



Sam Sullivan was standing at the back of the auditorium, greeting people as they came through the double doors, when he heard an unmistakable sound: something between a snort and a giggle, filled with joy. He'd know Clara Lewis's laugh anywhere. Instinctively, he looked up from his conversation with Nancy Jones to find the source of the sound. Clara was walking down the hall with a little girl and a man he recognized from Bible class earlier that morning. Dirk or Drake—no, Derek. He'd introduced himself and said he'd moved to Shady Springs with his daughter recently.

It was just like Clara to welcome strangers and make them feel right at home. He should be happy to see her talking with the visitor and leading him to her regular spot in the auditorium. Instead, an unpleasant pit formed in his stomach.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" He pasted on a smile and turned back to Nancy.

"I said the sign out front needs to be changed. We've had the same New Year's message for weeks now. I can't do it, but someone needs to."

"You're right. I'll get on that." He never drove past the front entrance on his way to the church building, and it was easy to forget about their sign on Main Street. He couldn't remember the last time

he'd changed the sign. It must have been sometime in January, if the message was about the new year. "Thanks for letting me know."

"What're you looking at?" Nancy gave him a questioning look.

Sam must've let his gaze wander to Clara's pew again. Nancy followed his line of sight.

"Who's that? He's handsome." Nancy craned her neck. "I wonder if he's single."

"I think Mr. Jones might take issue with that." He twisted his lips in a teasing smile.

Nancy swatted his arm. "Oh, you."

"Maybe you should go ask Clara about him." The two seemed awfully comfortable in that pew together. Derek leaned over his daughter and said something to Clara that made her laugh again.

Sam had no right to the dull ache in his chest, no claim to Clara's affections. But that didn't stop him from wishing she'd look at him the same way she looked at Derek now.

"Perhaps I will." Nancy's eyes twinkled with their shared teasing, but her expression softened when she looked in his eyes. "But I won't forget about you."

He wasn't entirely sure what she meant by that. He'd always worked hard to hide his true feelings. No one else could know what Clara really meant to him.

Derek was kind, clean-cut, and had a cute daughter. What more could a woman want? Not some bachelor preacher with a parsonage full of secondhand furniture and a calling that scared people away.

He'd been engaged once, a long time ago. But Rosie didn't want to be a preacher's wife. She'd walked away and changed his life with one sentence.

"I can't belong to someone who belongs to everyone else."

Sam nodded goodbye to Nancy and made his way up the aisle, training his gaze away from a certain section of the room. He stopped at the front pew of the auditorium, where he sat every Sunday. Alone, save for a hymnal and a box of tissues.

Today, however, Tom Simpson joined him. "Can I trouble you for a minute, Brother Sam?"

“Of course.” Sam scooted to make room and patted the space beside him.

“It’s about Micah, our grandson. I’m worried about him.”

Sam nodded. He’d had many conversations with the Simpsons over the years about their daughter and grandson. They’d prayed together for wisdom in the decision to take Micah into their home, although Sam and the Simpsons knew there was no real question of whether they’d take care of their grandson.

“Would you check in on him? Invite him to something with the youth group? We think if he found some friends his age, he’d be a little happier.”

“Of course.” Sam hadn’t thought about youth group activities in a while. Ever since their part-time youth minister, A.J., left for graduate school the summer before, the task had fallen on Sam. And he hadn’t done a great job. Perhaps he should recruit some help in that department.

“Thank you.” Tom smiled at him before turning his focus to the front where Bryce Reeves stood, welcoming the crowd and starting the first song.

Usually, Sam had trouble focusing on the song service because he was thinking about his sermon. Today, his mind couldn’t fix itself on either the hymns or his sermon. Instead, it kept wandering over to Clara’s pew, envisioning them sharing a smile or a songbook.

No. He tightened his hands into fists until his nails dug into his palms. He was letting his imagination carry him away. Clara had only met Derek this morning, the same as everyone else here. Time to center his mind on the words he was singing.

To God be the glory, great things He hath done ...

Closing his eyes, he sang the familiar tune.

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the earth hear His voice ...

By the final line, his heart had slowed its racing.

And give Him the glory, great things He hath done.

He sat with the rest of the congregation as Mr. Simpson got up to lead a prayer. The comfortable rhythm of standing and sitting, praying and singing, pulled his heart back to worship. By the end of the last song, he’d nearly forgotten all about the handsome new stranger. He

rose with his Bible in hand and stepped up to the pulpit. Smiling at the crowd, he let his gaze roam over the auditorium. Out of habit, his eyes found Clara.

Sam's smile slipped. His fingers gripped the edges of the wooden lectern. He cleared his throat.

"Good morning."

A chorus of good mornings echoed around the room.

"If you're visiting with us this morning, I'd like to extend a special welcome to you." Now his eyes refused to look at Clara. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to smile at Derek and his daughter.

Glancing down at his Bible, Sam paused. To the crowd, he hoped he appeared to be gathering his thoughts. He closed his eyes and allowed himself a moment of prayer.

Lord, please help me to get out of the way. Let Your message shine through. Please speak to me and through me this morning.

"We've been studying the book of Psalms the past few weeks, and today we'll be in Psalm twenty-seven."

Funny how often God spoke to Sam through his own sermons. Many times over his career as a preacher, he'd dig into a lesson and realize how much the message applied to his own life and struggles. But very rarely, like today, he'd prepare a sermon for the entire week only to feel God's words pierce his heart as if he'd never heard the lesson before.

"Wait for the Lord: be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!"

Who needed to learn to wait more than Sam?

Look at me, focused on what I can't have instead of waiting patiently for God.

Sam had studied the promises of the Bible. In fact, only last summer he'd taught a series of sermons on God's promises. Nowhere in the scriptures did God assure His followers romantic love and marital bliss. If it were so, Sam would know.

God had loved Sam well. More than he deserved.

He could be happy for Clara and whatever love she found. Even if it was with Derek or someone else.

Checking his notes briefly, Sam found his place in the outline. He

stepped away from the pulpit, speaking into his lapel microphone, and preached a message from the heart.

* * *

After the service, Sam watched from the front of the auditorium as Derek and his daughter were surrounded by church members wanting to welcome the new family. He'd already introduced himself, so he didn't join the throng. If Derek stuck around long enough, Sam would make his way over to add his welcome.

Besides, he had his own crowd of people to contend with.

"Great sermon this morning, Sam." One of the church elders, John Patterson, shook his hand.

"Yes, I've been enjoying the series on Psalms. There's so much good material," John's wife Susan piped in.

Of course, the comments after a service were rarely all positive. Suggestions ranged from light teasing to full-out complaining.

"Went a little long there, Preacher."

"I thought we talked about switching up the old songs for some new ones?"

"Why are we singing so many new songs? What's wrong with the classics?"

Everywhere he preached—from Nebraska to Texas to here in Arkansas—it was the same. Most people listened and left without comment. A few had kind things to say. And always someone had a complaint.

By the time Sam had greeted and conversed with everyone around him, Derek and his daughter were walking toward the exit with Clara.

"Do you like ice cream?" Derek smiled at Clara over his daughter's head. "Abby and I are looking for some good places around town. We'd love for you to join us sometime."

Sam stopped, his stomach sinking to his feet. He hadn't meant to overhear their private conversation and wished he hadn't. But now he held his breath as he waited for Clara's response.

"Oh, um, sure. That'd be nice."

He couldn't tell if Clara was simply being friendly or if she knew Derek was interested in her. Was Clara interested in Derek? Why wouldn't she be?

Clara deserved someone like Derek. And Sam was a fool for ever thinking he had a chance with her.