



The heart never speaks, but you have to listen to it to understand.
~ Chinese Proverb

My attitude has improved by the time I slide into my favorite booth at Luigi's Italian Cocina. It's hard to be upset in a charming establishment like Luigi's. For two years, it has become a sanctuary not only for my stomach but also for my soul. After the Container Store and the library, it rounds out the top three of my happy places.

"Nicki, it's so good to see you, *bella*." Luigi, the restaurant's namesake, races towards me. One of the reasons why my mom and I love this place so much—besides the tasty food, checkered tablecloths, and true Italian ambiance—is its endearing owner. He calls all his customers by their first name and insists on waiting tables himself.

"Luigi, how are you today?" I hold out my hands, and Luigi takes them, kissing each as part of his traditional greeting.

"I'm good, *bella*, now that you're back in my *ristorante*. I don't know what I'd do if you and your *madre* stopped visiting me each week." He pouts like a little kid, and I can't help but smile. A man of about sixty-five, he is still handsome. If you didn't love

the food, you'd come just to spend time with Luigi. He's adorable.

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that. Thanks to your warm hospitality and your delicious cuisine, we'll be customers for life."

"That's what I like to hear!" He claps. "Do you want me to bring your usual, or do you want to look at a menu?"

"The usual, please."

"Wonderful, I'll be back with your drinks and some bread." He nods and disappears.

I glance at my watch and notice Mom is running late. I'm sure she's fine, I just hope she's not out shopping. Rather than rush to judgment, I purge the thought from my mind and try to think positively.

Pulling out my phone, I click on social media and scroll through my feed. A memory from several years ago pops up on my screen—an old photo of my dad. I choke back the tears as I read the caption, *First snow of the season!* and gaze at my father building a snowman in our front yard when that was still possible.

From the wrinkled corners of his eyes and the huge smile on his face, he was doing what he loved—finding joy in the simple things of life. I set my phone on the table and rub my hands over my face.

My dad was the center of my world. Without his boisterous laugh and larger-than-life personality, an eerie silence ruled our home. No amount of noise blaring from the radio or television could fill the void he'd left behind. I'd tried. Yet nothing could have prepared me for the changes his absence would bring. Tears spatter onto the red and white tablecloth. I reach for a napkin and wipe my cheeks.

"Nicki?" My mother's voice pulls me back to reality.

I hide the tissue under the table. "Mom, I didn't see you." I climb out of the booth and hug her. "I'm glad you're here."

Rather than coming together, my mother and I each found

our own way to grieve. For me, it was simply trying to navigate my teenage years without him. He'd always been the one to help me with my homework, cheer me on at my soccer games, and play chess with me on the weekends. Without his constant support, I retreated to my room and isolated myself from everyone. It was easier that way.

"Are you okay?" She slides into the bench opposite me.

"I'm fine," I lie, sitting back down. "How are you?"

"I'm good. Sorry I'm late." She peels her coat and hat off, revealing an oversized sweater and messy hair. Sadly, neither look recently washed.

For mom, it was hoarding. Over time, it became increasingly obvious that her need for stuff wasn't healthy. When it became too difficult to walk in our house without tripping over something, I knew it was time to intervene.

"Now that Halloween's over, people are in full holiday-shopping mode. It was crazy at work, and I just couldn't get out on time."

I sigh in relief. "No problem."

Many times, when she was at work, I used to sneak bags out of the house, relocating them to the trash, certain she'd never miss them. Once, she caught me tossing some of the precious things she'd abandoned in my room into the dumpster and had been utterly undone.

Shaking the memory away, I say, "I was just scrolling through social media."

"Oh, looking for a job?" She unrolls the napkin and places it in her lap.

"I've had a change of plans." I scoot closer to the table. "I got a temporary organizing gig that should hold me over financially until I'm able to find another job from the applications and résumés I sent out."

"Wonderful! Maybe then you'll be able to restart your business."

"That's a nice thought, Mom, but I think it's time for me to

move on from organizing. As they say, when God closes one door, He opens another. Maybe it's time for me to walk through a new door."

"Who says that?" Her forehead wrinkles. "I don't remember reading that in the Bible."

I chuckle. There are some things you can joke about with my mom, but the veracity of the Holy Scriptures isn't one of them. "Calm down, it's just a saying."

Just then, my stomach growls. "I guess I'm hungrier than I realized." I scan the restaurant for my favorite waiter. "Where's Luigi?"

"Did someone say my name?" Luigi arrives at our table with the appetizers.

The smell of warm breadsticks and olive oil wafts through the air. "Just in time, Luigi." I take the breadsticks out of his hands and set them on the table. "I'm starving."

"Not in my ristorante, *bella!*" He wags his finger at me then places two glasses of water and a small plate of oil next to the bread.

I take a quick bite. "*Delizioso!*" I pinch my fingers together in front of my puckered lips, and Luigi's eyes sparkle.

"*Grazie!* Eat, and I'll be back with your entrees, *pronto.*" He speeds back off towards the kitchen.

Once Luigi has left, Mom and I devour the garlic bread.

"So, tell me about this temporary job." My mother dabs her mouth with a napkin. "How did it come about?"

"Remember how I told you I made those cold calls last week?" I lick the garlic off my fingers.

She nods then bites off another piece of her breadstick.

"One of them called back. She desperately needed someone to work with her boss, so I agreed to help."

"It's just like you to help those in need. You've always been an inspiration in that way."

"I'm not sure how inspiring I am, considering the circumstances." I grab another breadstick and dip it into the oil.

“My client is a handful, and it’s going to take an act of God for me to get on her good side.”

“Oh?”

Before I can reply, Luigi returns with our meals. “*Buon appetito*, ladies!” Placing the spaghetti and tortellini bowls on the table, he winks at each of us before dashing off again.

After we pray and settle in with our food, my mother circles back to our earlier conversation. “So, tell me more about this lady you’re working for.”

I slurp a noodle into my mouth and swallow. “Her name is Katherine O’Connor. According to the Internet, she’s a Connecticut socialite and CEO. But if you ask me, I’d say she’s difficult to work for and extremely eccentric.”

My mother picks up the parmesan cheese and sprinkles some onto her dish. “What makes her eccentric?”

Despite my need for food, I push my plate away from me. “You’re not going to believe me when I tell you.” Without missing a beat, I fill my mother in on Princess’s potty training, Ms. O’Connor’s sterile decorating style, and her unbelievable shoe addiction.

“And after seven hours of work, her only comment was ‘It will do!’ Can you believe that?” My voice rises a notch as my cheeks flush. “And then she had the nerve to declare she needed more shoes!”

“Nic, I think you’re the one who needs to calm down now.” My mother reaches over and pats my hand. “Why are you letting yourself get so worked up over this woman?”

I exhale in an attempt to let out all my frustrations. “Because she’s exasperating and hard to please. And her shoe issues remind me of —” I stop myself before saying something I’ll regret later.

“Reminds you of what?” she asks innocently.

Twirling my napkin around my thumb, I don’t have the heart to tell her that working with Ms. O’Connor stirs up memories of

our tumultuous times together in the past. And the decision I made to ensure we didn't grow apart again.

Despite all my efforts to bring order to our lives, I couldn't. Nor could I handle the chaos that constantly surrounded me inside the four walls of our home. Eventually, a chasm grew between us. Like a game of tug-of-war that no one ever won, our relationship deteriorated to the point that we were simply two former shells of ourselves living under the same roof.

Ultimately, I decided that I'd live on my own when I graduated from college because putting space between us was the only way I knew how to salvage what little family I had left. In doing so, my mother and I have a happier and healthier relationship today.

"Nothing. Forget I said anything." I toss my napkin on the table. "I just need this job to go well with her because she has connections that might help me get a permanent position somewhere."

A smile forms on my mom's lips. "This O'Connor woman may be rich and have connections, but never forget that God is the one who perfectly arranges all the details of your life."

I shrug. While I'm a believer, my faith isn't as strong as my mother's, and I'm not a hundred percent sure God is working out anything on my behalf right now. It certainly doesn't feel like it.

"Nic," my mom says softly, "maybe this is God's way of refining you and teaching you to have patience and love for people who aren't so easy to get along with. And who knows, maybe there's more to Ms. O'Connor than you realize."

"Let's talk about something else." I steer our conversation in another direction. "I shouldn't be discussing her with you in the first place, and since I have to go back to the estate tomorrow, I'd rather not give work any more of my time and energy right now. They belong to you."

She cups her chin in her hand and tilts her head. "What else do you want to talk about?"

“I don’t know. Something interesting that happened at work? What you want to do for Thanksgiving? What you learned at church last night?”

My mom’s face lights up at the mention of her weekly Wednesday night worship service. “Oh, Nic, you should have heard Pastor Jeff last night. It’s perfect for what you’re dealing with.”

“How so?” I raise my eyebrows. I seriously doubt that Pastor Jeff has any words of wisdom to share with me on the current situations of my life, but I’m open to listening.

“Well, he spoke about not storing up treasures here on earth and instead storing up treasures in heaven, which have eternal significance.” She pulls out her phone from her purse. “I’m sure you can find the sermon on iTunes or the church website. After you listen to it, maybe you could bring it up with your client and talk to her about how God doesn’t want us tied down to earthly things, like a room full of shoes, that don’t really bring much value to our lives.”

I balk. She’s not serious, is she? Mom’s entire house is full of treasures that have no value! I shake my head. *Does she hear herself or see the irony in what she’s telling me?*

Pausing to find the right words, I purse my lips. “Umm, Mom, did *you* listen to what Pastor Jeff was saying?”

“Of course I did—”

“Ladies,” Luigi interrupts us. “Do you want dessert or to-go boxes?”

“To-go boxes, please,” I reply without giving my mom a chance to respond. “Thanks, Luigi. Everything was great, but it’s getting late, so it’s probably best if we skip dessert this week.”

My mom nods.

“Okay, I’ll be back with your boxes and your check, *un momento.*” Like the Flash, he darts off again.

When I’m certain Luigi is far enough from the table, I confront my mom. “Do you think maybe what Pastor Jeff was

talking about last night is something you might want to take to heart?”

She picks at the sleeve of her sweater and grows quiet. I'm not sure if she's avoiding me or contemplating what I'm saying. I pray it's the latter. I've tried everything I can think of to get her to stop collecting things and stockpiling them for years now, but it's fallen on deaf ears.

Maybe a wake-up call from God will get her to change her ways. I'm not sure how many miracles I can ask for in one day, but I'll press my luck and see, because that's what it's going to take to cure my mother of her hoarding.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, she finally speaks up. “Nic, I think you're right.”

I perk up. “Really?”

“Yes, I do.” She pauses. “I don't know how I missed it before, but I realize now that I've been wrong.”

My heart pounds so hard inside my chest I'm sure she can hear it across the table. *Stay calm!* I don't want to embarrass or cause her any sort of shame. I'm just grateful her eyes have been opened, and she's willing to finally get the help and healing she needs.

“Thank you for pointing out this to me.” Her voice trembles. “I've been in the wrong, but not anymore.”

Tears pool in the corner of my eyes. “Mom, I'm so glad you see this too. No matter what happens, I'll be by your side the entire time.”

“That is so sweet, Nic, but I know you have your own volunteer activities. However, I'd be happy to look and see if there's something we can do together.”

“Wait, what?” I blink and shake my head. “Why are you talking about volunteering?”

“Because you made me realize that perhaps I need to be doing more work that has eternal significance. You know, just as Pastor Jeff was saying.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Mom, that’s not what I was—”

“For my two favorite ladies.” Luigi returns with our to-go bags and the check.

“Thank you, *Signore*,” my mother giggles. “We’ll be back again next week. Right, Nic?”

Shell-shocked by the day’s events and my mother’s misunderstanding of what I was trying to help her see, I’m rendered speechless. I simply grin and wave at my favorite waiter.

After we pay the bill and gather our belongings, I quickly scoot out of the booth. At this point, I’m desperate for a long hot bath and a good night’s sleep.

“Nic,” my mom calls out after me. “You forgot your food.”

Exhausted, I turn around and stare at the white plastic bag. “Just leave it. I’m full.”

“Well, we certainly can’t let it go to waste.” She picks up the container of food and chases after me. “If you don’t want it, I’ll gladly take it.”

Rather than argue with her, I let her have her way. There’s nothing I can say that will change her mind.

BY THE TIME I arrive at my apartment, I’m mentally, emotionally, and physically drained. I forgo the bath, slip into pajamas, and faceplant onto my bed.

I’m almost in a deep sleep when I remember I never asked Ms. O’Connor or Heather what time I should arrive at the estate in the morning. Pushing myself up off the lumpy mattress, I reach for my phone. When I open it, I see a missed call and voicemail. My fingers tremble as I press the button and listen to the message.

“Nicki, it’s Heather.”

Her sharp tone causes my back to stiffen.

“I wanted to let you know that you don’t need to come to the estate tomorrow after all. Thanks. Bye.”

Listening to the succinct recording again, I search for clues but can only come to one conclusion. Ms. O’Connor wasn’t as satisfied as she’d said.

Between the false hope of my mom getting help *and* being fired on the same day, I slink down under my bedding. I thought I had all the answers for Ms. O’Connor and my mom, but clearly, I was wrong. I don’t even have them for myself.

Now, what am I going to do?