

Part I of The Promise series

A Promise to Love

A Novella



SIMI JOEL

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Contents

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	11
Chapter 3	19
Afterword	30
<i>About the Author</i>	32
<i>Also by Simi Joel</i>	34

Chapter 1



If she could, Hannah Kolawole would build a mansion right here, in this room covered with the scrawled writings and paintings of her children, alphabet boards, and splashes of color everywhere. This was her happy place. The only place in the world where her life—and sanity—didn't fall apart. When she'd left home in Oyo seven years ago to move to Lagos, she made a promise to herself and God that she would live a life of service, committed and selfless to Christ and others around her. At the school where she worked, the children were her calling and she'd been faithful to that promise; her life, a ministry of love. But, on days like today, she wondered why her life in Christ, which was supposed to be full, felt so empty. Why did she feel so alone?

The sound of running footsteps pulled her out of her thoughts. The tiny thuds carried with them a joy and burst of energy that spread throughout her body. The first child burst through the classroom door and let out a shrill greeting.

“Good morning, Miss Hannah!”

A Promise to Love

It never ceased to amaze Hannah how such tiny bodies could produce such ear-shattering sounds. Hannah chuckled and stepped out from behind her desk, but before she could swoop the boy into her arms, a girl burst into the room and shoved him forward.

“Be careful!” Hannah yelled, reaching out instinctively to break his fall.

“Good morning, Miss Hannah,” Stephanie cooed softly. As if she wasn’t the same human who’d just shoved her classmate. At just eight years old, she was a fireball.

“Stephanie, what have I told you about being gentle?”

“But—” she stuttered for an explanation. “—he was in my way,” she finally blurted out.

Hannah shook her head disapprovingly.

“That’s no reason to have shoved Chidozie. So, what do you say to him?”

“I’m sorry, Chidozie.” The conciliatory words left her lips, but her spread-legged stance said otherwise.

Hannah bit her lip, fighting hard to hold in her laugh and remain stern.

“And next time, what do you say?”

“Excuse me, please. May I pass through?”

“Good girl. Now, go drop your lunch bag and have your seat.”

Stephanie hopped off, Chidozie following at a safe distance. Other children trooped in, and soon their chattering voices and yells filled the classroom. *Beautiful chaos.* This was why she was here. Love for these children, who felt like hers, and also loved her in return.

The loneliness she’d felt earlier had slipped away, like it always did at the sound of their laughter. If only she could carry that sound in her purse all day. She returned to her spot at the front

Chapter 1

of the class and asked them to settle down. When their noise reduced to whispers, she commenced her teaching plan for the day. They'd just returned from the midterm break, so she asked them to write an essay on how they'd spent their one-week holiday. The rest of the day passed in a blur of revisions, readings, and assignments.

* * *

Bankole kept glancing at his watch, hoping he was covert enough not to be seen by his client. He had to get off early enough to go pick up Steph from school. She'd been pretty upset that morning, stamping her tiny feet on the floor in protest when he'd announced that he couldn't go with her. Thankfully, his mom was around, so his driver had taken them both. He chuckled at the thought of his eight-year-old daughter who called the shots in his life. She had every right to be unhappy; he'd broken his promise to accompany her to school many times. He hated disappointing her and didn't plan to miss picking her up this afternoon. There was also a teacher's note that Steph had handed him two days ago, after he returned from his trip. Her teacher had invited her parents for a review. A wave of sadness hit him. He would be going for the meeting alone, as he'd been for the past four years.

“Yes, I understand,” He said to the man on the screen, who'd finally paused from his long tirade to allow Bankole respond: ‘I will update the contract with the specifics we just talked about, and once it's approved by our legal team, we'll resend it to you.’

‘Yes. I hope that all the bases will be covered this time—no mistakes.’

A Promise to Love

‘Of course, Dr. Shawn. I’ll see to that personally.’

‘Have a nice day.’

He ended the call, pulled off his jacket, and changed into something more casual. The meeting had gone better than Bankole hoped. He’d expected the doctor to still be furious about the late delivery of the last set of medical equipment to his hospital. They’d almost jeopardized the opening of his new hospital branch, no thanks to their operations team, but of course, he always bore the brunt of customer frustration. As customer service lead, Bankole had to handle the cases of their largest clients directly. What was worse than an irate customer was an irate Director. He made a mental note to send an email to the operations team once he got back, then grabbed his car keys from the living room, and texted his mom that he was heading to Steph’s school. She was still out since leaving the house that morning. Most likely visiting one of her many friends.

His phone beeped with her response.

Ope o.

He chuckled. She was his lifesaver. Being a single dad was the hardest job ever, and the last year had been his worst and his best. He’d gotten a promotion at work that took him around the world. It was the best thing to happen to his career. He was meeting top clients in cities that he’d only ever dreamed of. But the promotion had come with a lot of adjustments he was struggling with. Especially the guilt of being away from his family, his daughter. He hadn’t always been this bothered about being available for family, but a lot had changed in his life. He’d learnt hard lessons that he couldn’t be taught twice. If only he could push himself harder to be a better, more present father.

Chapter 1

After I close this deal, I'll take time off—I promise.

In about forty-five minutes, he pulled up to the school and parked at the designated car park just outside the school premises. He walked up to the high fenced gate and rang the bell, waiting for a uniformed security officer to step out and ask for identification. After signing in, Bankole was let through. He took in the expanse of land that housed the school's different structures, the playground, three blocks of two-story buildings, and other smaller structures courted by well-tended front and side lawns. The entire school served was a blatant reminder of why the fees were so high. He wasn't complaining though, his little girl deserved the best. As he turned left toward the administration office to get directions to Steph's classroom, it dawned on him that the last time he'd brought his daughter to school was on the first day of resumption last term. He shook away the guilt settling on him again and hurried on to the classroom.

* * *

They were late.

Hannah looked up from her notes and glanced at Stephanie who was busy with toys. She was the only child left in the class, waiting for her parents to arrive. It was close to an hour since school had been dismissed, and Hannah was using the time to look over her lesson plan for the next day. She smiled at the girl who looked at the door at intervals with a scowl on her face. She knew the feeling and wondered what kind of parents they were to keep their child waiting for this long. Most of the parents were the rich executive types who were busy with

A Promise to Love

their careers. She understood their choices and tried hard not to judge their absences, but some of those parents showed an unacceptable level of apathy to their children. She had a nagging feeling that Stephanie's parents were one of those. In the three terms that Stephanie was in her class, Hannah had met only her grandmother.

She stiffened when a knock jolted her from her thoughts. She looked toward the door, hoping that the long-awaited parents had finally arrived, and it wasn't yet another facilities manager coming to check if the classroom was empty.

"Come in," Hannah said.

The door opened and a tall man stepped in looking curiously around until his eyes landed on Stephanie.

"Daddy!" She squealed and bounded off her chair, running across the room to the man. At least one of them was excited. The man stepped fully into the room, fluid confidence in every movement. Now smiling, he bent over and lifted his daughter in one swoop.

Hannah stood up, waiting for him to shift his attention to her so that she could introduce herself. A couple of seconds passed with him ruffling Stephanie's hair and planting kisses on her face.

Finally, he looked at Hannah, and cleared his throat.

"Okay, down you go." He lowered Stephanie, stepped up to Hannah and stretched his right hand toward her.

"Good afternoon ma'am ... uh, I'm Bankole—Mr. Manuel, Stephanie's father. I apologize for my tardiness; it was poor planning on my part. It won't happen again."

Hannah took his firm handshake.

"Good afternoon, sir. I'm Hannah, it's nice to meet you."

Did her voice just falter? He was different than what she'd

Chapter 1

expected, and her initial judgment took a back seat. But what had she expected? Maybe a suit, or at the very least, a buttoned-up shirt, trousers, and those serious-looking polished shoes that corporate men wear. His frame was intimidating—not in a malicious way, but protective. His posture was authoritative, but in the fitted short-sleeve T-shirt, jeans and sandals, he looked more like a University student than a father. Okay, now she was reaching.

She shook off the thoughts and continued speaking to him.

“I won’t take much of your time, but I thought a face-to-face conversation would be better than a phone call. I’d like to run through Stephanie’s performance with you. It’s the second half of the last term for this year, which is a bit later than I would have liked for this review, but I believe we can still maximize her performance for the rest of the year.”

She gestured to her assistant’s chair, asking him to sit. After he settled in, she sat behind her work desk.

“Stephanie is a wonderful girl, super smart, active, with a highly analytical mind. This is a key strength for her but can easily become a distraction if she’s not engaged. There are certain compulsory learning activities that she needs to participate in with guidance and instruction, but some of the usual learning activities bore her easily.”

“Is that a problem?” He sounded defensive and she understood. She’d had similar conversations in the past.

“Not at all. We believe that fun can be a developmental tool and encourage it among our kids. Stephanie likes doing things on her own terms, and I have observed that there are specific activities she prefers. Like I said, she needs to be engaged with things that interest her. I think this may be missing on the home front, seeing how much she wants to hold on to some of our

A Promise to Love

items in class.”

“Things like?”

“Things like puzzles, board games, block sets, and storyboards.”

“Toys? You want me to get her more toys? She has dolls, dollhouses and all the best toys a child could have, but she isn’t interested in them.”

Hannah chose her words carefully. “I’m very sure that you want and are doing what’s best for your daughter. I do too, and would like to support her growth to complement your great efforts. Based on my observation of her interests in class, I believe we should experiment with a different assortment of toys that also aid her learning.”

He looked like he was listening now. He leaned forward on the table and held her gaze, only breaking it at intervals to look at Stephanie.

Hannah went on to explain why fun was important, and how parents should participate in their children’s activities. At the end of her talk, Bankole nodded and promised to take action.

He stood and his phone rang.

“Sorry, I really have to take this. It was nice meeting you.”

“Same here. Have a great evening, sir.”

He nodded at Hannah, and led Stephanie by the hand, out of the class.

Soon after they left, Hannah settled down to complete her lesson plan, but her mind kept going back to Stephanie’s dad. However, the ring on his finger served as a warning for her to rein in her thoughts. Where was his wife anyway?

Her phone rang, breaking her thoughts. It was her mother calling, for the ninth time in two days. Hannah sighed and watched it ring until the call ended.

Chapter 1

Why was the woman calling her suddenly after seven years of silence? The whole thing stung like a fresh wound, but Hannah distracted herself by packing up her things. Whatever her mother wanted could wait, she wasn't ready to handle any reminder of the life she'd left behind.

* * *

"Miss Hannah." Bankole mouthed the name of the woman he'd just met—the one who'd made him feel like a recalcitrant child when they spoke earlier. He felt a strong want to be liked, but this wasn't about him at all, so why had he felt like a deer in headlights when she looked at him. It wasn't her sharp look—the blue pencil skirt and white blouse—that had flustered him; it was her eyes, shining and piercing like his high-school class teacher's. But unlike Mrs. Ezra, Miss Hannah was pretty. Very pretty.

She was smart, too, and he grudgingly admitted that their brief meeting had been enlightening. She'd even given him an assignment on his daughter. He'd tried not to feel offended. He wasn't a juvenile; he was an adult, and well capable of raising a child. Yet her words rang true, making him feel more guilty about his absence in Steph's growing up.

"Daddy, why are you quiet?" Steph asked from the back seat. He looked at her through the rear view mirror.

"Nothing serious, baby. I'm just thinking about what your teacher said."

"Miss Hannah is very nice."

"Yes, she is, and she gave us both assignments to do."

"Huh? Miss Hannah gave you an assignment? Cool."

A Promise to Love

“I know, right?”

He might as well start his “assignment” now. He turned on the GPS and searched for his favorite bookstore.

“Let’s go shopping.”

Chapter 2



“**H**ey, girl! Guess what?”

“What?” Hannah asked, curious as to why Kosisochukwu, her childhood best friend, was calling at seven o’clock on a Sunday.

“I’m in your city!” Kosisochukwu squealed.

“Really?”

“Yeah, I got into town this morning and just checked into my hotel. We have a conference starting tomorrow, but I took the first flight in today so I can get some rest ahead of the event. Come have dinner with me tonight—we have a lot to catch up on. You can even sleep over, just like old times.”

Hannah mulled it over, eager to say yes, but she knew it would end up being more than dinner. It’d been months since they’d seen each other, so it would be a long night of *gisting*.

“Sounds delightful, babe, but I have work tomorrow.”

“So? You’re too serious. How does work affect an evening of fine dining and pampering? I’m in town for a few days and I’ve missed you terribly. Pack a few clothes and come chill with me.”

A Promise to Love

I'm sure my husband's blood pressure will go back to normal knowing that you're around."

"Haha. I'm surprised he let you travel with your *belle*."

"He'll be fine. I needed a break from all the smothering."

"Kosi, you *no fit* change."

"So what do you say? You could use some pampering. Let me spoil you this week."

"All right, fine—I'll come after church."

"*Daalu so*. Thank you, I'll text you the address. See you soon, darling."

An hour after church service ended, Hannah arrived at the hotel. As soon as Kosi opened the door, she pulled Hannah into a tight hug. Hannah leaned gently into it, careful to avoid Kosi's baby bump.

"You look so beautiful," Hannah said. "Your skin is glowing."

"Don't let this glow fool you *o*, I can't wait to have this baby."

Hannah had barely sat down when Kosi started bombarding her with pregnancy tales. When she'd spoken to her heart's content, she looked Hannah over.

"How are you and how's work?"

"I'm fine, and work is great. My children are, like, the best thing to ever happen to me. I can't even start describing the drama that happens in my class every day." She counted on her fingers. "I have a self-appointed PA, the class clown, the mother hen who acts like she's twenty years old, the journalist, and the politician. It's like an entire city in one class."

Kosi laughed. "It does sound like fun, but we both know it's hard work. I get nervous just thinking about this one that will soon pop out of me. What you have is a gift, but let's leave children gist for now. How far that *bobo* who was eyeing you in church? Have you both ... you know?" Kosi trailed off and

Chapter 2

winked mischievously.

“It didn’t go anywhere. I’m too busy for anyone who can’t make up his mind and speak up. In fact, I’m too busy for relationships right now. I’m just not ready.”

“He might just be shy and probably needs some coaxing, you know. With this ‘I’m busy’ you keep saying, maybe you’ve been carrying strong face for all them brothers. Chill small *ehn* and allow somebody who wants to show God’s daughter some love, do so. Love is sweet, hmm.”

“I can see that. You’re living proof.”

“Thank you, *enyi*. Anyway, let’s head down to the restaurant for dinner. We can continue this conversation there,” Kosi said.

“Okay, but first, I need to quickly use the washroom.”

While in the washroom, Hannah heard her phone ring.

“Your mum’s calling!” Kosi yelled.

Hannah froze and didn’t respond. When she stepped out, she took her phone from Kosi. It rang again, but she only bit her lip and stared at it until it stopped ringing.

“Why didn’t you take it? We can wait for you to talk to her, there’s no rush.”

Hannah forced a smile and lowered her eyes to avoid Kosi’s probing gaze. “Nah, it’s fine, I’ll call her back later.”

“You’re sure everything’s okay?” Kosi asked softly, concern in her voice.

“Yes,” Hannah replied hurriedly. “Everything’s fine. It’s just a phone call. Let’s go eat. I’m hungry.”

She looped her hand through Kosi’s elbow and ushered her out of the room. They walked to the restaurant and chose a table for two overlooking the water.

As they finished placing their orders, Kosi giggled.

“What’s funny?” Hannah asked.

A Promise to Love

“See that guy over there, the one in the blue T-shirt and glasses?”

Hannah looked sideways at the direction Kosi discreetly pointed to. She nodded.

“Yes? Do you know him?” Hannah asked.

“I don’t, but he kind of reminds me of Steve, that boy who had an obvious crush on you in SS3.”

Hannah looked closely at the man but turned quickly away when he looked right at their table.

“Nope, I don’t see it. They look nothing alike.”

“Well, how would you? You never gave the boy more than a second glance back then, with all the boys swooning over you,” Kosi teased.

“You’re one to talk. You were the diva, I was the side kick.”

“Yeah, those were the fun days,” Kosi said wistfully.

Hannah agreed. School had been the bright spot of her childhood. An escape from the tumultuous home front. At school, she could be anything she wanted, and she was. Class captain and prefect, press club leader, teachers’ favorite—and, thanks to her friend, a diva. Bright and beautiful, she was loved and she’d soaked it all up to make up for what was missing at home. *Home*—where she was nothing but a picture of failure to her parents, all because she wasn’t a boy. The scornful and spiteful look her father gave her whenever he’d looked at her was forever etched in her mind. Her mother never said a word or stood up for her. It felt like she blamed Hannah for losing her husband’s love. It was worse because they’d been unable to have another child after her. Everything then went to ruin after Hannah completed her Chemical Engineering degree, coming top of her class. Her father had seemed to start respecting her until she announced that she wanted to teach.

Chapter 2

Years of his vile feelings and actions had come pouring out from his mouth. He'd called her useless and a disappointment. She was no child of his, and if not that he was a good man, he would have sent both her and the mother packing after she didn't give him a male child. He'd fumed that despite his sacrifices for her, this was how Hannah had chosen to repay him. She'd scoffed at him. Sacrifices! Maybe he meant his beatings meant to toughen her up and make her as strong as a boy. Or perhaps he was referring to the times when she'd been forced to carry heavy objects and run tough errands, and if she wore a skirt that was higher than her ankle, she would get a beating. The response to her every mistake was always a beating.

Her phone rang again, and this time, Hannah couldn't hide her frustration.

"Stop calling me," she muttered.

When the phone stopped ringing, she looked up to see Kosi studying her closely.

"Hannah, when last did you speak with your parents?" Kosi asked.

"We haven't spoken since I left home, and now my mother keeps calling me like the world's ending."

Kosi understood, she'd know about everything from the start.

"I'm so sorry. Let's just take our food and head back upstairs," Kosi said.

Kosi motioned the waiter over and requested for their food to be packed. Once done, they headed upstairs and ate their meal in silence. Thereafter, Kosi attempted to probe once again and Hannah broke down in tears, sobbing into her friend's arms.

"It's okay, *enyi*," Kosi soothed as she rubbed Hannah's back gently. "You'll get past this. Why don't you hear her out, find

A Promise to Love

out why she's calling, rather than punish yourself with worry? You can then decide if you would speak with her again."

Hannah nodded in agreement, and when her phone rang again, she picked up and spoke with her mother.

* * *

"Daddy, come play with me," Stephanie pleaded in her high-pitched voice.

"Okay, baby, but daddy's working. I will come as soon as I'm done, okay?"

"Hmm, okay." Stephanie pouted and left his room reluctantly. Earlier in the week, when his mom announced that she was going to see his sister and have a mini-vacation in the UK for two weeks, he'd been excited for her. She deserved the rest. Two days after, the nanny had called in sick, so he'd given her a week off to recover. With the weekend approaching, Bankole thought that he and Stephanie would get some father-daughter bonding time. Unfortunately, he had to shelve that thought when his boss called to inform him that another client meeting had been set for that weekend. Bankole had spent the entire day yesterday preparing the documents for the meeting which was in less than an hour.

"Daddy!" Stephanie was back.

"Baby, go and play with your puzzles, okay."

"But it's no fun doing them alone," she whined.

"I'm sorry, but daddy has to work. I'll finish soon."

"Okay. But I'm hungry."

"Do you want a sandwich?"

"I want jollof rice."

Chapter 2

“There’s no jollof rice,” he replied without looking up.

“I’ll make it.”

“What?” Bankole laughed and stared at his daughter. She harrumphed and stood her ground. He wasn’t about to argue with this child.

“You know what, let’s not give you too much work. I’ll order from our favourite restaurant and we can both eat jollof rice.”

‘Yay!’

He picked his phone to place the order as Stephanie turned away to leave the room. Soon, he was engrossed in his work. When it was time, he joined the work call and stared at the blank screen.

“Hello? Can you hear me?” Bankole asked.

“Yes,” the voice on the other end replied, and his client’s stoic face appeared.

“I’m glad you could make it. I’ll share my screen now, so please let me know if you can see the document.”

Bankole clicked to share, but just as he opened his mouth to ask another question, there was a scream, followed by a loud crash.

“Steph?” Fear gripped Bankole’s chest, and without a second thought, he rushed out of the room.

“Baby?” he called. “Where are you?”

He heard whimpering coming from the kitchen, so he rushed in; stopping cold in his tracks when he saw Steph lying on the floor with her hands over her face. The gas stove was lit and there was a small pot lying on the floor beside her.

Oh no! She wanted to cook.

Bankole turned off the stove and moved his daughter’s hands away from her face. He gasped and his head spun. Everything was a blur after that—him scooping her into his arms, grabbing

A Promise to Love

his keys, and rushing out the door—down the stairs and into the car. The only things he felt were his pulsing heart and the grip of his muscles on the steering wheel as he sped to the hospital.

Not again. Lord, what have I done?

Chapter 3



It was still early when Hannah arrived in Oyo. Her stomach was in knots, and she fought the urge to turn back home. What was she thinking—taking Kosi's advice to go home after seven years? What would she say to her parents? It wasn't like she had much of a choice, though. Her father was dying.

She ordered a taxi at the park, and as the drive started, memories of her childhood returned. Her apprehension slowly gave way to silent anger. In those years that she'd been away, not once had her mother or father called. But now, somehow, her father lying on a sickbed was supposed to make everything go away, and she was meant to act like the bigger person.

Her mother had told her to come and make peace but thinking about it now almost made her retch. Couldn't her mother have come to make peace all those years ago?

"Calm down," Hannah muttered to herself. She wouldn't let her emotions get the best of her. The mission was simple: See her father and tell him she forgave him. So that if he died, she would have a clear conscience.

A Promise to Love

Is that all this is about? a silent voice nudged. What happened to loving everyone as Christ loved you, and the vow you took to give the love you never got from your parents?

She was giving love every day, but this was different. Love her father? Even God had to understand she simply couldn't let this go that easily.

When the driver pulled up to the hospital, Hannah got out and paid the fare. Pulling her bag close, she took a deep breath and stepped into the reception. After confirming her visiting rights, Hannah made her way to her father's ward.

Hesitant, she knocked on the door and waited. Not getting any response, Hannah turned the knob and pushed the door open slightly. Peeking in, she saw her mother sitting beside a bed. Stepping fully inside, Hannah moved closer and saw a man lying on the bed. It took a moment for it to hit her that the frail figure she was looking at was her father. The bullish man she knew had shrunk to mere skin and bones.

“Hannah.” Her mother stood. “You came.”

Hannah’s mother was also a shadow of herself. Her eyes were red, and her *buba* drooped over her emaciated frame.

Suddenly unable to speak, Hannah simply nodded and looked back at the bed.

Understanding that this wasn’t the time for many words, her mother didn’t press further.

“You came at the right time,” she said. “He’s awake.”

Hannah drew close to the edge of her father’s bed, fighting the tears that threatened to fall. For the twenty-eight years of her life, she’d only ever felt hate for this man. So, as compassion fought its way to the surface, she struggled for control. As if her hands developed a life of their own, they stretched out toward him. She touched his skin and lingered. In response, her father

Chapter 3

turned his head and looked up at her, his eyes sunken and weary. But there was something else, too. As recognition crept into his eyes, so did the look that she'd never been able to forget: Repulsion.

His reaction hit her like a kick to her gut. He turned away sharply, pulling his hand from her touch. Anger erupted from her inside. She lost control and began to cry; loud, heavy tears. Hannah felt her mother move close, but she pushed the woman away.

“I hate you.” It came out as a whisper, but it shook her. Those weren’t the words she planned to say.

“I hate you!” she yelled. “You’re dead to me!”

Then she turned on her heel and walked out of their lives for the second time.

* * *

Bankole sat in his car outside the supermarket for a few minutes, taking deep breaths. The car park was surprisingly empty for an evening. He was there to buy some snacks and supplies for tonight’s stay at the hospital, but he needed this time to breathe. He’d hardly had time to himself since they arrived at the hospital three days ago.

He sat there with his eyes shut, muttering, “How did I let this happen again? How?”

He’d stared at Steph for hours as she slept last night, feeling like a failure. Seeing the burns on his daughter’s face and arms stung deep as though they were his own wounds. He’d promised himself to never again lose sight of his family, but he’d failed. Thankfully, the doctors had said they weren’t too severe, and

A Promise to Love

she would recover. They were monitoring her today and would release her in another two days.

He shook himself out of his thoughts, swung the car door open, and walked into the store. He spent some minutes walking around the aisles, picking Steph's favorite chocolate bar first, some bottles of water, chips for himself, and some toiletries. Then he walked to the checkout and unloaded his cart.

"Mr. Manuel?"

Bankole looked behind him in response to the female voice and did a double take when he saw Hannah.

She looked at him curiously, her head tilted in concern. He wasn't surprised; he must have looked a sight after all those sleepless nights.

"Uh ... Miss Hannah, good evening. How are you?"

"I'm good, thanks. You?"

Bankole shrugged.

"How's Stephanie?"

He wondered at her question, growing slightly irritated. Didn't she know what was going on? Steph hadn't been in school for three days, and her teacher hadn't even called to find out why. What sort of teacher was she? Was her pretty face and demeanor just a cover for her indifference about her students?

"I've been out of town for a couple of days and can't wait to get back to work," she added. "I hope she hasn't worn the temp teacher out yet?"

Her reply and smile softened him. He now understood, But before he could reply, the cashier motioned for him to pay.

"Excuse me," he said, turning to complete his payment. Then, he waited for Hannah to complete hers.

They walked out of the store together, and he began telling her

Chapter 3

about the fire accident involving Stephanie and her treatment at the hospital. Hannah's face grew wide.

"May I see her, please?" she asked almost immediately.

Bankole couldn't refuse, and soon they were in his car heading to the hospital.

* * *

This was the second time that week that Hannah had been in a hospital, but this time was different. She cared.

Stephanie was sitting up on the bed and her eyes lit up when Hannah entered.

"Miss Hannah!" Stephanie squealed.

"Yes, sweetheart. How's my super girl doing?"

Stephanie launched into her version of the story, embellished with details that only a storyteller like her could weave. Finally, she ended by saying: "I'm going to look ugly now. No one will like me anymore."

"Huh?" Hannah opened her mouth in mock disbelief. "Oh no, you didn't. You're the most beautiful girl ever, and a strong one at that, a superhero with a badge. Don't you know that all heroes wear badges?"

Stephanie giggled. "I guess you're right." She peeked curiously at Hannah. "Do you think that fire has radiation, and I'll become a super-smart scientist who can move things with my mind?"

Hannah dropped her voice to a whisper. "Do you want to hear a secret?"

"Yes."

"I think you already can." She moved to tickle Stephanie. "See? You're moving my hands and they are coming over to you

A Promise to Love

right now!"

Stephanie squealed as Hannah tickled her, her laughter filling the room.

* * *

Bankole was returning from the doctor's office when he heard the noise coming from Steph's room. He ran over but stopped suddenly at the door. There was no trouble. His baby was laughing.

For the first time in days, he felt relief. Everything will be just fine. He stayed by the door, taking in the image. He didn't know how long he stood there until Hannah tucked Steph in and planted a kiss on her forehead.

His eyes pooled and he barely had time to regain composure when Hannah turned toward the door.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were back," she said.

Bankole looked behind her and saw that Steph's eyes were already closing.

Hannah chuckled. "She's a powerhouse, all right, but a girl needs her beauty sleep."

She walked quietly past Bankole and he followed her out of the room.

"May I drop you off at home?" he asked.

"No, it's fine, I don't want to be a bother," she said.

"You aren't a bother." He insisted on her comfort, and also because he found himself drawn to Hannah, wanting to talk to her.

"Oh, well, if you insist. It's a kind gesture and I'd be rude to refuse."

Chapter 3

“I agree,” he smiled.

They drove in silence until she asked a question out of nowhere.

“Where’s your wife?”

“What?”

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to pry. I’d only been wondering why Stephanie’s mom wasn’t around, seeing that your daughter’s hurt.”

He tightened his fist on the wheel and briefly looked at her before turning back to the road. How should he start to tell her that he was responsible for his wife’s absence? Sighing, he decided that he was tired of this burden of guilt and the pain. Right there, he turned his memories and pain into words.

“My wife left me because I was never present.”

“Wow, I’m sorry to hear that.”

Bankole nodded.

“I missed so many important moments in our lives because I was busy and thought I was making a life for us. Lucy always complained but I never listened. Then, on our third anniversary, I got home to meet her waiting with her bags packed.”

He remembered that night as if it happened yesterday.

“I walked into the living room, which was decorated with candles and flowers. Dressed in a fitted low-cut red dress that stopped just above her knees, she knocked the breath out of me, but it didn’t dawn on me that it wasn’t a mere surprise until I saw the anniversary cake set with food set on the table. Then she stood up and told me that she was leaving me. Her bags were packed, and she had the car key in one hand. I tried to beg but it turned into a full-blown argument. She left in anger.

I thought she’d be back the next day, but I received a phone call from the police that morning, saying my Lucy was dead.

A Promise to Love

An accident with a truck.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw Hannah cover her mouth with her hand.

“Oh my God, that’s terrible!”

She touched his shoulder. It was comforting, so Bankole continued to talk about the guilt he’d been carrying for four years, and his inability to move past that experience. By the time they arrived at Hannah’s house, his chest was tight and heaving. If he’d been a good husband to Lucy, she wouldn’t have left, and she wouldn’t have died. The fear and guilt still haunted him every day and night, but this was the first time he’d shared it with anyone.

“I still wear my ring as a reminder of the mistake I swore to never repeat. But with Steph’s incident, I feel like I don’t deserve any more chances.”

Hannah remained quiet for a while and Bankole felt like he’d said too much until he heard her sniffling.

He looked over to see her sobbing quietly.

“I’m very sorry, Hannah. It wasn’t my intention to burden you. I mean, we’ve only just met and I’m telling you the story of my life. Please don’t cry.”

She only cried harder, and he sat confused as to whether pulling her into his arms would be appropriate. He chose to wait it out and maintain the distance between them.

Hannah soon calmed down, but her voice shook when she tried to speak.

“I feel so embarrassed.” She smiled weakly.

He gave her a minute, sensing that there was something more.

“Do you want to share what’s bothering you?” he asked finally.

“My father is dying, and I just told him I hate him. So hearing you talk like this about your family is a bit too much. I see how

Chapter 3

you look at your daughter and I've wished that my father would look at me with just a fraction of that love. Somehow, I was hoping that I would get my wish when I saw him but ... ”

He listened as Hannah told him about the physical abuse she'd endured because she'd been born the “wrong gender.” How she'd thought that leaving would erase the years of bitterness stored in her heart, and when it didn't, she'd convinced herself that a little hate was okay. Now, she was breaking under all of that weight.

What was it his mother always said? “Love and hate don't come from the same source. Holding on to hate is like injecting yourself with a little poison every day. It would kill you.”

Hannah finished her story and wiped her eyes. Bankole saw a reflection of his state in her eyes.

A thought dropped in his heart and he voiced it aloud.

“I believe God's telling us it's time to let go. If your hate and my guilt feel this heavy, we shouldn't be carrying them.”

She nodded and he continued.

“I haven't had the strength to face this part of my life alone, but you've helped me today.” He fingered the ring on his hand.

“Yes, I believe that God's grace is sufficient to cover our weaknesses. He's our strength and ever-present help in time of need, and He'll guide us if we forgive and let go of the hurt, pain, and fear that we've been holding on to.”

“You know what? I have an idea. I'm willing to make a pact with you right now. To let go and allow God do His thing with me, if you promise to do the same.” Bankole looked over expectantly.

Hannah stayed quiet and he let the silence hang. Eventually, she nodded.

“I'm willing,” she said quietly gathering herself before un-

A Promise to Love

fastening her seat belt. “Thanks for the ride. And everything else.”

“You’re welcome, Miss Hannah.”

* * *

That night, Hannah thought about Bankole’s words over and over again. She’d bared her soul to two people in one week, but there was still one person she kept away from. That same night, Hannah walked into the waiting arms and loving embrace of her heavenly Father.

“Lord, it’s hard,” she cried. Again and again, He showed her His Word.

Then Hannah picked up her phone to call her mother, and she said those words that she’d since been unable to: “I forgive you.” She shared the love of the Father she’d received and invited her parents to do the same.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life,” she quoted.

Her mother responded with tears and an open heart, saying yes to the invitation and receiving the life of Christ. Her father, not so much, but Hannah knew that she’d done her part. It was all in God’s hands now. She’d fulfilled her promise to love.

* * *

On the other side of town, as Bankole pulled into the hospital car park, he felt love for the first time in years. It wasn’t natural;

Chapter 3

like in baring his heart, space had opened up for something more filling: Forgiveness.

“God forgives you, Bankole. I forgive you.” He said aloud, sliding off the ring that had served as a reminder of his mistakes. When he walked into the hospital, he was a new man—a loved man.

THE END.

Afterward



I hope you enjoyed reading The Promise series as much as I loved writing the stories. It was in the middle of working on a novel, which I'm planning to release next year, that I wrote The Hearts We Hold, and I didn't imagine I'd enjoy it as much as I did.

My heart's desire is to continue writing interesting stories in different genres, but always with one message at the center: to remind us that God loves us unconditionally. I want to keep sharing imperfect characters who make you laugh, cry, scream, or want to pull your hair out, and through them, remind you that no matter your situation, you can find joy, hope, and peace.

My novel in progress tells an incredible story of faith, secrets, betrayal, love, family, and everything in between. It's been a couple of years in the making, with many moments when I wondered if it would ever see the light of day. But I'm optimistic that you'll love it (because I already do). Feedback from beta readers has started rolling in, and some of it has had me in stitches.

To everyone who's read, shared, reviewed, sent kind words, or simply cheered me on, thank you for riding with me. Your

Afterword

support is truly priceless.

If you haven't, I'd like to invite you to join my mailing list for exclusive access to my notes, behind-the-scenes moments, first dibs on giveaways, and plenty of other fun stuff. I'd like to invite you to join my mailing list for exclusive access to my notes, behind-the-scenes moments, first dibs on giveaways, and plenty of other fun stuff.

Until next time.

Simi



About the Author



Simi is a storyteller at heart, crafting stories and worlds since her early teenage years. Her writing journey has evolved from bulletins to publications for university departments, eventually blossoming into flash fiction, short poems, and career-related articles. In 2017, she published her debut thriller novella, "Missing."

By day, Simi works in business development and customer marketing. In her free time, she nurtures her creativity through reading novels, handcrafting, volunteering, and singing her favorite songs at the top of her lungs. Born and raised in Nigeria, she now calls Canada home and hopes to inspire others through her journey.

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Also by Simi Joel



**COMING
SOON**

Title to be revealed ...

One accident, untold secrets, two lives (and more) connected by tragedy, until love, and an unseen threat forces the truth into the open. This is a stirring tale of guilt, secrets, and redemption.

Stay connected for updates and many more fun stuff.

IG: simi_stories

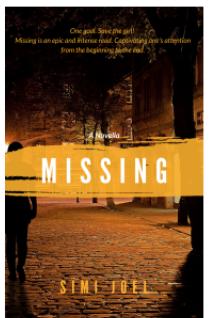


Scarred

Teni is only a woman working hard at her craft, and looking forward to her upcoming marriage. Until she encounters a young girl's story that forces her to confront the painful scars of her past. Burdened with the responsibility of helping the girl and her family, Teni must find the strength she isn't sure she has.

On other hand, Ranti appears to have it all—a thriving career, a loving family, and a promotion. Then tragedy strikes and an old flame reappears, offering her a second chance at happiness.

Scarred is a story that poignantly depicts the struggles of two women as they try to navigate life in the face of the changing landscapes of their emotional lives.



Missing

<https://selar.com/998791j03h>

Away from home, in the service of her country, Eunice is relishing her independence. Everything changes when in one fleeting moment of curiosity, she is abducted. In the days that follow, Eunice's friends have to work through their personal issues and search for her. The clues they find lead them to uncover a mind boggling conspiracy.



The Deal

<https://selar.com/755591o7k7>

In a stroke of ill-fate, Kolade, a struggling job seeker finds himself in debt to man who saved his life. To pay his debt, he has to do one job. So, he makes a deal, but the stakes are higher than he imagined.