

MERCY'S SONG

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Prologue

December 11th, 2010, Crawford County, Nebraska

A newborn wail permeated the hospital room, eliciting the response of everyone within earshot.

Well, nearly everyone.

Brandon stood, but Bethany beat him to the bassinet and scooped the baby up, shushing her sweetly.

Next to Bethany hovered Natassa's sister Olivia. She stroked silky newborn wisps of hair.

Even Laura inched to the edge of her chair as if she, too, wanted to cuddle the new life before her. Though she hadn't come to the baby shower, Brandon's sister-in-law showed up at the hospital with a balloon in hand two hours after Natassa gave birth.

Only Natassa's mother sat ramrod straight in the corner of the room, unmoved by the commotion surrounding her granddaughter. She looked as if she wished to bolt but invisible chains bound her to the chair. Hours before, at the baby shower, a twinge of hope sprung up inside Natassa as her mother laid a hand on her and at least assented to Bethany's prayer for her and her child.

Natassa shook her head, still trying to take it all in. Once her water broke at the gathering, they had to rush to get to the hospital on time.

When Mercy came, she came swiftly.

“You’re sure they said everything’s okay?” Natassa put a hand on Brandon’s arm, his flannel shirt soft beneath her touch.

“Sweetheart, relax. She’s fine. Perfect Apgar score. Perfect birth. Perfect baby.” He kissed her forehead. “Perfect wife.”

“It’s just ... none of our others came early.”

“Three weeks isn’t that early, babe.”

Natassa was about to seek further reassurance when the sound of Bethany singing stole her attention.

Mercy. Sweet mercy.

Good Lord, we need Your mercy.

Every morning. Every morning.

Your mercies are new.

Bethany swayed back and forth holding Mercy, serenading her.

“Hey.” Natassa couldn’t stop herself from interrupting. “That’s the song from the journal. From Mercy’s Journal. Is that how it goes?”

“Shoot, sugar. I don’t have a clue how the tune’s supposed to go. I just done made one up to go along with the words and that suits me fine. Looks like it suits your Mercy girl fine too.” Bethany continued to rock the newborn.

A soft knock sounded at the door and Maureen and Charles dragged themselves into the room, their faces somber as if they came to a funeral instead of a birth.

“Hi, little sister.” Maureen strode over to Natassa and stooped over her hospital bed. “Sorry I couldn’t make the shower. Work stuff. But here.” She thrust a small pink gift bag in Natassa’s general direction.

Brandon took it and put it with the others.

“Thanks for coming, Maureen.” Natassa gripped her sister’s hand.

Natassa’s mom popped up and enveloped Maureen in a hug, nearly clinging to her. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Misery loves company,” Brandon whispered in Natassa’s ear.

She snickered.

“Here, Grandma.” Bethany slipped Mercy into Natassa’s mother’s arms. “Why don’t you hold your grandbaby for a while?” She stepped back.

Mercy whimpered.

“It’s okay. It’s okay, baby.” Natassa’s mother’s voice sounded soft yet laced with discomfort. “Look, Maureen. It’s not that bad. The baby doesn’t even hardly look black at all, thank God.”

Natassa catapulted up, her wide eyes searching Bethany’s expression. “Mom!”

“What?”

“Why would you say something like that?”

“Like what? Do you want a black baby, Natassa? Sweetheart, come on. Use common sense. I know you like hanging around all those ... people down there in the city, but you’re not black. You’re white as they come. Stop trying to be something you’re not.”

“Brandon ...” Natassa whispered through clenched teeth, her eyes pleading.

“What’s that, babe? You’re hungry? I’m sure you’re sick of this hospital food. How about your mom and Maureen go and find you something better to eat, and I’ll go ahead and hold Mercy for a while. Sound good?”

Natassa mouthed “Thank you,” and Brandon stood and took Mercy into his arms.

Natassa’s mom jammed her hands on her hips. “I don’t think there’s any decent food in this building. We might have to drive for miles.”

“If that’s what it takes, I’m sure it will be worth the wait. Right, babe?”

Natassa nodded, but the women looked unconvinced.

“Hey, Chicka, sorry it took me so long to make it back here.” Breanna breezed into the room, out of breath and with a bag dangling on her arm.

“Breanna,” Natassa brightened. “I’m so glad you’re back.”

“Do you realize how difficult it is to find a huge blue bow? For a baby, I mean. Pink ones, I could have bought her a dozen pink ones. Or purple. But blue? I’m surprised she’s not walking yet with as long as that took me.”

Breanna dug into the gift bag, plucked out a bag of M&Ms, and tossed it on Natassa’s lap. “That’s for Mama.”

Natassa snorted. “Thanks.”

“She needs something more nutritious than that,” Natassa’s mom interjected from across the room.

“Now you, little missy.” Breanna knelt beside Brandon. “Or should I say little Mercy. You had better like bows ’cause your mommy has a thing for them. And I hope you like blue because it’s your mommy’s favorite color.” Breanna plucked the bow out of the bag, ripped off the tag, and gently placed it on Mercy’s head. It slumped over one eye.

“It’s too big.” Natassa’s mother huffed.

Bethany chuckled. “She’ll grow into it.” She turned and smiled at Natassa, then gestured around the hospital room.

“This whole thing done feel like it’s too big for the lot of you, but you’s gonna grow into it. Trust me. Wait and see.”

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February 3rd, 2014 , Crawford County, Nebraska

Everything DeAndre Scott owned fit in the back of his Corsica. He'd stuffed a dozen canvases, three boxes, and two suitcases into his trunk and back seat, along with some old busted up dreams and perhaps new ones that just needed some TLC to take flight.

Lord, is there still such a thing as new beginnings?

As he rolled into Crawford County, he slowed his vehicle to a crawl. Subtle changes had taken place over the past three years. A new gas station on his left. An office building ahead on the right. But mostly everything else looked the same.

There was nowhere else to go. *Who else in this whole wide world will give me a chance?*

Cruising into the parking lot of Java Joe's, he idled for a minute and stared at the mural. The rich shades of teal, blue,

and orange spelling out the name in bold lettering, the smattering of people fellowshiping, coffee cups in hand. He'd painted himself in the left corner, the only person of color in the mural. Not unlike the town itself.

"It looks ... Wow! Just wow! Amazing work, Dre!" Rob's voice echoed in DeAndre's memories.

Man, he could use a pat on the back right now.

God, please don't let this be another dead end.

He got out of the car and entered the building almost reverently. This place that had granted him a new start in life. If not for Java Joes ... He shuddered.

The bell jingled, unearthing memories.

He scanned the shop for familiar faces and disappointment crested as he found none. No Rob or James, Patrick or Eddie. No one he knew— unless ... Why did the girl behind the counter look familiar? Her blonde hair made her skin seem as pale as a model he'd seen on a billboard for alabaster makeup. He stepped into her line, the only line.

"Welcome to Java Joe's. How can I help you?"

She tilted her head slightly, then her eyes lit up. "DeAndre, right? Is that you?"

He nodded, his mind scrambling to place her face with a name.

"It's me, Janell. I trained you here, remember? Oh, I let my hair grow out. And lightened it."

"Janell. Yeah. I took your job." Why hadn't he remembered her? But she looked so ... different. More mature than she had then. But then again they had both grown a lot since he first walked through those doors.

"Then I took it right back." Her laugh sounded like a song. His smile broadened.

“So—what can I get you?”

He ordered and paid.

“So, James? Rob? Patrick? Any of them still around?” DeAndre propped his elbows on the counter. The line stretched behind him, but he wasn’t eager to leave the conversation.

“Yes, but the flu. This winter’s been brutal. I’m the last man ... uh, woman standing. I had to call some guys who haven’t worked here since the summer to help out, but they can’t get here until the afternoon.”

DeAndre stepped aside as Janell assisted the next customer. Only one other person worked in the back, and he scrambled about, helping her out front as well as working drive-thru. The bell over the door jingled again. He should leave her to do her job, but her smile snagged him, kept him close.

“I can help.” After all, he didn’t have anything better to do. Other than sit in a corner booth and sip his coffee, watching Janell. He could do that all day.

“Seriously?”

“Sure. I mean, if it isn’t against protocol.”

She blew a stray hair from her face. “I don’t know or care about protocol at this point. I’m swamped. Grab an apron.”

DeAndre slid back into the routine. He and Janell worked well together. They anticipated one another’s needs, talked without talking, danced without dancing. Hours flew by like mere minutes.

“Whew.” Janell wiped her brow with the back of her hand. “We’ve slowed down. You can take a break now.”

He reclined against the counter next to her and caught a whiff of vanilla that didn't come from the lattes. "That's okay. None needed." *I'd rather stay with you.*

Could he extend their time together further? Would she laugh him off? Shoot him down?

When business finally slowed, he gathered up his courage. Time to ask her the question he'd put off for the past three hours.

"So, I planned on connecting with Rob tonight. I don't know anyone else in town besides the guys here. Seeing as how they're all sick, would you want to grab a bite to eat after work? You could fill me in?"

He couldn't discern her expression. Did she think him corny for asking? Did she feel sorry for him?

"Sure."

It didn't matter. He'd take it.

Sitting across from her in La Mexicana made him forget about everything else, everything but that moment. Everything but her as she stuffed her face with chips and salsa.

"Aren't you going to eat anything?"

"Oh. Yeah." He picked up a chip. He wanted to smack himself across the head.

"Why do you keep staring at my hair?"

"The king is held captive by your tresses." *Did I just say that? OMG, I said that out loud.*

She paused with a chip midway to her mouth. "Don't tell me you're throwing down some Song of Solomon pick-up line." Then she laughed with her eyes and he forgot his name.

"Wait, you know it? Song of Solomon. The Bible?"

She shrugged. "College and Career group at church does a Bible study on Tuesday nights. We did Song of Solomon last summer."

"Ah. I did a piece on that ... pick up line, as you call it."

"A piece? A piece of what?"

"Art."

"Art? Okay, wait. Start at the beginning. You're an artist?"

So he did. He started at the beginning. How he had been scribbling in notebooks all his life and doing graffiti art on buildings in the hood but how he'd never thought he was good enough to do anything worth anything until the guys from Java Joe's told him differently.

And how he would never have met those guys if she hadn't gone away to college. When her position as a barista opened up, the manager Jim gave him a chance to break free of the cycle of his neighborhood. Rob and Patrick had helped him get his GED and apply for art school and he had gotten a scholarship.

The waiter brought their food and he tried to focus on telling his story instead of the way she loaded her fajitas so full they overflowed from the sides, dripping onto her plate as she ate.

"The scholarship kept getting renewed. Got me through three years. Then it ran out. I tried to get a job out there, pay my own way. But paying rent and bills stretched me, let alone tuition. I could only scrape by. I thought maybe it was a sign that I needed to move on. Come home. Only I'm not sure where home is anymore."

Janell twisted her lips together and nodded slowly. She sat forward and ... Were her eyes glistening? But then she shook

her head as if to banish whatever she was about to say, to do. She sat back and crunched a chip.

“So, the piece you were talking about, when did you do that?”

“Interpretive Art. One of my teachers was a believer. He challenged us to interpret Biblical symbols and allegory in our artwork. He got me searching through the whole book of Song of Solomon looking for material. Some of those guys had a real good time with that one, but in the end, I landed on ‘The king is held captive by your tresses.’ All of those strong symbols and that’s the line I couldn’t get away from.”

“I wish I could have seen it.”

“You can. I have it in my car.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “I’ve got most everything I’ve done in the trunk of my car.”

Her eyes glistened with tears. “Life doesn’t always end up the way you planned it, does it?” Regret dripped from her voice, thick like honey.

“No.” A world of pain seemed to hide behind her question.

“What about you? What’s your story?”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “Another time?” It sounded like a plea.

“Does that mean you’re giving me another shot? I didn’t completely blow this?”

Her eyes opened wide as she slid her hand across the table in an invitation. His hand met hers. Their fingers intertwined. He stared at the dark and light, cradled together. In another time, another place, it would be unthinkable. But here and now, perfectly acceptable. Even in Crawford County. Maybe

the entire reason he came back was for the woman in front of him. Only God knew. And this? This equaled perfection.

He paid the check and held her hand as they walked to his car. He had to drive her to Java Joe's where she'd left her car. If only he could take her home, see where she lived. Get more of an idea of what made her tick.

On the drive back to Java Joe's, she filled him in on how Rob made assistant manager and Patrick worked at Java Joe's some on the weekends but hustled at a start-up IT company during the week. The two of them still lived at the same house, though Patrick was pretty serious with a girl. Janell assumed he wouldn't be there for too much longer before marrying her. James remained the manager of the coffee shop and still as kindhearted as ever.

DeAndre careened into the parking lot and angled his Corsica next to her Beetle. The lights from the other stores in the strip mall still shone, though Java Joe's on the corner stood dark, his mural only faintly illuminated by the nearby streetlamps.

"So, how far of a drive do you have?" DeAndre's mouth quirked. Years ago, on his first day on the job, she'd asked him a similar question.

"My parents live about ten minutes north of here."

"And you live with your parents?" He fished for information. Hopefully he didn't seem creepy, like a stalker.

"Yep."

"Cool." Having two loving parents who were willing to support and encourage you in life sure seemed like a gift to him.

"Cool? Trust me. It's anything but cool."

"Oh."

“Sorry. I don’t mean to take it out on you. Show me your painting, DeAndre. The Song of Solomon one.”

She smiled up at him. Her hair glinted in the light streaming from the streetlamp.

They got out, and he popped the trunk. “You gotta promise not to make fun of it.”

“Make fun of it?”

“Promise.”

“Okay.”

He shuffled through dozens of canvases and then pulled it out, angling it toward the stream of light. A king stood clothed in scarlet and purple, holding a scepter. Before him bowed a woman with her hair flowing all around him, covering the canvas. Her hair wove around the king’s ankles, around his wrists, and around his waist.

Janell stared. Silent.

“Sooo, what do you think?”

“DeAndre,”—she was so quiet that he could hear her breath—“I’m trying to take it all in.”

“It’s a 16 × 20 inch canvas. There’s not much to it.”

“There’s so much detail.”

He looked at it again. Okay, she had a point. He did spend quite a bit of time on this one.

“Can I ask you something? I don’t know how to ask it.”

“Go ahead.”

“The king is black. Why?”

He shrugged. “Why not? Do you think everyone in the Bible looked like you?”

A pause. “I guess not. I never really thought about it before.”

“You go to the art museum, and you’ll see pasty white Jesuses everywhere. That’s because pasty white men painted them. Jesus was a Jewish man, Janell.”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

Her eyes traversed the painting inch by inch.

“The girl. What color is she? The dress covers up her skin. All you can see is her hair. It’s not black, but dark brown?”

“Like yours,” he whispered. Could he? Would she mind? He reached out and took a strand of her hair, rubbing it between his fingers. So soft. She never took her eyes off the painting, didn’t pull away. Did that mean she was okay with it?

“So, you like it?” he asked.

“Like it? Are you kidding me? It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

He chuckled. She needed to get out more. “You can have it.”

“What? DeAndre, no. This is a masterpiece. You don’t give it away to some girl you just met.”

Tentative, he reached out and touched her cheek. When she closed her eyes and gave a soft smile, he gently pried her face away from the painting until she faced him.

“Janell, you aren’t just some girl I met. I painted this for you. I just didn’t know it at the time.” He ran his hand through her hair. “The king is held captive by your tresses.”

Her lip trembled, and he kissed his fingers and touched them to her lips. He didn’t dare do more, or he might scare her away.

She turned into his arms and clung to his shirt. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He wrapped his arms around her. Her small body pressed against his. She was so fragile, so soft.

“I have to go.” She swallowed hard. “You coming by the coffee shop tomorrow?”

“Will you be there?”

“Of course.”

“Then I’ll be there.”

He placed the painting in her trunk, then watched until her taillights completely disappeared.

