

HER HEART'S LONGING

The Three Sisters - Book Three

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Family matters, so I'd like to dedicate this book to my four brothers and two sisters. How different life would have been if I'd grown up an only child like Katie. We have our differences, but we pull together when it counts.

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*K*atie Mann raised her face to the rays of the September sun and ran her fingers through her copper curls. The cool breeze carried the scent of falling leaves.

The weather reminded her of days when she and her best friends, Haleigh and Aubrey, had kicked at the crunching leaves and jumped in raked piles.

“Katie Mann!”

Is that ...? Oh, no! She slowed her steps. She could pretend she didn’t hear or see him and turn at the next corner.

Too late!

A broad smile lit his face. “Katie, just the person I was hoping to meet.” He stopped and waited for her.

Nathan West. What was he doing in Greenlawn? Nathan had shown up several times last spring, saying he wanted a second chance. This was the first contact she’d had with him in almost four months.

The day’s brightness dimmed. She walked a little faster and brushed by him.

“Hi, Nathan. I’m kind of in a hurry, so I don’t have time to stop and chat.”

He fell into step beside her. "Is it all right if I walk with you? We can talk as we go."

"It's a public sidewalk."

"Are you ready to go out on a date?" Nathan stuffed his hands in his pockets.

Katie shook her head. "I don't think so, Nathan." She needed to nip this in the bud.

"Hear me out before you refuse."

Please leave. She walked faster.

"I've been thinking a lot about you lately." He matched her pace. "About us, actually."

Katie shook her head again. "Not interested." If she was that important to him, where had he been all summer? He'd blown his second chance.

"Let me finish. I know I didn't handle things well back in school. We made a mistake, and I'm sorry. But I want a second chance with you, and I'll do it right this time. I'd like to take you out to dinner on Friday night."

He sounded so confident she would say yes that she resolved to say no. "I'm sorry, but I have a commitment out of town this weekend." She stopped and turned toward him. "We're not school kids anymore. My feelings for you are ... well, I'm not really interested. I've put the past behind me, and I don't want to dredge it up."

The past was the past, and she didn't want to have dinner with him. If she walked faster, maybe he'd get the point.

"I thought you'd forgiven me." He sounded disappointed and accusing at the same time. Just before high school graduation, he'd met her in Pastor Pete's study to apologize to her and tell her he'd become a Christian.

She huffed. "I forgave you a long time ago, but that doesn't obligate me to go out with you." She checked her watch. *Just go away, Nathan.* "We were very young and very foolish when we thought we were in love. It's in the past and done."

Nathan had made himself scarce after she'd told him she was

pregnant. Maybe her father had threatened him, or his parents had kept him away. By the time she returned to Greenlawn after giving birth, his family had moved to another town. Frightened, left to struggle alone with guilt and her decisions concerning the baby, she'd needed a long time to heal from the wounds Nathan's desertion and her own failure inflicted.

"Now that I'm a Christian, maybe God wants us together. I thought you were willing to try again."

The injured expression on his face matched the tone of his voice. She shook her head. Agreeing to date him again had been foolish. This time, she wouldn't give in to his coaxing.

"I've had four months to reconsider what I told you in the spring." He didn't offer to explain his absence or why he hadn't contacted her. "The answer is no."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, how about this? There's a big church in Amblersville that has an awesome drama department." Charming and persistent, he knew how to get her attention. "They do a big production in the spring and fall, as well as a Christmas pageant. The Christmas one last year was fabulous, and I know you'd like to see their play on the life of the apostle Peter."

Peter. She felt a kinship with the apostle who'd failed to stand with Christ during His trial but received His forgiveness and cleansing. She'd experienced the same forgiveness and cleansing.

She'd heard about the drama department at the Amblersville Crossroads Church, but she'd never had the opportunity to see one of their productions. Maybe going out with him once would be okay. Or maybe she was crazy.

"All right." She pictured her father's frown if he found out she'd agreed to a date with Nathan West. She hoped neither her father nor any of his friends saw the two of them walking together.

"Next Friday, then? Will you have that night off?"

She nodded, relieved they'd arrived at the bank, her

destination. He named the time he'd pick her up, suggesting they go out to dinner before seeing the play. She agreed, and he walked away with a smile on his face and a swagger to his step.

Katie arrived home after completing her errands, her insides still churning from her meeting with Nathan.

Should she cancel her date with him?

She'd fight that battle later. Now she needed sleep. Although Katie loved nursing and the elderly residents she cared for, the late shift wasn't her favorite. Sleeping in the middle of the day and staying awake all night was hard, but the residents of the Senior Home needed care 24/7.

First, though, she checked for phone messages. She had three texts—the last from Pastor Pete.

Katie, I had an email about the church drama conference next weekend. Did you register? Today's the last day.

I'm registered and looking forward to it!

As the church drama director, Katie looked forward to the conference. She enjoyed meeting with friends involved in church drama ministry and attending the workshops. She planned to stop at Grandma Whitaker's on the way home from the conference.

When she was sixteen and pregnant, Grandma had taken her in and given her the unconditional love she needed, the love her mother and father couldn't give her at that time. Grandma guided her through her decision to let her baby be adopted, and she homeschooled Katie during her pregnancy. She'd taught her about putting the past behind and finding hope as she looked to the future.

In her bedroom, Katie started to brush her hair but set down her hairbrush and opened her jewelry box. From the bottom, she withdrew a photograph and gazed at it.

"He is so beautiful," she whispered.

She held the toddler's photograph against her chest. The

adoptive parents had sent it to her through their lawyer four years ago. She didn't know his name or where he lived, but she ached to hold him again, even after almost six years.

Sophomore year in high school had begun with promise, but it ended a 'real bummer,' as her friend Aubrey would say. Aubrey nearly died in an auto accident, Haleigh's family moved away, and Katie became pregnant. For a long time, she'd struggled with guilt for her failure, and she feared failing again.

"Maybe I shouldn't keep this. But it's the only thing I have of him."

She hoped she'd meet her biological son one day. He'd be allowed to seek her out when he turned eighteen. If anyone who knew her met him, they'd immediately see the resemblance — the red curls and green eyes, even the smile. She didn't talk about him with other people, except one time with Haleigh Abbott.

The day after she'd given birth, they used the hospital chapel for the brief ceremony when Katie 'gave' her baby to his new parents. Grandma Whitaker and Mom and Dad were with her. Grandma's pastor, Pastor Clay, said a prayer of blessing for the child and his parents. She'd planned this, knew it was the right way. But even now, the memory of that day made her tremble and press her hands over her heart.

"There, Katie, that's enough of that. You have no right to him at all. He belongs with his parents." She tucked the photo back into the box and closed the lid.

Burying her face in her hands, she let the tears flow. "God, someday will You give me another son?"

She pulled a tissue from the box on the bedside stand and blew her nose.

"Maybe I'll always be single. Maybe I'll never be a mother again. Please, help me learn to be content where I am now. You forgave me and have given me the opportunity to begin over. You are so good, God."



WHEN KATIE CAME on duty as the night nurse in her wing of the Senior Home, she greeted aides Angie and Mallie, along with LPN Susan and nursing student Zena. Except for Zena, she'd worked with this team since she was hired.

The residents under her care could move around on their own but had a variety of medical conditions that needed watching. Her shift began when most of them were preparing for bed and ended when they got up in the morning.

The residents in her wing had a hard time settling to sleep. The nurse call board lit up often with calls for help to go to the bathroom. Two residents fell out of bed, neither of them hurt. Because of the lateness of the hour, Katie made a note to call the families before she left work in the morning.

"Katie, Ruth Decker has a fever and a hacking cough. Will you come check her?"

Susan's midnight summons drew Katie away from the computer at the nurses' station. Ruth had complained about not feeling well earlier. It took only a minute for Katie to decide it was time to call the ambulance. She leaned over the old woman.

"Ruth, I'm going to call the ambulance to take you to the hospital. I'll let your son know so he can meet you there."

Susan stayed with Ruth to get her ready while Katie informed the home's night nurse supervisor, who called the ambulance while Katie called Ruth's son.

A couple of residents wanted to get up at three in the morning rather than the usual six. Assured they weren't ill and didn't have to use the bathroom, Katie convinced them to remain in bed. Late in her shift, when she sat at the computer to check records and finish reports, the system balked. The nurse supervisor was able to correct the glitch, but the delay added to her stress.

Despite her love for her work and the residents, when her shift ended in the morning, she was ready to go home.

One more twelve-hour shift and one eight-hour shift this week, then she'd leave for the drama conference at noon on Friday.

Occupied with her work, Katie didn't think about her date with Nathan even once all night. She still had time to cancel, but Nathan wouldn't give up easily. She'd have to somehow convince him that she didn't want a second chance with him.