

Chapter 1

Simone Herron wanted to escape from the pain, and from life. At this time of the year, she always felt utterly lonely. It was like being in the middle of the ocean surrounded by only the waves. This was year number two without Joshua. Simone had family and friends, but it wasn't the same.

As if she weren't already miserable, the holiday season had arrived, with all of its cheery fanfare. She wished she could skip over November and December and head straight into January.

Pensive, Simone stared out her Fifth Avenue office window in the center of Manhattan, New York—the city that never slept. She could imagine that below her hordes of people bustled to and fro, arms laden with shopping bags, and tourists gawked at the beautiful and spectacular views from The Empire State Building to Times Square. Who wouldn't love it? But her heart was no longer enraptured by its beauty; the Big Apple wasn't the same anymore.

Simone turned away from the window. Even the busyness of the city and all it had to offer could no longer mask her restlessness. Something was missing. Could a move be the answer? A new locale would distract her and keep her mind off her personal life.

Sitting in the leather chair at her desk, she mindlessly shuffled the papers. When had her life fallen into this monotonous rut? For the past couple of years, she'd spent her Thanksgivings serving dinner at Shepherd's Gate, a women's shelter. Christmas was spent singing carols with her church at Faith Bible Center. She enjoyed those things, but she wanted more.

Maybe her boredom stemmed from the fact she'd buried her fiancé a few months before their marriage. But that was two years ago. She should have been enjoying life, but Joshua was gone and she was alive and still trying to remember how to put one foot in front of the other.

People told her time would heal her wounds and it would get easier day by day. And they were right—some days. People also told her never to question God, but those who knew her were aware that that was like asking an artist not to paint. There were days on which she felt she'd moved on, but others when the feelings in her heart and her dreams of him were as real as the love they'd once shared.

She couldn't understand why God had taken the only man she'd ever truly loved. Joshua had been her soulmate, her friend, the love of her life, her future children's father. The more she got to know him, the more she realized that meeting him had been something divine. He'd felt the same way.

There was an undeniable connection between them the first time their eyes met on their college campus in Manhattan. She wondered what their children might have looked like. Would they have had his dark eyes and curly black hair, or maybe brown eyes like hers?

The idea of not having a family hurt her to the core. Her parents were married for decades before her father suddenly died from a heart attack. They cherished one another and that's what she wanted for herself. For now, her dream of falling in love and having a family was tucked away somewhere in the back of her mind, preserved in the faint hope of a second chance.

Simone wasn't sure she believed there was such a thing as getting back to a normal life. She accepted what life had dealt her and was allowing her circumstances to bring her to a place of

surrender. She learned to accept that when life brought pain, God would give her the strength to go through it.

Simone became teary-eyed as questions swirled around in her head. Why, with all of her great accomplishments—she was a paralegal for a prestigious law firm, Armstrong and Armstrong; she worked with some of the most gifted and intelligent lawyers in the city—did she still feel like there was a void in her life? She needed a change. A fresh, new beginning. A move would make her feel differently and do her wonders.

She scanned her office. Her eyes drew to the plaques on the wall, awards she had received from her boss. Then she focused on the plaque on her desk, a gift from her pastor. Her favorite scripture was engraved in it, and the office light gleamed on the words. “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.—Romans 8:28, KJV.”

She knew God was in control, but sometimes, it was more difficult to accept when His plan superseded her own. She’d heard all the sermons. She was in all the prayer lines. She’d had plenty of oil poured on her head. But the pain remained unbearable. She was resilient, but felt weak, as though she hadn’t slept in months. Externally, Simone had it all together, yet she felt detached. She was a fighter at the end of her fight.

A knock sounded on her office door. The door swung open and Terrance Armstrong strolled in. “Good afternoon, Simone. You not going to lunch?” Terrance, one of the firm’s partners, was the man. He was a strong and capable real estate attorney, the best in the business, and sought out by all who could afford him.

Simone sat at her mahogany desk and cleared her throat. “I was busy working. Lost track of time.”

Terrance was not only her boss; he was a good friend. If he could reverse the past for her, he would. She watched as he observed her. That was the thing... no one could change what had happened.

He claimed a seat in front of her desk. “Are you sure you want to do this? You think relocating is the answer?”

She grabbed the box of Kleenex from her desk, dabbed at her eyes, and nodded her head. “I do. Sometimes a change of atmosphere and surroundings is all that’s needed. Besides, I don’t have any real reason to stay. I love my job, you know that. But since Joshua’s passing, being here’s been much harder than I expected. Everything about New York reminds me of him.”

“Are you sure you’re not trying to run away from the memories? You can’t outrun pain.”

She leaned forward and took a deep breath. “No, not the memories. I’ll treasure those forever. I believe this move will help me plant new roots. Besides, my family has been asking me to come home. My mom is getting up in age, and I want to spend as much time with her as I can. You know how beautiful Northern California is. Who wouldn’t want to live in the Bay Area? Change is good, right? I think you told me that one day.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s beautiful, and change is good. You got me there. You’ll have to get used to the earthquakes, though.” They both shared a hearty laugh.

“See, why did you have to go and bring up earthquakes?”

Terrance raised his hands in mock surrender, cocking an eyebrow as an easy smile formed on his lips. “Hey! I’m only being honest. Seriously, though, you know we’ll always have a place here for you if you ever want to return, and we’re only a flight away. I hate to see you leave. You’ve been like a little sister to me.”

Simone’s face softened. She gave him a slight nod and smiled.

Terrance continued, “I do have some connections in the Bay Area. Have you ever heard of the law firm Blackman and Blackman? They’re one of the premier firms on the West Coast. I bet you would fit right in. Aaron and his brother Shaun are two of the best real estate attorneys in their field.”

Simone listened attentively as he spoke. The more he talked, the more hopeful she felt and the more convinced she was that she was doing the right thing. “No, I don’t believe I’ve heard of them. But I’m grateful for your connections. I wasn’t sure where to begin. I know I can work anywhere, but it’s better when firms come highly recommended and referred.”

Terrance nodded in agreement. He continued, “I met Aaron at a conference last year. I’ll give him a call first thing in the morning.” Terrance paused for a moment and stared at her. “I’m being selfish. A change in location might be a good thing for you. I’ll miss you, for sure, but I know that wherever you establish yourself, you’ll do fine. Besides, any firm that hires you is getting a blessing, and I know, ‘cause I taught you most everything you know.”

They shared a rousing laugh. Simone rolled her eyes at his lack of humility. “Boy, whatever.”

“Check with me in the morning, but first, lunch.” He slid the chair back and stood, extending his hand. Simone accepted and squeezed his hand as they headed toward the door. At least someone was excited about her future.

Once she arrived home, Simone kicked off her shoes and burrowed into her favorite sofa, basking in the well-designed, unobtrusive beauty of her living room. After a short rest and dinner, she did some research on Blackman and Blackman. Terrance was correct. They were one of the premier law firms in Northern California and she was quite impressed with some of the accolades and awards they’d received, particularly for ethics. Aaron Blackman sat on the board of directors for the San Francisco Lawyers Association and had been featured on both national and local television programs. Furthermore, he’d authored several books and published articles in national magazines.

After reading about Blackman and Blackman, she was keyed up with anticipation at the prospect of working for this firm.

She got off the sofa and strolled into her bedroom, changed into her pajamas, and climbed into bed.

She tossed and turned all night. To make matters worse, her alarm was set to go off in a few hours. She lay there, looking at the ceiling, eyes wide open. She thought about reading, about working, about Blackman and Blackman.

What's wrong with me? It's only a phone call... a phone call that could change my life. Moving across states was a major task. She was excited and nervous at the same time. Would another law firm like her? Would they want to hire her? Would they keep her? She knew she was making herself restless for no reason.

As she pondered her fate, she tried to concentrate on the journey ahead. She was treading on unfamiliar territory. Would she be able to handle what the future held—good or bad—or would this move bring more heartache, like losing Joshua had?