

## Chapter Three



Nothing stopping them? Daisy could list a million reasons a relationship with Luke was out of the question. Well, that might be an exaggeration, but still. The faith he once claimed was non-existent. He declared his love, but if rumors were to be believed, he'd hooked up with half their graduating class since their breakup. Her heart couldn't survive the devastation he left in his wake when things went sideways. And they would go awry. As long as he was drinking, it was a guarantee.

"I can't."

He dropped her hands. "But ..."

She shook her head. "No."

Raw need filled his eyes. He viewed her as his salvation. She refused to accept the role. It would only lead to disappointment for them both. Still, the temptation to ignore the truth tugged at her heart.

It wooed her with the lie that Luke wasn't going to fill his emptiness with God, but he could fill it with her. It would be better than nothing. They could both have what they wanted. The love she'd pushed to the background through the last few years screamed at her to listen, to accept what she wanted.

Daisy turned her head and broke the spell his eyes attempted to cast over her. Father God, I don't have the strength to refuse or to walk away. What do I do?

*You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*

But God, I know the truth of Your word. Your Son has made me free.

*You do.*

Luke. He needed the truth. Pain led him to drink, and his drinking blinded him to the Son who could give him the freedom he craved.

"I'm not what you need." She faced him. "I can't be. You've got a problem, and I can't let it into my life no matter what I feel for you."

Light fled his eyes, leaving them dark and cool. "Because I like a drink every now and then?"

"Yes. No. I mean, it's not like that." She sighed. "It's not occasional. You drink yourself stupid more often than not. It's not healthy or safe. And it keeps you from dealing with life."

He swore. His fist connected with the swing arm. "Just like Mike. Both of you act like this is some big issue. It's not."

"Mike?" Daisy frowned. "Your boss talked with you about this?"

He glared at her. "Yeah. This morning. Right after he canned me."

"I'm so sorry." Daisy hurt for him. It couldn't be easy. But surely, he had to see there was a real issue.

He scoffed. "Doesn't matter. I'm done with him and his run-down nursery. Never could figure out how he kept all of us anyway. He couldn't be making any money. Probably needed to let someone go, and I was an easy target."

"You know that's not true. Mike is your friend." His forearm was tight under her own as she rested it there. "But he sees what I see."

Luke flew off the swing and spun to face her, defensiveness

starching his spine. “And just what do you see? Some lousy, no-account drunk?”

Even in the ugliness, Daisy had never regarded him in that way. But apparently, somewhere inside, Luke believed exactly that, though he didn’t admit it. A wise squeezed her chest. “No.” She kept her tone quiet and steady. “I see a caring, wonderful man who’s been hiding behind addiction.”

“Addiction?” He raised his hands in frustrated disbelief. “You think I’m an addict? I’m the next junkie they’ll find in an alley somewhere?”

*Lord, give me the words.* “There are lots of addictions. Junkies aren’t the only ones letting substances direct their lives. Alcohol, gambling, sex, porn. Anything sinking its talons into a person’s brain chemistry can create an addiction.”

Luke’s eyes narrowed. “I can say no any time I want.”

“Do it, then.” Daisy sucked in courage. “Because when you’re drunk, you turn into a man I don’t recognize and, frankly, don’t have any desire to.”

“I already said I’m sorry for last night. It was a bad night is all. Drinking didn’t cause it.”

“Then, we have a real problem.” Daisy raised her chin. Luke mirrored the action. She’d reached the point of no return, but she couldn’t veer from the truth. “Because if your behavior last night was just Luke Masters having a hard day, whether we could get back together again should be the least of your concerns. That’s a man I don’t even want as a friend.”

Daisy refused her building tears and the quaking every muscle in her body cried out for. Luke would see it as weakness. He could not be allowed to see the cracks in her armor. One glance and the battle would be lost.

Luke’s jaw worked as he glared, but was that shock and hurt underneath? Daisy felt it as clearly as radiating sun on a summer day. *Please, God. Don’t let it harden him.*

“So, that’s the way you feel?” He raked a hand through his

hair. When she didn't answer, he shook his head. "Fine. You're the last person I expected this from. But I guess it was just a matter of time before you deserted me too."

Luke strode from the porch, not sparing her even a glance until he opened his Mustang's door and turned to get in. Their eyes met over the distance. His gave her one last chance to take back her words. A slight shake of her head was all she could manage. Anything else would release the torrents. Luke slid low into the driver's seat. A trail of dust followed his exit from her driveway. Was it the dress rehearsal for his leaving her life as well?

Stiff from the encounter as much as the chill in the air, Daisy trudged from the porch back inside. She should call Bekah. Then again, Daisy was in no mood to deal with her friend's good-riddance attitude.

Her coat missed its peg and slid to the floor. Daisy stepped over it on her way to her overstuffed recliner. She sank into it and cupped her hands over her face as the first sob escaped.

What had she done? Luke and her, together. For as long as she could remember, he'd been in her life. Even after dating through her senior year of high school and well into her sophomore year in college, they'd never compromised their friendship. In those early post-dating years, their continued relationship had proved difficult to navigate, especially when new guys entered her life. But none were ever worth losing Luke. They moved on. Luke remained.

Until now. She stuttered a breath between her tears. Was it worth him knowing the truth?

If she went to Luke, he'd take her back like nothing stood between them. Back to the status quo. On good days, they'd enjoy the same easy camaraderie they'd always shared. On the bad ones, Luke would have a few too many, and Daisy would be there to carry him in from the lawn.

At one time, the good days outweighed the bad. Now, they

attacked with greater frequency. Even when he didn't drunk dial her, Daisy knew Luke was still drinking. On nights her phone was silent, ugliness haunted her dreams. Whatever woman he hooked up with was there to help him inside. It didn't take the town busybodies reporting his every move to figure it out.

Cold seeped in with a memory she'd rather forget.

Daisy had arrived at his house with two fresh cups of coffee, oblivious to his activities the previous night. Luke's discomfort as he let her into his kitchen confused her. They'd always seen each other's houses as second homes. The door was always open.

Before she could work out the puzzle, a woman traipsed out of his room in nothing but her bra and panties and wound herself around him with a cat-that-ate-the-canary grin.

"You ordered us coffee." She'd kissed his cheek. "How sweet."

Daisy swallowed and looked everywhere but at the two of them. Dutifully, she held out the second cup. "Um. Yeah. Here you go. Two coffees."

He'd taken them from her before she stumbled back out the door in her hasty escape. He didn't owe her fidelity. They weren't together. But his failure to be even half the man she'd fallen in love with stung.

It was the last time she'd darkened his door without invitation, revoking their open-door policy until further notice.

"God, I can't do this." Not even she was sure what her prayer meant. Her need to cling to the truth butted up against her desire to fix her friendship with Luke. "Help me. Please."