

# The Hearts We Hold

A Novella

SIMI JOEL





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HOLD*

*A Novella*

*First published by Similoluwa Joel 2025*

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*First edition*

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## *Chapter 1*



**H**umming quietly, Hannah moved stationery around her desk, arranging coloring pens until they were in uniform rows, stealing a quiet moment before the students trooped in. Today was ordinary, and she loved that. Earlier, her colleagues grumbled during the principal's marathon welcome speech, but she was secretly content. As a school teacher, routine was comforting. Every term promised the chaos of new students with developing personalities and inquisitiveness, but she could handle that.

Her holiday had been filled with a variety of activities, including movies, church programs, youth events, and visits to friends. But the silence that welcomed her whenever she returned home sharpened her loneliness, reminding her of what she longed for. The time spent with Bankole—Stephanie's father—whether on late-night calls or in person, was a warm spot in her life, filling a space she didn't share with anyone else.

“Hello ...”

The low, unexpected greeting broke her thoughts. Hannah

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turned sharply. The classroom was supposed to be empty. Children and teachers were still gathered at the assembly, and most parents would leave immediately after drop-off. No one else should be here yet.

Her eyes found him quickly. Bankole stood in the doorway, his presence filling the small room. The corners of his lips curved, forming a slow, disarming grin.

“Good morning, Mr. Bankole,” she called, feigning as if they were strangers, but her fingers played with a pencil.

“What brings you here today?”

“I wanted to say hello to my daughter’s favorite teacher,” he said. “I looked for you at the assembly, but you’d already left. A colleague of yours told me where to find you.”

“Just needed to tidy up before the chaos begins,” she said, trying not to sound too happy. “But Steph is in Geoffrey’s class this year, right?”

His grin faltered, and he cleared his throat. “Yeah. She’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss her too,” she said softly.

With flourish, Bankole held out a small gift bag.

She blinked. “For me?” she asked as she took it and looked inside. There was a cute bottle of perfume, a single flower, and a chocolate bar.

“A little back-to-school something,” he said.

“You get me, B.” She pressed a hand to her chest. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure. Anyway, I should get going. Guess I’ll see you around.”

She caught his gaze. “Is that a promise?”

He nodded. His eyes conveyed an anticipation that mirrored hers. They’d grown close since Stephanie’s hospital scare. What had started as check-in calls had become regular evening catch-

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ups—“Steph wants to say hi” randoms—then cozy dinners in his home. Lately, they’d both been busy, but Hannah hadn’t stopped looking forward to his company.

“Let’s walk back together,” she offered. “I want to see if I can greet some new parents at drop off before they leave.”

As Hannah squeezed past him in the doorway, her front nearly brushing his, his chin fell into her line of sight. She caught a whiff of his familiar, fresh, citrus scent, and their arms brushed lightly. A flutter stirred in her belly, but she masked the reaction, focusing on leaving the room with composure.

After the assembly, she quickly settled her students. She was about to read a book when Geoffrey strode in.

He paused in the doorway, an eyebrow raised. “There was a parent looking for you earlier.”

“Mr. Bankole?” she asked, already guessing. “You sent him my way?”

He nodded. “It seemed urgent. I told him his daughter’s in my class now, but he insisted on seeing you.”

“Hmm.” She didn’t offer anything further.

“I see …” Geoffrey smirked.

She paused. “What?”

Geoffrey tucked his hands into his pockets. “Well, since you asked, you two looked … close, coming out of the classroom together.”

Her shoulders stiffened. “Close? And what exactly do you mean by that?” she asked pointedly.

Geoffrey lifted his hands defensively. “I overstepped. I just meant you seemed friendly. You were his daughter’s teacher, after all. It’s good to have rapport with parents. I hope to build that with mine this year.”

She tilted her chin toward the door. “You could start by

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spending more time with your own students.”

He took the hint and shuffled out.

When he was gone, she exhaled slowly, realizing her hand was clenched around the book she was holding. She turned her attention back to her students and began to read.

\* \* \*

Bankole eased his car into the only open spot in the jam-packed parking lot outside his client’s office. His boss’s voice crackled through the car speakerphone.

“Your appointment is set for next Tuesday. You’ll need to be in Jos by Monday night,” his boss said.

Bankole’s jaw flexed. Tuesday was Stephanie’s ninth birthday. He’d promised himself this year would be different. No last-minute cancellations or weak attempts to make up. Stephanie was still sulking over his absence from her church drama.

“Sir,” he said, keeping his tone even, “my vacation is booked for next week.”

There was a pause, and the faint rustle of papers on the other end.

“I understand, but this meeting can’t be pushed. His second hospital branch opens in a month and he needs support chasing some permits.”

Bankole rested his forehead briefly against the steering wheel. “I’ll book my flight,” he said finally.

The call ended. He loosened his tie and hit the phone call button for Dara, the department’s travel assistant.

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“Already on it,” came his voice, skipping any greeting.

Bankole managed a short laugh. “Let me guess, you already got the details before the call reached me.”

“Yep. But ...” Dara hesitated.

“Yes?”

“You’re supposed to be on vacation next week, and Steph’s birthday is on Tuesday. What’s your plan?”

“I know, I’ll try to work around the schedule. Please book my return flight for that afternoon. If the meeting’s early, I can make it back in time for the party.”

“Hmm, that’s doubtful.”

Bankole understood. These meetings never ended in the boardroom. They stretched into long evenings of bars, banter, and deals sealed after the official agenda.

“You really should take your vacation,” Dara’s voice cut back in, snapping Bankole out of his thoughts. “You don’t want to keep missing opportunities to make memories with your kid.”

“You sound like that cricket in *Pinocchio*,” Bankole said, referring to Stephanie’s latest favorite show.

“The conscience guy? You should listen to me then. You’ve got to make the time, she’s growing up fast.”

“I know, I know. I’ll do better,” Bankole promised, ending the call.

As he adjusted his tie, his thoughts drifted to the morning with Hannah. Her smile softened his guilt and the delight in her eyes as she thanked him lit a flame in his heart.

He adjusted his collar, his fingers brushing his empty ring finger. He’d finally stopped blaming himself for his wife’s accident and replaying that night, searching for what he could have changed. God had helped him make peace with it, but moving on was a different battle. Hannah made it feel possible,

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and that scared him.

He stepped out of the car, straightening his jacket. At the reception desk, he offered a smile to the receptionist.

“Good morning, I have an appointment with Mrs. Lois.”

The receptionist nodded and gestured toward the elevators. As the elevator doors slid shut, he couldn’t shake the image of Hannah standing in that quiet classroom, her laughter asking him if there was room for more than friendship, for family.

\* \* \*

Studying was a chore, and while weekends were dedicated to preparing for her project management certification, Hannah hardly ever met her goals. Expanding her skills was important if she wanted to take on administrative roles such as managing educational programs and organizing workshops. With the exam just over two months away, the pressure was starting to get to her.

Kosisochukwu had offered to keep her company via video call. Hannah was sitting at her dining table, textbooks and a large notepad spread before her. Kosi’s face appeared and disappeared from view of the laptop screen from time to time. On her breaks, they chatted about old classmates, office drama, Kosi’s baby and her latest antics, neighborhood gossip, and whatever else crossed their minds. Topics were never in short supply.

“Thank you for keeping me company,” Hannah said, stretching her back.

“Girl, don’t worry about it. I’m alone tonight and loving

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it. Oluchi is with her grandparents, and my husband is on a business trip. So, this weekend's all mine. I don't mind sharing part of it with you, as long as you promise a full paragraph of dedication to me at the end of it all."

Hannah laughed softly. She'd give Kosi an entire page if she could. Her friend had been her rock in more ways than one, even through pregnancy. Hannah's mind cast back to when her father had been clinging to life in the hospital. Kosi had been there for her, praying with her, encouraging her to share the gospel with a man who had spent a lifetime rejecting her. He'd wanted a son, not her.

She had long learned to live with that. But his rejection of Christ had hurt deeper than the years of rejection. It had felt like failure before her heavenly father. The one task she'd felt burdened to fulfill had been beyond her reach.

Kosi had encouraged her—she'd planted a seed, and God would touch his heart.

Hannah shook off the descending blues and decided it was time for a break.

"That suya is calling my name," she said, eyeing Kosi's plate through the screen. "Looks so good with that *kunu aya*."

Kosi bit off a chunk of meat, exaggeratedly chewed, and mouthed, "Yummy."

Hannah rolled her eyes playfully. Her phone buzzed with a message from Bankole. A teasing check-in about how the studying was going.

"*Good*," she typed back, then returned to her reading.

Minutes later, her phone rang. Her heart leapt, then plummeted when she saw her mother's name flash across the screen.

"I thought we agreed that your phone would be on DND while you study?" Kosi scolded, her voice muffled through the

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speaker.

“Sorry,” Hannah whispered, silencing the ringtone, but she didn’t turn off the phone.

It rang again.

Kosi’s face reappeared on the screen, her brow arched. “Let me guess. Your mom?”

“Yes.”

“And you aren’t picking up because … ?”

Hannah gently closed her textbook.

“Since dad got discharged, she’s been calling nonstop. Always about something new. I’m exhausted, Kosi.”

“But she’s your mom,” Kosi said quietly. “And you’re the only one she has.”

Hannah sighed. That line—you’re the only child, their only hope—had been used on her too many times as a leash tying her to their approval. Still, faced with Kosi’s hopeful expression, she caved. When the phone rang a third time, she answered and placed it on speaker.

A loud crash made both women jump.

“Mom? Are you okay?” Hannah asked.

Her mother’s sobs came through the line. “Your father’s mind is broken.”

“What? Did he hurt you?” Hannah’s mind raced through a million possibilities.

“No,” her mother cried, “but it’s just as bad. He’s been refusing every nurse, getting into angry fits, and throwing things. We’ve gone through four already. The last one just didn’t even come back. When I try to help, he calms down for some time, but it never lasts.”

“If trained nurses can’t handle him, what do you expect me to do?”

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“I don’t know.” Her mother’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I think he wanted to die. He’s acting out because he hates being helpless. Maybe if he sees you, he’ll calm down.” Her mother’s voice trembled.

Hannah let out a short, bitter laugh. “That’ll be the day,” she muttered. The day her presence soothed her father instead of provoking him would be the day Christ returned.

Another crash echoed.

“I have to go,” her mother said, and the line went dead.

Hannah shut her eyes and squeezed tightly as her mother’s words looped in her mind.

*He wanted to die. He should have.* The thought clawed at her. Her conscience pricked her, and she repented silently. His survival had been a miracle. It was a second chance for him. Or for her.

When she opened her eyes, Kosi’s expression had softened.

“Well,” Hannah said, “I guess that’s the end of studying for today.”

Kosi nodded. “Call me if you need anything, okay?”

“Yeah.” Hannah thanked her for the company and spent the rest of her day trying to leave the conversation behind.

## *Chapter 2*



**B**ankole's phone had been buzzing all afternoon with pictures, short clips, and messages about how well the party was going. But the notifications had stopped about an hour ago—which meant the party was over. He winced, imagining his daughter's inevitable tantrum. Stephanie had been counting down to the day for weeks, and despite his best intentions, he hadn't made it in time. By the time he arrived, the vendors were clearing the grounds. Colorful balloons and confetti littered the ground. A few guests remained, chatting in small groups while their children darted around with sugar-fueled energy.

He spotted Stephanie quickly. She was in high spirits, giggling and jumping around in her pink princess ball gown, tiny hands flailing as she narrated something to a woman seated at a corner of the tent.

His heart squeezed as a thought crossed his mind. Was she learning to live without him? He'd missed so many moments lately, so what if she'd stopped saving them and was starting to

## *Chapter 2*

build her memories around other people?

“Daddy!” Stephanie squealed when she saw him.

He barely had time to drop his bag before she came barreling into his arms. He caught her easily, lifting her high, her cake-smeared face wide with laughter.

“Hey, birthday girl.” He gave her a noisy kiss on the cheek. “How’s my baby doing? Did you have fun?”

“I won the dancing chair competition,” she declared proudly.

“Of course, you did,” he said, grinning as he carried her toward the tent, dragging his bag in the other hand.

The woman under the canopy turned, and his grin widened.

Hannah had come, and she’d waited.

“Thank you for coming,” he said once he reached her, setting Stephanie gently down. His voice dropped lower. “And I’m sorry for arriving so late. My flight was delayed.”

Hannah offered a small, shy wave. “I wouldn’t miss it for anything. It was a lovely party, and the kids had a blast. Even the adults didn’t want to leave,” she nodded toward a group of parents huddled under the tents.

“That’s good to hear,” he said, his gaze lingering on her eyes longer than he intended. He cleared his throat and dropped his gaze, admiring the way her dress fell softly and beautifully around her slender frame.

Then he excused himself to greet the few remaining guests, thanking vendors but glancing back occasionally to catch the sight of Hannah. By the time he returned, Geoffrey had joined her.

They exchanged polite greetings, but as he was about to head inside, a question popped into his mind, and he blurted without thinking.

“Hannah,” he said, turning back. “Do you have any plans for

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the evening? Or would you like to stay for dinner?"

She hesitated, her eyes shifting uneasily to Geoffrey.

Bankole instantly regretted asking in front of him. It was an invitation that wasn't meant for the company.

"We were just about to leave," Geoffrey said quickly. "Hannah was waiting for me to wrap up a conversation with some of the guys I met earlier. We were talking about tech and trading. You know, boring stuff for the ladies." He chuckled at his own joke. Bankole didn't.

I could drop you off," Bankole offered.

She shook her head. "It's fine. I'd love to stay, but I have to study this evening."

He nodded slowly, offered Geoffrey a firm handshake, then reached for Hannah's hand. Her fingers were cool and her grip tender. He held on a moment too long before letting go.

"I really wish you could stay," he whispered.

She ducked her head, lashes lowered. "Maybe next time."

She and Geoffrey waved goodbye to Stephanie and walked toward the parking lot. Bankole's gaze followed them until they disappeared beyond the gate.

He felt a small tug at his sleeve and looked at Stephanie. "I got you something. Let's go open it with Grandma."

She squealed, her small hand slipping into his as they walked to the house.

\* \* \*

## *Chapter 2*

As Geoffrey drove away from the party, the pulsing music, the hum of traffic, and the map offering directions to the location Hannah provided kept them company. She leaned her head wistfully against the window, wishing that she could have accepted Bankole's dinner invitation. She enjoyed spending time with him, and whenever they talked, she felt like she belonged to a family.

As the car slowed near a familiar row of shops near her neighborhood, Hannah straightened in her seat.

“You can drop me here.”

Geoffrey shot her a quick glance and his mouth quirked with mock offense.

“Don’t worry, I’ll drop you off at home. Unless you don’t want me to know where you live,” he said smugly.

Hannah pressed her lips together. Geoffrey was always too casual and loud for her own good. He was a junior at work, yet knew too much about everyone in the department. The last thing she needed was for him to spin stories about her.

“Alright,” she said, giving him directions for the final stretch until they turned into her street.

When the car came to a stop in front of her gate, she reached for the door handle.

“Thanks for the ride. I appreciate it.”

He leaned back in his seat. “Won’t you invite me in? I came all this way, the least you can do is offer me something to drink, right?”

She turned to face him fully, forcing herself to respond calmly.

“I’m exhausted from all the partying, and like I said earlier, I have to study.”

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“Sure,” he said with a scoff.

Refusing to rise to his aggravation, she offered a tight smile and closed the door gently—too gently for how much she wanted to slam it.

He drove off. As she climbed the short walkway to her door, she took a steady breath to brace herself. Her mother had texted earlier, confirming she’d arrived safely and found the spare house key under the mat.

Inside, the faint scent of soup greeted her. But before she could take it in, she nearly tripped over two large red suitcases blocking the doorway.

“Mom?”

Her mother’s voice floated out from the kitchen following her hurried approach.

“My dear, I’m so sorry,” she apologized, reaching for the bags. “I was just about to move those.”

Hannah’s eyes narrowed. “What are these doing here?”

Her mother’s lips pressed together. “I know I said I was coming for a family christening,” her mother began. “And that’s true. But that wasn’t the whole picture.”

“I’m listening,” Hannah said, leaning against the wall.

“Well, your father’s behavior has become unbearable. Nothing I said got through to him. The nurses left, and he directed all his frustration at me. You know how your father can be.”

“Yes … and?” Hannah nudged.

“I couldn’t take it anymore. I packed my bags and called his brothers over, told them there was an emergency.”

“You didn’t.”

Her mother laughed. “I did. While they were in the room with him, I hailed a cab, carried my bags, and left for the park. I couldn’t stand another night in that house.”

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“Where do they think you went?”

Her mother shrugged, and Hannah finally noticed how drawn her face looked.

‘It’s okay,’ Hannah said quietly. “Sit down and I’ll make you something to eat.”

Her mother waved a hand. “No need. I already cooked, and cleaned the kitchen too. Don’t waste a minute on me. You won’t even notice that I’m here.”

Hannah almost laughed. Those words always meant the opposite. Her mother’s presence was hard to miss. But looking at her now, shoulders slightly slumped, Hannah couldn’t bring herself to argue.

“You’re unbelievable,” Hannah said finally, letting out a laugh. “You left him with his brothers?”

“Yes *o*, both elder and younger. Let them try to reason with him and take care of him. He can’t kill me just because he wants to die.”

“Mom!”

“What? It’s true.”

Her mom shrugged, wearing an “I said what I said” expression.

Hannah couldn’t help thinking that the last person who still loved her father and hadn’t entirely given up on him was standing in her home. His wife had left him behind. Her heart ached with an emotion she couldn’t name, and she whispered a quiet prayer under her breath.

“God, please touch his heart.” *If her father changed, it would be a big miracle.*

\* \* \*

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Bankole arrived early at the tennis court, while the morning was still cool. He parked his car and scanned the rows of empty courts until he spotted his brother-in-law, Max, waving from the far side. Stephanie had bounded out of the car and was bouncing with excitement, gripping her racket tightly as she jogged ahead toward the children's play area. The nanny followed closely behind.

They played three rounds, and at the end of it, sweat dampened Bankole's collar. When they finally took a break, Max walked over, a towel draped over his neck.

"The family is planning my sister's memorial next month," Max said somberly. "We'd really like you to come."

Bankole took a gulp of water from his bottle. For the past five years, he had usually spent the day alone with Stephanie and given the nanny the day off. His mother usually came over in the evenings.

"You're family to us. We miss her, and this year we want to do something meaningful, together as a family, in her name," Max said kindly.

Bankole stared at the ground, thinking about it. Max was right. His Lucy had lived for others and would have smiled at the thought of them doing something good in her memory. But he wasn't sure if he could handle being around so many people talking about her at the same time.

"I'll give it some thought," he finally managed to say.

Max nodded.

After they wrapped up, Bankole walked to the children's play area. Stephanie came running, hair in disarray. She threw her arms around him.

## *Chapter 2*

“Daddy, did you win?”

He chuckled softly, ruffling her hair. “Of course, I did.”

Bankole pressed a quick kiss to her cheek before sending her on her way with Max for a day with her cousins.

After they left, he sat on the bench for a while, the smack of ball against bat from other players his only remaining company. Fiddling with his phone, he debated what to do next. Hannah came to mind naturally.

He started to dial but stopped himself. A same-day invitation to spend the day together was impulsive and might seem disrespectful. So, he typed instead.

*Hey. Are you free tomorrow?*

He hit send. Minutes later, his phone pinged with her response.

*Would've loved to, but I have a family party this weekend. Monday evening?*

Monday was good. It gave him something to look forward to. He typed back

*Perfect.*

He rested for a couple of minutes more before heading to his car.

## *Chapter 3*



**M**onday came by quickly, and Hannah was in good spirits. The thought of seeing Bankole later that evening made her dance. She poured that energy into her morning lessons. Halfway through her class, the director's assistant appeared at the door.

“Miss Hannah, the director would like to see you during lunch break,” she said.

Hannah blinked. “Uh, sure. Any idea what it’s about?”

The lady’s eyes darted away. “I’m not sure.”

That avoidance piqued Hannah’s suspicions, but nothing came to mind that could warrant a meeting with the director.

When the lunch bell rang, she made her way out and ran into Geoffrey.

“You look so serious,” he said. “Why don’t you have lunch with me? I can turn your frown into a smile.”

“Sorry, I have a meeting with the director.”

“Oh yeah, that.”

His tone dipped oddly, and he walked off quickly.

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By the time she reached the director's office, her nerves were shot. The secretary ushered her in, and the director greeted her warmly. She started with small talk, asking Hannah about class updates, family well-being, and education reports. Hannah started to relax. Until the director leaned forward and switched tones.

"It has come to my attention that you're engaging in an inappropriate relationship with a parent of one of your students."

The director's words hit Hannah like a slap.

"What?" Hannah's voice broke.

"I'm surprised, but I wanted to speak to you directly before taking any action."

"Ma, that's not true."

"I want to believe you, but a staff member has corroborated what were previously only rumors."

"Rumors? A witness?" Hannah shook her head. "I really don't understand."

"I don't need the details, but consider this a warning," the director said briskly. You're dismissed."

Hannah rose wordlessly and walked to the door. Her hands trembled as she reached for the doorknob, but she turned back.

"Ma, I haven't done anything wrong."

The director sighed. "You're like a younger sister to me, so I'll give you some advice. Separate your work from your personal life more carefully. When it becomes a topic among colleagues, it's already a disruption. The complaint against you stated that your relationship is interfering with your duties and affecting students' experience. There's no smoke without fire, so check yourself."

Hannah nodded and exited. She didn't need to think too far to know who the colleague was. *Geoffrey*. Her pulse quickened

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as she walked down the hall. By the time she spotted him across the cafeteria, laughing with two other teachers, her vision blurred. She was halfway to him, muttering angrily, when someone caught her arm.

“Don’t do it,” Eben warned gently. He was one of the few colleagues she trusted.

“Let me go,” she snapped.

“I know you’re upset,” he said, tightening his grip just enough to steady her. “I heard you were called in because of Geoffrey’s nonsense. But if you confront him right now, you’ll only make things worse. He wants a scene. Don’t give him one.”

Hannah took a shaky breath and stopped moving.

“Good,” Eben murmured when her shoulders relaxed. “Now let’s go get lunch, and we’ll sit as far away as possible from that imbecile.”

She scoffed bitterly. “Sounds like a plan.”

\* \* \*

Bankole arrived at the restaurant early. He hummed along to the soft music playing from the speakers and chose a corner table.

When Hannah walked in, he spotted her immediately. Her shoulders were slumped. He waved, and when she reached him, he stood and drew her into a soft hug. She barely reacted.

He pulled out her chair and watched her settle in before taking his seat and studying her face. The waiter arrived to take their order.

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“I’ll have the peppered asun with jollof rice,” Bankole said, glancing at Hannah. She scanned the menu briefly.

“Just the garden salad with chicken, please,” she murmured.

After the waiter left, Bankole leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table.

“Rough day?” he asked.

Hannah frowned.

“Something like that.” She didn’t explain.

He tried to keep the conversation light, focusing on her students and her mom’s visit, but her answers were short. When their food arrived, she pushed the vegetables around the plate.

Finally, he set his fork down.

“Hannah,” he said gently. “You seem distant. I’m worried about you. What’s going on?”

She sighed, wiping her mouth lightly with the edge of her napkin.

“I had a bad day at work and felt helpless. I told myself I’d try not to let it affect tonight, but clearly that didn’t work.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Her lips parted, then closed again. She shook her head.

He nodded slowly.

“No pressure. I actually got you something.”

Her brows lifted a little. He reached into his pocket and brought out a small box. Inside was a delicate silver bracelet that he’d bought on impulse while shopping for his mother. The way it shined had reminded him of Hannah’s simple beauty and the way her eyes she lit up.

He took her hand, and his breath hitched. Her skin was soft against his as he clasped the bracelet around her wrist.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

“It looks perfect on you.”

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She sighed, her eyes clouded, and she gently pulled her hand back, fiddling with the clasp.

“I got reprimanded at work today for having an inappropriate relationship with a student’s parent.”

“What on earth? Bankole started. That’s absurd. How did that even come up?”

“I don’t know. Apparently, there were rumors and a so-called witness.”

“Maybe someone misunderstood something? I mean, you’ve always been professional. The first time we met, you spoke to me like any teacher would. Although I initially felt defensive about the feedback regarding Steph, I later came to understand it. Do you think something similar is going on?”

“No.” Her gaze met his. “It’s about you … I mean us.”

“What?”

“Someone reported that I’m involved with you and that my personal relationship is affecting my work.”

He sat back, the words sinking in. “That’s ridiculous. How is our friendship inappropriate? Besides, Steph has a new teacher now, so it isn’t a work issue.”

“Well, I was warned to keep my personal life separate from work, so, I think we should lie low for a while. Like, no stopping by my classroom in the mornings. I just don’t want to be the center of gossip anymore.”

“I’m sorry our friendship led to this. If this is what you need, I’ll respect it. I won’t risk your career and reputation over a misunderstanding.”

She nodded, but her eyes narrowed with confusion.

“Are we friends—I mean, just friends?” she asked.

He paused, unsure where the question came from. “Yeah?”

Hannah leaned back in her chair and away from him.

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“Are you okay? Did I say something wrong?”

“Uh, no … I’m trying to understand,” she said with a shaky laugh. “I thought we were more than that, B.”

He went silent. Words eluded him.

“I mean, all the time we spend together, the calls, dinners, even this.” She flicked her wrist, accusingly showing the bracelet. “You led me to believe we were building something.” Her voice cracked. “But if we’re just friends, then I’ve clearly misunderstood.”

His mind reeled from the sudden turn in the conversation.

“I do care about you a lot,” he stuttered, but no other words came up. He reached for her hand, but she recoiled as if it were poisonous.

She carefully unclasped the bracelet and set it on the table.

“I can’t take this. And I guess that settles everything. Since there’s nothing between us, my reputation is safe.”

“Hannah, wait.” He said, rising as she stood, grabbing her bag. “Please don’t leave like this. Let’s talk. I didn’t mean—”

She turned toward him, eyes glistening. “We’ve said enough already. Thanks for dinner.”

With that, she turned and walked away.

Bankole sat down heavily and wrapped the bracelet in his palm. He tried to take a bite of his food, but it turned to sand on his tongue.

“Hello handsome.”

A female voice pulled him out of his reverie. He looked up to see a dashing young woman peering at him. Before he could answer, she took her seat opposite him, just where Hannah had been sitting.

“May I help you?” Bankole asked.

“You looked like you needed some company. My name is

## *THE HEARTS WE HOLD*

Shalewa," she said, stretching well manicured fingers to him."

"Um, I'm not sure what's going on but I'd like to be alone if you don't mind."

"Are you sure that's really what you want? I can give you a couple of better options." Her lips curled in a sultry smile.

Bankole shook his head, his mind jumbled to process what was happening. Without another word, he stood up and left.

\* \* \*

Hannah was enjoying her mother's stay more than she cared to admit. First, she didn't have to return to an empty house after the disappointing night with Bankole, but also because her mother looked happier—her steps lighter with a childlike excitement as she moved around the house humming old hymns. Every now and then, conversation drifted toward her father, and Hannah caught a worried look cross her mother's face before she masked it with sarcasm.

Her mother had been on a tour, visiting old friends and relatives she hadn't seen in years, rekindling relationships that had grown strained because of her husband's disapproval. She told Hannah stories of her youth, travel, and experiences before marriage, like the bus trips to Abeokuta to see Olumo Rock with friends. She spoke wistfully about the time she wanted to explore the North, but her husband forbade it. She relished her current freedom, but it came with a downside. Word had gotten around to Hannah's father and his brothers that her mom was staying with her, and they started blowing up her phone the night before. When she hadn't picked up, they'd sent

## *Chapter 3*

messages with cloaked threats. But this morning, they switched to guilt-tripping and manipulation.

*Your father isn't eating. He's weak. He needs his family. This is an emergency.*

Her mother had turned off her phone, retreating into her Nollywood movies. But Hannah didn't have that luxury.

Hannah stepped into the shower to prepare for the day, bone-tired. As the warm water from the shower pelted her shoulders, she tilted her face into the stream, letting it drown out the voices and the humiliation from Bankole still scratching at her.

Her stomach clenched at the thought of how naïve she had been to believe that his actions equaled affection and feelings for her. To feel like she was now part of his family. She'd even returned to the restaurant to see if they could talk it out, but he'd been neck-deep in conversation with another woman.

When she finally stepped out of the shower, she caught sight of the time on her phone and hurriedly dressed. Her phone rang, and her father's caller ID blinked at her.

She closed her eyes, muttering a prayer under her breath as she finally picked. "Lord, please help me hold my tongue."

"Hannah," her father's raspy voice grated against her ears.

She didn't reply.

"Tell your mother to come home."

"She left for a reason," Hannah said quietly. "And I doubt she'll come back if nothing has changed. You want her to take care of you, but you aren't treating her well."

"She's my wife," he coughed. "Her place is here with me."

"There it is," she murmured, more to herself than to him. "She has given you everything, loving you more than herself, so ask yourself why she would return."

"I don't have to listen to this," he snapped weakly.

## *THE HEARTS WE HOLD*

“You’re the one who called me,” she said. “And if you’re trying to threaten her with your health, it’s not going to work this time.”

The line went dead. Hannah let the phone fall beside her, swallowing the lump in her throat. His indifference jolted her.

She dabbed her face with powder and forced herself to smile. As she headed out, a thought followed her.

*How can a man love others when he hates himself?*

## *Chapter 4*



Bankole stared blankly at the monitors in front of him. Rows of numbers on display didn't make sense. He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his temples. He took a sip of coffee from his mug and gagged—it had gone cold, just like the look on Hannah's face as she walked out of the restaurant.

He'd been cruel—not intentionally, but cruel all the same.

That night, he'd sat in the restaurant for what felt like hours, retracing every word, gesture, and moment that had brought them to that point. He didn't have to look far to see where he'd gone wrong. She hadn't misread the situation; he'd taken advantage. He leaned on her kindness, leaning into their intimacy and blurring the line of friendship without defining what it meant.

It had been a week, and they still hadn't spoken. He glanced at his phone, half expecting a message to pop up, but there was nothing.

His mornings felt incomplete without her messages, the Bible

## *THE HEARTS WE HOLD*

verses she sent in the mornings, to which he'd reply with a short prayer. He missed the way her eyes softened when she laughed at his dad jokes and how her fingers fiddled with random objects when she tried to hide her shyness.

He'd sent a text apologizing for the misunderstanding, but she hadn't responded. He told himself the time apart was necessary for her to process. But the truth was that he was hiding and needed to face what he'd been avoiding.

She'd called it something more.

A groan escaped his lips, and he dragged a hand over his face.

"I miss her," he muttered to the empty room. His hands hovered on the phone screen as he made to type another message. But he hesitated.

Did she miss him, too? He wondered. Or had she closed that chapter, realizing that she'd wasted her time on a man too lost to recognize when love was staring him in the face?

He tried to reason with himself: she was being kind, tolerating his closeness only because of Stephanie. Hannah wanted what was best for his daughter. But no, Hannah didn't pretend. And she'd been upset that night, not relieved. He'd hurt her.

The doorbell rang, breaking through his thoughts. Bankole checked the watch and noted it was lunchtime.

He walked to the door and opened it for Max, holding two takeout bags.

"Thought we could discuss the memorial plans over lunch," Max said.

"Perfect timing," Bankole replied, stepping aside to let him in.

They ate quietly in the living room, watching some football highlights. When they finished, Max pulled out his laptop and shared the design and content drafts. The sight of it made Bankole's throat tighten, but he pushed through and scrolled

## *Chapter 4*

through the pages of photos, tributes, and short notes from family and friends about Lucy. Max had done a thorough job of collating, and he was grateful.

“These all look good,” Bankole said finally. “But I want to replace the cover page picture. This one carries her professional persona, and the day she took it, she’d been exhausted. I don’t want her to be remembered like that.” He pulled up a different picture on his phone. “This one,” he said, turning the phone toward Max.

Max nodded. “I love this. I really miss her eyes. There was so much life in them.”

“Yeah.” Bankole’s voice dropped. “I miss everything.”

Max placed a hand on his shoulder. “You know,” he said gently, “you deserve happiness again. She’d want that for you. Don’t be afraid to let someone in.”

Bankole only nodded.

\* \* \*

That evening, he found Stephanie curled up on the living room rug, her books and puzzle abandoned, the pieces scattered around.

“What’s wrong, princess?” he asked, lowering himself beside her.

She looked up with watery eyes. “Uncle Max helped me with my family tree project … but I miss Mommy.”

Bankole pulled her close and stroked her hair. “I miss her too,” he whispered.

## *THE HEARTS WE HOLD*

They sat like that for a while before he decided to pick her up.

“You know what? Let’s make a royal tower.”

She perked up and ran to get her LEGO box. Together, they built a tower of blocks, Stephanie giggling when it wobbled. They pretended Mommy was the guardian who lived at the top, watching over it to keep it from falling. Then they danced to her favourite songs. Eventually, she got tired and fell asleep on the rug. Bankole scooped her up, kissed her cheek, and whispered a prayer as he laid her in bed.

“God, thank you for her joy. Help me not to ruin it.”

When he finally lay down in the quiet darkness, he allowed himself to hope, closed his eyes, and whispered another prayer with longing.

“Lord, if it’s your will, let Hannah forgive me, and if there’s still room in her heart, give me wisdom to love her right this time.”

\* \* \*

As Hannah loosened her braids on the bed, her phone buzzed for what felt like the tenth time. It should have been a good thing that her mother had turned her phone back on. But somehow, Hannah had become the new target of her mom’s relentless stream of Facebook posts and news links. Her mother didn’t care that they were under the same roof and could easily talk like normal people. Instead, she’d spam Hannah with links, then walk in seconds later to ask if she’d read them.

It was annoying, but it distracted her from thinking about

## *Chapter 4*

Bankole. Her heart ached for him, but it was still overpowered by how foolish she felt. For all the dating seminars and advice she'd devoured, she'd walked eyes open into the easiest trap, an undefined relationship.

Her mother walked into the room for what felt like the umpteenth time. Hannah dropped her hands and sighed.

"Mom, do you want to start going back to your husband's house? Because it's like this house is too small for both of us."

Thankfully, her mother had the grace to look embarrassed, but she ignored the jab.

"Let me help you with your hair," her mother offered.

Hannah moved to the floor while her mother took the spot on the bed behind her. Fingers worked gently through her braids, and she was beginning to relax when her phone rang again.

It was an unsaved number, so she almost ignored it, but something told her to answer.

"Hello?" she asked cautiously.

The person at the other end introduced himself as one of her school's security guards.

"How may I help you?"

The guard explained that a student was at the gate, asking to see her.

"There must be a mistake," Hannah replied. "It's Saturday, so school isn't open. Please inform the parents there are no activities scheduled for this weekend. We'll contact them through official channels about any changes."

The guard explained that the girl had come alone, without parents.

Hannah's pulse quickened.

"Is she okay? Disoriented? Please, ask for her full name."

The answer pushed her to her feet.

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“Stephanie? I’ll be right there and call her father on the way.”

She hung up, dialing Bankole’s number as she yanked on the first clean clothes she found. He didn’t answer, but she tried again, and again. By the time her cab rolled close to the school, he finally picked up. His voice was frantic.

“Steph’s at the school!” she shouted over the hum of traffic.

“Oh God. We’ve been looking everywhere!” he shouted back.

“I’m almost there.”

“I’ll meet you. Thank you, Hannah. Thank you.”

When the cabs stopped near the gate, she spotted him immediately, frantically arguing with the guard. His eyes darted everywhere until they landed on her. Relief swept across his features.

“I couldn’t be happier to see you,” he said, pulling her into a hug. “Please tell him I’m her dad.”

“It’s okay,” she soothed. “He’s only following protocol. I already informed our director.” She turned to the guard. “Thank you for calling me. Has she contacted you?”

“Yes, ma’am. She said to release the child to you for verification and record the incident.”

“I understand. This is her father. Please take his ID and make a copy for the file.”

Bankole fished out his Identification, handing it over to the guard, who then ushered Stephanie out.

“Miss Hannah!” she squealed, discarding her lollipop and running. Hannah crouched and caught her in a hug.

Bankole’s shoulders slumped with relief as he took Stephanie from her, gathering her into his arms. He thanked the guard profusely and started down the street toward his car, glancing back every few steps until Hannah followed.

Inside the car, Hannah fastened her seat belt while he strapped

## *Chapter 4*

Stephanie. When he slid behind the wheel, he squeezed his eyes shut and exhaled shakily.

“I was gone for five minutes,” he said, voice trembling. “We stopped at the supermarket to shop for some groceries. When we got to the car, I realized we were out of tea, so I ran back to grab some. When I came out, Steph was gone. Nobody saw her leave. I first tried to call you, but your line was busy. Hannah, I thought ...” His voice cracked.

“Hey.” She touched his arm gently. “She’s safe now. Let’s get her home, calm down, and then talk to her,” Hannah suggested gently.

He nodded and started the car. The drive was quiet. When they reached the house, Bankole’s mother rushed out and carried Stephanie inside.

Later, in the kitchen, Hannah and Bankole sat over two glasses of juice.

“Thank you for showing up today,” Bankole said.

“Of course, I’ll always be there when Steph needs me.”

He gave a faint smile. “I should have known better. After everything that’s already happened, leaving her alone, even for a minute, was reckless.”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” she urged. “Just talk to her about safety after the tension settles.”

He looked at her for a long moment. “I don’t deserve your kindness.”

“Maybe not, but I’ll give it anyway,” she said, trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice but failing miserably.

A silence stretched between them, their unspoken issue hanging in the air.

“I’m sorry,” he said finally. “For hurting you and taking advantage. That was never my intention. Can you forgive

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me?"

Her throat tightened. "Yeah, whatever. At least things are clear between us, so let's keep it that way."

"Hannah please."

"Don't use that voice with me," she said, her voice low. "I saw you that night with another woman. I thought you'd come after me, but you didn't even try. So don't patronize me." She watched his eyes cloud over with confusion.

"I swear, I didn't know the lady. She came over to my table and was saying some strange stuff. I didn't understand it and left," he explained feverishly.

She wanted to believe him, but it was too convenient. Yet she knew Bankole, and he'd never given her reason to doubt him before all this happened. She struggled with a decision, but his mother's entry saved her.

His mother explained that Stephanie had recognized that the supermarket was near her school and wanted to surprise Hannah with a visit. Hannah and Bankole exchanged looks in disbelief as his mother retreated.

As Bankole chuckled she couldn't help but smile back. And for a minute, all was good in the world.

\* \* \*

Standing by the church doors to greet family and friends gathered for Lucy's memorial, Bankole held Stephanie's hand in his. He wasn't about to let her dart into the crowd again. At home, he'd expanded her play area, stocked new books, and made evening park visits part of their routine. Stephanie

## *Chapter 4*

couldn't be happier.

Max approached, eyes red.

"Thanks, brother, for making this happen for all of us. It was a beautiful ceremony," Max said.

Bankole pulled him into a hug, letting go of Stephanie's hand briefly. When he let go, his throat burned as fresh tears gathered. There had been so many tears shed already. The hymns had nearly undone him.

"No, thank you for being family. I didn't realize how much I needed this until today. You've been kind to me since day one, and that's something money can't buy."

Max squeezed his shoulder. "You're family, and my sister wouldn't have wanted it any other way."

When the last guests departed, Bankole thanked the pastor and led Stephanie to the car. As he clicked his seat belt into place, a gentle calm washed over him. He felt sure now and ready to reach for happiness again. For Hannah.

He'd wanted to say more the other day in the kitchen, to reach across the space between them, take her hand, and ask for another chance. But the timing had felt wrong. That had changed. He couldn't go another day without letting her know what she meant to him.

At home and after dinner, Stephanie was happily occupied in her play corner. He retreated to the couch and dialed Hannah's number. She didn't pick up, but he tried again.

She answered on the second ring, breathless.

"Hey, Hannah," he said, attempting to mask his nerves. "How are you?"

"I'm good," she replied, a little out of breath. "Just got back from market runs with my mom. We're getting ready to travel to Oyo, so we stopped by the market for some clothes. Trust

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my mom to make us walk half of the city before deciding what to buy. I just sat down when your call came in.”

He chuckled, “Sorry for catching you at a bad time. I can call back later.”

“It’s fine. I have a few minutes before we continue packing. How’s Steph?”

“She’s good. A little quiet during the memorial, but she’s back to her bubbly self now.”

“How was it?” Hannah’s tone softened, and it almost undid him.

“It was touching, but it was a lot to take in emotionally. I hadn’t been around much of Lucy’s family since the funeral. They were kind.”

“That’s beautiful,” she whispered, then fell quiet.

He cleared his throat. “And how’s work? Did the issue with your director finally blow over?”

“Yes,” she responded excitedly. “You won’t believe it, Geoffrey apologized to me.”

“Did he? Please tell me you made him sweat a little.”

“Only a little bit,” she laughed. “He caught me as I was locking up my classroom for the day. I couldn’t believe it, but his usual swagger was gone, and he looked so nervous. Then he said he’d messed up and admitted to reporting me to the director. Although I almost hit him when he claimed he thought he was just doing his job.”

Bankole snorted, “That was his idea of an apology?”

“I know, right? But when he saw my reaction, he changed his tune and said he should have come to me first. That he was jealous because parents trusted me more.”

“That was low.”

“Yeah, and if the teachers didn’t get angry at him for stirring

## *Chapter 4*

up trouble, by his own admission, and reporting him for cutting corners on his work, which made the director issue him a warning, he probably wouldn't have apologized. But he did. That's what matters."

"You're far too kind."

"Everyone deserves some kindness," she said, "Even you," she added softly.

He smiled at that. "Even me," he echoed. "I just hope he's learned from it. I'm glad the others stood up for you."

"I was worried," she admitted. "So yes, a big problem is gone."

Another pause stretched between them.

"I hope this is not out of turn," Bankole began carefully, "but I'd really like to talk to you."

"What do you mean?" Hannah chuckled. "We are talking."

"Yes, but I mean in person. Dinner or something."

She went silent, and his heart started to thud. The last dinner had ended in a disaster, so he understood. He gave her time, but the seconds dragged.

So he took a breath and continued. "Hannah, I tried to bury my feelings, but they grew anyway. Pretending I wasn't in love with you only hurt you. But I'm no longer running. I want to spend my life with you, and I'll never let you doubt my heart again. So please let me see you."

The line was quiet, safe for her breathing.

"Okay," she finally whispered.

Bankole exhaled a shaky breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"Our usual spot?" he asked.

"Yeah, but it'll be when I get back."

"Be careful, okay. And if you need anything, let me know. I'll be here and I'll wait."

## *THE HEARTS WE HOLD*

“You promise?” she asked.

“I do.”

When the call ended, Bankole sat there for a long while, phone in hand. For the first time in years, his heart felt ready to be loved again.

## *Chapter 5*



Hannah and her mother arrived at their compound to a small, cheerful commotion. Relatives met them at the gate, embracing them both, carrying their luggage and ushering them into the house like long lost family members. Her mother basked in the attention, walking as if her feet no longer touched the ground. Hannah trailed behind, smiling at the sight.

Her father waited at the door, frail and leaning on a cane, one arm supported by his brother. The proud man she'd grown up fearing looked small and vulnerable.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice quivering. "For how I treated all of you. I was insufferable, cruel, and drove you away. I can't fix everything in a day, but I promise I'll try. I want to be a better man, husband, better father."

Her mother's hand flew to her mouth, and in the next second, she seemed to fly to him, weeping openly as she wrapped him in an embrace.

Hannah shook her head.

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*Soft woman*, she thought. After all that *shakara*, I thought she'd make him suffer a little longer. But her mom's forgiveness came easily; the list of demands she'd penned down was now forgotten, tucked carefully into her blouse.

As family members cheered on, Hannah moved around, exchanging greetings. Her father had gone to great lengths to bring them all together.

Later that evening, Hannah found him sitting alone on the veranda, staring out into the compound. She walked over and sat beside him.

He reached for her hand. "You didn't give up on me. I deserved to be abandoned, but you and your mother came back home."

She swallowed hard, a lump rising in her throat. "You didn't make it easy, but grace is about what we don't deserve."

He let out a weak laugh that dissolved into a sigh. "I spent so many years angry with myself. And felt guilty about how I treated you and your mother. I used to think forgiveness was for better men. But seeing you live out your faith—and your persistent kindness—makes me wonder if God can forgive me too."

Hannah squeezed his hand. "He already has, Dad. Forgiveness is a gift. You only have to accept. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us," she said.

Her father bowed his head in a prayer for mercy. And as he uttered the last amen, Hannah felt a release deep in her spirit.

She whispered her own prayer of praise: "Thank you, Lord, for restoration."

\* \* \*

## Chapter 5

Returning from the exam center, Hannah walked briskly along the curb, singing softly to the tune playing through her earphones. Her studying had paid off—the exam had been a breeze—and she'd sent Kosi a long, heartfelt message on her way home, promising to call later. All she wanted now was a hot bath and sleep.

She greeted a woman sitting in front of her shop, early Christmas decorations already up. Strings of lights twinkled, and red and green ribbons trailed along the bunting strung across the storefront. Christmas was almost here.

As she got closer to her gate, her heart stilled at the sight of a familiar car parked nearby.

*Bankole.*

She'd promised they'd talk after her return from Oyo but hadn't had the mental space to face him. She'd needed to process her father's change, focus on her exams, and just be.

That hadn't stopped her from missing him. On nights when sleep refused to come, she'd fought the urge to call and hear his voice. *Friends don't do that*, she'd told herself.

She walked up to the car. He was asleep in the driver's seat, head to the side. The sun cast a soft glow over his clean-shaven jaw, and her stomach fluttered.

He stirred, blinking awake. His eyes met hers through the window, and his lips curved.

"Hannah," he murmured, sitting up quickly. His elbow hit the horn, making them both jump before they laughed.

She stepped back as he opened the door, holding a shopping bag.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi." She tilted her head. "You've been waiting long?"

"Not really. I wasn't sure if you'd be home yet, but I wanted

## *THE HEARTS WE HOLD*

to see you.”

“Do you want to come in?” she asked.

He nodded, and they walked into the house together.

She dropped her bag and sank into the couch.

“How was the exam?” he asked, sitting across from her.

“Good. Better than I expected.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” He stood, disappeared briefly into the kitchen, and returned a moment later with muffins on a plate and a glass layered with parfait.

“You made this?”

“Bought it, actually,” he admitted. “But I arranged it myself. Presentation counts for something, right?”

She took a small bite and sighed contentedly as the chocolate melted in her mouth. They talked about Stephanie’s latest discoveries, his mother’s visit, the week gone by. It felt like old times.

When she leaned back, full and done with the snack, Bankole’s tone changed.

“I’m sorry, Hannah.”

She looked up.

“For taking you—and us—for granted,” he said quietly. “You healed parts of me that were broken, and I clung to you because you made me feel whole again. But I didn’t give you the same in return. I let fear and guilt hold me back.” He exhaled slowly. “There’s no doubt in my mind that I want you. I need you. And I can’t picture my life without you and Steph in it. Forgive me for taking this long to say it.”

He met her eyes. “I love you, Hannah. From that night at the hospital till now, my heart’s been yours to have and hold.”

Her breath slowed as his words melted through the wall she’d built. The yearning in his voice was real, and she didn’t question

## *Chapter 5*

it.

Her fingers played with the hem of her sleeve. “You know,” she whispered, “I told myself I was done waiting for you. That I’d moved on. But hearing you now...” She shook her head and laughed softly. “You make it so hard to stick with that decision.”

He moved closer, sitting on the edge of the chair. “Then don’t,” he said gently. He reached for her hands. “I promise to spend the rest of my life making it up to you, and loving you with everything I have.”

He turned his palm upward, his fingers brushing hers, holding on just long enough for her to decide if she was ready.

From beside her, soft music from her discarded earphones drifted faintly through the room.

Hannah smiled, the corner of her mouth trembling as she whispered, “I’ll always love you, B.”

\* \* \*

The months flew by quickly as Bankole settled into the new version of “life lately”. Stephanie was thriving, and his relationship with Hannah had blossomed. She’d returned from Oyo radiant with news of her father’s transformation. He was grateful that her joy spilled over into the grace she offered him when he finally spoke the words he’d held back for months. Everything had fallen into place, and now he was about to take the biggest step of his life. He was terrified.

His mother and assistant sat across from him, heads bent over a laptop as they reviewed the final proposal details. The team

## THE HEARTS WE HOLD

of decorators was already at the garden venue.

His phone rang, and his boss's name blinked on the screen. When he answered, the man's voice was urgent.

"Banky, we have a situation. One of our biggest clients is threatening to pull out of the supply contract. I need you on the first flight out to Uyo."

*Not again.* For years, work had stolen special moments from him. He wouldn't let it this time.

He drew a slow breath. "Sir, respectfully, I submitted my leave notice weeks ago, and you approved it yourself. I've delegated it to my junior manager, and I'll coach him over the phone if needed." He continued explaining the situation with the proposal planned.

Bankole could almost hear his boss grinding through a hundred arguments. Then the man sighed.

"I see—you're right. I've lost too many moments with my family to do the same to you. Go win your woman, son. I'll take care of this."

He hung up, and Bankole turned to his mother and assistant, who were watching him closely.

"It's happening," he said. "Nothing's stopping this."

\* \* \*

By noon, Bankole arrived at the garden. It was a dream—arches of white and blush blooms, ribbons, and golden lights everywhere. The sky was slightly overcast, and Bankole's heart beat fast as he prayed that there wouldn't be rain. Every time his phone buzzed, he snatched it up, hoping it was Kosi confirming

## *Chapter 5*

Hannah was on the way.

“We’re here,” the message finally came. But with the confirmation came the first raindrop—then another, and another. Guests squealed and scrambled beneath the tents where desserts were spread. Ribbons whipped loose in the wind but Bankole just stood there, rain drenching his suit.

Kosi led Hannah under the tent.

Hannah froze and her eyes widened as she took in the scene. Her eyes eventually landed on Bankole, mid-laugh, standing alone in the open, rain pouring down his face.

“My love, stay under the tent!” he called.

But she only kicked off her shoes, gathered her dress, and sprinted barefoot across the wet grass into his arms. He scooped her up and twirled her in the rain.

“You’re crazy,” she said between laughs.

“Completely crazy about you, and utterly lost without you,” he replied, dropping to one knee. His hand trembled as he pulled out the small box, opened it, and the ring caught a light.

“I’ll make this quick, so you don’t catch a cold. My love, the one who makes my heart whole, and makes me want to hold on to love and never let go, my heart is yours to hold. Will you do me the greatest honor a man could ever ask for? Hannah, will you marry me?”

Her hand flew to her mouth, tears mingling with the rain as she nodded and squealed, “Yes! Yes, I will!”

Bankole slipped the ring onto her wet fingers.

A cheer rose from under the tent, Kosi shrieking loudest, Stephanie bouncing on her toes before running to wrap her tiny arms around them both.

They stood together, soaked to the skin, laughing under the downpour. Then just as suddenly as it began, the rain softened

## *THE HEARTS WE HOLD*

to a drizzle. The band began to play again as guests trickled back out, clapping and calling their congratulations.

Through the chaos, Hannah and Bankole found each other's eyes. The world narrowed to just the two of them, and a quiet promise passed between their hearts.

*Our hearts forever, we'll hold.*

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

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support is truly priceless.

I'd like to invite you to join Simi's Nook 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.

**You can connect with me on:**

⌚ <https://simistories.com>

🔗 [https://www.instagram.com/simi\\_stories?igsh=MW15b2ozZHhpN2](https://www.instagram.com/simi_stories?igsh=MW15b2ozZHhpN2)

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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

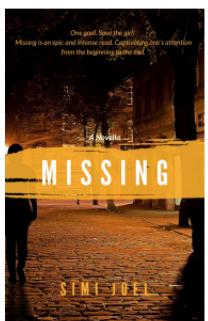


## Scarred

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.

