you?” I ask.

“Rosa,” she states as if I should somehow know exactly who she is and why she’s in Dana’s home.

Since it seems like she’s meant to be here, I take that as my cue to get dressed even if it leaves her unsupervised. As I’m pulling on my pants, I hear the front door open and close. By the time I’m dressed and coming out of my room, Rosa and Dana are talking in hushed voices. When Dana says my name curiosity gets the best of me. I try to get closer to make out what they’re saying, but the floorboards protest and give me away.

Both Dana and Rosa turn to look at me. Dana’s face is flushed from her run, and she glistens with sweat. Slowly, my eyes scan her down to her toes then back up. Unbridled attraction thrums through my veins.

“Well.” Rosa’s lips turn up into a wide smile. “I’m glad I can finally meet you and put a face to the name.”

From the glances exchanged between the two women, Dana has, at a minimum, partially filled Rosa in on our situation.

“It’s nice to meet you too. I’m sorry our introduction was so...” I trail off not knowing how to finish that thought.

“Raw,” Dana supplies, then covers her mouth to try and hide her smile. Rosa gently smacks Dana’s arm, her expression playful.

I scratch the back of my neck. “Uh, yeah.” The tips of my ears heat in embarrassment.

Rosa sends Dana a sharp look. “Why didn’t you tell me you’re hosting a house guest?”

Dana chews on her bottom lip. My eyes focus on the movement involuntarily, and what I assume is a memory flickers to life. The image is of Dana looking up at me through her lashes. She bit her lower lip as if she was waiting for me. After a brief tortuous second, I pressed my lips against hers and her body melted into mine. Swallowing hard, I attempt to rein in my thoughts, but the memory plays on repeat.

When Dana speaks again, it pulls me out of my haze. “It was kind of a shock, and I haven’t really been able to think straight since I found him. I knew I was forgetting something on my way back from my run but don’t know how I forgot about our brunch.”

Rosa waves a hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about that. I can see you have a lot on your plate.” She crosses her thin arms over her chest and eyes me warily. “You do realize if people at church find out about this little arrangement there will be talk?”

Dana sighs. “I know. But Crew stayed too! And Nancy Woodhouse already knows. I called her this morning, and she assured me I did the right thing.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

“So how exactly did all of this”—Rosa waves her hands around— “happen?”

Dana tells Rosa the full story, including the orders from Dr. Woodhouse.

A placating smile replaces Rosa’s stern expression. “Okay, well, that explains it, but we need to rectify this situation before tonight. And I believe there is a very simple solution.”

“Yeah?” Dana and I say in unison.

“Crew will take him in.”

Dana immediately shakes her head. “I already tried that.” She gives me a side-eye. “He’s made his position clear...”

I finish for her. “Crew is very much team anti-Rhett.” A sick feeling fills my gut. Not just because of Crew. Anxiety has my chest tightening when I think about being away from Dana. She’s become my safe place amidst all this chaos.

Pursing her lips, Rosa says, “Nonsense. Let me have a word with him.”

Dana raises an eyebrow.

Rosa holds back a smile and lovingly pats Dana’s cheek. “Leave it to me, sweet girl.” Then she turns to me and winks.

Rosa knew exactly what strings to pull and what buttons to push when it came to

convincing Crew to let me temporarily live with him. I make a mental note to get on her good side. She clearly holds a lot of influence and knows how to get things done.

Dana and Rosa came with me when I moved the belongings Dana bought for me into Crew's one-bedroom apartment. Afterward, Crew came back with us to Dana's cottage to eat the leftovers from breakfast.

We all sat and talked for over an hour after our plates had been scraped clean. They interacted as if they were all lifelong friends, yet I didn't feel like an outsider. They made me feel welcome and as if I belonged. Well, Dana and Rosa did.

Crew doesn't like me and doesn't hide it. Even though I don't think staying with Crew will be comfortable, there's currently no other choice. One night at Dana's was enough to potentially cause gossip, and she's sacrificed enough for me. Especially with her being a small group leader of teenage girls—teenage girls who she loves as if they're her younger sisters. She practically glowed as she told me about them and said that Wednesday nights are her favorite because she gets to see them. The last thing she needs is for my presence to complicate her position or call her character into question with church leadership. So, despite my less-than-stellar relationship with Crew, I will be staying with him until I get my memories back or somehow figure out where I live.

By the time night rolls around, I have no doubt that I am the person Crew hates most in the world—past, present, and future. He makes me choose between the smelly couch and a blow-up mattress that doesn't look like it still holds air.

I stealthily lean over and take another whiff of Crew's couch. I gag. Yeah, air mattress it is.

Once I tell him my decision, Crew goes to the hall closet, grabs a pump, and shoves it into my hands. "You're going to need this."

He drops the deflated mattress onto the floor without a word. So I get to work and get it blown up, then toss a sheet and partially moth-eaten afghan on top. Despite the bed at Dana's being too small, it was comfortable. This "bed" looks like it's seen better days; there is a chance I won't be able to walk tomorrow after a night sleeping on it. Especially with my ribs being so tender.

Crew must notice my hesitation.

"It looks rough but it stays pumped up for the most part."

I stare down at the rubber bed that's already losing air and looks lopsided thirty-seven seconds into being blown up. Crew gives me a full-blown mocking smile.

"I hope you have the sleep you deserve." His expression drops into a menacing scowl, and I pray that he doesn't try and strangle me in my sleep.

EIGHT

DANA

If I was struggling before, I am barely surviving now.

"Why me?" I stare up at the cloudless sky with my arms raised, then let them fall to my sides. After leaving Crew's, I parked in my driveway and walked straight to the beach. I needed fresh air to think clearly.

"Why are you letting me struggle so much? Why is he back in my life?" My prayer sounds equal parts hopeless and whiny.

I don't expect an answer, not audibly anyway, but I stand on the sand for another few minutes. Inspiration for a new video hits. I want to get started before the urge goes

away. I return to my house, unlock the door, grab the Bible resting on my coffee table, and minimal filming equipment. It's the Bible I once pored over daily and studied with all my heart.

The same Bible I take to youth group on Wednesdays. My high school girls give me so much motivation I find it impossible to ignore even the slightest pull toward creating content. They always bring questions for me from the scriptures they've been reading. Since it's still summer break, we haven't met in weeks and I am ready to reunite with my girls.

Soon I will be able to see them. In the meantime, they deserve more content. So I position my ring light and phone perfectly for me to shoot another video. Like so many other times, any inspiration flees like the wind.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

I thought maybe shooting in a different location or at another time of day would help. Especially since inspiration struck me so hard on the beach. But nothing helps. I'm still stuck with this block. It makes my frustration mount even higher.

I unplug my ring light, pull my phone off its stand, and set it next to my open Bible. That's what I need. My Bible. To dive in, dig deep, and study the truth of God's holy Word for myself. Not just for online content.

But no matter how hard I try, I can't. The words blur together or the ideas don't make sense to me. It's as if I'm being mentally blocked from understanding. Like I have ears that don't hear or eyes that can't see.

Giving myself a few more minutes, I stare at the passage and continue to come up short. I collect my Bible, ring light, phone, and stand, and head back into the house. Once everything is in its respective place, I reluctantly repost an older video that did well on the first go-round. Hopefully, it will do well for me again.

After locking up and getting a quick shower, I'm off to bed, hoping that tomorrow will bring new post ideas and a stronger defense against Rhett Stryker's charms.

I pound on Crew's door and yell, "I brought sustenance!"

Seconds pass before the door is pulled open, and Rhett stands before me in all his rumpled morning glory. He puts a finger to his lips as if telling me to be quiet.

I wrinkle my brows.

“Crew is still sleeping,” Rhett whispers, apparently noticing my confusion.

“It’s almost eight in the morning. Crew never sleeps this long, even when he’s coming off a long shift.”

I motion to his scruffy cheeks. “Are you growing out a beard?” He had a five o’clock shadow yesterday, but he must be someone who needs to shave every day. The extra scruff makes him look like someone else I know, but I still can’t figure out who. It’s driving me crazy.

He scratches his jaw. “No? But maybe I should shave.”

“I can stop by the store on my way home from work and pick you up a razor.”

Rhett shrugs. “I can pick one up later.” He motions for me to come in.

I walk over to the galley kitchen and lay the food I picked up on my way on the counter. The unmade, sagging air mattress catches my attention. “That does not look comfortable,” I mumble mostly to myself.

“It wasn’t,” Rhett says, rubbing his side. “Where do you work?” Rhett asks.

“A little cafe in town. I help out a couple times a week to get out of the house.”

“You only need to work part-time?”

“Well, my main job is a small business I run on social media.”

He stares out into space as if thinking hard about something I said.

“What?” I ask when he’s been silent for too long.

“What kind of small business?”

I shift on my feet. “It’s a sort of ministry.”

Rhett raises his eyebrows. “Tell me about it.”

So I do. And I can’t help it when I talk faster and get more excitable as I tell him the little details he asks about.

“It started out as a way to hold myself accountable in deep diving into the Bible. The more I posted, the more followers I gained, and I got to interact with other women who wanted to learn how to study their Bible in depth. After I hit twenty-thousand followers, I had my first business reach out and ask to work with me. And it’s just grown from there.” His eyes never leave my face, his expression telling me he’s listening to every word intently. It’s as if he’s really interested in something I’m so passionate about.

Once I finish explaining it all, he says, “That’s amazing. I’d like to watch your videos sometime.”

My eyes widen. “Oh, I don’t know…”

“Come on, you’re okay with thousands of strangers watching but not me?”

I open my mouth, then close it. “It’s different when you know the people watching them. Even when it’s the girls I mentor at youth group; it’s weird when they talk about things they learned from one of my videos. That’s why I’m nervous about leading the upcoming girls’ retreat”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

“So you’re CPR certified, a social media influencer, a popular barista, a mentor to teenage girls, and now you’re going to lead a retreat. What can’t you do?”

My lips tilt up into a smile at his praise.

“I actually also love to crochet.” I point at the crochet hook in my hair.

Rhett shakes his head with a flirty smile. “You crochet too? Aren’t you just full of surprises?”

“I’m full of surprises?” I laugh. “Says the man who I found washed up on shore.”

“Touché.” He pours two mugs of coffee and hands me one.

“So what are your plans for today?” I ask after washing down my bagel with a healthy swig of coffee.

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I figured I’d spend it with you.”

“Would you be up for visiting your old job and maybe meeting with some of your previous coworkers? I could take you over there before my shift. They’ll probably be excited to see you.”

He doesn’t look convinced by my statement, and his next words confirm my suspicion. “I guess we’ll have to see.”

As we finish our breakfast and coffee, I can only hope this idea won’t completely

blow up in my face.

To say Rhett's old coworkers were leery of his return would be a massive understatement. When he worked at the resort, he was well-liked by the customers and staff. But now it seems as though their friendliness is forced. I assume it's because he vanished without a trace and they're not sure what to make of his sudden and unexpected return. Similar to how I have felt since finding him.

We've walked through a few places at the resort, worked our way into the lobby, and are heading toward the pool walking down the hall of offices. Anxiety tightens in my chest when the concierge stops Rhett right in front of West's office. West is still on his honeymoon with my sister, but it's a reminder of another obstacle I'll need to tackle at some point. Soon, I'll have to tell my sister and new brother-in-law that my old flame literally washed back into my life.

West and Olivia may have approved of pre-ghost Rhett, but I have no idea how they'd react if we somehow got over this massive hurdle to rekindle what we had—not that I'm ready to entertain that idea. I'm remaining firmly in the camp of an anti-romantic relationship with Rhett. Even if every interaction we've had since I found him washed up on shore has pushed me closer to the edge of falling for him again.

“So are you going to be attending Faith Alive again?” Rhett's old co-worker asks.

“That's my plan,” Rhett answers.

Rhett told me on our first and only date that West was the one who invited him to church and ultimately helped point Rhett to his Savior. Even though West was technically Rhett's boss, he didn't allow business to come between his duty of witnessing to the lost.

It's one of the things I envy about my sister—that she landed a man living fully for Christ. That was the first thing that originally drew me to Rhett...well, after the burning attraction.

“I'll see you Sunday then,” Rhett tells his co-worker as we open the double doors that lead to the pool area.

A small group of his old coworkers are gathered by the outdoor food area taking their breaks. At least that's what I assume the group in uniform is doing.

I take a seat at one of the outdoor tables and encourage Rhett to mingle. While he does that, I pray God gives Rhett his memories back and that He will guide me to do the right thing when it comes to Rhett.

Glancing over at where Rhett stands among a group of his old coworkers, my heart aches for what we could have been. He turns his head and meets my gaze from across the room, motioning with his head for me to come over. I hesitate for only a second before I oblige.

“Dana!” the group shouts as I come to stand next to Rhett.

One of the many consequences of being the resort owner's sister-in-law is that everyone knows my name, but it helps ease some of the tension in the room with their uncertainty about Rhett. We stand and talk as the other tennis instructors reminisce with Rhett while trying to jog any of his memories of working here.

I don't have much to add to their conversations so I remain an observer, watching the way they interact with Rhett. Any lingering doubts I had about believing Rhett actually has amnesia go out the window as frustration etches across his face while his coworkers continue bringing up the past. If he remembered anything, he'd be engaging with them and not growing more irritable by the second. I grab his strong

wrist in an attempt to ease his discomfort. His fist unclenches, and he looks down at me, giving me a grateful smile.

Soon after that, we say our goodbyes and head to my car. This attempted trip down memory lane didn't trigger anything for Rhett, and when we asked, none of his coworkers knew where he lived. He must have been a private person.

“How much time do you have before you need to be at work?” he asks.

“I still have a few hours. Why?”

He grabs my hand and pulls me toward the beach, a genuine smile on his lips.

NINE

RHETT

“How would you feel about a walk down the beach?” I ask after pulling her toward the shoreline.

Dana cautiously looks over at me, then back to the group of people talking as if we were never there. “Are you feeling up for that? You look tired.”

“I really don’t want to be at Crew’s right now.” The truth is, I don’t want to be alone. Not just because Dr. Woodhouse said I shouldn’t be, but because being next to Dana is the comfort my confused mind needs.

“We can go to the beach, but we’re not going for a long walk. You still need to be taking it easy.”

I fight the urge to reach for her hand. She hasn’t pulled away from me, but I can sense that it takes her off guard each time I touch her. She’s all I have right now, all that feels familiar. I don’t want to lose her to a stupid mistake.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Dana’s only response is a slight quirk of her lips.

I follow her down the sandy sidewalk that takes us from the resort to the beach. We walk the shore a bit, but we never go so far that we lose sight of the resort. She finds a comfortable spot, and I sit down next to her on the sand. She leans back on her forearms and stares at the wide expanse of ocean before her eyes fall closed. There’s

a smile on her lips as she tilts her head back, her hair gently grazing the ground.

“Didn’t your mama ever tell you it’s rude to stare?” she asks as her eyes slowly open.

I don’t answer right away because something pops into my mind unexpectedly. “She did, but she also taught me how to appreciate beauty.”

Both of us inhale sharply. It’s a memory that broke through, which is satisfying, but not as satisfying as the light blush my compliment brought to Dana’s cheeks.

The memory is of Mom and me at an art show, staring at pictures and paintings done by my brother Caleb and his classmates. I remember being jealous because Mom was going on and on about how talented Caleb was.

I tried to act like I didn’t care, but at one point, I said, “It’s all right, I guess. I’ve seen better.”

Instead of scolding me for being a jerk, she said, “I understand that sometimes we don’t want to admit that something is beautiful. But even in those times, you should appreciate it for what it is.”

I’m grateful Mom’s words have stuck with me. I appreciate beauty now more than ever with the most beautiful woman sitting here with me. As our conversation unfolds over the next couple of hours, I get to see deeper layers of Dana’s internal beauty.

Long after Dana drops me off at Crew’s apartment, I replay our day together, hoping that my memories with her return soon. I know there’s more to her than what I’ve seen so far and I want to learn everything.

The next several days pass in a similar pattern: Dana shows up mid-morning with coffee and food, we visit a few places around town and get lunch, we eat dinner, and

we spend some time on the beach before Dana brings me back to Crew's apartment for the night. I like the structure. But most of all, I just like being with Dana.

She's guarded with me, probably because I hurt her. Yet she's walking with me through this uncertain time. And doing it with a smile.

She has another shift at the café today, and with nothing better to do, I decide to hang out there until she's done.

The Screaming Peach looks like a quaint little place from the outside, but as soon as you step through the door, it opens up to a book and coffee lover's paradise.

The left side of the shop contains the café, with a long counter and pastry case. Behind the counter is a line of appliances any coffee connoisseur would desire. The right side houses bookshelves in all shapes and sizes, each one packed full of books. The center of the book section houses a table full of books written by Olivia Swann—Dana's sister. It was the first thing Dana showed me when giving me the grand tour.

"For you," Dana says as she places a brand new Bible on the table.

I look up at her with a smile. "You didn't need to buy me this." There hasn't been much to do at Crew's apartment when I've waited around for Dana, so I asked to borrow one of his. Like everything else, Crew was reluctant.

She lifts a shoulder. "I would have given you one for the retreat, but I figured you'd want something a little more masculine than a pink or purple cover."

I puff my chest out, trying to think of something witty to say, when the bell over the door rings.

“I better get back.” Dana hooks her thumb over her shoulder and returns to the counter.

A new song with a heavier sound plays over the speakers. Like so many things, it sounds familiar but I can’t grasp why. Was it a favorite song of mine? When the chorus starts, images fill my mind as if pictures are being snapped.

I’m standing next to a man who looks a lot like me, as well as a few other guys. Our arms are draped over each other’s shoulders, and we’re all looking in different directions. The man who looks like me is my brother Caleb. It’s something I just know. I stare blankly at the table, fighting to remember who the other men are. Could they be my other brothers? No, Caleb is my only brother. I’m not sure how I know he’s my only brother, but I do. Were the other guys friends? I clench my jaw as the memory slips away. It was as if their names were teasing the edges of my brain, remaining just out of reach.

My hands ball into fists, and I sit them on top of the Bible Dana just put there. I rest my forehead against them.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

“Why can’t I remember?” I mumble to myself.

I swallow the lump of irritation in my throat and focus instead on opening the brand-new Bible and reading the beginning of Genesis. Maybe it will trigger a memory or at least confirm that I’m on the right track with God.

I read through a chapter, but the bell over the door keeps chiming and the chatter of people grows louder, and I can no longer concentrate. When my gaze travels over to Dana, she’s working through the long line of customers like a pro. Her focus doesn’t waver from her work, and I have to fight against the urge to go over to her. This is her job, and she doesn’t need to be distracted.

At least not yet. Not until all these people are served. She’s too irresistible to keep away from. I smile to myself before flipping my Bible’s pages to the New Testament.

TEN

DANA

“White mocha frap for Natalia!” I say to the group of customers waiting on their orders.

“I’m Natalia,” one of our regular customers says, barely loud enough for me to hear. Her brown hair hangs over her shoulders in soft waves.

“Thank you,” she says as I hand her the cup.

“Here’s a fifty-percent off coupon for the whole store.” I hand her two slips of paper.

Her brow furrows. “What’s this for?”

“Being a valued customer.”

She smiles, and it lights up her green eyes. “Thank you so much!”

I wish her a good rest of her day, knowing that I’ve finally obeyed the urge to invite her to church by slipping a flyer behind the coupon. It finally feels like a step in the right direction.

As Natalia leaves, another surge of customers pours through the doors. I jump back in to help my boss, Lindsay.

The next hour rushes by before the store quiets and I can take a breath.

“How’s it going with Mr. Loverboy?” Lindsay asks, motioning with her head toward Rhett. He’s been sitting at the table between the bookstore and café reading the Bible I bought for him.

I release a groan. “Not you too.”

“Always me.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “Is that a Bible he’s reading?”

I wipe down the already clean counter. “Yeah.”

“He’s a Christian?”

“He is. It’s one of the few things he remembers.”

“That’s...” She trails off, tilting her head. “Sweet.”

As if Rhett can sense my eyes on him, he looks up and sends me a devastating smile.

“That man is gorgeous.” Lindsay gives a low whistle.

He doesn’t break eye contact or look ashamed that he was caught staring. Instead, his smile broadens, and he stands and practically struts toward me.

“Can I get you something to drink?” I ask when he approaches.

He puts both hands on the counter and leans forward as his eyes rake me up and down.

His voice is husky. “I don’t think what I want is on the menu.”

My heart stutters at that. The flirty Rhett is out full force, and I don’t think my heart can defend itself against his charms. I firm my resolve. Two can play this game.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

I ask, “And what is it that you want?”

Rhett’s gaze drops to my mouth. “Not something I want to say in front of an audience.” My breath catches. Okay, never mind, I can’t play this game.

The subject needs to be changed—pronto.

“How about the house brew?” I ask.

A wolfish grin spreads across his lips. “That will do...” Again, his eyes drop to my mouth. “For now.”

Good gravy, Miss Macy. I can’t handle this man. I need to remind myself that he was sweet and flirty before he ghosted me too. Rhett once made me feel like I was the most important person in his life. As if we could have something amazing. But when I finally let him in, he vanished. Once his memories return, he could remember why he left and leave me in the dust again. I’m not sure my heart could handle his abandonment a second time.

After I give him his drink, he makes his way over to his table and starts reading his Bible again. Good, hopefully, he finds the verses about not tempting a fellow believer.

“You know, for a guy with no memories, Rhett seems to be completely smitten with you.” Lindsay nudges my shoulder with hers.

“It’s probably similar to how certain baby birds get attached to the thing they see

right after hatching.”

Her gaze slides to something behind me, and she tries to fight a laugh.

I mouth, “He’s right behind me, isn’t he?”

She nods.

Rhett’s deep voice still manages to startle me. “Did you just compare me to a freshly hatched baby bird?”

I turn slowly around, feeling my face heat. Pinching my lips closed, I neither confirm nor deny what I said.

He leans across the counter, pressing his hands against the countertop. The scent of his body wash invades my senses. “I can assure you, Little Siren, my attraction for you is not because you were the first person I saw after waking up on the shore. These feelings run deeper than surface level.” Suddenly, he goes silent. Something flickers in his eyes, and he goes perfectly still. The chime over the door jingles as another patron enters, but it doesn’t break him from what I assume is a reverie.

Lindsay gives me a look that tells me to stay where I am, then shuffles down the counter to wait on the customer while I stare expectantly at Rhett. He shakes his head, then focuses back on me, his eyes penetrating mine.

“You’re not a fling for me, Dana Swann.” His next words come out gravelly. “You never were and never could be.”

I swallow hard. “You remember?”

His hand slides forward and his pinky brushes mine. “Can you take a quick break?” I

can tell that something has shifted with Rhett. Something big. The something I've been simultaneously dreading and hoping for.

"Yes, she can," Lindsay chimes in after handing the customer her change. "Dana, take as long as you need."

After I hang up my apron and send up a silent prayer for guidance, I go out the front door, Rhett following behind me. We're silent as we make our way through the town square and pass the fountain. Rhett reaches for my hand, and despite my better judgment, I let him take it. He immediately laces our fingers together.

"I still don't remember everything. But I remember our date."

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I ask, "Do you remember what happened afterward?"

He's slow to answer. "That part is blurry."

Something tells me he's lying. But I don't call him out on it. Not yet. Getting these memories back is a big deal. I need to give him time to work through what he remembers.

"What I do know is that you were never a fling for me. I meant what I said that night." He comes to stand in front of me, his fingers still locked with mine. "You were always more than that." He searches my eyes. "In those few short days, you became..." He pauses and closes his eyes as if trying to find the right words. When his eyes open and he stares into mine, the intensity makes my knees weak. "Everything to me."

I can't hold back anymore. I wanted to give him space until all his memories returned, but with how sincere he looks saying all these pretty words to me, I have to

know.

Shaking my hand free, I ask, “Then how did you—?” I throw my hands up and reword what I really want to ask. “Why did you leave me?” My voice cracks, and I hate that I’m opening myself up to more heartache. But I can’t help myself. I need to know. Maybe it’s the not knowing that has prevented me from moving on.

He grits his jaw, and I’m confident he knows the answer, especially with how he shifts his stance as the silence stretches. Mustering all the courage and armor I can manage, I ask the question I’ve been afraid of hearing the answer to since the moment I got the message that broke my heart.

“Is it because I wasn’t enough for you?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

“No. Absolutely not.” His response is firm without a moment of hesitation. He tugs me forward until I’m pressed against him and he wraps his arms around me. “You are so much more than I deserve. I thought that then, and I know it’s even more true now.”

I look up at him through watery eyes. “I don’t believe that. You were surprisingly unexpected.”

His brows scrunch. “How?”

I tug him by his hand to the side of the fountain to let a group of people walk past us. “You’re one of the most gorgeous guys I’ve ever seen.”

“One of?”

I smile, feeling a hint of the tension slowly ebbing away. “The most good looking guy; better?”

He shrugs, then gives me a confident smile. “I guess.”

“But more than your looks, you’re sweet and patient. When you prayed over our food, you were so sincere, as if you meant every word. Before you, I went out with guys who claimed to be Christians, but it was all for show. With each of them, I made it clear that my faith is an important part of my identity. It was easy to see through their deception, but with you...there wasn’t even a drop of a lie.”

“I wanted to be honest and open with you then. And I need to be open and honest

with you now. I remember everything. Including the reason I left.” Closing his eyes, he blows out a long breath. “I found out my son needed a transplant.”

A tidal wave of devastation crashes over me. It’s a miracle I remain standing. Rhett never mentioned a son—which means there has to be more to this story. And whatever it is will alter everything I thought I knew about the man standing in front of me.

ELEVEN

RHETT

The last thing I expected was regaining all the misplaced fragments of my memories while standing at the café’s counter. Seeing the look on Dana’s face took me back to the night of our first and only date, and then the tsunami of destruction that immediately followed.

It’s as if the key was uncovered, and immediately unlocked every missing piece of my memory. Including who I was before arriving on Amber Island and why I ran here several years ago. A heavy weight of regret and trepidation lodges itself inside my chest.

“I didn’t know you had a son,” Dana says, her voice cracking at the last word.

Shaking my head, I say, “I didn’t either. Finding out you have a child with someone is shocking enough, but then in the same breath, Ashley—my ex—told me our son, Oscar, was hospitalized with acute liver failure and needed a liver transplant. I went into auto-pilot, knowing I needed to help him however I could.”

Dana gasps and places a hand on her chest. “Was he...is he okay now?”

I swallow. “Yeah. He got part of my liver and, praise God, his body didn’t reject it, and now he’s living his best life.”

I grit my jaw, wishing my memories hadn’t returned so I could continue living in this bubble with Dana where my past hadn’t come back to haunt me and ruin my second chance with this incredible woman. Because Ashley and Oscar are just the tip of the iceberg. Another thing I remember is something I never told her about. Something that could break the sliver of trust she may still have in me.

“Why do you not sound...happy about that? Him living his best life, I mean.” Her tone is cautious.

I blow out a puff of air, trying to figure out the best way to tell her. Once I processed everything Ashley dropped in my lap I wanted to reach out to Dana, but I convinced myself she wouldn’t want anything to do with me once she realized what my lifestyle was like before I came to know the Lord. My son would be a constant reminder of that life. Then the magnitude of everything else fell on me, and I knew having kept my real identity a secret would only distance us more. I made myself believe Dana was better off without me. That what we had—no matter how incredible—was not meant to last forever. A clean break would be best for us before we got too serious. But as I stare into this amazing woman’s eyes, I know my heart never believed those lies. I’ve been hers since the moment she stepped foot on my court in her tennis skirt, polo shirt, and sun visor.

Countless times, I kicked myself for canceling my cell service before boarding the flight to Chicago that changed my life. For not reaching out and telling Dana exactly what was happening. Then I remembered who I once was and that it was time for me to face the consequences of my past actions. Consequences I didn’t want to burden Dana with.

I focused on recovering from my own surgery and trying to connect with my teenage

son, yet she still lingered in my thoughts. As much as I wanted to reconnect with Dana, my life was too messy for someone like her.

She's young, beautiful, and kind, unscarred by life's sharp edges, while I'm a man who's walked a jagged line for most of his existence. Someone who earned the marks marring his skin. It wasn't right to mix the pure with the scarred.

Ashley thought she was acting in Oscar's best interest by keeping him from me after I ignored her attempts to reach out. Just like I thought keeping my true identity a secret from Dana—and everything associated with it—was what was best for our new relationship. No one on Amber Island knows who I was, so I didn't think it would be necessary to tell her at first either. But when I finally got the urge to open up and tell her the truth on our date, I chickened out.

"It's complicated," I finally answer.

Dana removes her hand from mine and crosses her arms over her chest. Up until now, she's stood silently, allowing me to work through my thoughts. "Then un-complicate it for me," she says. It's almost a demand.

I want to tell her everything and for her to know who I truly am. But I can't. Not yet.

She taps her foot and raises one of those sassy eyebrows as if telling me to go on.

I run my hands through my hair and say, "Oscar wants nothing to do with me. I lived less than a mile away from him, but whenever I tried to go see him, he refused to see me. Praise God his body didn't reject the part of my liver he got. We went to check-ups at the same time, but he refused to go to lunch with me or do anything with me throughout it all. Eventually, I decided it was time to move back and return to a life where I felt at home." I was only on Amber Island two days before I went surfing and had the accident, yet I feel like I've lived a lifetime since coming back.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

She stands still as a statue and looks just past me. Her silence continues to stretch, and my nerves twist into a tight coil.

“Please, talk to me, Dana. Say something.”

She uncrosses her arms and tosses them in the air. “I’m happy you’re both okay.”

A smidgeon of my tension releases but I don’t know what else to say.

She must not like my silence because she adds, “What else do you want me to say?”

Tell me you forgive me. Tell me you understand. Tell me we’re going to get past this, I want to say but don’t. “All I want to know is what you’re thinking.”

She shakes her head and chews on her bottom lip before answering, “I need time. And space.” Turning back toward the café, she adds, “And I need to get back to work.”

As we walk to The Screaming Peach, the urge to take her hand consumes me. But her stiff posture screams at me to stay away. So I do.

We follow a large group of people into the café. She gives me what appears to be a regretful look before slipping behind the counter and donning her apron.

I’m too distracted by the lack of closure to our conversation to think about much else. I grab my Bible and lukewarm coffee, then slip out the front door as she waits on customer after customer.

Dana said she needs time. It's a fair request and one that I plan on respecting.

Instead of going back to Crew's apartment to wallow in self-pity, I head over to Dr. Woodhouse's office early. Considering my memories are back, my headaches are gone, and the pain in my side has dropped to a minimal ache, I'm hoping he'll tell me I can live on my own. If he does, I can finally go home. Now that I know where my home is.

As much as I appreciate Crew's hospitality—if I can call it that—I'm ready to be out of his apartment. It's obvious I'll never win him over, and to be fair, I'm not his biggest fan either. Every time he's been around, it's like navigating a minefield.

The only person I want to be with is the woman who said she needs space.

I open the door to Dr. Woodhouse's office and the bell jingles. After I give the receptionist my name and date of birth I sit in one of the chairs in the waiting room.

"Dr. Woodhouse will see you now," the young nurse says only a few minutes later.

I follow her into the exam room and sit in one of the chairs. Dr. Woodhouse comes in moments later with a smile.

"How are you feeling?" he asks as he gets himself situated.

"A lot better, thank God. My memories came back."

Dr. Woodhouse claps. "That's great news! How's your head feeling? Any dizziness?"

"Nothing terrible. Everything else is feeling better too."

We continue the exam, and as I had hoped, he clears me to go home and resume most

activities—although he cautions me against surfing alone. I agree and set an appointment to follow up in a few weeks.

There's a small lift in my spirit as I walk to Crew's apartment. Even though things are uncertain with Dana, at least I'll be in my own place again and free of the tension with Crew. Of course, having a mostly clean bill of health from the doctor is a step in the right direction too.

Once I let myself into the apartment, I pack up my minimal belongings and throw them in a garbage bag I find in one of Crew's cupboards.

I'm getting ready to leave when there's a knock at the door. I swing the door open and find Dana standing on the doorstep. She shifts on her feet as I take her in. She's wearing ripped denim shorts, a black tank top, and sneakers. Her hair is down, the wavy strands fall over her tanned shoulders. It's a more relaxed look than the one she had at the café. Hopefully, it's a good sign.

"Dana." My voice comes out thick.

"Hey," she says almost shyly.

"Come in." She follows me inside, and I shut the door behind her. "What brings you over?" Swallowing the lump in my throat, I add, "I thought you needed space."

Dana shakes her head. "I was wrong to say that earlier. I didn't handle your news well, and I'm sorry for that."

I shake my head in disbelief. "How do you think you should have handled it then?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

She blows out a puff of air, making a piece of hair rise off her forehead.

“Honestly, I don’t know. Everything just felt like a lot all at once?—“

“It was.” I clear my throat. “For me and for you.”

Her eyes soften. “I can’t imagine how you felt when you found out about Oscar. I guess—,” she starts, then snaps her mouth closed. “I guess I can understand why you didn’t reach out to me.”

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “You do?”

She lifts a shoulder. “I mean, you had just discovered you had a son who was in a literal life-or-death situation. It would be hard to think of anything else.”

Without thought, my lips pull into a smile; I feel increasingly undeserving of this woman’s forgiveness. I take a step toward her. “I can promise you, Little Siren, I won’t make that mistake again. No matter what happens I need you to know I’m not running again.” Opening my arms wide, I add, “I’m all yours. If you choose to give me a second chance.” She’s quiet but doesn’t deny that she will give me that opportunity, so I add, “Let me prove that I’m a man who will work hard every day to be worthy of your affection.”

“Oh, okay, well.” She looks at the ground. “We’ll have to see about that. But I think I’d like to be friends. Just friends.” She looks up at me from beneath her lashes. “At least for now.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I ask, “So is that a yes then? Are you giving me a second chance?”

She chews on the corner of her bottom lip before saying, “Only time will tell.”

I can’t help but smile at her. “Oh, so it’s gonna be like that? I’ll have to work for it?”

Dana tilts her head to the side and gives me a flirty smile. “Absolutely. You clearly don’t know me at all if you thought I’d just let you right back in.”

Her request is fair, but her playful smile has me pushing her a little. “Why don’t we try to pick up where we left off?” I wrap my arms around her waist and lean forward. Instead of giving in to me like I hoped she would, she takes a step back, forcing me to release her.

She lifts her hands and playfully pushes me. “Oh no, no, no. You don’t get to kiss me. Not yet. We’re starting over.” She chews her lip again as if she’s nervous. “I think we need to take things slow this time. Allow ourselves to really get to know each other as friends and not dive in head first because of our chemistry.” Despite her words, I can feel the pull she has toward me, the magnetic field that surrounded us even when I had no memories of anything or anyone.

I try to use that to my advantage and drop my voice an octave. “Is that so? And here I thought you were mostly attracted to my charming personality.”

She lifts her chin. “Charm is deceitful.”

“And beauty is vain. But a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised,” I finish.

Her pretty lips lift in a smile. “That is so. Besides, Amber Island is my home now. It would be more than a vacation fling with the hot tennis instructor I wouldn’t need to

worry about seeing again.”

“You were never a fling. No matter what happens, I need you to get that through your thick but pretty head.”

She looks down at the floor. “I know.” Then she opens her mouth to say something but snaps it closed.

I tilt her chin up with the tip of my finger until her gaze meets mine. “Dana Swann, will you go out with me tonight?”

Her eyebrows lift, and she removes my finger from her chin. I tuck both hands into my pockets and take a step back, to give her the space she craves.

She asks, “Would this be a date?”

“No. From what you just said, I’m assuming you want this to be a just friends outing.”

Despite her flirty tone, she says, “You would be correct in that assumption.”

I can’t help as my lips tilt into a smile, welcoming the challenge Dana Swann just dropped into my lap. She may be reluctant to give me a second chance, but I won’t waste this opportunity. It may take some time, but I will show her how much she means to me, and how good we can be together as more than just friends.

“Did Dr. Woodhouse free you to go home?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“That’s great!” She claps her hands, then asks, “Would you like a ride there?”

“That would be great.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

We leave Crew's apartment and get into her car. I give her the directions to my place, and as we travel down my bumpy gravel driveway, I send up a prayer of thanks.

"This is it," I say as she parks next to my Ford Ranger. The mere sight of my truck screams "freedom," and another wave of gratefulness washes over me.

"It's cute," Dana announces as she looks at my tiny hut.

"Do you want to come in?" I ask.

She grips the steering wheel as she shakes her head. "No, I'm sure you have some people you need to contact?"

"You're right," I respond. "I should probably give Ashley a call and check in on Oscar."

"That's what I was thinking." She gives me a genuine smile, and my chest warms at her understanding.

"All right, well, I'll see you tonight. I'll pick you up this time." I've missed driving and want to be a perfect gentleman on this outing.

"Are you allowed to drive?"

"According to Dr. Woodhouse, yes."

"Okay, then I'll see you later."

I fight the urge to lean across the console and kiss her cheek. Instead, I just say, “Thank you, Dana. For everything.”

“I was happy to do it.” The sincerity in her voice sets me at ease.

After we say our goodbyes, I go into my hut and straight to my phone on the counter where I left it before the accident. The battery is dead, so I plug it in and wait impatiently. I try to pick up the minimal clutter to keep myself occupied. As soon as I see the screen light up, I call Ashley.

“Well, glad to hear you’re still alive!” Ashley answers in a clipped tone.

“I’m sorry it’s been a couple of days. But I had a bit of an accident.”

Her tone immediately softens. “Are you okay? What happened?”

I tell her the full story, from my surfing accident to the part where Dana dropped me off at home. Thankfully, I don’t need to go into detail about who Dana is to Ashley. After my surgery where I gave Oscar part of my liver, I was loopy coming off the anesthesia and told Ashley about Dana.

“Wow,” she says, clearing her throat. “Thank God you’re okay and that Dana found you. What a surprising blessing.”

“You have no idea.” I run my free hand through my hair. “How’s Oscar? Has he...” I trail off, knowing Ashley will understand what I’m asking.

“No. I’m sorry, RJ really.”

I push down the lump that forms in my throat. “Can you call me Rhett?” My stage name was just that—a stage name and not someone I want to be associated with

anymore. She's been calling me RJ since we reconnected but now it just feels wrong.

"Yeah, of course," she says. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize it bothered you that I called you RJ."

"Don't apologize. It's a me thing. I wanted to bring it up before but it didn't seem important in light of everything else. But ever since coming to Christ, I've become a new creation and want to shed the image of who I once was."

"I get it," she whispers into the phone. "Well, I'm glad you're okay now. I'll talk to you soon."

"Let me know if Oscar changes his mind." That lump in my throat returns.

"I promise."

We say our goodbyes and hang up. Immediately, the heaviness in my soul is back as well as the pull between wanting to forget who I once was and knowing that if it wasn't for my past self, Oscar wouldn't exist. Even if he wants nothing to do with me.

I scan through the minimal pictures I have of my son. Ashley sent them to me after Oscar's successful surgery, wanting me to at least be able to see pieces of his childhood.

My son is now sixteen, the age when I should be teaching him how to drive. I've already missed out on so much of his life, and as hard as it is to stay away, I know it has to be his choice to connect with me.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

I spend some time in my Bible, praying over Oscar, Ashley, and Dana. Asking God to light the path of His will because right now I feel like I'm wandering through the darkest wilderness.

TWELVE

DANA

“Do you think it’s wise to go out with Rhett so soon after his memories have returned?” Rosa asks.

“You’re killing my excitement,” I say from inside my closet.

“I’m not trying to; I’m asking if you really think you’re ready for this. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t think Rhett is bad for you. You’ve just been hurt so many?—”

“I’ll be protecting my heart the whole time.” I step out of my closet wearing a simple outfit of jean shorts and a floral tank top and primp a little in my mirror.

“Have you prayed about this?”

I meet Rosa’s gaze in the mirror as I adjust my shirt’s neckline. “I have.” It’s true, I have prayed, and the whole idea has built cautious excitement. I meant what I told Rhett—we need to get to know each other better this time around. So I prayed that God would give me the ability to focus on building a friendship with Rhett and not fall into his arms too quickly. “It’s not a date. He’s taking me out as a friend.”

Rosa's shoulders visibly relax. "That's good." She nods, and I can practically see the wheels turning in her brain as if she's deciding whether she should say what's really on her mind or not. After a resigned sigh, she adds, "I didn't want to tell you this before, but I think I need to. You know I don't like going off of feelings since feelings can be deceitful, but there's something about him that feels...off. Almost like he's hiding something."

That's all it takes for a seed of doubt to plant itself in my chest, but I don't admit that to Rosa. "Maybe you feel that way because of what happened before. Then finding out he has a son. I think we're all a little off balance." I told Rosa about Oscar shortly after she arrived. She knows everything. Which is probably why she feels the way she does.

Rosa sighs. "Maybe."

I turn away from the mirror to face my friend. "Look, I know this is all...bizarre, but none of it has felt wrong. Instead, it all somehow feels right. It's as if all these seemingly insignificant puzzle pieces are finding their way together. As if God is actively organizing this mess of a puzzle." I ignore the hint of doubt from her previous words and work on convincing myself and Rosa that this is the right way to handle things. Lifting a hand, I tick the reasons off on my fingers. "I was the one who found him on the beach. I was the only person available to him when he had a nightmare in the middle of the night. I was the one he's felt comfortable with since waking up on shore. It's all led up to here." The doubt I once felt fades into the background, still present but not making me actively question myself.

Rosa nods in understanding. "I'm not trying to question your choices or make you question your choices. I just want you to take a step back and look at all of this critically and—more importantly—through the lens of God's will." She takes a deep breath. "And I don't want to see you get hurt again."

Those words are like a dagger straight to my heart. Rosa and Olivia are the two people I've run to each time a man chooses another woman over me. Rosa has always been beside me, comforting me and telling me it will all be okay. Crew is always there too, but his support usually includes asking me if I want my exes "taken care of" like he's some top-secret mafia hitman.

I release a shaky breath. "I know. And I appreciate you and everything you've done for me. You don't need to worry about that happening because Rhett and I are going out as friends. Nothing more."

"Are you absolutely sure about that?" She pierces me with a look.

I stare out my window, thinking of how to best answer her. He definitely wanted a kiss earlier today, and it took all my self-control to turn him down. Everything about him is so tempting, but I know I need to set boundaries around my heart. Which means my lips need to keep to themselves. "I'll make double sure that's clear tonight."

When I turn to face her again, Rosa gives me a half-smile, stands, and walks over to me. She places one hand on my shoulder. "Okay, you have a good time then."

I still feel uneasy about some of what she said, but I shake it off and smile in return.

"You look absolutely stunning. Have I told you that tonight?" Rhett asks as he helps me into my chair.

We're at the rustic restaurant we went to on our first date. Even though we're not on a date this time, I've come to love this place—plus they have the best spinach and artichoke dip.

"Several times." I laugh. "You don't look too bad yourself." I motion to him from

head to toe before he takes his own seat. Rhett wears his thirty-six years well, the deep smile lines around his mouth only enhancing his appeal. The way he wears those dark wash jeans and button-down gray dress shirt has my heart pounding faster. When he sits, he rolls up his sleeves, showing off his impressive forearms.

This isn't a date. We're here just as friends. I create an internal chant, hoping that at some point, I'll actually believe it.

The struggle started from the moment he picked me up. He met me at my door and took me down to his truck where he opened his truck door for me and helped me in. Once he got in on his side I gave him a warning look.

"You didn't need to get my door. This isn't a date."

"My mama raised a gentleman. I'm just doing what she'd expect me to."

I melted a little as he said it. Clearly, he loves and respects his mom. It's safe to say a man like that will treat his woman well when he respects his mom.

Once we order our drinks and choose what we want to eat—including the spinach and artichoke dip—Rhett leans forward. "Thank you for everything you've done for me. You easily could have walked right past me on that shore, but you didn't. You stopped and helped me, the guy who hurt you."

My throat thickens. "You don't need to keep thanking me. I just did what I felt called to do."

“Well, I’m just...thank you.”

The waiter arrives and places our drinks in front of us. Needing a lighter topic of conversation, I ask something I’ve been curious about since first meeting Rhett. “So, Mr. Tennis Instructor, how did you find yourself in the business of tennis instructing?”

He takes a sip of his water, and I can see his smile from behind the glass.

“You’re going to make fun of me for this.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Well, this should be good.”

“I don’t think I told you this before, but I grew up in near poverty. We lived in the projects and barely made it paycheck to paycheck.”

My smile drops and my heart goes out to young Rhett, who must have fought hard to get out of that. “No, you never told me.” Not that he had time to tell me much of anything in the week we spent together.

“My mom was amazing. She was a single parent and worked three jobs to keep me and my brother, Caleb, fed. Even though she spent countless hours at work, she somehow managed to be there for Caleb and me anytime we really needed it. As soon as we were old enough, we both went out and got jobs. Caleb was able to get a really good one working for the mayor. He of course got it with no experience or references.” Rhett’s nostrils flare, and I’m reminded of how he said he always felt like he lived in Caleb’s shadow. “As for me, I had my focus set on something else.”

He pauses a moment and takes a drink. All traces of irritation are now gone, and a partial smile sits on his lips.

“I’m assuming we’re getting to the point where I will probably make fun of you.”

My attempt to lighten the mood seems to work as a new lightness fills his expression.

“We’re practically there.” Rhett clears his throat. “The something I had my sights set on was actually someone. She was one of the lifeguards at the country club pool.” Jealousy bubbles to the surface, but I quickly squelch it out. He keeps talking, unaware of the silent battle going on in my head. “We were in the same homeroom the previous school year, and no matter how hard I tried to impress her, I could never snag her attention. So when I found out she worked at the country club, I decided that I would try to also get a job there. The pool overlooked the tennis courts, and I thought if she was forced to look at me on the courts every day, maybe she’d finally notice me.”

I lean forward, intently listening to Rhett as he recalls this memory. “Well, I applied and then got the job. There was only one problem.”

I blurt out what the problem was as soon as I realize what it must be. “You didn’t know how to play tennis.” Unless there was a tennis team or they played tennis in gym class at his school, I’m not sure how a kid in Rhett’s situation would have learned how to play.

Rhett stares at me in shock. “How did you know that?”

I lift a shoulder. “Lucky guess. So tell me what happened with the job! Didn’t you have to try out or anything?”

“Umm, no. They overlooked that part of the application; apparently, the hiring

manager was new and overwhelmed. From the first swing of the racket, the lead tennis instructor caught me in that lie, but instead of telling management about it, he taught me everything I needed to know over the course of my job training. He said he liked my confidence and that I put myself out there even with no experience.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “I take it you were a quick study.”

“It turns out playing guitar and playing tennis work well in tandem. Something about picking up on the rhythm...” He trails off, looking as though he regrets what he just said, though I can’t figure out why.

My brows scrunch. “What’s wrong?”

He inhales a deep breath and releases it. “Nothing.”

I don’t want to risk it becoming awkward, so I say, “I’d love to know how playing tennis and guitar work together.” Rhett never told me he played guitar in our prior conversations—which I guess isn’t surprising—but I figure I’ll ask him more about that later.

Regret colors his expression as if he wishes he could take back what he just said. A muscle in his jaw ticks for a moment, and then the tense atmosphere dissipates.

“There’s a rhythm with both.” He starts tapping his fingers on the table to the song playing softly over the speakers. “Even when the tempo shifts faster or slower, there’s a rhythm that just...exists. It’s the same with tennis. Once the ball hits their racket, I can almost feel the rhythm of the ball.”

“I never thought of it that way, but I guess that makes sense. So you learned how to play tennis to impress a girl.” I don’t try to hide my smile. “Did it work?”

Rhett looks away. “Not even a little. Apparently, she had a big-shot football star boyfriend who was at college. They got married shortly after she graduated high school.” He shrugs. “But it ended up working out for me in the long run. When I escaped to Amber Island, I needed to find a job, and I got another tennis instructing gig that led into the lead instructor role.”

“Escaped?” My heart skitters to a practical stop. “What were you escaping from?”

Rhett goes silent for a long moment, his expression turning completely stoic before he answers. “Life.”

There’s another uncomfortable stretch of silence. Obviously, there’s more to Rhett’s story than I originally thought. I wait another minute to see if he expands on his cryptic answer, but he doesn’t.

For the first time ever, I feel uncomfortable in his presence. There’s so much about him I don’t know and it seems like there are things he’s still not ready to tell me. Things he’s trying to hide. Just like Rosa warned. Rhett closes his eyes as though he’s trying to decide what to say next.

In hopes of pivoting into something lighter, I ask, “How did you get into guitar?”

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

It takes him a moment before he dives into the story of how he learned to play the guitar in high school after his music teacher gifted him one. Our conversation morphs into other topics as we snack on the appetizer and any discomfort I had before vanishes.

A few minutes later, our waiter arrives again, this time with our entrees. As soon as he steps away, Rhett reaches across the table and takes my hands, then we both bow our heads.

“Dear Lord, thank You for this day. Thank You for this woman and for giving me this second chance. Please help us to honor You and do everything for Your glory today, tomorrow, and each day to come. Bless this food to our bodies and help us to live for You in all that we say and do. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

“Amen,” I whisper.

Rhett catches my gaze from across the table, and my heart skips a beat. The look he gives me is so tender and sweet that my legs turn to jelly, and I’m grateful I’m already sitting down. He gives my hand a gentle squeeze.

I repeat “we are just friends” in my head to keep myself from falling too hard and too fast...again.

THIRTEEN

RHETT

Everything with Dana is easy. Natural.

The last couple of days have flown by as Dana and I have fallen into a comfortable rhythm. We've spent every evening together since our "not date," and I've found myself looking forward to seeing her more and more every day.

We now share dinner together every night sometimes at my place and the others at hers. After dinner, we listen to music, at least two songs from my favorite album *The Raven's Song* by Phantom Echoes. Each night, either Rosa or Crew has joined us, and it feels as though I'm courting a girl like they did in the early 1900s. Which, in some ways, I am.

She softens toward me after each of our days spent together. The idea of us feels like more of a possibility every day. There's one big problem: she doesn't know who I truly am and I haven't been able to work up the courage to tell her.

Tonight. I'll tell her tonight. I'll bite the bullet while ripping off the bandage. We can't move forward into anything deeper or more without her knowing everything. It may already be too late. I just hope I don't lose all of the progress we've made once I lay everything out on the table.

"Lord, give me the strength and courage I need to tell Dana the truth tonight. To lay it all out there and tell her who I am—who I was. I pray that despite my deception she'll fully accept the possibility of us. Amen."

There's a soft rapping at the door. It's go time.

But when I swing the door open, finding Dana on my porch wearing a sundress and a bright smile, all conviction goes out my open windows. I can't lose this. I can't lose our progress. I can't lose her.

“Hey,” she greets then steps through the door.

I look behind her, expecting to find Crew or Rosa ready to come in too. “Where’s our chaperone?”

Her smile widens before she releases a girly laugh. “We don’t need a chaperone.”

I close the door behind her. “Then why have we had one up until now?”

She bites her lip and shrugs. “I wanted to make sure you knew where we stood, and I figured having Crew or Rosa with us would help make that clear.”

“And you think it’s all clear to me now?”

Her gaze flits to the floor and she’s silent for a beat. Finally, she meets my eyes, looking at me from beneath those long lashes. “Maybe...” She bites her lip, looking shy with a blush covering her cheeks. “Maybe I’ve changed my mind.”

Her words shift the air between us. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying? Are you ready to give me a second chance?”

All traces of shyness are gone. “I still want to take things slow, and we still need to get to know each other more. But I can’t deny our connection.”

My brain needs a few moments to catch up with her words and my heart needs to slow its race with the anticipation building inside.

Dana’s face falls. “Or maybe this pull I feel is just one-sided.”

“No.” Without thinking, I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her against me. “Definitely not one-sided. Not before and certainly not now.” I brush a strand of hair

behind her ear, allowing my finger to trace down her jawline until it's at her chin. Tilting her head up, I meet her eye to eye, hoping to convey the sincerity of what I'm about to tell her. "The pull I have toward you is so strong I can taste it. The feel of you in my arms right now is like taking the strongest hit of epinephrine. My heart feels like it can finally beat again. Like I've been brought back to life."

She inhales a sharp breath. "Wow." She rests her hands on my biceps and slowly runs them up over my shoulders until her arms are wrapped around my neck. I bend forward a little so she doesn't need to stand on her tiptoes.

"That's how I've felt about you since the moment you set foot on my tennis court: wow."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

The world around me stops as she moves her face toward mine. I don't dare speak. I don't breathe. Then her lips are on the corner of my mouth. It's a tease of what could be, but I don't want to push her, even if it takes every ounce of restraint in my body not to pull her against me and claim her lips in a kiss that would seal her as mine. Her hands lazily run down my chest before sliding around my waist. She rests her head on my chest. She hugs me and squeezes hard. We stand like that for a few seconds before she pulls back and looks up at me.

"I'm hungry," she says.

Laughter pours out of me, helping release the tension in the room. "Well then, let's get you fed."

After praying over our food and relationship, we enjoy our meal of lasagna, salad, and garlic bread.

She taps the corners of her mouth with a napkin once she's done eating. "That was delicious. Thank you."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. Would you want to go down to the beach and try to walk off some of it?"

"Sure," she says excitedly.

"Then we can come back and enjoy some dessert." My eyes drop to her lips, and her cheeks pinken. I smirk, loving this new dynamic between us. "I meant the cheesecake."

Her mouth pops open, and she says, “Oh. Right. That’s what I assumed.”

We walk down to the beach, like we’ve done many times before. This time, though, I boldly take her hand.

“This is nice,” I say, looking over at her.

“It is,” she agrees. “The beach at sunset is absolutely beautiful.”

“So are you.” I lift her hand and kiss the back.

“Thank you.” Dana looks down at the sand, a shy smile on her lips.

We continue our walk in companionable silence until we decide it’s time to head back to my hut.

I plate both our slices of cheesecake, setting Dana’s piece down in front of her as she sits at my dining room table. I watch her take her first bite.

She makes a show of it, throwing her head back and sighing. “This is amazing. Cheesecake is my favorite.”

“It’s why I got it.”

Her focus snaps to me. “How did you know?”

“I remember how you eyed the other couple’s cheesecake when we were on our first date.”

She narrows her eyes. “You’re more observant than I thought.”

“There’s still a lot about me you don’t know.” As the words leave my mouth the conviction I’ve been ignoring hits me full-force.

“Well, I am very much looking forward to learning more,” she says.

This is the perfect opening to come clean. Over the course of the night, I almost told her a dozen times, but I didn’t. I can’t ruin this night and what has already developed. Forcing down the conviction lacing my insides, I spend the rest of the night basking in Dana’s presence and enjoying our second chance.

Before bed, I call Ashley to check in on Oscar. She answers on the second ring.

“There’s nothing new,” Ashley says without a greeting. “I tried talking to him again today, but he escaped to his room without a word.”

“You don’t need to push him.”

She sighs. “I should have tried harder to tell you about him.”

“I wasn’t exactly father-material back then. Besides, we can’t turn back time. Don’t beat yourself up.”

Ashley’s silent for a moment before answering. “You’re right. I shouldn’t keep bringing up the past. We can’t change it.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

“No. We can’t. But I’m hoping he has a change of heart. No matter how long it takes, I know it will be worth it.”

“Heisworth it,” Ashley says, her voice full of emotion. “I pray he comes around.”

“Me too,” I say before changing the subject and asking Ashley about her day.

“Well, I did go out with someone last night.”

“Yeah? Is this the same guy you told me about a couple of weeks ago?” I ask.

“He is.”

“Things are good, I take it?”

“So good,” she answers, and I can hear the smile in her voice.

“I’m glad. You deserve someone great.”

“As do you,” Ashley says.

“I already have her.”

Ashley clears her throat. “Hold onto her.”

“I plan on it.”

My subconscious taunts, But will she hold on to you when the secret you've kept comes back to bite you?

After a few more minutes of small talk, I end the call and head to bed, praying that God gives me the confidence and words I need to finally tell Dana everything.

FOURTEEN

RHETT

I wake up drenched in a cold sweat and my covers on the floor as the remnants of last night's nightmare fade away. I've had the dream for years, a dream I've asked God to take away from me so I can at least have some peace while I sleep. But His answer seems to be "wait."

Before I even sit up, my legs bounce with nervous energy. I hop out of bed, slide on my running shorts and shoes, and head out the front door.

I haven't been for a run in a while. As much as I want to sprint down the beach to burn off this anxious energy, my side is still tender, I sometimes still get dizzy, and my stitches are healing. So I force myself to take it slow.

As Dana's little bungalow comes into view, I'm again hit with conviction. I need to tell her. But if I tell her and I lose her... I don't know what I'll do.

We've been taking it slow. Each evening is laidback but still holds crackling tension like lightning brewing in a storm cloud. It's been good, though, really getting to know her this time around. She's an incredible woman with a heart for Jesus and her ministry.

Something about our time together last night felt monumental. We walked down the

beach until we found the perfect spot to sit and look up at the stars. I'll never forget the way she looked sitting on the sand under the moonlight, with a contented smile on her face as we listened to the ocean waves.

We enjoyed the tranquility of nature's sounds for a few minutes before she gently cut through the silence. "You know, I grew up on the beach, but there's something about Amber Island that just feels..."

"Like home," I finished for her. She looked at me, eyebrows raised. "I feel it too. It's why I'm here again. Chicago never felt like home, not really. I've always been drawn to the ocean." Her gaze was fixed on me as if she was hanging onto my every word. It gave me the confidence to say, "Probably because a little siren had been calling for me."

Her lips tilted up in a smile. It wasn't flirty, but it still drew me in. Every cell in my body screamed to touch my mouth to hers, but I didn't. I respect the lines she's silently drawn and know the wait will be worth it. One day she'll erase those lines and she'll be mine. But first, I need to work up the courage to tell her the truth, to tell her everything. Even if facing the darkest parts of my past is the last thing I want to do.

I swallow the lump in my throat as the memory I see in my nightmares crashes into my thoughts. The sound of gunfire, the smell of black powder, the haze that came after, and the roaring in my head that morphed into a numbing silence.

Dizziness slams into me, and I realize I've taken off into a run. I slow down and lean forward, resting my hands on my knees, and breathe in deep. Slowly, I lift my head to try and combat the dizziness and stare out at the sparkling water, inhaling the salty ocean air.

"You need to tell her," I say out loud, then shake my head.

I can't lose what we have. It's too good.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

But I have to. We can't move forward until I tell her everything.

Eventually, it will come out—I can't hide who I am forever. It will be best if Dana learns it from me.

Standing up straight, I grip the back of my neck with both hands and close my eyes.

“Give me the courage to finally tell her. Please, Lord.”

With that simple prayer, I turn and head back to my hut.

I muster all my courage as I step into The Screaming Peach after the lunchtime rush. Dana stands alone behind the counter, her dark hair pulled into a ponytail that cascades down her back. When she turns to look at me, there's a confidence that I haven't seen from her before. As if she's sure about us. Sure about me.

Her body language tells me she's feeling good. If she is sure about us, she'll accept what I have to say no matter what. So I approach her. The only patrons are browsing the books with their coffees already in hand, giving me the perfect opportunity to snag her unhindered attention. I'll take her out after her shift and tell her.

“Hey, Little Siren.”

I love how she looks at me as if I'm the only man she sees. As if I'm the only man who matters.

She bites her lip. “Hey, Rhett. What can I get you?”

You, I want to say but don't. It'd probably be too bold right now. Instead, I say, "I'll have a medium dark roast."

When I hand her my cash, she pushes it away. I stuff it into the tip jar, and she rolls her eyes before getting to work on my simple order. She tosses a few shy smiles over her shoulder during the process.

The bell over the door dings, and I scan the café and book area, finding they're both cleared out. I could tell her after her shift. Or I can tell her now. Last night I failed to hold onto the courage to tell her everything. That courage is back in full force. Either way, I need to tell her now. It's time to lay my past in front of her. To share the secrets I've kept in an effort to preserve our relationship.

When she finishes up my order and hands it over to me, her touch on my fingers lingers. I set my coffee on the counter and fully take her hand in mine. I try to gather all my thoughts, all the secrets I've kept from her. Once I tell her, there's a really good chance she won't look at me like this again. That she won't allow me to hold her hand. Once she knows everything, our relationship will change. If it's for the better or worse, only time will tell. I pray for the better.

I search her eyes, then release her hand and take a sip of my coffee. "Thanks." It's hot, but not too hot. The balance of flavors is everything any coffee drinker would love. I focus on the taste, grounding myself in this moment.

"Sure thing," she answers. When she turns away, I catch another shy smile curving her soft lips.

"Dana," I say, and she turns back.

The truth is poised and ready on the tip of my tongue. Her eyes sparkle with excitement, the trust I see there has me choking on the words. I can't do it. I can't tell

her. I can't ruin this...us.

"Did you need something else?" she asks.

"I wanted to tell you that I've really enjoyed getting to know you." My courage deflates.

"Me too. This all feels...real. Not that what we had before wasn't, but this time around feels deeper. You know? Almost like we didn't get to know the real versions of each other, but now, I know the real Rhett Stryker and not just the flirty tennis instructor."

A lead weight sinks deep down into my gut.

As if he was waiting for the perfect time to ruin this moment, Crew struts in and eyes me warily as I talk to Dana.

"Hey, Crew. How's it going?" I ask.

"Fine," he says, "Anything new with you?"

I shake my head. "Not really."

Crew wastes no time turning to Dana and pulling his phone from his pocket. That lead weight in my gut feels ten times heavier. Ominous. He extends his phone, showing something to her. Her eyes study whatever is on the screen carefully.

Dana raises a brow at Crew. "Why are you showing me a picture of RJ Hemlock?"

Everything inside of me seizes. I need to speak up. Say something, anything, but my mind goes into panic mode, blanking out.

“Doesn’t he look familiar to you?” Crew asks, then glares at me.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

“What do you mean?” She shakes her head.

“You don’t see it?” Crew asks.

“See what?” she asks, her tone annoyed.

“It’s him.” Crew grabs his phone out of Dana’s hands, and then places it next to my face. “See?” His voice raises. “RJ Hemlock of Phantom Echoes is Rhett Stryker, the man who ghosted you.”

Dana’s boss Lindsay must have heard us because she comes out of her office and walks over. She looks at Crew’s phone. “They definitely resemble each other.” Her gaze ping-pongs between the screen and my face. “Add some guyliner, lip piercings, long hair, and a beard, and that’s him.”

Dana glances at Lindsay, her expression one of disbelief. Then her expression morphs into a wide smile, and she laughs hard. “Right! You think RJ Hemlock is standing right here under my nose and I didn’t notice?!” She motions to the picture on Crew’s phone screen but the words appear to die on her lips as she focuses more on the picture. She looks back and forth until her face pales and her eyes are larger than saucers. It’d be comical if this was any other situation.

And that’s when the coffee grounds hit the fan.

“You’re not denying it,” Dana says, placing her hand on her chest. “Please deny it. Please don’t tell me I’ve been spending hours and hours with RJ Hemlock without even realizing it. Don’t tell me you’ve been lying to me from the moment we met.”

Tears brim on her lower lash line.

I raise my hands in a placating gesture. “I can explain?—”

“So it’s true? You’re RJ Hemlock?”

The lead weight in my gut moves up to lodge in my throat, and I find it hard to breathe. My chest is tight, and it’s as if my conscience is saying, I told you so.

“That’s my stage name.” She opens her mouth as if she’s going to speak, but I need to explain before this becomes an even bigger mess. “Listen, it’s not like I?—”

“Don’t! Do not try and talk your way out of this. You lied to me.” Dana inhales a shaky breath. “I trusted you. I gave you my heart—” Her voice cracks on that last word.

The vice around my chest squeezes hard, and I back slowly toward the wall, praying that God allows it to open up and swallow me whole. So I don’t have to face the consequences of my deception.

“I didn’t lie to you.” The words are bitter, a twist on the truth. “I was going to?—”

“We’ve listened to Phantom Echoes every time you’ve come over and you said nothing!”

Frustration at myself simmers in my blood. “I had my reasons.” I run my hands through my hair and grip the back of my neck, attempting to come up with something, anything to make her understand. “I was going to tell you.”

“Really, Rhett? Really? Because you had every opportunity to tell me after your memories returned. I could see in your eyes that you were holding something back.

So please tell me, when were you planning to come clean and tell me who you really are?" Her movements are stilted, her eyes wild.

"What was I supposed to say? 'Hey, that's me singing?' I wanted you to like me for me. For who I am now!" The words are out before I can think them through. This was never a concern with Dana even if it had been in my past.

Dana rears back as if I just slapped her. And it's at that moment that everything falls apart between us. The moment our delicate bond cracks then shatters into too many pieces to put back together.

"Did you not realize I was already crazy about you? I laid my heart bare for you. I shared things with you I've never shared with anyone, not even my sister! You ghosting me was one thing, I could forgive that in time. But this? This betrayal has completely broken the trust I had in you. The belief I had in us."

My heart implodes. A chasm opens up in my chest, swallowing my heart and its tiny little pieces.

I gently grip her arm. "I'm sorry, Dana."

She looks at me with a disgust I will never forget and pulls her arm free. "Sorry doesn't cut it. What you did to me..." She purses her lips, cutting herself off. Tears stream down her cheeks, and I want to wipe away each and every one of them. Her nostrils flare as if another thought has entered her mind. "Are you married?" she asks and her question takes me completely off guard.

"Married? Who would I be married to?" My voice is strained.

Dana's eyes search mine. "Oscar's mom. I read an article about RJ Hemlock weeks ago, when you were in the hospital. It was a picture of RJ Hemlock—you— in a

hospital and a woman the article claimed to be your wife standing beside you.”

“No.” My voice is firm. “I’m not married. The media uses anything they can to manipulate the truth. I can’t believe you’d even think?—”

“Yeah, well there’s a lot I never thought—” Dana shakes her head, covers her mouth with both hands, then sprints to the office.

Lindsay and Crew have remained uncharacteristically quiet. Before they can unleash their own fury on me, I see myself out of the café and head to my truck. Once I’m inside, I try to start the engine, but it doesn’t turn over. I pop the hood and get out, hoping it’s an easy fix.

Crew comes out and storms over to me. “Remember what I told you? A single sniffle and you’d be dealing with me.” He shoves me in the chest. “Everything inside of me wants to put you back in a hospital bed.” He pulls his fist back and swings.

Page 38

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

I duck just in time and put my hands up. “I don’t blame you.”

It looks as though he’s winding up for another swing but stops. A menacing smile turns up his lips.

“You’re not worth it.” Then he backs slowly away, not turning from me until he’s opening the door to the café.

I’m clenching my fists so hard I can feel my short nails digging into my palms. After getting back into my truck, I slam the door and try the ignition. This time, it turns over, and I peel out of the parking lot, hating myself for breaking Dana Swann’s heart...again.

Less than a mile from my hut, smoke pours out of the hood of my truck. I can’t see a thing, so I look out my side window and pull over. I thought it was just being temperamental earlier. Clearly, I was wrong.

When I step out, the skies open, and it’s as if Dana has control of the weather and chose this moment to rain down her fury on me. Thunder cracks moments before lightning stretches across the sky. I go to open the door but discover my automatic locks kicked in, successfully locking my cell phone inside.

“Just perfect,” I mutter under my breath.

I start my trek down the road, praying that lightning doesn’t take me out before I make it home.

Several cars speed past, splashing me with dirty street water. It's only been minutes, but it feels as if I've been trudging through this storm for years. How many times did I tell myself to tell Dana about my past? About who I am—or was?

I regret hiding my identity from Dana but I don't regret hiding it from everyone at the resort. After being hounded by the media for years, pouring my soul into my music, and making the fans happy, I wanted a normal life. Which meant I needed to keep my identity to myself. Even though Amber Island is private, it didn't mean my identity wouldn't be used by someone with bad intentions and I'd be back to where I started. No one in my new life needed to know. But Dana deserved to. I was just too afraid to tell her, especially after she told me Phantom Echoes—my claim to fame—was her favorite band.

When I was in the band and living a life of sin, all I needed to do was share my stage name and women flocked to me. Then I met Dana, and we connected on a level deeper than I've connected with anyone before and I didn't want to ruin it. It could have—would have—changed things once she realized who I once was. Would she be falling for me, Rhett Stryker? Or my famous persona, RJ Hemlock?

It was truly a miracle she didn't recognize me from the start. And Dana liked me, Rhett Stryker, for me. I didn't want her to look at me differently than she did. Now I don't know if she'll ever even look at me again.

I close my eyes, not caring if I trip or fall. Everything inside of me aches. Who I was and who I am are two completely different people. Will I ever live down my past as RJ Hemlock? Or will I exist in the shadow of my sins forever?

The only good that came out of that sinful lifestyle was my son. A son I didn't know existed until his mom called me out of nowhere, beyond desperate for hope. This wasn't how I planned on having children, but my life has been a series of unexpected blessings and consequences. Which has proven to be even more true through my

recent circumstances.

As the storm rains down on me, I open myself to every heartbreak I've ever felt, praying God uses this downpour to wash it all away.

It was raining the night I went to the hospital for surgery too. The rain was a big part of the song I wrote for Oscar. The song was unlike any other I've ever written or performed. I poured out everything I had, the love I didn't know I could have for someone I barely knew. The gratefulness I feel knowing he's healthy after a life-threatening illness. How much I want to build a relationship with him and make up for lost time.

But I haven't heard a word. He hasn't spoken to me since he woke up in the hospital and the doctors told him everything looked promising. Oscar turned on his side, faced me in my own hospital bed, and thanked me for donating part of my liver. Before I could even say "You're welcome," he had turned back over, put his earphones in, and completely ignored me.

I've called him for months and he refuses to talk to me. Despite sharing my DNA, Oscar is still a stranger. Someone I desperately want to get to know yet who hates me. I don't know how to fix my relationship with him. Or how to fix my relationship with Dana.

I can't tell if the wetness on my cheeks is from the rain or tears. Probably a mixture of both. I haven't cried since my mom's funeral, but if any moment warrants tears, I think this one does.

A car slows to a stop beside me. The mechanical sound of a window opening has me turning my head.

"Rhett? What are you doing walking out here alone in the rain? Are you lost?" Dr.

Woodhouse says with genuine concern.

I shake my head.

“Get in.” He pushes the door open from the driver’s side.

“I don’t want to ruin your seats,” I find myself protesting.

“Forget my seats. I don’t want to see you back at the hospital with pneumonia.”

I relent, sliding into the car and closing the door.

He checks his mirrors and pulls back onto the road.

“Care to tell me why you’re wandering the streets while we’re in the middle of a tropical storm?”

“Well, I kept the fact that I’m the lead singer of Dana’s favorite band a secret from her since I met her and she just found out through Crew when I should have come clean a long time ago.”

“Why did you keep that a secret?” he asks.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

There's no reason to hold anything back. So I lay it all out there. How originally, I wanted to keep my anonymity with Dana like I did with everyone else. How I knew I should have come clean the moment I realized how important Dana had become to me in such a short time. But then I found out I had a son who was sick and needed part of my liver to survive. Only to end up having him hate me. Then coming back to Amber Island and falling in love with Dana all over again but too afraid to finally tell her the truth. I end with, "Not exactly a good way to kick off a relationship." As if on cue, lightning flashes in the sky at the same time thunder roars. The wind howls louder.

"Neither is lying to the girl."

If Dr. Woodhouse is surprised by this revelation or concerned about this worsening storm, his stoic expression doesn't show it. We come to a four-way intersection and he stops. "Where am I taking you?"

I tell him which way to turn and give him the rest of the directions to my hut. As we continue to drive, I pray for our safety. Right now, the roads aren't flooded, but I know from experience that conditions can change in an instant. Unfortunately, none of my prayers prepare me for what we find after making it down my driveway.

"It's gone." The pain I've had in my chest since watching Dana lock herself inside the office grows into a sharp, stabbing ache. My house was never anything spectacular, basically just a studio apartment on a beach. But it was home. My sanctuary. And all that's left is rubble.

"Must have been a microburst of some kind," Dr. Woodhouse says, staring at the

destruction.

Rubbing my pulsing temples, I mumble, “Could this day get any worse?”

“Sure it could.” Dr. Woodhouse pats my shoulder, then looks behind us before turning the car around and heading back for the road. “You could have nowhere to stay.”

“I don’t have anywhere to stay,” I say, my frustration mounting.

“Sure you do. You’ll stay with me and Nancy as you weather this storm.”

Somehow, I know he’s not just talking about the storm raging outside.

FIFTEEN

DANA

The windows rattle as the wind howls outside. It’s been three days of this. Three days since I ran away from Rhett after learning of his ultimate betrayal. From the very beginning, he’s lied to me about his identity, the very core of who he is. I’m not sure our relationship can ever come back from that.

Hurt and anger continue to grow inside me, creating the defensive wall I should have put in place from the very beginning to protect me from this new pain.

Rosa tightens the afghan around her shoulders as she reclines on my couch. She’s been with me since the storm arrived, sleeping in the spare bedroom that once housed Rhett. Where he had a nightmare and in his sleepy state told me he wanted to keep me. Tears burn my eyes at the memory.

Rosa shivers a little then says, “It’s gonna be a few more days of rough weather. I can feel it.”

“This storm came out of nowhere, didn’t it? I don’t remember hearing anything about it on the weather channel.” I keep my voice as monotone as possible, trying to show control over the torrent of emotions warring inside of me.

Rosa looks straight ahead, her expression calm and sure. “Some storms blast into life when we least expect them. We can’t prepare for them, but we do our best to defend what we can and trust that God will protect the rest.” She takes a sip of her tea. “Ooh, that’s good. I love a good jasmine tea.”

Rosa sounds so cavalier about everything. Stuff with Rhett, this storm that has kept us cooped up for days. How can she stay so relaxed when the world around us is slowly drowning us?

“We’re not just talking about a storm, are we?”

“No,” she says. “I was talking about the tea too.”

I give her a frustrated look. “Please just say what you want to say. Probably something along the lines of ‘I told you so.’”

Rosa calmly shakes her head. “No. Not even close. I want you to tell me what happened with Rhett when you’re ready.”

I’m ready. It’s been eating at me for days. So I lay it all out on the table. Her expression is unreadable as I come to the last things that were said.

“So what is it that you’re most upset about?” she asks.

“Everything,” I answer too quickly.

Rosa takes a long sip of her tea. “But what hurts you the most?”

“I don’t know.” Getting up, I pace the length of my living room, trying to find a way to burn off energy and clear my head. “It’s all hard.”

“It is. I don’t envy you right now. No one would. But you need to know God is working in all of this.” She squints as if deep in thought. “In everything He works for His glory.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

My nostrils flare and I purse my lips. “What about this would bring Him glory?”

Rosa tilts her head to the side. “That, my dear girl, is in your hands.”

I plop down on the sofa beside Rosa, and we sit in pensive silence. My eyes close as I pray silently. I’m not sure how much time passes, but the torment must show on my face. I hear Rosa’s tea cup clink on the saucer and I open my eyes. She takes my hands in hers. “You need to forgive him.”

Her unexpected declaration has my blood turning to ice. “How? How can you be on his side? You said yourself you thought he was keeping something from me! Rhett had every opportunity to tell me the truth of who he was—who he is—and he didn’t.”

“Did Jesus put a condition on the forgiveness of humanity as He hung on the cross? Or did He willingly die for all sins, no matter how awful they were?” Rosa’s eyes narrow, and for the first time ever, she raises her voice at me. “Forgiveness isn’t always easy. But it is necessary.”

She stares at me, but I can’t look her in the eyes because she’s right. And I don’t want her to be. I want her on my side, not Rhett’s.

Seventy times seven. It’s a whisper in my spirit, a reminder of Jesus’s lesson on forgiveness. The first time I’ve felt God in I don’t even know how long. It feels like a turning point. One I hope doesn’t take more months to process.

“Maybe you’re right,” I say reluctantly. “But it’s not going to be easy to forgive this. To accept all of this.” Not only did I date my teenage crush without knowing it, but

he has a child with another woman. Because there's always another woman. I choke on a sob and grab a pillow, clutching it to my chest.

Rosa rubs circles on my back. "Our plans are rarely God's plans. Sometimes He throws a storm—or a rockstar—into our lives to teach us a lesson. Sometimes the lesson is specific, but every time the hardships hit, they are meant to push us closer to Him, the Creator of our world, our life, and sometimes, to get our attention, He allows our struggles."

"You're telling me," I mumble.

She ignores me and continues. "People get it wrong a lot. They think 'every good thing' James talks about means that only the good things that happen to us without struggles come from God. But good things often come out of chaos, trials, and tribulations. And God's good things often present themselves in those very tribulations. Not because He wants to hurt us or likes seeing us struggle; what He wants in those moments is for us to reach out to Him like a child reaching for their father in a time of need so He can scoop us into His loving arms and we can cling to Him as our world seems to fall apart. When we trust Him in every moment, He blesses us beyond what our human minds can even comprehend. He blesses us with His love. It's the only love we truly need in this life. When we trust Him, He pieces our world back together, creating the tapestry He designed for us, and shapes us closer in His image." She turns her face away and brushes a tear from her eye.

Thunder crackles in the distance, and the lighting that follows several seconds later lights up the sky in a mosaic pattern of purple, blue, and white. There is beauty even in the heart of the storm.

My eyes drop to the Bible I've neglected, sitting on my coffee table. I've reposted my popular videos the last few weeks because I've struggled to make new content. My desire to be in God's Word has continued to dwindle the longer I've remained angry

toward Rhett and unforgiving for his betrayal. It was hard before he returned, but now...now it's even worse. But how can I forgive Rhett for not only abandoning me but lying to me and hiding his true identity? The longer I sit with that thought, the sicker I feel. Deep down, I know I need to forgive him. And I also know that in time, I will trust him again.

“How do I forgive him? How do I weather this storm? How do I let my world fall to pieces without grabbing for the fractured bits to try and put it back together myself?” I fire my questions at Rosa, unable to hold back anything. She's not only one of my dearest friends, she's the person I know will answer them with honesty and wisdom.

She picks up my Bible from the table and hands it to me. “You'll find your answers in there.” She taps the cover.

A huff of frustration leaves me. Then I swallow the lump in my throat. “No one else knows this, but since you're already seeing that my faith is failing, I may as well tell you.”

If she's surprised by my statement, her face doesn't show it. She just pushes her glasses back up her nose and looks at me as though we have all the time in the world. As if she's perfectly happy sitting here with me, listening to me complain and whine.

“I've tried reading my Bible, but over the last few months, it's been difficult. Even before this mess with Rhett started, I've felt like a counterfeit Christian.” I shrug a shoulder. “I haven't been able to film new videos that have real substance.” Releasing a shaky breath, I admit, “I haven't been able to read the Bible for my own growth either.”

Rosa tilts her head but is silent for a long moment. I scoot down the couch and pull my legs up, curling them beneath me.

Finally, she speaks up. “Our spiritual growth.” She blows out a breath and purses her lips as if she’s struggling to find the right words. “Let me phrase this in a way that leaves room for my error. Our faith shouldn’t depend on our mountain-top experiences with Jesus. Our faith shouldn’t focus on how close we ‘feel’ to God. It shouldn’t depend on how we feel at all. Our love of God isn’t a feeling but a choice. Will you choose to get up and read your Bible?” She raises a brow at me.

“I’ve tried!” I practically shout. “So many times. But every time I read the words, any understanding flees and I haven’t been able to prep a single word for the retreat.”

“That is something you’ll need to rectify.”

I give her a frustrated huff. “I’m aware. But how?”

“Stop looking at it as work. Read it because you want to. Don’t think about what you are going to get out of it. When you sit down and open it up, focus on what the passages teach you about God.” She points toward heaven. “Not what it can do for you, but what you can do for Him.”

“I would have felt much better if you would have stayed with me and West through this storm, and I don’t just mean the tropical storm.” Olivia gives me one of her looks before she takes a sip of coffee. “Why didn’t you tell me about Rhett?”

She sets her mug down, her face showing traces of the hurt I unintentionally inflicted. I take a long drink of my own coffee, giving myself a few moments to gather my composure and formulate a good answer.

She and West had just landed when the rain started. Thank God they made it to their penthouse before the thunder and lightning storms started. They were stuck there since they came home. Now that the weather has let up enough for her to leave safely, she came over to check on me. West stayed back, giving us this time together.

The rain finally stopped last night after a week of downpours. For days, I couldn't even step outside for fear of either getting blown away by the winds or getting struck by lightning. Now the sky is a cloudless light blue. Sunlight reflects off the calm surface of the ocean. The air is fresh and crisp as we sit out on the porch in my Adirondack chairs with a little side table between us holding our mugs of coffee.

Olivia nudges my foot. "Why didn't you tell me about Rhett?" she asks again, the little patience she had quickly dwindling.

"You were on your dream honeymoon in Paris. I knew if I told you what happened, you would be on the first flight back to Amber Island. I wasn't going to do that to you or West."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

Her lips turn down into a little frown. She knows I'm right.

"I didn't need my big sister to come fight this battle for me," I add.

"I wouldn't have come here to fight this battle for you. I would have come back so you knew I was in your corner."

Her thoughtfulness brings a tear to my eye that I brush away. "Please don't hold that against me. I wanted you to enjoy your honeymoon without needing to worry about me. And I'm perfectly good."

Olivia scoffs. "Right." She makes an up-and-down motion, referring to the hair I haven't washed or brushed in a week pulled into a messy bun, my baggy sweatpants, and ripped T-shirt. "If this is perfectly good, I'm afraid to witness what not 'perfectly good' is."

I narrow my eyes at her. "Listen—"

Olivia cuts me off. "When was the last time you really read and studied your Bible?" she asks. It's a question I posed to her when she abandoned West after their reunion. Just like when I asked her, there's no judgment in her tone, only concern.

"I opened it a couple of days ago," I answer.

After the storm passed and Rosa left, I opened my Bible like Rosa suggested—like I knew I needed to. But the words blurred together, and there was no way I could read it, let alone study it. None of the peace I used to have in the Word washed over me.

Everything inside me curled into a ball of confused emotion.

“I didn’t ask the last time you opened it. I asked the last time you read and studied it. You used to spend countless hours in God’s Word.”

Shrugging, I say, “I needed to read it to create studies and videos. It was my job.” I practically choke on the words. That was never why I read my Bible. It was just a bonus to be able to share that passion with others. Originally. But recently? Well, recently, it’s been a whole other story.

“Was your job?” Olivia asks incredulously.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I grit my teeth. “A girl who can barely read the Bible has no business making a profit talking about studying the Bible. It’d make me a fraud. If I go through the motions just to make an income...that’s not me. I want my videos to draw people to Christ, and to do that, my faith needs to be solid.”

“What they come for is your passion for the Word.” She visibly swallows. “Your passion for Jesus.”

“That passion is dormant right now.” My stomach clenches violently at the vocal admission.

Olivia doesn’t hide her surprise at my statement but then narrows her eyes before standing. She goes into my house and rustles around for a minute then comes out holding my Bible and a cup of pens and highlighters. Carefully, she places them on the table next to me.

“Give me back my sister. Stop making excuses. All your answers are in there.” She points to the closed Bible, echoing Rosa’s words. Words I know are true but am finding it difficult to follow.

I stare at her but say nothing.

She grabs her purse and slings it over her shoulder before leaving me alone with my thoughts and the Bible I desperately need to get back into. Her car starts, and I hear the crunch of gravel. After confirming she's gone, I push my Bible away.

SIXTEEN

RHETT

Since I hit rock bottom several weeks ago, my truck has been fixed but my relationship with Dana has remained broken. I've managed to talk to Rosa on several occasions, but she's only told me "Give her time" every time I've asked about Dana.

I see Dana at church each Sunday, but she always finds a way to avoid me.

I've tried calling her I don't know how many times, but she never answers. As each day passes, I grow more hopeless and it becomes harder to breathe. My only relief comes from reading my Bible, spending time with the Woodhouses, and going to church with them.

But my relationship with Dana isn't the only one that's failing. There's nothing new from Oscar. He's just as closed off as ever. It's becoming more difficult to stay positive when my son refuses to forgive me for not being a part of his life before now.

I regret ignoring Ashley's calls back then. Instead of thinking she was calling about something important, I assumed she was another delusional fan who thought I'd change my philandering ways for her just because we spent a few nights together. I feel sick at the thought of who I once was. Irritated that I didn't just take one of her calls.

How different would my life be? Or Oscar's? Would he be better off? Or hate me more for the selfish man I was back then?

Our first meeting would have been when he was an infant. Instead, I met my son when he was sixteen and in need of a life-saving transplant. I remember the day we left the hospital after his surgery. It had been only a few days since I vanished from Amber Island and left Dana behind, but it felt like my time with her was a lifetime before. My thoughts couldn't drift to her or what could have been. I had to focus on Oscar's health. On my own recovery. Our medical team told us there was still a chance for complications, the big one being a rejection of the organ. But we were physically in a good place, so it was finally the right time for Ashley to give me some answers.

She invited me over to their house so Oscar and I could connect. But the moment we stepped through the door, Oscar went straight to his room.

"Why didn't you tell me about my son?" I asked once Oscar was out of earshot.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

She must have known this was coming because before the entire question was out of my mouth, tears filled her eyes.

“I tried. I was going to tell you the day I found out. But you...canceled on me.”

When I closed my eyes, I tried thinking back to that day and the reason I canceled. It was so many years ago that I couldn't for the life of me remember.

“Then I saw your picture online. You were out with the band and...several other women.” Her smile was halfhearted as if she understood even back then where our relationship was headed.

“I'm sorry. I should have answered.” It was a pathetic response, but I didn't have anything else to say.

She shrugged. “I begged you to call me back, that I had something important to tell you.” Ashley released a deep breath. “You never did. So I gave up until I had him. He was a beautiful baby boy.” She had a sad smile on her lips. “He looked just like you, and I wanted to reach out again. But then I saw more pictures of you partying with different women and I realized maybe this was how it was supposed to be. That you weren't cut out to be Oscar's dad.”

Her statement sliced into me like a machete. It would have hurt less to be wide awake during surgery than to hear those words. Not because she was callous when she delivered them but because they were true. As much as I'd like to say I would have changed, there's no guarantee that I would have. I was too self-absorbed.

That didn't start to change until Gannon, the lead singer of Awestruck—one of the bands we toured with—pulled me aside after one of our concerts to talk to me. It was shortly after my fling with Ashley and I had sunk deeper into the party boy lifestyle. He wasn't judgmental as he shared the truth of Jesus's love and forgiveness if I'd turn to him. Even though I didn't apply the truth he shared, everything he said stuck with me. It was the same truth West shared with me when I started going to church with him.

Their words told me God wasn't out to get me or waiting for me to mess up so He could rain down His punishment over me. God was waiting for me to see Jesus through the people He brought into my life who lived for Him.

Those people lovingly showed me that we all deserve God's punishment and judgment, but Jesus took on that punishment to save all who believe, including me. They told me that God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to die for our sins. To give us not only life but life to the full. Partying wasn't living life to the full; it was a temporary salve to cover the emptiness inside me. A superficial distraction from what—or Who—would give me life to the fullest.

Ashley was right; I wouldn't have made a good dad. It was a sad and painful truth. It stunned me that Ashley thought she and Oscar would be better off without me—a rockstar who could give them the world.

Before Christ, I wasn't cut out to be a dad. After Christ, well, I know I'll still fail, but I also know that God's grace is big enough to cover even my great inadequacies.

Over the next few months after our surgeries, Ashley updated me on Oscar's life and recovery because he refused to speak to me. So I did the only other thing I could think of—I wrote him a song. Then I recorded it and left the flash drive in an envelope with Oscar's name at their front door.

When I checked my mail a week later, I found a note from Oscar in my mailbox that read:

Thanks for the garbage, Old Man.

More than a year later and I'm still in the same spot with my kid. It's frustrating and soul-shattering all at once. It's been a hard road, but I am doing my best to remain faithful in believing God has a plan and is working in the muddied waters of my past and present. With Oscar and with Dana.

"Rhett, you have a guest!" Mrs. Woodhouse calls from the top of the steps, pulling me free of my thoughts.

"Who would be visiting me?" I think out loud. My heart pounds at the hope brewing there. Could it be Dana? Is she finally going to let me explain?

Dillon Grimes, Faith Alive's youth pastor, waits for me on the living room sofa. I've only spoken to him a handful of times after church. But he seems like a decent enough guy. I just have no idea why he's here to see me.

"Hey, Dillon." I shake his hand and take the chair across from him.

"Hey, Rhett, how would you feel about getting back on the stage again?" he asks.

I eye him skeptically and lean back in the chair. "You know my history, I take it?"

He looks sheepish as he nods. "I do. And I don't say this lightly, but I feel like Divine intervention is at play."

I swallow the lump in my throat and raise an eyebrow. "How's that?"

“Our guitarist just put his notice in. He’s moving off the island, and we need someone to take his place.”

Sweat breaks out across my forehead. Playing on stage is a rush unlike any other. But the last time I stepped off the stage, the entire trajectory of my life was altered. The memory of that time plays on repeat in my nightmares. The same nightmare I had while staying with Dana.

After taking a shaky breath, I say, “I don’t know.”

Dillon clasps his hands in front of him and rests his forearms on his legs. “Can I ask why? I really thought you would have been excited. Dana told me how talented you are, and after listening to a few of your songs, I have to agree with her.”

“You talked to Dana about me?” I feel a confusing mix of pride and envy.

“She talked about your music when we dated. She told me about her love for Phantom Echoes and how much she enjoyed listening to your guitar solos.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

“You dated Dana?” I ask, my voice as sharp as knives. The mix of pride and envy I felt morphs into pure, unadulterated jealousy.

“Uh, yeah. We went out for a few months, actually.” He tugs his shirt collar away from his throat. Beads of sweat form on his forehead. Something tells me Dana thought they were more serious than Dillon did.

“Aren’t you engaged?”

He scratches the back of his neck and looks uncomfortable. “Sadie and I started dating a couple of weeks after I broke things off with Dana. I proposed a month later. When you know, you know, right?” he asks, then gives an awkward laugh.

“So let me get this straight. You dated Dana, broke up with her, and got serious with another girl right after?” My blood boils not just because of what Dillon did but because I know Dillon wasn’t the only man to do this to Dana. The doctor from the hospital we ran into did the exact same thing to her.

She deserves better.

Red crawls up the sides of Dillon’s neck. “When you put it like that, it does sound pretty bad.”

My nostrils flare and my hands clench into fists on my lap. “I guess I just don’t understand how a man can walk away from a woman like Dana, let alone move on so fast.” Hypocrite! My subconscious screams at me.

His eyes narrow. "I can assure you, Dana is happy for us."

I scoff.

Dillon's lips pull into a firm line. "Coming here was a mistake. I may have prayed about this but talking to you now I don't think we'd work well together."

Despite agreeing with him on that point, I feel a tug that this—playing again on stage—is something God is calling me to do. A feeling that promises this time playing on stage will be very different.

Dillon stands.

I rise from my seat too. "Wait."

He looks at me, the red on his face fading back to his usual pale tone.

"You said you prayed about this, right?" I ask.

Reluctantly, Dillon plops back down and nods in confirmation. "I did."

"Give me a few days. Let me pray over this decision too, and I'll let you know. If after some prayer God shows me this is His will, I'll make sure this stuff with Dana won't get in the way of following God's lead."

Any harshness in Dillon's expression vanishes. "I respect that and agree." He takes my extended hand and we shake.

"Thank you for your consideration," he says.

I nod, then see him out.

Once Dillon is gone, I release a deep breath. “I’m not sure what You’re doing, Lord, but I’m here for it either way.”

“Thank you for all your help,” Nancy Woodhouse says, patting my back as I finish washing up tonight’s dishes. “But I don’t want you to feel obligated to keep helping out around the house. That’s not why we invited you here to stay with us.”

“I appreciate that, Mrs. Woodhouse, but I’m hoping to get out of your hair soon.”

She playfully smacks my back with the dishtowel she’s using to dry the dishes. “You stop that nonsense. We’ve both enjoyed having you here. Clarence refuses to pay someone to do what he says he can do, but he couldn’t turn you down when you offered to do it for free. Good idea calling it a ‘thank you’ so he didn’t take too big of a hit to his pride.” She winks. ”Your future wife is going to be one lucky woman.”

There’s only one woman I could ever picture spending the rest of my life with and she hates me. I swallow the lump in my throat so I’m able to reply. “Thank you, but I’m not sure if I’m the settling down and getting married type.”

“You are the marriage type, mister. The right woman just hasn’t come along yet.”

“Yes, she has,” I say without thinking.

Nancy stops mid-dry, a sly smile on her face. It’s then that I realize the cunning woman set me up with her statement. “Is that so?”

“I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

She says, “I knew it. Speaking of Dana, are you going to try to talk to her soon?”

I shake my head. “She doesn’t want anything to do with me. What I did to her is unforgivable.”

All levity in her expression is gone. “Nothing is unforgivable.”

I give her a look that says I don’t believe her.

“Nothing,” she says with finality.

“Well, then it’s probably going to take a long time for her to get over it. And I can’t blame her. I had every opportunity to tell her who I am but didn’t.”

“You know I’m not happy about you lying to all of us.” Her tone is surprisingly not one of judgment. “But I can understand why you kept your identity a secret.”

“I wanted a fresh start. To be who I am and not who the world expects me to be.”

She smiles gently. “I can understand that. Dana will too. Just give her time.”

I release an exasperated sigh. “That seems to be the answer for everything—wait.”

Nancy pats my chest. “It often is, though God answers all our prayers. Sometimes His answer isn’t what we want. Sometimes it is. But we always learn His perfect answer in His perfect timing.” She pulls me into an embrace. “I’m praying for you. Keep leaning into God and you’ll get through this.”

“I know.” It’s something I do know and have known but still need to be reminded of. “Thank you.” I squeeze her back, and she holds me tight. Her hug reminds me so much of my mom that I squeeze her harder and send up a grateful prayer that God put another wonderful woman in my life to encourage me.

I’ve been praying for the last few days, trying to figure out if joining the church band is something God wants me to do. At first, I wasn’t sure if it’d be a good idea since my true identity is slowly spreading through the community. The people of Amber Island are private, but it doesn’t mean someone won’t turn on me and release my whereabouts to the media. But the more I pray about it, the more certain I am that God is calling me to do this. Step out in obedience and God will handle the consequences, right?

Dillon texted yesterday and asked if I’d want to do a trial run at youth group this week, and I told him I’d let him know by tonight. Apparently, he’s grown impatient with waiting on me. Even though I’m leery about going back on stage I keep reminding myself that this is for God’s glory. Not mine. Facing that fear will be worth it so I can go out there praising the God who saved me. The God who’s sovereign. The God who gives and takes away.

I’m searching the scriptures, trying to confirm I’m making the right decision while Nancy sits across from me working on a crossword puzzle.

“Do you think she’ll be at youth group?” I ask. Nancy looks up from the paper and gives me a mischievous smile. I don’t need to name who I’m asking about.

Since Nancy is in charge of the women’s ministry, which includes the girls’ youth group, she should know which of her volunteers will be present.

“That girl hasn’t missed a Wednesday since her first small group. She’ll be there.” Nancy rests her hands on her hips. “But if she’s not there, I’ll be dragging her little

butt out of her house and through the doors of the church.”

I smile and shake my head, then excuse myself to my room to pray. This feels like the final confirmation I need to make my decision.

I call Dillon, and he answers after the first ring. “Did you decide?”

“I’ll be at youth group.”

“Awesome, thank you, Rhett.” His voice is full of relief.

After saying goodbyes, we hang up. I pray that this is the perfect place to start again.

SEVENTEEN

DANA

I stare at my empty notebook and then the blank lines in my study Bible. This block has become more pronounced than ever. I haven’t been able to understand a word of the Bible. When I stare at the black text against the cream-colored pages the words jumble together, tying themselves into indiscernible knots that I can’t untangle.

I grind my back molars, unable to release the tension that’s been growing inside of me.

Time away from Rhett was supposed to help me sort through these feelings. But all it’s done is make me more miserable.

I’ve accepted that Rhett has a child—a teenager. I’ve accepted that he ghosted me for a very legitimate reason. Do I wish he would have told me what was going on? Of course. But he had a lot dropped on him all at once, and he had a life-or-death

situation he needed to handle. How could he tell a girl he just started dating that he has a son he didn't know about who is dying and needs part of his liver?

I close my Bible and rest my forehead against the cover. Maybe if I stay here long enough the words will seep into my mind and untangle this web of emotions.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:32 am

The fact that Rhett has a son isn't what took me over the edge. It would be something we need to work through, but it's not insurmountable. What feels impossible to get over is his deception. The fact that Rhett made the conscious decision to keep his identity a secret from me. He had multiple opportunities to tell me he was RJ Hemlock. Rhett and I listened to Phantom Echoes as he taught me tennis, and I told him how much I loved the band. Back then, again, I can understand him keeping his past under wraps. But when he got his memories back he should have told me the truth. When I told him I wanted more he should have told me. We listened to Phantom Echoes after dinner and he had countless opportunities to tell me. But he didn't.

If Crew hadn't put the pieces together, would Rhett have ever told me the truth? Or would he have strung me along until another girl snagged his attention? Like the last three guys I dated?

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I sit up and rub my forehead trying to fight back the painful thoughts and questions that threaten to consume me.

They pour in anyway.

Who's to say he wouldn't get back together with Ashley, the mother of his son? If Oscar decides to connect with Rhett, it would mean Rhett connecting again with Ashley. I know he talks to her to keep up with how Oscar is doing, but if they start spending time together, who's to say they won't decide to get married? It wouldn't be surprising since I'm never the final choice. I'm the last step before forever but neverthebeforever.

You won't be Rhett's forever either. Another intrusive thought breaks in. I should pray. I should focus on Jesus and remember that no matter what happens with Rhett, I am chosen by Him. That Jesus chose me. That He died so that He can spend forever—eternity—with me. But I'm too deep in my head to stop.

My head is too full of thoughts and emotions. A numbing pressure weighs down my chest. I need to cry. Crying would help relieve some of this pressure, like letting air out of a balloon that's too full. But the tears refuse to come.

I clench my eyes closed. "Lord, what am I supposed to do?" I ask out loud.

No answer comes.

I should be ecstatic now that we're back at youth group after summer break. I get to see my girls and listen as they sing and praise our Savior then tell me all about their summers. And I am excited to see them, but how can I show excitement for the Word of God when I haven't been able to read it? How can I show excitement for prayer when all of mine have been...pathetic?

Even though I've tried opening my Bible countless times, God has continued to be silent, and I've allowed the distance to grow. I've been tempted so many times to call my sister and tell her she'll need to lead on her own tonight. Then guilt would strike, and I knew I needed to push through this lack of motivation so I could spend time with my girls. Because if I can't push through this, how can I lead the girls' retreat that's right around the corner? The girls' retreat where I am supposed to teach a group of teenage girls how to deeply study their Bibles?

The retreat is going to be here before I know it, and I still have nothing to share. My relationship with God is in shambles. There is only one way that should help me overcome this hurdle.

Feeling more desperate than ever, I crack open my well-worn Bible and stare at the black and white pages. I find a passage my pen and highlighters haven't touched yet. Back when I wasn't a mess, I originally planned on using a different group of verses for the lesson. But the longer I stare at the untouched text, the stronger I feel about this developing idea. I grab a pen and paper then scribble down a couple ideas. My phone lights up with a notification, and it distracts me enough that the idea slips away. I'm left with two sentences that barely make sense.

The timer on my phone goes off, notifying me that I need to get ready. Usually, I try to look at least somewhat put together when I go to youth group. But tonight, all I can manage is leggings, a long black T-shirt, and my leopard print cardigan. I run the brush through my hair and call myself ready to go.

Music fills my car as I make the short drive to church. Hollyn's song "In Awe" plays on the radio, and the words choke me up the longer I listen to it. By the time I pull into a parking space, I'm wiping tears from my eyes and am grateful I didn't put mascara on. The lyrics are the reminder I need that God is good and I am not. I hear it and understand it. Now it's a matter of letting it sink into my heart so it can be a balm to my soul.

After making sure my face is not red and splotchy from my tears, I head into the church and send up a silent prayer of forgiveness and guidance.

"Miss Dana!" Liz, one of my small group girls, greets me as I enter the church's sanctuary. She's sitting beside Madi, another one of my girls. The rest of the group sits with their hands folded on their laps, feigning innocence. They must be up to something.

I take the seat at the end of our aisle.

The other clusters of students mill around the modern sanctuary while they wait for

their leaders to arrive and for Pastor Dillon to open with prayer. To distract my mind from wandering down the Dillon path, I look toward the largest stained-glass window. It sits at the front of the sanctuary and is a depiction of Jesus sitting on a rock with a dozen children sitting around him with one on His lap. It's exactly how I picture Jesus when I close my eyes. Even now as I sit in this spiritually dry season of life.

Not spiritually dry. Disobedient. The thought comes to me unbidden. Shame fills me. Something needs to change. I need to change.

"We heard your secret boyfriend is back in town!" Madi and Liz manage to say in unison, almost as if it was rehearsed and it makes me focus on the present.

The rest of the girls turn toward me.

"He's not my boyfriend," I say too quickly and defensively. Madi and Liz share a look.

"Riiight," Madi says with an exaggerated teasing tone.

I draw my lips into a firm line and stare the group's two troublemakers down. "Listen, Rhett and I aren't dating."

"Is that so?" Gracie asks haughtily before adding, "I heard that after you went out with him, he ghosted you, and then you found him washed up on shore a few weeks ago."

"And I heard he stayed with you while recovering from his surfing accident and you two have been seen around the island out to dinner and walking on the beach," Liz adds with a conspiratorial smile.

I point at each of them. “How did you find any of this out?”

Each of them pinches their lips closed.

I scan them with narrowed eyes before choosing Emma as my victim. “Emma, how did you learn about my and Rhett’s past relationship?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

Her eyes go round, and she looks like a deer caught in the headlights. She glances at each of the other girls, who give her a look that says to keep their source a secret. But as I expected, she caves.

“My mom heard from Janice who overheard Mrs. Woodhouse talking to Dr. Woodhouse at the grocery store about how Rhett was staying with you while he recovered from his accident.” She looks genuinely upset with herself. “It’s been making its way around town.”

“Of course, it has,” I mumble. “Just so you know, he only stayed with me one night. And Crew was there too.”

They all stare at me, appearing unconvinced, but Olivia arrives with the best timing, and she distracts them as she comes down the aisle.

“Miss Olivia!” the girls all shout and then storm to the aisle, where my sister holds her arms wide open. Each girl hugs her.

“How was your honeymoon?” Emma asks.

My sister shares about her and West’s trip to Paris, and we all settle back in our seats.

“Sorry I’m late,” Olivia whispers to me. “West and I...” she trails off, her cheeks turning pink.

“You’re not late. You’re just not as early as you usually are,” I respond. Looking over her, nothing seems out of place. But there’s a glow about her that tells me exactly

why she's later than usual. I smirk at her.

She smooths back her hair. I wiggle my eyebrows, and she rolls her eyes.

“Olivia and Weston, sitting in a penthouse...”

“Stop!” Olivia whisper-yells, making the group of girls turn to face us.

I bite my tongue as the desire to continue singing the obnoxious song from our childhood overwhelms me. It's nice having my sister back. She's always been my safe space. The person I know I can count on to not just be there for me but be real with me and stand beside me as I face the consequences of my choices—good or bad. I try to be the same for her.

Olivia's mouth pops open as she turns to face the stage. Then she smacks my arm and points. “Since when does Rhett play in the church band?”

“What?” I ask. My chest tightens and I rub the tender spot. I've successfully avoided Rhett at all costs. Sure, I see him in the pews at church, but I dodge him any way I can.

This is no how I wanted to face him—with him playing the guitar, giving me no chance of ignoring him. RJ Hemlock—now known as Rhett—captured my teenage heart through song. I don't know how my battered grown-up heart can handle hearing him play up close and live after knowing him so personally.

“I had no idea.” My voice is barely audible above the music.

Rhett starts strumming the guitar. He sounds even better than I remember. There's more to his playing, more to his music. It's a tune I've never heard before but is absolutely beautiful.

“He’s incredible!” Olivia whisper-shouts.

“That’s not what I need to hear right now,” I say, only mildly joking. Words from a song I wrote long ago play in my mind to the rhythm of his guitar. They’re a perfect match. Rhett’s eyes lock with mine and my breath hitches.

Before I can dwell on it, Olivia says, “Sorry, sis, but it’s a fact. I refused to admit it when we were younger, but despite the grunge sound of Phantom Echoes, RJ’s talent is undeniable.”

Her words bring me back to the present. I blow out a frustrated breath. “Right. RJ, not Rhett.”

A few of my girls rustle around and whisper to each other.

Olivia reaches over and grabs my hand, giving it a little squeeze. “I know it’s frustrating, but this too will pass. Give it to Jesus. He has a plan.”

It’s something I shouldn’t need to be reminded of. But the sentiment is the comfort my heart needs.

“I’m worried about you,” she says.

“I’m going to be okay.” I’m still a complete dumpster fire, but life is moving on, and in time, I’ll figure out what to do about Rhett. But first, I need to focus on getting back to Jesus. My relationship with Jesus is more important than anything or anyone else. Jesus chose me. I am His.

Finally, I understand why I haven’t been able to comprehend anything I’ve read: I’ve been too focused on myself and my woes, consumed by anger and hurt to understand the message God has written in His word. A conviction like I’ve never felt before hits

me, and I make it my mission to focus on my girls and the lesson today, doing my best to ignore the talented man on stage.

As if she can sense my turmoil, Olivia leans over and whispers, “You know I’m here if you need me.”

“Just pray for me,” I respond.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

“Always,” she says before squeezing my hand one more time and letting go.

The continued soft melody of Rhett’s acoustic guitar plays over the speakers and switches to a song I know. Lobby dwellers filter into the sanctuary at the cue. If Rhett is permanently taking over the guitar, youth group will never be the same. I’ll need to pray extra hard that my focus will be on Jesus, the message, and ministering to my girls. No matter what happens with Rhett, Jesus needs to forever be my number one everything.

EIGHTEEN

DANA

The following week, Rhett is on stage again, playing the guitar like it’s exactly what God created him to do. I successfully avoided him in public since last Sunday. Earlier this week I saw him walking down the sidewalk with Mrs. Woodhouse carrying a few bags of her groceries. Before they could see me I ducked out of sight, hiding behind a raised flower bed.

Something needs to change because I can’t keep walking on eggshells at church and ducking behind shrubs in public just to avoid an ex. It’s exhausting to live in what feels like a constant state of flight. Speaking of exes, I ran into bachelor number one at the grocery store with his new wife. Because why wouldn’t I?

I smiled and gave an awkward wave, and they completely ignored me. It was yet another reminder of how I never seem to be enough.

Gracie gasps, successfully lifting me out of my downward spiral. One of the senior girls in our row mutters something to my tenth-graders and points at Rhett.

After the senior slinks back to her seat, Gracie turns to face me. “Is that true?”

“Is what true?” I ask.

“Rhett is also RJ Hemlock?” Apparently, the word about Rhett got around fast after last week.

When Rhett looks up, our eyes connect and my breath hitches. “Yes,” I whisper.

“You dated a rockstar!” Liz exclaims. “You’re obviously still smitten with him.”

I tear my gaze away from Rhett.

“No. What Rhett and I had was temporary. He lied to me about who he was, and I don’t know if we can ever get past that,” I say sternly. Unease slides into my belly when I catch Emma’s look of judgmental curiosity.

“Oh,” is all Liz says in response.

The music turns into a complicated, fast tempo, and I focus back to the man on stage. I assumed the time away from him would help my bruised heart recover and that I would get over him. But that was a stupid assumption because I will never get over Rhett Stryker.

I also stupidly thought that after his first week on stage, I’d get over the excitement of hearing him live. But I was wrong. Listening to him again tonight only makes my heart ache for him more.

Rhett stares directly at me and smiles. I do my best to remain expressionless.

“So he hurt you?” Liz asks as if she needs to know more of the story.

I clench my jaw before answering. “Yeah. He broke my trust.”

“And you don’t think you’ll ever get over it?” she asks.

For a few seconds, I’m silent in contemplation. This is not something I want to discuss with anyone, especially not a group of impressionable teenage girls. But I also don’t want to lie, so I finally answer. “I want to.”

Liz nods in understanding and faces forward. When I catch Emma’s eye, she gives me an indiscernible look.

Someone ruffles my hair from behind, and I turn to scold one of my girls but meet Crew’s mischievous smile instead.

He quickly glances to the stage, then back to me. “You okay?” he mouths. Crew was on duty last week and had to miss youth group. Sunday was our original guitarist’s last service, and I decided not to tell Crew about Rhett joining the church band in stupid hopes that it was a one-time thing.

I shrug. “I’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” He doesn’t look convinced, but I’m grateful he doesn’t push me anymore on it.

The rest of the band comes out on stage and starts singing. I do my best to focus on the lyrics and not the talented man playing the guitar but find my gaze constantly drifting back to Rhett. His eyes are closed, and he’s wholly consumed in singing his

praises to our Savior. Someone sneaks out and puts a microphone in front of him, and his rich, baritone voice takes center stage. Chills break across my arms. His voice is incredible, but the sincerity shining in every word he sings sends a warmth through me. I look across the aisle at Crew, who looks...proud. Surprisingly so.

Rhett's eyes pop open, but he keeps singing as if he just realized it's been his voice filling the sanctuary. Sure, most of the youth group is singing along with him, but Rhett has a voice that refuses to be ignored. At least by me.

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

We sing a few more songs before Dillon takes the stage and delivers his message on forgiveness. Each verse he reads is like a bolt of conviction hitting me at the center of my heart. He ends in a prayer that has me fighting back tears, knowing I need to let go of the past.

We're dismissed into our small groups, and a herd of teenage girls swarms around me and pushes me to our room.

"No. You don't understand. I will never forgive her," I'm shocked to hear Emma say as we all filter into the room.

"What she did was wrong, and you have every right to be upset, but not forgiving her isn't going to help you. Or make her feel any worse than she already does," Gracie says, giving Emma a gentle look as she takes her seat on the couch.

Emma rolls her eyes at Gracie and crosses her arms over her chest. She drops onto the couch, leaving several spaces between them.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Emma gives me a dirty look, and I raise an eyebrow. "Sass and attitude aren't going to deter me."

Her shoulders visibly relax and her arms fall to her sides. She swallows, and I can see moisture at the corners of her eyes.

"Millie told Jax that I had a crush on him. After I swore her to secrecy."

I grimace. Yeah, definitely a harsh betrayal. “And what happened with Jax?”

Emma hangs her head. “He told her that he can only see us as friends.”

“That’s hard.” Olivia walks over and sits beside Emma, touching her shoulder. “I know it hurts now, but another guy will come around and make you forget all about Jax.”

Emma shakes her head. “I don’t think so.” She looks up at Olivia. “I’m in love with him.”

I give my sister a lot of credit for not laughing or even cracking a smile. Emma can be quite a fickle drama queen. Only a few weeks ago, she was gushing over a senior boy she had study hall with that was definitely not named Jax.

Olivia and I both know how it feels to have your heart broken as a teenager. The emotions are valid and powerful. But those feelings quickly fade, and as adults, we can look back at what we experienced and almost laugh at how much something like an unrequited crush at fifteen hurts. But we survive, and those feelings fade away. I can’t explain that to a fifteen-year-old living in those moments, though.

“We need to forgive,” I say, feeling hypocritical.

“Why?” Emma snaps.

“Because Jesus set the example and forgave us for all of our sins. Even the ones that break His heart.”

“Have you forgiven Rhett for lying to you about who he used to be?” Emma asks, pushing me to acknowledge the truth I’ve fought so hard to ignore. This is why I need to be careful with what I say around these girls. They don’t miss a thing.

I stare at nothing in particular, unblinking. One thing I promised them from the get-go was to always be honest. That even in the hard things, I would be open with them. I have no excuse for changing that now. "It's something I'm working on." I turn my gaze back to Emma.

She gives me a haughty smile. "I guess it's fair for me to say that forgiving Millie is something I'm working on too."

I sigh and close my eyes for the briefest moment. At least it's a start.

Needing to get this derailed freight train back on track, I ask Madi to open us in prayer.

She was the most nervous about praying when I first led these girls. Long pauses and stutters hindered her from being able to talk to God openly in front of other people. But now she's confident and bold in her prayers, a prayer warrior not just at church but at school. From what the other girls tell me, Madi is the one at their lunch table who prays over the food despite the snide remarks and snickers from their classmates.

Spending time with these girls is exactly what I need and I'm grateful my heart has softened marginally this past week so I can really embrace this time with them. Madi sends up a heartfelt prayer that gets us ready to dig into the passage Dillon spoke on earlier. The girls each pull out their notebooks and pens, jotting down notes as we go through the passage word by word. Pride fills me as I look around at their well-worn Bibles. Their Bibles are worn from more than just coming to services and small group too. They love Jesus and live for Jesus. These girls are setting an example for me.

Watching Rhett play on stage made me momentarily forget it, but it's the reminder I need. It shows me what life is all about. It's not about the sexy undercover rockstar on stage; it's about Jesus. Just like not everything in this life is about finding "the one" who will maybe make our hearts happy; it's about discovering the One who laid

His life down to save our souls and gives us something no circumstances can ever take away—joy. Listening to their answers and hearing their excitement is both eye-opening and humbling.

As we work through the verses, my heart thirsts more for God's Word. I've been deprived of it for far too long. This is the push I need to not give up when the passages don't make sense. I need to stop looking at it through the lens of what I can get out of it and instead read it as a way to learn more about God. To watch the promises He made come to fruition. To see the prophecies of old come true in God's perfect timing. Without warning, tears brim as my eyes are opened to the reason behind my struggle. Just like when the scales fell from Paul's eyes, the symbolic scales of my selfishness flutter to the ground and reveal the reason for my block.

Was it fair for me to be angry at Rhett for lying to me? Sure, it's justified, but what he did isn't unforgivable, and it's not right for me to believe that for another moment.

Lord, please help me to let this go. Help me to forgive and move past this.

Olivia closes us in prayer before the whole youth group meets back in the sanctuary. When we step through the doors I see that Rhett is back on stage, strumming his guitar and gently humming an old hymn into the microphone.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

“Are you okay?” Olivia asks, reading me like an open book.

I nod and dab my eyes. “Yeah, I think so.”

She leans forward and whispers in my ear. “Are those good tears or bad tears?”

I release a chuckle. “A mixture of both.”

When Olivia sees my smile, the sympathy in her expression turns to relief. “Glad to hear it.”

Once the remaining small groups are back in the sanctuary, Rhett sings the hymn he was humming. His eyes are closed, as if he’s imagining the scene portrayed in the hymn before him. He pours emotion into each note as though he’s become one with the words and melody. Tears fill my eyes. It feels like this song created over a hundred years ago was written for his voice.

The music fades, and our gazes lock when he looks up. I give him a soft but genuine smile before Pastor Dillon closes us in prayer.

After we’re all dismissed, Gracie links her arm in mine and pulls me to the lobby. “Please tell me you and Rhett are getting back together. We’ll be the envy of the youth group if our leader starts dating the guitarist and singer who also happens to be a world-famous rockstar!” She squeals the last part.

“Girls,” Olivia scolds. “What Dana chooses to do when it comes to Rhett is no one’s business but her own.”

“It’s fine, Liv. Honest,” I say.

“Have you forgiven him?” Emma asks. Her expression is hopeful, as if my answer will determine her own decision with Mille.

“Almost,” I answer honestly.

Tonight has convicted me to my core, but there’s still more I need to work through. The desire to pour my heart out to God through a secret creative outlet overwhelms me. An outlet not even my sister knows about.

After saying my goodbyes, I sneak down the hall and slip into the room I pray brings me freedom.

NINETEEN

RHETT

Emotions like I’ve never felt before thrummed through me as I played on stage, only intensified by Dana’s presence in the pews. She loved my music and my voice when I played in Phantom Echoes, but seeing her experience it as I played live gave me a swell of pride. Pride that I quickly felt convicted of. I wasn’t playing for her; I was playing for Christ, and I prayed in those moments that God would help me focus on Him over Dana. Thankfully God quickly answered my prayer. Sure, my gaze kept drifting to her, but I was no longer playing to impress her.

Our time apart has done nothing but increase my desire for her. I see how she interacts with her teenage girls at youth group. How she greets the people at church and gives them her full attention. Even through the windows of the café, I see how she smiles at customers in a way that forces even the grumpiest people to smile in return. Witnessing those small moments only makes me miss her more. But I’ve held

back from approaching her. According to Rosa, Dana still needs time. Even though it's hard, I will continue to respect that.

But whether she wants to admit it or not, what we have will never go away. It all started before I even knew she existed. This all started with Phantom Echoes.

The same Phantom Echoes that fell from fame in a flash. In a single night, my world crumbled. Memories of that night still play on repeat each time I pick up a guitar. They greet me in my dreams, morphing them into the nightmare I experience almost every night. It's been years since I witnessed a woman's death, yet the memory never fades. Even when amnesia clouded everything else, her face, her actions still haunted me. Just like they did while I recorded my song for Oscar. But the more I play—not for myself, but for Christ—the less the memories sting. God is healing me through each of those moments.

My life pre-Christ was a mess. If I didn't come to Christ when I did, I don't know where I'd be. And just like the comfort I received after making Jesus Lord of my life, the stepping out in obedience I took after picking back up a guitar has been a balm to my fractured soul.

Playing and singing felt so good tonight that I can't help but make my way back to the music room to play some more.

Before I reach for the door handle, I hear someone inside singing. A woman's voice fills the room; it's beautiful, but her tone is full of heartbreak. I don't recognize the song and the melody is slightly off, but I could listen to her for hours.

Leaning against the wall, I close my eyes and allow the somehow familiar voice and lyrics to wash over me.

“I know what I do is wrong

I know it's not right

Lord, please take this sin away

and make me feel all right

I never meant to hurt You

when I turned my back away

Page 50

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

I feel like David in the Psalms, Lord;

over and over I beg

Please let me stay

With You, Lord, I'm happy

With You, Lord, I'm strong..."

She sings through it another two times, and I allow myself to soak in the words and melody. Then I silently pray the prayer of her song, asking God to get me through the messes I've made.

The music stops, but absorbed in my prayer, I don't notice until the door opens and someone says, "Rhett? What are you doing here?"

I'm both surprised and not surprised to find that the beautiful voice belongs to Dana.

I stand up straight and look at her up close for the first time in weeks. There are dark circles under her eyes and frizz frames her face, but I still find her breathtaking.

Her eyes shift back and forth and she clears her throat. "Did you...hear me?" Her voice comes out small.

"I didn't mean to intrude. Honest." I put my hands up in a placating gesture. "But when I heard the emotion in your voice and the sincerity of the lyrics, I couldn't walk

away. I had no idea you could sing.”

“I could say the same thing to you,” she spits out, then scrunches her nose as if she didn’t mean to say the words out loud.

Tucking my hands into my pockets, I feign nonchalance. “I deserved that.”

“You did.” She presses her pink lips together and closes her eyes.

My chest cracks open at the sight of her vulnerability. “I’m sorry, Dana. I couldn’t be more sorry. You have no idea?—”

She stops me, raising her hand. “I can’t hear this right now.”

“At least hear me out.” She opens her mouth—to retort, no doubt—but I keep going. “I’m sorry.”

Dana stares at me a long moment, arms crossed tightly across her chest.

Since she doesn’t leave, I take the opportunity to be honest. “I know forgiving me may be impossible, and I wouldn’t hold it against you if you never did. But I at least need you to know the truth, and then you can do with it what you will.” I search her eyes, doing my best to convey the sincerity of what I’m about to say. What I’m about to promise. “I will do everything I can to earn your trust back because you mean more to me than I thought possible. I will never give up on you. I will never give up on us.”

Her mouth pops open. I take a step forward, running my knuckles down her soft cheek. “You mean the world to me, Dana Swann. And I will fight for you and prove to you how serious I am about you. I’m not going anywhere this time. Where you are is where I want to be. You can have all of me. I will give you my heart, handing it to

you piece by piece until there's nothing left."

She stares at me, unblinking, her chest rapidly rising and falling. I send up a genuine prayer of thanks that I at least have some positive effect on her.

A gentle smile lifts her lips until she forces them back into a firm line. "I'll hold you to that, Rhett Stryker."

And just like that, she's made her own promise to me.

It's been four days, and I've still heard nothing from Dana. In an effort to distract myself and focus on another broken relationship, I call Ashley, who answers on the second ring.

"Hey, how are you?" I ask.

She sighs. "I've been better. But I know you're not calling for me. I'm sorry, but Oscar hasn't changed his mind."

"I am calling for you too."

"If you really want to know, I'm not doing well. Oscar has shut me out, and nothing I do or say is getting through to him." She sounds defeated.

"I'm sorry." I've lost count of how many times I've apologized for my failure to be who they needed me to be.

"You need to stop apologizing. The past is in the past, and we can't change a thing."

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

I'm grateful she feels that way, but it will be a while longer before I can forgive myself.

"I can try. But I will never stop hating myself for what I did."

"Grace, Rhett. Give yourself grace. What does it say at the beginning of John? For from His—aka Christ's—fullness we have received grace upon grace."

I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose with my free hand. "You're right."

"Don't let Oscar's unforgiveness hold you back from forgiving yourself. I've forgiven you, but more importantly, God has forgiven you. Now it's time you forgive yourself."

"You've become a wise woman, Ashley Johnson."

Her sharp intake of breath makes me smile.

"Well, thank you. Though I don't feel wise right now."

"Oscar is a stubborn kid. He loves you and you're a great mom. He'll come back for you, no matter how he feels about me." The last part has me choking up. I never thought I'd be so desperate at my age for a teenage boy's approval. But he's a part of me, a blessing that came out of my mess of a life. Even if he never forgives me, I'm grateful that I had the chance to meet him and help him.

"He's going to come around for you too." Ashley says with conviction. "It will just

take more time.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Me too,” she whispers, then clears her throat. “Hey, well, I got to go. I’ll let you know if anything changes.”

“Thank you. Have a good one, Ash.”

“You too.”

The spark of hope I felt before calling Ashley flickers out when we hang up. As much as I want to know if Oscar listened to my song, I can’t bring myself to ask her. She has enough going on.

So to focus on something I can control, I read a few Psalms to get ready for today’s service.

I take my place at the end of my usual pew with Dr. and Mrs. Woodhouse as I wait for the cue to go on stage. Mrs. Woodhouse nudges me with her elbow and tilts her head toward the aisle, where I turn to see Dana walking to her seat. Crew isn’t far behind her. Dana must feel my gaze on her, and she turns and gives me a quick wave. I wave back and mouth “Hi.”

Rosa arrives late, but she waves enthusiastically after sitting beside Dana. Crew turns around and nods in a silent greeting. Then it’s my cue, and I make my way up on stage, picking up the guitar I’ve become so familiar with, and get into the mix of contemporary worship songs and hymns we’ve practiced for today. To keep myself immersed in worship, I close my eyes and sing while standing back from the microphone, not wanting to take over the lyrics and detract from the lead worship singer.

The final song comes to a close, and I open my eyes and look toward Dana. The magnetic, almost electric pull we have crackles despite the people standing between us. She once said we have great chemistry—and we do—but everything about us, about her, is so much more. She gives me a gentle smile, breathing life into the spark of hope that's been simmering in my chest.

I make my way back to my spot with the Woodhouses as Dillon greets the congregation. "Happy Sunday, Saints!"

He runs through the announcements and brings up the upcoming youth girls' retreat. I send up a silent prayer for Dana, who is leading the messages that weekend.

When Pastor Ben takes the stage, I try my hardest to focus on the message but fail miserably. All I can think about is Dana, the son who wants nothing to do with me, and the complete mess I've made of my life. The Holy Spirit nudges me with a promise. There's still hope.

Mrs. Woodhouse hands me a mint, jolting me back to reality.

"Let's go to the Lord in prayer."

I bow my head as the pastor says his prayer and closes the message.

My life is still a mess, but it's in the thick of the mess where God works His good. I know my past mistakes aren't bigger than God, and in time, He'll make everything good and right.

TWENTY

DANA

Tears sprang to my eyes as I read Matthew 6 after youth group and my quick talk with Rhett. Once I got to the verses that say, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses,” I couldn’t hold back the waterworks and I let it all out.

This block I’ve had for weeks both with my own quiet time and preparing for the girl’s youth retreat has been lifted. But it only happened when I finally handed over everything to Jesus.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

In so many of my videos on social media, I remind my audience that God has the final say and that He is ultimately in control. Before this past Wednesday, I was not walking my talk. All of it was lip service. Dillon's message, Emma's admission, pouring out my heart in song, and my small chat with Rhett brought me to my knees. Literally. The moment I stepped on my porch, I dropped to my knees and begged God to forgive me for my unforgiveness and to help me release my grudge to Him. God reminded me that I am not perfect and have been forgiven for so much more than Rhett asked my forgiveness for.

After finally giving it all up, then the floodgates opened. I highlighted verses, scribbled in the margins, and absorbed the words like a sponge. It rejuvenated my starving soul. It was exactly what I needed and had been deprived of.

For days, I've sat, read, and studied. I'd love to record it and share it online since I haven't posted a new video in weeks, but this time in the Word isn't about being a "Christian influencer;" it's about me, Jesus, and using my dry season to create a lesson for the youth weekend. It's going to be different than what I originally planned on sharing, but doesn't God usually work that way? Outside of our expectations?

I took Sunday off to go to church and spend time in fellowship with Rosa, Crew, West, and Olivia. But this morning, I got up and went straight to working on the retreat.

So here I am in my office, doing what I love once more. My coffee sits beside me, and I sit with my legs crossed on my overstuffed office chair while I scribble down what feels like endless notes and ideas for the upcoming girls' retreat. The excitement I originally had when Mrs. Woodhouse asked me to teach is back with even more

intensity. I bite my lip as more and more comes to me, as God allows my mind and heart to absorb His Word and for me to apply it to my life and these lessons.

After another hour, my hands cramp up and I decide to take a break. Just as I stretch my legs out from under me, my doorbell rings.

My breath whooshes out of me the moment I open my door.

“If you’re still upset with me, I’d understand,” Rhett says as he extends a bouquet of sunflowers. “But I can’t go another day without seeing you and talking to you.”

I cross my arms over my chest, a pathetic attempt at protecting my heart. Yes, I have forgiven Rhett, but my emotions are still raw. I’ve remained silent, and he’s continued to give me the space I asked for. I needed the last few days of study, reflection, and prayer to heal not just from Rhett’s lies but from the grudge that I held onto with a vice-like grip.

I’ve prayed that God would show me when it was time to move forward with Rhett and He would allow me to be vulnerable with Rhett again. Something stirs inside of me, telling me that the time is now.

“Hey,” I say. “It’s a bit early to be groveling, don’t you think?”

Rhett closes his eyes before he can see my smile. The pretty bouquet of flowers falls to his side but is still held firmly in his grip.

“I’m sorry,” he says in a whisper. He hangs his head but lifts the sunflowers toward me.

This time, I take them. “Thanks. I’ll be right back.” With that, I go into my house, fill a vase with water, and set the bouquet on my kitchen table.

Rhett remains at the entrance, as if he's afraid to enter without being invited.

"Oh, you're still here?" I ask nonchalantly as I head back to the door and lean against the frame. I fight back a smile.

His smirk is roguish and unfairly attractive as he looks at me, seeing right through my act. "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

"Who said I wanted to get rid of you?"

He lifts both dark eyebrows. "If you not inviting me in was any indication..."

I step out on the porch and close the door behind me.

There's no more teasing glint in Rhett's eyes. "I told you that I'd never give up on us. But that's not true."

My heart sinks. This felt like a really solid step in the right direction. Maybe I wore out my chances and he's given up on me, and he's giving me the flowers as a goodbye. It wouldn't be the first time a man gave up on me.

He must read my expression because he quickly explains. "I don't want to force you into anything you don't want." He pauses, then carefully adds, "Or into something you're not ready for."

"And what do you think I may not be ready for?"

His dark eyes bore into mine. "The plans I want for us are not short term. I'm serious about you. More serious than I've ever been about anyone else. But you're twenty-four and maybe you don't want to settle down yet. If that's the case, and you still want me, I'll wait for you."

My belly fills with butterflies, and I place a hand on my stomach to both calm them and ground me.

His Adam's apple bobs and he closes his eyes. When he reopens them, there's a vulnerability in them I've never seen before. "I was an idiot to not say goodbye and an idiot for not being honest about who I am...or was. If I could turn back time, I'd have told you from the start. I never would have left without explanation. You would have known exactly why I was leaving but would have been confident that I'd come back to you the moment I could."

I knew he was sorry before, and this not only confirms it but it also tells me he wants more with me. More than bachelors one through three post ghosting-Rhett did. It didn't work out with them because this whole time it's been Rhett. I just needed to remain patient and trust that God had me and my future securely in His hands.

A gentle breeze sweeps through my porch, bringing hints of salt and sandalwood with it, rustling Rhett's hair. He runs his hands through it and turns away from me but not before I see the look of uncertainty on his face.

He walks over to the side of the porch, planting his hands on the railing, then says, "The first time I met you it was like taking a deep breath of fresh air after being confined in an oxygen-free cell of my own making. You were light and sweet with just the right kick of sass. In those first few moments, I knew you were someone special." His back muscles tense, and I have to fight the urge to go and wrap my arms around him.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

“I felt the same way,” I say in a gentle whisper. He’s quiet for a few beats, and I wonder if he heard me. But when he turns around, there’s a blazing intensity in his eyes. The same one I noticed the moment before he kissed me. My insides warm at the memory.

“I’m sorry I kept my past identity from you. Every relationship I had before you was superficial. The women only chose me because of my fame.” His voice is deeper than I’ve ever heard it.

Tears spring unbidden to my eyes and I nod. “I can understand that. And sure, I crushed on RJ Hemlock as a teen from the moment I first heard his voice and watched him perform on TV. But I fell for Rhett the moment I laid eyes on him.” I can’t help my half smile. “I couldn’t help but fall hard for you.”

His lips turn down and he shakes his head. “You were a teenager when I was at the peak of my career. Don’t make me feel ancient. I don’t want my age to be another thing that should keep me away from you.”

I give him a sad smile. “Don’t let it.”

“Dana,” he says, his voice pained. “I don’t deserve you and I shouldn’t keep pursuing you.”

I grit my teeth, frustration quickly replacing the hope of what we could be. “Why would you say that?”

He looks away from me. “Because my heavy baggage will only drag you down.”

Angry tears spring to my eyes. “So, what are you saying? After all of this”—I wave my hands around—“this groveling and flowers and everything, you’re saying you don’t want me?”

His nostrils flare, and before I know what’s happening, he’s crossed the distance between us. He grips the top of the door frame and crowds my space, not hiding the longing in his eyes.

“You’re misunderstanding me.” He shakes his head. “What I’m saying is that despite not deserving you, I am far too selfish to let you slip through my fingers again. If you’ll have me, I’ll hold onto you with everything I have. I promise that you will never doubt my love or devotion.” He releases his hold on the doorframe, cupping my face with both of his big, calloused hands. “Whether you choose me or not, I am yours. Until my final breath.”

My chest rises and falls with his declaration. “And I’m all yours.”

His eyes search mine, then without warning, his right hand slides up to the back of my head, putting a barrier between the door and my skull. He presses his forehead against mine.

“You have no idea what a relief it is to hear you say that. Because without you...” Then his mouth is on mine, and he thoroughly shows me exactly what I’d be missing without him. I melt into him like soft butter melting on a hot pancake. It feels so good being in his arms, being kissed...being cherished by him.

I don’t know how much time passes as we kiss. His hands roam down to my lower back, and he drops them to my hips and gives me a gentle squeeze. He pulls away just enough to kiss the corner of my lips, then my jaw. His movements are fluid and precise, as if he can read what I want from him as his hands cup my face once more and he presses a lingering, tender kiss to my forehead.

He pulls away and stares down at me, leaving me beyond dazed. My eyes aren't focused on anything besides Rhett. I slide my hands up to his shoulders, raising on my tiptoes to initiate another kiss. Rhett only allows a peck, so I lower off my toes with a pout.

“Oh, Little Siren, don't worry, there will be much more of that. And I hate to break this moment, but there's more I need to tell you. I want to lay everything out in the open before we continue. No more secrets.”

Reality crashes over me. “There's more you've hidden from me?” I can't mask the tremor in my voice.

He retreats a step and runs his hands through his hair. “It's not something many people know about. Only the people who were there when it happened.”

“When what happened?” I ask.

He motions for us to sit on the hanging swing. I put a little space between us, but Rhett doesn't allow it. He grabs my legs and rests them over his thighs.

“The last concert Phantom Echoes ever played, a woman died. And it was my fault.”

He's silent for a few beats, and all the pieces of the puzzle click into place. “The woman who died backstage,” I say. He nods in confirmation. “But she committed suicide,” I argue. “That's not your fault.” With exception of the breaking news right after it happened, the tragedy was kept under wraps. Phantom Echoes canceled all future concerts and might as well have dropped off the face of the earth.

“She's the one who was in your nightmare, wasn't she?” I ask, but he doesn't need to say anything for me to know the answer. I knew that nightmare had to be awful for him to have the reaction he did. That was the memory that refused to give up when

everything else—except his feelings for me—was swept away by amnesia.

He nods solemnly, then looks away. “She was in my dressing room when she did it. I watched her pull the trigger. I couldn’t stop her no matter how hard I tried. But I’m the reason she’s dead.”

“You can’t blame yourself for the actions of an unhinged fan.”

“She was going to shoot me. I should be the one who’s dead. Instead, she turned the gun on herself.” He goes silent for a long moment, and I can tell he’s gathering his thoughts. Rhett inhales a ragged breath and releases it. “I flirted with her, then rejected her, and my rejection brought on her death.”

I can’t hold back my gasp. His guilt rips my heart open. Without thought, I slide my way completely on his lap and wrap my arms firmly around him. The swing rocks forward and back, the motion soothing. Rhett doesn’t hug me back, but he doesn’t push me away either.

“It’s another reason why I know I don’t deserve you,” he whispers. As if disregarding his statement, he wraps his arms around me in a tight embrace.

RJ was known as the heartthrob of Phantom Echoes. He was the one women threw themselves at. According to the few articles I read about him in the tabloids, he took advantage of that attention. He’s probably been with so many women that it’s a number I don’t ever want to know. For his entire time in the band, he could have any woman he wanted. Something that’s mostly likely still true. I close my eyes, trying to rein in those thoughts because we’re not talking about any of those other women; we’re talking about a woman who took her own life in front of Rhett.

“So she was a groupie?”

He nods, and my stomach twists into a painful knot.

As if he can read my thoughts, he says, “Please know I am not that same man. This is why I wanted you to know me as Rhett, not RJ. You liked me for me and not who I portrayed myself to be. I’m sorry I lied to you, I really am. But I need you to know why I kept my identity to myself the first time. My life was so messy as RJ.” He releases a humorless laugh. “I wanted to pretend like he no longer existed. But those consequences still caught up to me.”

I know he’s referring to his son. “A child isn’t a consequence,” I say with conviction.

“You’re right, he’s not. But because of who I was, I never got to know him. Ashley tried reaching out when she found out she was pregnant. I ignored her calls, and she eventually gave up. I don’t blame her.”

“But you know him now.”

“Not like I’d like to. And he hates me.”

I rest my head on his chest. “I doubt that. He’s probably just lost and confused.”

“I know the feeling,” Rhett mumbles.

“Me too,” I whisper.

We sit like that for a long while, allowing the day's warmth to cocoon us. I silently pray, thanking God for His goodness and how He brings beauty from ashes. I ask that He'd remove the weight of Rhett's past from his shoulders and that God would bring Rhett out of his ashes.

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light," I quote Matthew 11:28-30 out loud.

Rhett releases a gentle laugh. "I needed that."

"It's one I memorized years ago. After my first love broke my heart."

He tightens his grip on me. "I hate that you experienced so many heartbreaks and that I was one of them. Never again. Your heart is safe with me."

I pull back and stare into his eyes. Seeing nothing but sincerity, I say, "I trust you."

"Good." He leans forward and presses a kiss to my nose.

I rest my head on his chest and enjoy just being here with him and the feel of his black T-shirt, soft against my skin. The waves crashing against the shore provide the perfect backdrop. Rhett's spiced cologne mixes with the salty ocean air, and I wish I could bottle it up and inhale it when I crave the peace I feel in this moment.

I'm so comfortable that I start to fall asleep. Just as I doze off, Crew's voice breaks through my dreamlike state. "What's going on here?"

I practically jump off Rhett's lap.

Crew's chest glistens with sweat, and he pulls his sunglasses away from his eyes. He's apparently been on a long run; he doesn't usually travel this far down the shore.

"Get out of here," Crew grits out, staring down Rhett.

"I know what you're trying to do, and I love you for it, but I'm okay," I say, walking to the steps.

Crew's expression softens. "You are?"

"Grudges are a cancer, and the only cure is forgiveness." Suddenly, I realize that's something I need to relay to Gracie the next time I see her.

"You've forgiven him? For everything?" Crew asks.

My answer is immediate, but it's not mechanical—it's honest. "If Jesus forgave me for all of my sins, past, present, and future, I think the least I can do is forgive those who've wronged me."

Crew casually slides his sunglasses back over his eyes and addresses Rhett. "Well, if Dana has forgiven you, then I guess we're cool too."

Rhett gives me a cautious look. I shrug.

"If you're free tonight, West and I are going to shoot pool at Reggie's."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

It's an invite I never expected Crew to extend. But I'm grateful for it all the same.

"Yeah, that sounds like fun," Rhett answers.

And just like that, the man of my dreams and my best friend are forgetting the past and moving forward.

TWENTY ONE

RHETT

Crew, West, and I arrived at the pool hall a few minutes ago. West is looking for an open pool table while Crew and I order wings and three root beers.

We find a booth and West sits with us after reserving a pool table. Crew and West talk back and forth with no lull in their conversation. It's nothing I have any input in, so I stay quiet. Once the waitress brings us our order and West prays over our meal, their attention turns to me.

"So what are your intentions with Dana?" West asks just as I take my first sip of root beer. I cough and clear my airway, but it burns going down.

Both men are staring at me expectantly. "I want to marry her."

Crew raises a brow, and West grabs his root beer and takes a swig. He sets it down a little too hard, and the carbonation bubbles up and almost over the bottle.

“Is that how you felt before you ghosted her?” Crew asks.

I scratch the back of my neck and study my untouched plate. To give myself a moment to find a way to answer, I grab a wing from the bucket and dig in. After a few bites, I realize I need to finally answer.

“What I had with her even back then was amazing. But can I confidently say yes, I was in love with her? No. I can’t.” I take another bite.

“But you can say that now? That you’re in love with her? That you choose her?” West asks, accusation lacing his tone.

“Yeah, absolutely,” I answer around a bite of wing, not wanting to wait a second longer. I don’t want to plant a single doubt in either of these men’s minds.

West and Crew look at each other as if they’re trying to gauge the honesty of my response.

My phone rings. I wipe my hands on the napkin and dig it out of my pocket. Ashley’s number flashes on the screen. Something in my gut tells me to answer.

A feeling of foreboding comes over me. “Hello?”

“Hey, is this a bad time?” she asks.

I motion with my head to West and Crew, indicating that I’m going to step outside, and both men nod in acknowledgement.

“Yeah, give me a second. Is everything okay?” I walk toward the exit. “Is Oscar okay?”

“I don’t mean to worry you; I just needed to talk.”

“Okay?” It’s more of a question than encouragement to continue.

“He’s as okay as can be expected, but he’s furious with me,” she says, and I can feel her pain through the phone. “It feels like no matter what I do, it’s the wrong thing.”

I make it outside and walk a few feet away from the door for privacy.

This doesn’t sound like her. “Did something happen?”

She scoffs. “Not really. He’s just become even moodier over the last couple of weeks. Has he reached out to you?”

“No. Did you expect him to?”

She sighs before answering. “Not really, it was just hopeful thinking.” She pauses, and I start to respond when she continues. “Look, I know you have your own life on the island now. But I really wish things could be different. I regret?—”

I know the line of thinking she’s heading down, so I cut her off. “No, you did the right thing. It would have forced him into the spotlight against his will and potentially ruined both of your lives. I was far from father material back then.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

“Things could be so different if you would have known. You’d have a relationship with your son. He’d have a dad to talk to when he gets mad at me.” I can hear the strain in her voice.

“That part is on me. It was wrong of me to ignore your calls. I don’t blame you for giving up.”

She sighs.

“Besides, there’s no guarantee the relationship I’d have with him would be a good one. But I hope we can eventually build a good one.” I run my free hand down my scruff. I’m a different person now; surely, he will realize that at some point. “He hasn’t said anything about wanting to see me again, has he?”

“Not exactly. He did say you left something for him.” She laughs. “He had no idea what a jump drive was, so once I explained how it worked, I grabbed him my old computer and he told me he would listen to it.”

My chest tightens. “Did he?” I glance across the parking lot, looking at the sunset in an attempt to ground myself and calm my racing pulse.

“I don’t know. But what was it?”

Pushing off the wall, I pace back and forth, trying to decide if I should tell her or not. It was something I wrote and recorded just for him. Will it take anything away from it if she knows? Probably not.

“If you don’t want to tell me, you don’t have to,” she says after a long pause.

“I’d just like for it to be something between him and me for right now.”

“I understand,” she says. There’s another long pause before she adds, “I’m worried about him.”

“Me too, but it will be okay. I can come back for a while if you think it would help?”
The mere thought makes my chest squeeze.

She’s quick to answer. “No. I mean, no offense, but he’s struggling to accept you as his dad. I think distance will help.”

That heavy feeling spreads to my gut. The time I spent with them feels pointless when at the end of it, it was clear he wanted nothing to do with me. And apparently still doesn’t.

“Oh,” is all I say.

She releases an exasperated sigh. “I’m sorry. This is all messed up. I shouldn’t have bothered you.”

“Stop,” I say. “I want to know these things. I want to help in any way I can. I missed the first fifteen years of his life. If I can help with the next fifteen, I want to. He doesn’t want anything to do with me, but I still want to know what’s going on with my kid. So if there’s problems, please tell me. I’ll be there as soon as I can if you need me.”

“Thanks, Rhett, we’re fine right now. I just needed someone to talk to. Thanks for being there.”

“Of course.”

I hang up, and when I turn around, I find Crew right behind me, his arms crossed over his chest. I’m sure Dana has told him by now that I have a son. But I don’t know how much of this conversation he heard or how he’ll interpret it.

“That was my kid’s mom.”

“I figured. How old is he?”

“Sixteen.”

“Fun age,” he says dryly.

“Attitude for days. Hates his dad.”

“He’s probably just hurting. You’re good at that, aren’t you? Hurting people.”

Tucking my phone in my pocket, I say, “Unfortunately, I am. I’m a messed up man with a screwed up past that will haunt me for the rest of my life. I’ve made countless mistakes over the years, and I’ve been trying to make up for those mistakes. Especially with my kid.”

“You leaving again? Without saying goodbye?”

“Look, I don’t know what all you heard from that conversation, but my son wants nothing to do with me. So I’m not going to just show up at his door. I know Dana is your cousin and a close friend of yours so you’re protective of her, but I am not going to make the same mistake I made with her last time. If something happens and I need to go back to Oscar and Ashley, I’ll let Dana know.” The look on his face has me bristling, so I take a step forward. “And I’ll make sure she knows I’ll be coming

back.”

A smile tilts up one side of his lips. For the first time since meeting him, he gives me a genuine smile. “Good. Now get back in there so I can kick your butt at pool.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

Which is exactly what happens. I spend the next few hours getting completely destroyed at pool by a firefighter and a billionaire. As we play, we chat and I talk about my time with Dr. and Mrs. Woodhouse.

“So you need a new place to stay?” West asks as he sinks the eight ball for the third time in a row, sealing his own win.

“I mean, I’d like to have my own place again,” I answer honestly without trying to show my desperation. The Woodhouses have been amazing, and I’m grateful for all they’ve done for me. But as an adult man, I’d like to have my privacy. Unfortunately for me, unoccupied houses and apartments are hard to come by on Amber Island.

“I can set you up in a bungalow,” West says, then takes a swig of his root beer.

Shaking my head, I say, “You really don’t have to do that. I have the funds to get another place?—”

“It will be for the interim. Not permanent. That way, you don’t need to keep staying with the Woodhouses while you’re looking for a new place.”

It’s strange to feel sad about leaving a man and woman I’ve only been living with for a few weeks. Nancy has become like a second mom to me, so leaving there will be bittersweet. But I am ready to have my own place again.

“You really don’t have to do that. It’d be way more than I deserve,” I say.

“Oh, I’m aware,” West responds. His expression is unreadable.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry I left you high and dry.” I scratch the back of my neck.

West is quiet for a beat, studying me. “You abandoned us so you could take care of your kid.” West extends his hand, and I shake it. He pulls it back and chalks his cue. “I wish you would have told me that at the time, but I can’t hold that against you. What you did was selfless.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Thanks, man.” I pick up my bottle and lift it for a cheers. Crew and West both clink their bottles against mine.

“Water under the bridge,” West says. “So how about that bungalow?”

“If you really don’t mind, I’d appreciate that,” I find myself agreeing as I re-rack the balls.

West shrugs. “It’s been sitting around empty for a while. It’d be free maintenance for me.” He quirks a smile before breaking the balls and sinking two stripes.

TWENTY TWO

RHETT

I look around, taking in my bedroom at the Woodhouse home one last time. It’s simple but cozy. Soft yellow walls match the yellow and blue quilt covering the double bed. The house always smells of comfort food, something I know I’ll miss at my own place.

Mrs. Woodhouse stands at the door looking at me sadly. “I meant it when I said you were welcome here for as long as you need,” she says as she clutches my final unpacked shirt against her chest. She insisted on helping me pack my very few

belongings despite everything fitting in a single suitcase and my guitar case. The tears that slide down her wrinkled cheeks crack open the piece of me this woman's selfless love has taken hold of.

"Please don't cry. I'll still be on the island, just not right down the hall."

"I know," she says with a snuffle. "It's been a true pleasure to have you here." She gives me a sad smile. "You're the son of my heart. The son I always wanted but God in His infinite wisdom decided not to give me."

She would have made an incredible mother, but God's plans aren't always our plans.

"That's a very humbling thought." It's hard not to get choked up. "I will never be able to pay you guys back for all you did for me." Nancy as well as Dr. Woodhouse, have been the landing place I needed during these struggles. There's not a doubt in my mind this was also God working for my good. My mom may no longer be on this earth, but God gave me Nancy to help me navigate through these difficult and unexpected times.

Nancy gently smacks my shoulder. "We don't want paid back. We want you to be happy...to find God's call for your life and the wife He's handpicked for you."

"Well, you're not getting rid of me. I'll be over here for dinner as frequently as you'll have me."

She visibly relaxes and hands over my last shirt. This time, her smile isn't sad. "That's good to hear. It makes letting you leave just a tiny bit easier."

When I arrive at my new home, Dana, West, Olivia, and Rosa are all standing on the small covered porch. I walked past this bungalow a hundred times when I worked here, but knowing it's my new home—at least temporarily—makes me look at it in a

whole new light.

Rosa sits on one of the two rocking chairs, giving me a warm smile. Olivia sits in the other rocker, her husband—and my old boss—West stands behind her with his hand on her shoulder.

“Welcome home!” Rosa says, standing and greeting me with a hug.

“Thanks,” I mumble into her hair.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

When I look over to West, he slips off his stoic mask and smiles. “I hope you find your amenities tolerable.”

“I appreciate this more than I can say.” I reach forward and shake his hand.

Olivia says, “I think you’ll like it here.”

“I hope you can make this your home soon. We’ll leave you all to get settled.” West looks down at his wife with an expression very clearly just for her and she flushes.

“You two have fun!” Dana smirks. She links arms with Rosa and sings her way into the bungalow as I follow behind.

It’s only slightly larger than my 800-square-foot home, but my bedroom is its own room, which is an upgrade from my studio-style hut. The small kitchen has just enough space for a stove, miniature refrigerator, sink, and coffee pot. Thankfully, the whole home is already furnished, another nod to West’s generosity despite our rocky past.

“It’s cute,” Dana says, turning in a slow circle and taking it all in.

I walk over to stand beside her. “Please never refer to anything about me as cute. It detracts from my masculine energy.”

Dana rolls her eyes, but Rosa is the one to say, “Masculine energy is hogwash. You’re as man as you allow yourself to be. No one can emasculate you without your approval.” A slow smile stretches across her lips. “But Dana is right; this place is

cute.”

The three of us let out a laugh, and it feels good. For weeks, I’ve felt nothing but the weight of my past on my shoulders, and before that, the frustration of having no memories at all. But being here with Dana and Rosa, the weight shifts ever so slightly, allowing me this moment to breathe and laugh and smile.

TWENTY THREE

DANA

I haven’t slept in over thirty-six hours. My eyes burn from staring at my computer screen for the last thirty of those hours. As I look out at the group of teenage girls, any exhaustion flees, and I’m invigorated more than that time I drank a triple shot of espresso. The doors close, and Mrs. Woodhouse gives me the nod to go ahead. I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face and the tears that spring to my eyes. Those tears take away the burning in my dry eyes, and I take it as a tiny God-wink that He’s with me, providing for even my silliest needs. I turn my face and swipe the teardrops away.

The sanctuary has been transformed into fellowship central. Circular tables are sprinkled throughout the large room, eight chairs around each one. Every table is full. For the millionth time in my life, I am floored by how amazing Jesus is. All the girls chose to be here to learn how to study God’s Word this weekend.

Lord, thank you for getting me here. Thank you for this opportunity. Let my words be Yours and not mine. I am Yourwilling vessel; fill me with Your Spirit so my cup overflows and pours into these young women this weekend. Amen.

Another brief wave of tears flows from my eyes, and I grab a tissue from the box on the podium to dab them.

After switching on my headset, I say, “Sorry, this is all so beautifully overwhelming. Seeing all you young women sitting in this sanctuary smiling up at me is surreal. So many of you love like Jesus, and it is truly encouraging to my heart. It’s a blessing to know you and to be here. So thank you for having me.”

My group of girls shouts from their seats, “We love you, Miss Dana!”

Tears spring to my eyes. “Stop it! I’m going to cry again!” I wipe them away but then whisper into the mic, “I love you girls too.”

Then it’s time to get to business. I have hours of material ready to share and a pep in my spirit that I’ve never experienced before as I dive into the lesson surrounding the hard truth I’ve been personally going through over the last several weeks: the need for forgiveness.

When Nancy asked me to be the teacher for this retreat, I felt honored, and after a lot of prayer and encouragement from not only my girls but several other small group leaders, I felt the undeniable urge to say yes. So I did, yet I couldn’t figure out what I was going to teach. Until Rhett. Until I had to come to the end of myself, fall to my knees, and give it to God. Because this is for Him. Not for me. Not even for my girls. But for God’s glory. And my prayer, even when I was unable to write a single word, was that He would be glorified.

I wrap up my current lesson and look out at the group of teens and their leaders, all of them presumably applying what I shared. An indescribable feeling of pride washes over me. But not personal pride, more of a gratefulness that God has chosen me for this opportunity and given me the ability to do it.

Olivia waves me over from our table, and I take my mic off and set it on the podium before heading over. I sit beside her, and she wraps an arm around me, giving me a gentle squeeze.

“You were amazing. Practically glowing up there. I am so proud of you!” She kisses my temple like she used to do when I was little.

We sit with our girls and work through the study method I just taught, and I can practically see the light bulbs go off as we read and study each passage on forgiveness. Emma’s face slowly becomes crestfallen, and I know she realizes the truth: she also needs to forgive.

She turns to me, eyes watery. “Miss Dana, I-I think it’s time I forgive Millie.”

“I think so too.”

“Can I call her?” she asks.

We had the girls turn their phones off so they would focus on the retreat and not the next social media craze. For this situation, I make an exception. Emma pulls her phone from her bag and impatiently taps her foot as it turns on.

Emma places the call and chews on her thumbnail as the phone rings, looking more nervous than I’ve ever seen her. Our group sits and waits with bated breath.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

Millie answers on the fifth ring. “Emma?” The disbelief in her soft voice is clear.

“Yeah, it’s me. I-I...” Emma stutters. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry for being so ugly toward you. It was wrong of me. Even though you shouldn’t?—”

I nudge Emma and give her a stern look. “It’s not about that,” I mouth.

She takes a deep breath. “You apologized, and instead of forgiving you, I’ve held it over you.” A tear slips down her cheek. “And I’m sorry for that.”

“Oh, I forgive you!” Millie cries over the phone. “I’m so sorry I went behind your back. I didn’t do it to hurt you, I was just trying to?—”

“I know,” Emma says. “You were trying to be a good friend and do what I didn’t have the nerve to.”

“Exactly...” Millie trails off, then says, “Aren’t you at the retreat this weekend?”

“Yeah,” Emma answers. “I’m there right now.”

“Oh.” Millie sounds disappointed. “Well, I’ll let you get back to it.”

I grab Emma’s phone. “Would you want to come? It’s not too late. We still have the sleepover, and in the morning, we’ll dig into a new passage.”

“Really?” Millie asks enthusiastically.

“Sure!” Olivia says. “As long as it’s okay with your parents, I’ll come pick you up now.”

Millie shouts, “Mom! Can I go to the retreat at church?”

There’s shuffling on the other end as if her mom is coming into the room with her. “Isn’t that happening right now?” Millie’s mom asks.

“Yeah, but Miss Olivia said she can come get me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ll drive you. I told you that you’d regret not going,” her mom says.

“Mom,” Millie whines exasperatedly. “They can hear everything you’re saying.”

We all laugh.

It doesn’t take long for Millie to arrive but when she does, her smile is broad and I can tell she’s excited to be here.

Emma greets Millie with a bear hug.

“I’m so sorry. I never should have held onto that grudge for so long.”

Tears stream down both girls’ cheeks.

“And I’m sorry for what I did too.”

They both give each other another hug and we pray again, asking for God’s continued guidance through our studies.

The rest of the weekend is a blur of Bible study, activity, bonding, and worship. As I share my passion with these students, I find myself feeling renewed and rejuvenated like never before. It's as if God is refilling me as I pour into these girls.

It's taken a lot of pain, struggle, and heartache to get here. I was spiritually dryer than dry and terrified I wouldn't be able to keep my promise of leading this weekend. But in God's perfect timing, through His unwavering goodness, the lessons came together. By God's amazing grace, we had an incredible weekend.

TWENTY FOUR

DANA

I'm putting the final touches on my hair for church when I hear an unexpected knock. I check my appearance one last time before opening the door.

Rhett stands there in all his black button-down dress shirt glory and wearing jeans that fit him just right. There he is, my literal teenage dream, looking at me with the same adoration I know is reflected in my eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

“Good morning,” he says, his voice deep and thick.

“Good morning,” I reply.

He wraps me in his arms, and I cling to him, struck again at how good it feels to be here with him. Without barriers, lies, or secrets between us.

“Are you ready to go?” he asks when I pull back. “I really shouldn’t be late today.”

“Well this was a bit of a surprise so give me a few moments and I’ll be ready to go.”

Rhett gives me a smile and presses a kiss to my forehead. My heart warms and I close my eyes, sending up another prayer of gratefulness.

I pop back into my house to grab my purse, keys, Bible, and notebook and to slip on my shoes.

When I come back out, Rhett stares at me as if he’s seeing me for the very first time.

“What?” I ask, but don’t wait for his response as I turn and lock my door.

“Every time I see you, you get more beautiful.”

My cheeks heat, but I do my best to own my blush and turn back to face him after confirming that the door is indeed locked. “You don’t need to flatter me.”

He wraps his arms around me and pulls me to him. Staring down into my eyes, he

says, “I’m only speaking the truth, Miss Swann.” His gaze drops to my lips. “My little siren.”

I inhale a sharp breath, and Rhett takes this moment to press a kiss to my lips.

“You are far too tempting,” he says as he pulls back.

The kiss only lasted a second, but it leaves me stunned and I blink up at him. “I could say the same of you.”

We stare at each other for a long moment, a tender look exchanged between us.

“Let’s get you to church. It’s not every day a prior rockstar takes over as worship leader.”

He laces his fingers in mine, and hand in hand, we walk down my front steps to his truck.

Church leadership picked the right man to lead worship. Rhett is perfect for the position which is made even more clear now as I watch him. His energy is palpable. I’ve always thought his voice was incredible, but hearing him up there playing and singing not for himself but for God is more amazing each time.

After the band finishes and welcomes Pastor Ben to the pulpit, Rhett disappears out the stage doors. He then comes in from the back and sits down next to me. He places the Bible and notebook he brought on his lap and takes my hand in his. We’ve spent many evenings reading and studying the Bible together. Studying God’s Word has become as natural to me as breathing and getting to share that with Rhett makes it even more special. When Pastor Ben tells us he’s going to open in prayer, Rhett bows his head and gently squeezes my hand.

Pastor Ben preaches an excellent sermon on grace. As he wraps up, Rhett slips out and heads back to the stage, where he picks up his guitar and strums while we close in prayer.

The next several weeks somehow pass slowly and quickly all at once. Having Rhett in my life is literally my dream come true, and getting to know him more and more strengthens my belief that God has been in this all along. My heart is cautious, but I still believe that Rhett is the one. I believed that to be true from the first week we spent together. Back then, that belief was completely illogical and unrealistic, but now, each day confirms it.

I walk out to my porch with a tray of coffees, cream, and sugar. A majority of my core crew is here with Rhett, Rosa, and Crew. We're missing Olivia, who is deep into editing her newest novel, and West, who is busy with running his exclusive resort.

Right now is a time for us to be together, just existing and enjoying the beauty of friendships and nature.

A gentle breeze chases off the humidity. The sun is high in the sky, making the ocean sparkle like thousands of diamonds. Rhett's sandalwood cologne mixes with the salty ocean air and I thank God again for this life He's given me.

Rhett comes up my porch steps holding his phone at his side. I can't discern the look on his face.

"Did Oscar answer?" I ask Rhett as I place the tray down on the small table.

Rhett shakes his head, his lips pulled into a firm line. "No." He sits down on the wicker sofa.

Rosa pats his shoulder. "He'll come around. Right now, Oscar is too blinded by

confusion to see the truth—that you love him.”

My heart squeezes at the dejected look in Rhett’s eyes. I can see the desperation on Rhett’s face and the hurt Oscar inflicts each time he doesn’t answer his phone. It’s been weeks of this.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

“God is in this,” I say, handing Rhett a steaming cup of black coffee.

Rhett thanks me and leans back on the couch. “I know.”

Crew sits across from us in a matching wicker chair, remaining uncharacteristically quiet.

“And what are you thinking?” Rosa asks Crew, stirring in her cream and sugar.

Crew leans forward, resting his forearms on his knees. “I think Oscar is being an idiot.”

Rhett shakes his head. “No, he’s not. I really can’t blame the kid.”

Crew shifts his attention to Rhett. “Yes, you can. You gave him part of one of your organs. You gave up your life here to save his without hesitation. Despite not even knowing he had existed minutes before you heard about his diagnosis, you knew you’d do anything to help save him. He’s being a little turd.” Crew muttersturd under his breath.

My mouth drops and my eyes go wide. Crew standing up for Rhett? Unheard of. He may have told Rhett that they were cool, but it didn’t mean they immediately became best friends. Crew has been cautious with Rhett, knowing his track record wasn’t the best. Slowly, his walls have come down, but this turn of events is completely unexpected.

“He’s not.” Rhett smirks. “I missed so much of his life. I’d probably act even worse if

I was in his shoes.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” I interject. “You’d be grateful you had a dad who wanted to be a part of your life and would make that sort of sacrifice.” I take the spot next to Rhett after Rosa scoots to make room for me.

He wraps an arm around my shoulders and kisses my temple. “I’m glad you think so highly of me. But I was just like Oscar when I was his age.” Rhett is silent for a long pause, and almost as if we all know he needs a moment to think, the rest of us give him the time he needs. After apparently gathering his thoughts, he says, “I wrote him a song, recorded it, and left it on their porch.”

“That’s so sweet,” Rosa says.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he threw it away,” Rhett adds.

“Doubtful. More likely he’ll sell it off to the highest bidder,” Crew says.

I roll my eyes. “Okay, Mr. Optimism.”

Crew shrugs. “That’s what I’d do if I was Oscar.”

“He’s not going to do that,” I say, giving Crew a dirty look. He shrugs. “Oscar will come around,” I tell Rhett. Praying I sound more confident than I feel...and that I’m right.

TWENTY FIVE

RHETT

“I know I don’t deserve any of the good things I have in my life right now. But Lord,

I am begging You for another shot with my son. Please soften Oscar's heart toward me." I say the prayer out loud as I sit on the back porch of my temporary home, strumming my acoustic guitar.

Every time I think about how badly I've messed up my life, I think of Dana and remember the beauty she floods my world with each day. I remember the forgiveness she extended to me and thank God for the relationship we've built with Christ at its center. I haven't had a single doubt that Dana will one day be my wife, but the one thing holding me back from proposing to Dana is Oscar. Something tells me that things need to be right with my son before I pop the question.

The ring has been burning a hole in my pocket for the last few weeks. But every time I start to drop to one knee, something happens.

The first time I tried to propose, we were on the beach, and just before my knee touched the ground, I was attacked by a seagull. The next time was on the boardwalk, where I was run down by a granny in a wheelchair race. The last time was under the stars on the plot of land she helped me choose for where my new home will soon be built. We were standing on a patch of gravel, and when I went to get down on one knee as Dana gazed at the stars, I tripped on my shoelace and drove my knee into the stones. After that, I decided it was time to give it a rest. All of that made it clear that I need to figure things out with Oscar before successfully proposing to Dana.

My phone vibrates, and I answer on the first ring.

"Rhett?" It's Ashley, sounding panicked. "I need you."

"Is it Oscar?" I ask.

"Yes," she sobs into the phone.

“What’s happened?” Worst case scenarios flash through my mind at lightning speed. The last one has bile rising in my throat.

“He’s...he’s...” she stutters, then I hear her blow her nose. “He’s in jail.”

Relief washes over me, followed by dread. “What?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

“I can’t believe he’d do it. But he did.” The tone of her voice has my stomach sinking.

Then I go into defense mode. “Does he need an attorney?”

“No, he just needs you.”

I can’t help but feel confused. “Me?”

“Yes. He told the cops it was his dad’s apartment, and they didn’t believe him because they knew it belonged to RJ Hemlock and he didn’t have proof that he’s your son.”

“Wait, slow down. Tell me exactly what happened.”

She blows out a frustrated breath, then tells me Oscar snuck over to my apartment in Chicago and completely destroyed it. When he got caught, he insisted that the owner—me—was his father. No one believed him, and he was arrested for destruction of private property. I kept my apartment so I’d have a place to stay in Oscar’s hometown if he ever decided to forgive me and reconnect.

She breathes out a resigned sigh and says, “We need you.”

“I told you I will always be there for you, Ashley. No matter what.”

“So you’ll come here and set all this straight?”

“Of course. I promise I’ll be there in the late morning, early afternoon at the latest. Don’t stress. I’ll make sure everything is fixed.”

I hear a door slam and feet pounding against my bungalow’s floorboards toward the front door.

“Please do. I’m helpless right now.”

“I know. We’ll get through this,” I say gently. “But I gotta go. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” I hang up and run outside, watching as Dana jumps into her car. I sprint and grab the door as her fingers grip it to close it.

She looks up at me, and I shatter at the look of betrayal in her eyes.

Trying to deescalate the situation, I say, “I didn’t know you were coming tonight.”

“Well, I thought I’d surprise you. But apparently, you found a way to surprise me instead.”

My stomach clenches. “You heard the tail end of a phone conversation.”

“It was enough.”

“No, it wasn’t.” I lean down and take hold of her hands, pulling her gently from the car. I stare down into her eyes, caging her between my arms against her door. “Oscar is in trouble.”

Her expression softens, and I’m reminded of her tender heart. Let’s just hope she’ll also be understanding once she lets me explain. “Is he okay?”

“Yes...no. I don’t know.” I release her, take a step back, and run my hands through

my hair. “Everything is a mess, and it’s all my fault.”

“Tell me what’s going on.” She shuts her door and takes my hand, and I bask in the comfort of her touch.

She follows me inside, and to try and calm myself by focusing on something else for a moment, I offer her some iced tea. We sit on my couch as she sips her tea, and I tell her everything Ashley shared with me on the phone. Dana listens intently with a sad smile on her lips.

“You need to go. I get that. I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions.” She rests her tea on the table, then stands and paces my living room as if needing to move to gather her thoughts. “I was just afraid you were going to sneak off and leave me again.” When she looks at me, there are tears in her eyes.

I shake my head and stand. “No. Not even close.” I step closer until we’re toe to toe. “I will never walk away from you again. I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life, but walking away from you is the one I regret the most.” I slide my arms around her and pull her so close she has to tip her head back to meet my eyes. My voice drops several octaves, a new feeling of possessiveness coming over me. “You’re mine now.” She releases a shaky breath. Slowly, my hand slides up her arm and I cup the side of her gorgeous face. My thumb traces her lower lip. “And I’m all yours.” I lower my face, her lips just out of reach until I whisper, “forever,” and she bridges the space between us, crashing her mouth on mine.

TWENTY SIX

RHETT

The last thing I wanted to do was leave Dana behind. But this isn’t an ideal situation to make introductions between Dana, my son, and my son’s mom.

“RJ Hemlock?” Officer Bishop asks with a scoff after I give him my name.

“That’s right.”

“ID,” he says in a monotone before extending his hand.

I dig out my wallet, slide my driver’s license out, and hand it over to him. For the first time since I stepped up to the desk, the man looks up at me, but then he looks back at my ID. “This says Rhett Stryker.” I try not to roll my eyes like a teenager. “RJ Hemlock was my stage name.” Expecting this issue, I already have the contract to my apartment pulled up on my email and I show it to him. After a few moments of deliberation, he gives me a curt nod and hands my phone back to me.

“Oscar Davis was found trashing your apartment by the security guard at your complex. When he was placed under arrest, he kept repeating that the man who owned the apartment is his dad. Is that true?”

“Yes,” I say.

I grit my teeth as an odd mix of excitement and anger fills me. Excitement that Oscar finally acknowledged that I’m his father. Anger because the first time Oscar admitted to being my son was in front of a security guard while he was destroying my apartment.

We run through the motions, and I assure Officer Bishop that I have no intent of pressing charges and that I want to get Oscar out of here. After sorting everything out, I sit in the reception area and wait for Oscar to be brought out. I pull my phone out and scroll through my messages with Dana, and I can’t help but smile. Everything with her is both comforting and unexpected. It’s only been a day but I already miss

her presence.

“I’ve been praying I’d find you here when I arrived.” Ashley plops down beside me, the dark circles under her eyes revealing the turmoil she’s endured.

“I told you I’d come,” I say.

“You did,” she agrees. “But I can’t say I’d blame you if you didn’t.”

Her statement has me raising my brows. “Oscar is my son. I’d die for that boy if I had to.”

Tears fill her eyes. “You’ve proven that.”

Carefully, I put my arm around her and pat her back, trying to infuse any kind of comfort I can. A few moments later, we hear footsteps before Oscar stands in front of us, staring down at us. I remove my arm from Ashley’s shoulders and stand.

Oscar has a look of disgust on his face. “You abandoned me when I was a baby?—”

Ashley cuts him off. “No, Oscar. RJ never abandoned us.” It’s clear the words pain her by the look on her face. It’s probably reminding her of our checkered past. The reminder pains me too.

“That’s right, he just never returned your phone calls. Because he didn’t want to take responsibility for his actions.”

My shoulders droop. “You were better off without me back then. I would have made a pretty crappy dad.”

“You were a crappy dad,” Oscar practically spits at me, then turns his head, looking

away from me.

His words send a sharp pang to my chest, but I stand strong. “I deserved that.”

I look from Ashley to Oscar, praying God helps me find the right words to say. “Don’t get me wrong, I wish I could have known you from the very beginning. But I also wish I would have been a better person back then. I didn’t deserve you.”

I tentatively place my hand on his shoulder. “But that’s all in the past. And we can’t change the past. We can only try to be better in the future and leave our shortcomings to God.”

Slowly, Oscar turns back to face me, staring straight into my eyes, clearly checking to see if I mean my words. “Mom never said you were a Christian.”

“It seemed to me like you didn’t want to know much about me. So she respected what you wanted.”

Oscar looks between me and Ashley. “I guess that’s true.”

“I can’t change what I did or didn’t do in the past. But if it’s all right with you, I’d like for us to focus on the future.”

Despite not looking convinced, Oscar shrugs. “I guess we can try.”

We head over to my apartment, and Oscar takes several hours to clean up the mess he made with minimal help from me or his mom. Thankfully, he’s done no damage to my furniture. Once he’s cleaned everything up, I call my realtor to let her know it’s once again in showing state, and she tells me she already has a buyer ready to make an offer.

After Ashley and Oscar leave, I call Dana and update her on everything.

Dana's response is one of understanding. "I'm glad you were able to get him out. But I know this isn't easy on you. We're praying for you back home. Take whatever time you need."

"Thank you for understanding and the prayers. I need it. We all need it."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

“Of course,” she says with sincerity.

“I couldn’t ask for a better woman. I love you so much.”

After saying our goodbyes we hang up. Despite knowing she meant what she said, I have the intense need to be with her again. All while knowing I need to make sure Oscar knows I want a relationship with him before I go home.

The next day, Oscar, Ashley, and I go out to lunch and meet with my brother Caleb at a local diner.

There is some awkward small talk, but it doesn’t take too long for Oscar to open up to Caleb. Even though Caleb was afraid this unusual lunch would be uncomfortable, we are all able to fall into an enjoyable conversation.

“We should start hanging out some,” Caleb suggests. “I’d like to get to know my nephew. Besides, I’m way cooler than your dad.”

I roll my eyes, and Oscar laughs.

“It’d be cool to hang out with my dad and uncle,” Oscar says.

My heart sinks and Ashley sends me a wary glance. “Maybe that’s something that can happen a few times a year, but Rhett lives on Amber Island now. That’s why he’s selling his apartment.”

Oscar’s nostrils flare and he’s silent for several tense moments as things appear to

click into place. “I thought you were just moving to a town nearby not across an ocean.” He narrows his eyes. “So you say you want to be a part of my life, and yet you want to live thousands of miles away from me. How am I supposed to believe you want a relationship with me?”

I raise my hands in a placating gesture. “This will be far from normal, but?—”

“But he has a life on Amber Island,” Ashley finishes.

Oscar points at his chest. “But he has a son who lives here.”

From out of the corner of my eye, I see Caleb’s attention bounce between me and my unconventional family.

I look at Oscar with all the sincerity I can muster and tell him, “I’ll have a place for you to stay, and you’d be welcome to visit anytime you want.”

“Really? You’d let me come stay with you?” I hear reserved excitement in Oscar’s voice.

Shrugging, I say, “I’m getting a new house built as we speak. I was hoping you’d want to come visit me regularly, so I made sure my house plan has a room specifically for you. You’ll even have your own bathroom. When you come over we can surf.” I rub the back of my head where it tingles, reminding me of the near-deadly situation I put myself in while surfing alone. “Or go golfing. I could teach you tennis too if you’d want.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Can you teach me how to play guitar?”

I crack a smile. “I figured that’d be a given.”

It's clear by his expression he doesn't completely believe me—and I can't blame him—but I make it my mission to prove to him that I mean it. That I want my son in my life, no matter what.

The last three days with Oscar have been exactly what we needed. He's stayed with me at my apartment and helped me pack up my things that I then sent to Amber Island. He's become increasingly more open with me, something I've thanked God for countless times.

The buyer will move into my apartment less than three months from now which means I'll need to crash with my brother whenever I come up to visit. Thankfully he's on board with that and excited to connect with his nephew.

Our trip to the airport is full of jokes, laughter, and goodbyes. Oscar and I have started a relationship—something I've been praying for since I found out he existed. We're in a good place right now, and I know that God will continue to bless us.

Ashley pulls up to the sidewalk at the airport. Other traffic bustles around us, but I can tell it's more than driving nerves that have her clutching the steering wheel with white knuckles.

“I wish things could have been like this from the beginning.”

“Me too.” I shake my head and check the rearview mirror. Once I confirm Oscar's wearing his headphones, I add, “As hard as this has been, it was meant to be like this. It all came together in God's timing. I want to be the dad he deserves, there for him in every way possible.” I run my hands through my hair. “I'm so proud of how well you stepped into your role as his mom. Despite the random act of delinquency, Oscar is a good kid.” I turn to face Oscar, who's taking his earphones out. “I've really enjoyed getting to know you better and I look forward to learning more about you.”

“Me too,” Oscar says.

I smile back at him and open my door. “This has been great. We’re going to do this again soon. Next time on Amber Island.”

“Sounds good.” He scratches the back of his neck.

Ashley and Oscar also get out of the car. Oscar grabs my suitcase from the trunk and plops it down next to me.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

He surprises me when he pulls me in for a hug, and I firmly pat his back, swallowing down my emotions. “I mean it. I want to be a part of your life. I meant every word of that song.” My voice is raspy and full of emotion.

Oscar pulls back, looking confused. “How do you know I listened to it?”

“Then why else would you have gone to my apartment and trashed it?”

“You’re right, I did listen to it. Then I went straight to your apartment to talk to you.” He swipes under his nose. “Your real estate agent was there. She told me you were moving out of town and she was trying to sell your apartment.” He kicks at a pebble on the sidewalk. “So I snuck back in and trashed it, trying to get back at you.”

I nod. “Honestly, I can see why you’d be so upset.”

“I’m sorry,” Oscar says for the first time.

Ashley walks over to stand beside him and wraps an arm around his waist. “I knew when you were a toddler I’d be doomed once you became a teenager with your stubbornness.” She ruffles his hair. “I guess I should be thankful you waited until you were sixteen to throw your first tantrum.”

Oscar shakes his head, but a smirk is on his lips. Then he looks up and stares at me, and it’s like looking at a mirror into the past.

“I’ll call you when I make it back. And we’ll make plans for you to come down soon,” I say.

“Sounds good.” He pauses, then adds, “Dad.”

I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face or the tear that escapes. Then I pull him in for a strong hug and say goodbye to the son I recently learned existed and am beyond grateful to have.

TWENTY SEVEN

DANA

“He’s coming back, you know,” Rosa says.

As much as I want to be as confident as she sounds, I can’t manage to get my hopes up. Rhett vanished once; he could easily do it again.

“You two have a lot more history now. That man can’t take his eyes off you when you’re in the same room. Even on stage, his eyes always come back to yours. Doing what he loves and made a career out of, and his focus is on you.” Rosa gives me a gentle smile. “And the Lord, of course. It’s clear his talent is from God and that Rhett sings and plays for God’s glory. But my point is Rhett is always looking for you and that man loves you.”

I give her a half-hearted smile. What she says about Rhett on stage is true. And just the thought of his brown eyes meeting mine across the room while his voice washes over the crowd gives me chills, but believing that he’s coming back is still a concept I refuse to let my heart grasp onto. I can’t help it. Watching him leave this time left a sick feeling in my stomach. No matter how many times he’s called and assured me he’s coming home to me, I can’t shake the feeling that I’m not enough for him. That he’ll disappear again and leave me behind.

If Rhett decides to hang back for a while longer to try and build something with

Oscar, I won't try to guilt him out of it. Oscar is his son, and he deserves to know his dad. It's selfish of me to keep worrying about it. No matter what happens, God is in control.

I release a resigned sigh and take a long drink of my coffee while staring out at the beach. We've positioned our chairs to face the ocean. The sun rises above the waters, bathing the sky in orange and pink hues. As I stare at the wisps of clouds, tears spring to my eyes.

For so long, I questioned God about Rhett, about finding the one, about getting married and starting the next stage of my life with a husband. Especially with my stint as the never-ending bachelorette. Sure, my love life has been moving forward more slowly than I'd hoped. But that has proven to be a good thing. God's timing is perfect. His will is going to be done no matter what. If Rhett is it for me, he'll return or God will find a way to make it happen. But if he's not, God has another plan, and I need to trust in the waiting.

Rosa's voice breaks through my thoughts. "When I was a little girl, I had my entire wedding planned. My dream dress was sketched, and every detail down to the flower arrangements was noted," Rosa says as if she can read my mind.

"What?" I ask without hesitation.

She gives me a radiant smile. "My parents were a beautiful example of a truly God-honoring, Christ-centered marriage, and I wanted that desperately. Both of them showered me and each other with love. It's something I ached for as I grew older." Rosa sets her mug down and wraps her aged hands around it, lightly drumming her red nails against the porcelain. "When I was in college, I sought my future husband." She chuckles softly. "My mom said I didn't go to college to learn, I went to find a husband. And she was right." She turns her glassy eyes to me. "But I never found him. None of the guys there had any interest in me."

“I find that hard to believe,” I say. Even as a late-middle-aged woman, Rosa is naturally beautiful. Not that looks are everything, but when you pair that with her sweetness and care for others, she’s the full package.

“Well, God had a plan for me so I was able to work unhindered in areas where men were not welcome. I was able to witness to women in shelters; if I was married, I’d have to leave my husband for months on end to achieve what God allowed me to. I saw so many of those women come to the Lord and start their healing journey.” Her expression is radiant.

“I didn’t know you did all of that,” I say, feeling like a horrible friend when I see how one-sided this relationship has been.

“Well, I don’t go around talking about it. Since I’ve moved to Amber Island, countless people from the church have tried to fix me up with the widowers and older bachelors.” She gives a soft laugh. “I’m far past the age of child-bearing. The more I trusted in the Lord and leaned into Him for understanding and seeking my God-given purpose, the more those desires to be a wife and mother faded into the background.”

I release a mix between a laugh and a scoff. “Moments before I found Rhett, I begged God to remove my desire to be a wife and mother. I was so sick of being the last step before guys jumped into marriage with someone else, and I felt so rejected eachtime.” I swallow, remembering how I felt when my eyes landed on Rhett as he turned his head to face me. It was just like the first time I laid eyes on him, as if my heart said, “This is the one we’ve been waiting for.”

“And then God brought you Rhett.”

“And then God brought me Rhett,” I repeat.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

We sit in pensive silence, each sipping our beverages and enjoying the serenity of nature and the gentle slosh of waves against the shore.

The sound of tires against gravel eventually breaks through our peace, but when I turn and see the man behind the wheel, I don't miss a beat. I jump up and sprint down the steps, leaping into Rhett's arms the moment he's out of the truck. I wrap my legs around his waist. His arms lock beneath my thighs, and he becomes my solid ground once more. He's my safe place, even in the storm of our own making. Because together, we have been a storm.

I cup his face and kiss him hard on the mouth. Then my arms go around his neck as he deepens the kiss, not needing to use words to show me how much he cares about me or how much he's missed me. My heart doubles in size and butterflies fill my belly as our kiss continues.

When I feel at least partially satiated, I try to pull back, but Rhett doesn't let me. His one arm holds my legs in place, and the other skims up my back and holds me firmly against him. We kiss until we're both breathless and I find myself sliding down his front.

The magnitude and desperation of my actions then hits me. My eyes widen, and my face heats to volcanic proportions. I just made out with my boyfriend in front of Rosa. But I don't have time to be embarrassed because before I realize what's happening, Rhett is on one knee and pulling something out of his pocket.

"This is not how I imagined doing this. I wanted to give you a romantic moment, and I've tried several times over the last few weeks. I could plan another one, but I can't

wait a moment longer.” He inhales a shaky breath. “I know our relationship has been far from conventional, but you are the most beautiful and unconventional woman I’ve ever met. Dana Swann, you are the sunshine to my clouds, the beauty from my ashes, and the woman I truly believe God created for me.” He swipes at his eyes with the hand not holding the small velvet box. “I love you more than I can put into words. My heart knew I loved you the moment you stepped foot on my tennis courts, but it took my brain a little longer to figure it out. I made several more mistakes and will probably make countless more, but one mistake I will never make again is leaving you. I love you and I need you to be my wife. I need you in good times and in bad, in?—”

I cut him off, unable to hold back my enthusiastic “YES!”

He smiles and stands, wrapping his arms around me, holding me close, and I know in this moment that he will stay with me...forever.

THE END

EPILOGUE

RHETT

“You’ve got this, baby. We’re almost there.”

“We?” she asks, her voice shrill from the pain. Dana’s nails dig into my skin as another contraction hits her.

I know countless women before Dana have done this, been the vessel God created life in, but it doesn’t matter; my wife’s continual strength amazes me. From the first signs of pregnancy through each of the trimesters, she’s handled it with ease and grace. Now she’s bringing our first child into the world.

A few minutes later, the most beautiful sound fills the hospital room. Our daughter's tiny body is quickly wiped down by the nurses before she rests her on Dana's chest. There are tears in Dana's eyes as she gazes at our first child, our baby girl.

"She's absolutely perfect," Dana says as she takes our little one's tiny hand and puts it on her finger.

"Just like her mama," I say, looking from our little girl to my gorgeous wife.

Dana smiles up at me. "This feels like a miracle."

"I was just thinking the same thing." Leaning down, I place a gentle kiss on Dana's forehead, then our daughter's. "What are we going to name her?" I ask. Although we've discussed names, we couldn't settle on any of them and decided to wait until she arrived to pick one.

Dana looks up at me with a smile that tells me she's found the right one and that her mind is already made up.

She beckons me to lean down so she can whisper it in my ear.

"It's perfect. A perfect name for our perfect little girl," I say.

We're discharged to go home after two nights in the hospital. It's finally time to create our new normal as a family of three.

I pull into the driveway and tell Dana to stay in the car so I can unlock the door and help her get in more easily.

I stick my key in the lock but halt when I notice it's already unlocked.

“Hello?” I ask, then motion for Dana to stay in the car.

“In here!” Rosa calls from one of the bedrooms.

I breathe a sigh of relief. “I didn’t realize you were going to be here when we got home,” I say loud enough for Rosa to hear me.

“I just wanted to make sure everything was ready for you.” She pokes her head out of the bedroom we turned into a nursery.

“You’re a gem, Rosa,” I say.

Page 67

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

She smiles and shoos me away. “Go get our girls!”

I go back out to the car, lifting the car seat out with one hand and helping Dana out with the other. She’s moving slowly as she takes my arm and we go up the porch steps.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

There’s a pained expression on her face but she says, “Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

“Let’s get you situated on the couch.”

Dana gets comfortable, and Rosa comes out and whisper-shouts, “Welcome home!” She comes over and sits next to Dana, looking at the tiny bundle of joy in the car seat and placing a hand on her chest. “She’s absolutely perfect. What did you name her?”

Dana bites her lips and looks up at me to answer.

“Rosaline Jane,” I say.

Tears begin to stream down Rosa’s cheeks. “You named her after me?”

“Yes,” Dana says softly, then grabs a few tissues off the side table, handing some to Rosa and keeping a couple for herself.

“Thank you,” Rosa says, wiping at her cheeks.

“You’ve been my rock and a second mom to me from the moment we met. It was the perfect name for her.”

“I thought so too,” I add.

Rosaline starts to wriggle and fuss, so I lift her out of her car seat and pass her to the woman she’s named after. Rosa gently sways with her on the couch, successfully calming her.

Dana, Rosa, and I pass little Rosaline between us our first few hours at home. I’m amazed that Dana already knows what each of Rosaline’s cries mean. Including the one that means she’s hungry. Dana has just pulled Rosaline from her breast when there’s a soft knock at the door.

Dana hands Rosaline to me and covers up. “Come in!” she shouts.

Olivia, West, and their little boy Grayson come in with giant balloons and a huge stuffed bear.

“Is it a boy like me?” Grayson asks, jumping up and down.

Olivia gazes down at him, shaking her head and smiling. “No, baby, remember? Auntie and Uncle Rhett-Rhett had a little girl,” she tells him, using the name Grayson gave me when he first started talking.

Grayson scrunches his little nose and crosses his arms over his chest. “Girls are gross.”

All the adults laugh.

Reluctantly, I hand a semi fussy Rosaline over to Olivia’s outstretched arms. She

cradles Rosaline, her swollen bump providing extra cushion, before setting her on her shoulder and tapping the baby's back to burp her.

"So what name did you decide on?" Olivia asks, looking at Dana before Rosaline releases a burp. Olivia cradles Rosaline once more and slowly sways, lulling the baby to sleep. She doesn't fuss but nuzzles deeper into Olivia's arms, almost as if she knows her aunt can be trusted and will love her unconditionally.

"Rosaline Jane Stryker," Dana answers.

Olivia's gaze snaps to Dana's. "Oh it's perfect. I love it." She places a gentle kiss on the top of Rosaline's head and gazes down at her. "Well, you have to be the most precious little girl I've ever seen."

Grayson plops down on the recliner and reaches his arms out. "Okay, it's my turn to hold the baby."

Olivia looks at Dana, then me, making sure we're okay with the four-year-old holding her.

Dana nods, so I take Rosaline from Olivia and carefully place her in Grayson's arms, all while still holding her myself.

Grayson stares down at her as she stares up at him in turn.

"She's so tiny," Grayson whispers. "So pretty." He removes one arm from beneath her and boops her nose. "We're gonna be best friends, aren't we? Even though you are a girl."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 7:33 am

Rosaline opens her eyes, then coos up at him. He raises his face and looks at all the adults in the room with his mouth shaped in an O. “I think she likes me.” He bounces on his seat, and I lift Rosaline off him.

“My turn,” West says, reaching for her and taking her gently.

Olivia walks over to the couch and sits down, resting her head against Dana’s. “I can’t believe my little sis is a mommy now.”

“Me neither,” Dana says, looking up at Rosaline in West’s arms.

“I’m so grateful we get to do life together and be mamas together. Just like when we played house when we were little girls.”

Dana starts crying, and I grab a bunch of tissues off the side table and hand them over to her.

“Why am I crying?” Dana asks.

“Because your hormones are going crazy after bringing a beautiful, tiny life into the world,” Olivia answers, rubbing up and down Dana’s back as she blows her nose.

“I guess that makes sense.” Dana chuckles, her tears slowing down.

This is yet another humbling moment, being surrounded by people who will love my little family almost as much as I do. God is not only a God of forgiveness but grace upon grace. Giving us far more than we could ever deserve.

There's another knock at the door, and I look to Dana and Rosa to see if they know of anyone else coming today. Caleb plans on coming down next week, and Dana's parents said they'll be over a little later once they get home from their cruise. The Woodhouses are visiting family in the states and won't be back for another week. Both women shrug. West, Olivia, and Grayson went home a while ago, so unless they left something behind, I don't know why they'd come back so quickly.

When I open the door, I'm beyond surprised.

"Oscar? Ashley?" I ask.

Ashley looks at me sheepishly. "The moment you called and told me the baby was here Oscar booked us the quickest flight, and here we are. I told him you'd want time to settle in before we barged in, but he insisted."

Oscar doesn't look one bit perturbed. He shrugs. "I've never been a big brother before."

I grab my son and pull him against me in a tight embrace.

It's been a slow process, getting Oscar to fully accept me as his dad and learn how to trust me. Especially with all the bumps on our journey. But God has been working on both of us, and I couldn't be more grateful that he is here right now and that he was the one who wanted to be here for the huge moment in my and Dana's lives.

Oscar and Ashley are each carrying something; Ashley has a basket and Oscar holds a gift bag. When they notice me eyeing them, Oscar lifts up the bag and says, "For the baby."

Ashley lifts up the basket and says, "For the mama."

"Let them in!" Dana shouts.

Ashley and Oscar follow me inside. Rosa continues to bounce little Rosaline. Dana slowly tries to stand while grimacing.

“Just relax,” Ashley says, carefully helping Dana back onto the couch.

“I don’t want to be rude to our guests,” Dana replies.

“Stop it. We’re not guests. We’re here to help. See?” Ashley points to the basket. “I made this for you. It’s a postpartum basket. It holds the same things I used to recover after having Oscar.” She leans down and says in a mock whisper, “And he was a ten pounder.” This brings a laugh out of Dana, and her grimace turns into a smile...then more tears.

“Thank you.” She reaches up for a hug, and Ashley sets the basket on the table and hugs my wife as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. And in our world, it is.

“You are very welcome. Now.” She claps her hands together. “What do you need done?”

Oscar has already taken Rosaline out of Rosa’s arms and is walking around the living room, gently bouncing her and whispering down to her. I have no idea what he’s saying, but seeing the love in his eyes as he looks down at his baby sister, I can’t help but smile and thank God once again for the blessings He’s poured over me.

Without Dana asking anything of Ashley, Ashley goes into the kitchen and helps Rosa get the meal together.

Right after we finish up our meal, Dana’s parents arrive, and Olivia, West, and Grayson return. Crew comes over right after his shift. In less than an hour, our entire family—other than my brother Caleb—is in our home, bustling about, and helping in any way they can.

Rosaline is passed around slowly, each person not wanting to hand her over to the next. It's a day filled with laughter, joy, and an endless stream of oohs and aahs.

I sit on the couch, my little girl finally in my arms again. Everyone except Oscar and Ashley are gone. As I stroke Rosaline's soft cheek, I pray out loud. "Thank you for this beautiful little girl and my beautiful wife. Thank you for our family and the ways they've pushed us to become better versions of ourselves. Please continue to bless Dana and me with patience and understanding so we raise our family with You at the center. Guide us and help us to honor You in all we say and do. Thank you for Oscar and Ashley and the relationship we've built from the ashes of our past. Thank you, Father, for being so good. Amen."

Dana sits down next to me. "I love when you pray," she says with a yawn.

Ashley looks over at us, a smile on her face. Oscar sits on the floor, resting his head against the couch. My worlds colliding could have easily brought nothing but destruction. Instead, God worked my failures for His good.

Rosaline's tiny mouth opens with her own silent yawn, and she nuzzles into me. Dana rests her head on my shoulder, and I rest my other hand on my son's shoulder. My blended family embraces the silence. With my heart full of hope and gratefulness, I thank God once again for this life I don't deserve but that He's given me anyway.