

Eden
Non Grata

Volume II

A Novel

by

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*To like-hearted kings who quest for story.
Your courage is His treasure...*

Every Choice Has A Consequence...

This Christian fiction novel (in two epic volumes) offers a sweeping parable centered on the complexities of family and the profound nature of love. Adam cannot be without Eve—and now he cannot live in Eden.

At its core, the story explores the timeless battle between good and a stirring evil that challenges the very fabric of hope and the human heart. The mayor's rebellious son is to marry the preacher's spirited daughter, but this proposed union under God begets a world of good versus stirring evil. Ultimately, victorious truth meant to heal two wounded hearts will pierce the lives of all around them.

Through moments of loss and despair, the characters are confronted with trials that threaten to extinguish their spirit. Pastor Malachi Noble and his wife, Leah, want to protect their only daughter from the damage of Adam's sinful life. Joshua Thorne—wealthy but desperate, alone, and troubled following the tragic death of his wife—has lost all hope for his only son. Even Adam and Eve's most loyal friends—Silas King and Rebekah Jordan—find themselves tempted by darkness and its destructive allies.

Yet, it is only through the journey of redemption that true salvation and renewal can be found. Before salvation is lost, the discipleship of Adam's parole officer, Dr. Solomon Judah, the corruption of Eve's nemesis, Judge Herod Stone,

and treasures stored in heaven by the late Rachel Thorne will help change the lives of Adam and Eve forever.

Ultimately, this epic literary journey of spirit illustrates how the restoration of heart and hope is possible when one embraces the path of redemption. The amazing grace and mercy of the Lord's teaching will show them a new way, a new truth, and a new life far from the paths where all is meaningless—a chasing after the wind.

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Words Be Few

What is your life?

You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

James 4:14

Malachi sat alone in his office at Walnut Grove Baptist Church, the silence shrouding him as if it were the only comfort he could find. As he looked at the photo of Leah on his desk, he noticed the shaking in his hands and felt confused if it was from the anger or the fear. He closed his eyes and again heard her confession:

“I’ve been unfaithful to you, Malachi. I’ve been sleeping with Silas King.”

His eyes crossed over the desk, looking at all of the files and the paperwork and the busyness of being a pastor, even one in so small a place as Eden. He let his wet eyes wander over to the bookshelves that wrapped around his office walls, full of tomes and references and books he had spent many nights over the years reading instead of spending time with Leah or Eve. He let his gaze rest upon the handsome certificates on the wall signifying all the years of effort put forth to complete his undergraduate and seminary education.

“So much time,” he said aloud, to himself and to his wounded heart. *“No wonder...”*

Malachi thought back to the day when he ordered Rebekah Jordan from his home, his wife shaken to tears, hysterical in her words, and finally sobbing out her truth. He remembered the horror he felt in looking at her with hatred and confusion and pain in his eyes.

“For how long?” was all he could ask her, his body moving away from hers, repulsed, shocked.

“How much further than the first time does it matter?” she asked him.

My wife is a liar, he said to himself, the office having become his only retreat that felt safe, the home no longer a place where he could honestly find a part of himself worth looking at. It was here, in the vestiges of his pastor’s position, where he could continue to put the fig leaf in between Leah and himself and pretend as if the questions he had in his mind could possibly have logical answers in his heart.

Pushing back in his office chair, Malachi felt the beating of his heart begin to ripple, a gallop of fear tripling its beat and making him begin to sweat. *Everyone will find out. Everyone will talk. All of this will unravel and become a scandal. Eden will judge me, turn me away. Leah will want a divorce. Eve will never trust us again. The sins of the flesh, my wife’s flesh, will taint my entire call from God, casting it before the wicked so they can dance around the flames that will burn my family down to the ground.*

His eyes gravitated back to the photo of Leah. To ask “*Why?*” didn’t mean as much as trying to figure out where he had laid the foundation for her doubt and whether or not his

own actions had forged the key he must have handed her. Silas, he knew, was young, handsome, virile, and from his own daughter's limited trust in him he knew that the young man and his relationship with Rebekah was headed for some difficult times of its own. He didn't want to picture them together, Leah and Silas, and yet the enemy of God was standing in the dark recesses of his mind and heart, a subtle laughter emanating from the evil he had unleashed into all their lives.

'You are such a fool, Malachi Noble. And such a good pastor, aren't you?'

In the aftermath of her confession, Malachi turned silent against Leah and Eve, the house becoming an eerie shrine of silence and blind shame. His daughter, knowing something was wrong, tried to speak to him but he couldn't divulge what he couldn't wrap his own mind around in terms of Leah's admission. And he spent every night since it happened either sleeping in his study at the house or coming to the church to pray, cry or feel the talons of hatred beginning to tear against the skin of his heart.

"Your mother and I are dealing with something that has *nothing* to do with you," he told Eve the other morning when the two of them were eating breakfast together, Leah having left the house after preparing the meal in silence and eating by herself in the kitchen.

"Everything about me has *something* to do with both of you," she reminded him. "You are my parents."

I've failed as a husband, as a father. The arrow came from Satan, covered in the flames of his lies, aimed at the most tender part of his heart. Of course he asked her what happened, if it was over, and who else knew about their indiscretions. None of the answers satisfied Malachi because he had been slapped across the face with the deceit of the one he trusted the most outside of God. And, he knew, the silence of God in the wake of such hurt was an even deeper wound that he had no triage to hold back the bleeding.

When he arrived home that evening, he found most of the downstairs lights in the house off. Leah was sitting in the hallway outside the kitchen, in the exact spot he had found her the day he walked in the house when she was raging against Rebekah. She had an open bottle of Scotch next to her and was drinking from a crystal tumbler. Malachi noticed she also had an empty glass beside that.

"Figure that will help?" he asked, surprised to hear her laughing at him.

"Guess that means you don't want to join me at the bar?" As he entered the kitchen to put down his briefcase and book bag, Malachi heard the clink of the bottle against one glass, then another. "I'm drinking," she said, her voice husky yet dangerous, "to the fact that none of us in this house are innocent anymore. Our guilt isn't blind anymore."

Malachi left the kitchen and stood over his wife.

"Is that your guilt talking, Leah?" He felt a tang of pity watching her take another sip. She was dressed in a pair of jeans was wearing one of his favorite blouses, a black silk

one he had given her for her birthday a few years back. He noticed it had several top buttons undone, her hair pinned up and revealing her neckline. “Or maybe you’re just depressed enough to get smashed because Silas isn’t around to convince you otherwise?”

Laughing again, Leah picked up the second tumbler and raised it above her head, holding it out for Malachi to take.

“Much like the apple,” she said with a smile, “there stands the son of Adam, not quite knowing what to do next.” She jiggled the glass at him. “And just like Adam,” she said to her husband, “you’re *silent*.” Her face evaporated into a mask of want. “I’d stand up but would probably fall over. Please,” she said, still holding the glass up in her hand, “sit down for a second.”

Malachi looked at his wife, slowly reaching up to first unbutton the top of his shirt collar and loosen his tie. He then took the crystal tumbler of Scotch from her hand and moved over next to her, sliding his body down and sitting next to her. For a moment he looked at the liquor as if it were a man standing there with a knife to his throat. He closed his eyes and brought the rim of the glass to his lips. As he took in a sip and swallowed, the heat of the Scotch brought his heart alive as if the embers had been blown over with a fierce wind into a roaring flame.

“You know this isn’t going to *change* what we have to face,” he said to Leah.

“Is that your *solution*, Malachi?” she asked. “We have to *change* all this, make it right, and make it neat and pretty before God and the rest of Eden? Is that what you think I want, Malachi, to *change* who you are or haven’t been?” She finished the rest of her drink and let the tumbler fall from her hand onto the wooden floor between them.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said to her, the honesty chased away by another sip of liquor, his mind chastising him for sitting there with her and playing this game. The drink began to warm his chest, and the touch of her hand on his startled him, Malachi even more surprised when Leah rose up on her knees next to him.

“*I do*,” she said, as far from their marriage vows as she could be. Leah took the tumbler from his hand and pushed herself on top of him, her mouth hot and tasting of liquor as her kisses began to smother his mouth. Malachi felt a fierceness emerge from his hands as he tried to push her away but then found himself pulling Leah closer into him, swimming in his own guilt, listening to her unspoken words turn into the mystic language of ecstasy begging his forgiveness.

* * *

The next morning he left Leah sleeping in their bed, not wanting conversation with her after their tryst nor wanting to exacerbate what was surely going to be an unpleasant hangover for her after all the drinking she had done. With just a few shots of Scotch in him, Malachi felt fuzzy enough, the morning shower purposefully more cold

than hot, his breakfast more black coffee than eggs and toast. And then it was off to his office at Walnut Grove to begin preparation for that weekend's sermon. It was one he didn't want to, at this point, either prepare or present to the congregation he felt little or no connection to in spite of everything that twisted or turned in his personal life as it continued to disintegrate around him. *I wonder*, he thought, *what they would say if I preached about my own wife's indiscretion?*

On the drive to the church, Malachi noticed his anger surface as he tightly gripped the wheel, unable to rid his mind of the faces he wanted to scream at: Leah, Silas, even at Eve for the way she kept falling for the weaknesses in Adam. *Why did you bring me to this church, God, this place? You know I never wanted to come here in the first place but answered Your call as I was supposed to. Look what's happened because of it.*

When he first arrived in Eden and was handed the pulpit at Walnut Grove, Malachi knew that his fire and passion for preaching the Word of God was well suited for the small town. Eden, as he found out quickly enough, was just as full of sinners as some of the larger cities he and Leah had been living and serving in prior to their arrival. On one hand, the needs of the congregation were the same and his role as pastor was less challenging. Of course there would always be the need for weddings and funerals and baptisms and prayer. At first he tried to convince himself that many of the faithful in Eden were simply loving the Lord and

accepting him in the natural progression of pastors who had served over the years. After all, he was young, with a beautiful wife, and a daughter that was loved by the whole town.

How long before this secret becomes the sin out in the open? Another driver blared his horn at Malachi as he was caught daydreaming at a stoplight that had turned from red to green. He muttered a vile curse to himself and gunned the engine, speeding away from the light and towards the church across town. *What have I done so horribly wrong that I deserve such treachery and wrath visited upon my heart and home?* Malachi caught himself wanting to curse God aloud, to spit out his temper and his hatred on that which he couldn't see, being human instead of being the pastor. Even Leah's drunken advances the night before, just a bandage on a bleeding artery, couldn't assuage the pain his heart was feeling nor squelch the anger that grew inside of him, consuming his thoughts as rapidly as they corrupted his ability to forgive.

Just blocks from the church, Malachi saw Silas King walking out of one of Eden's bookstores. Swinging his car into the first street side parking space he could find, half of the rear end still sticking out into the oncoming lane, Malachi burst from the driver's side door, slamming it shut behind him as he bolted around the back of the car and onto the sidewalk in pursuit of the young man.

Does he think he can walk among us here without reproach, without consequence? Who does he think he is

bedding down the woman I've given my heart to and thinking he can just walk among us as if he has not anything to atone for? How evil is his heart to not hide away in shame? Malachi felt the rage in him follow the questions without purpose, a blind calling to hate in his heart that quickened his steps, not caring who saw him or what they would see when he caught up to Silas.

As the young man entered a video store, Malachi shortened the distance between him and Silas, intent on going in the store after him. Just a few storefronts down from going in after him, Malachi heard Eve's voice clearly calling out behind him.

"Dad!"

Malachi turned, seeing Eve coming up the sidewalk behind him, several passersby offering him a "Hello, pastor" as she approached.

"Eve," he said, his breathing flustered and his collar stained with a quick sweat of fear and guilt, "what are you doing here?"

She held up a small bag from the candy store. "I thought I would get some white fudge for Mom, try to cheer her up." She looked suspiciously at him. "Dad," she said with concern in her voice, "why were you following Silas?"

"Following Silas?" he asked, lying, turning around from Eve to look away.

"I saw him walk by as I was leaving the store," she told him. "You walked *right by me*, like you were chasing after him."

“Eve, look...” Malachi stood silent, the rage in him blinded now by images of his daughter and Adam together. “Stop doing this,” he warned her.

“Doing what?”

“*This*,” he said, his voice seeming raised on the sidewalk as a few more people walked by, greeting them both with a smile. Malachi waited until they were moving on and said to Eve, “I don’t want to get into this here.”

“You don’t want to talk to me,” she said, indifferent, standing there and challenging him. “Mom is falling apart at the seams and neither of you are ready to tell me what’s going on. Rebekah’s a basket case and Adam won’t talk to Silas, whom you seem bent on talking to.” Malachi looked at his daughter, who wore a mask of fear, looking like a small girl wanting to cry but not wanting to disappoint her father in doing so. He could see the anger flashing in her eyes. “Do you think I believe any of *this*?”

Malachi didn’t say anything but moved past her in the direction of his car parked down the street, leaving Silas and the confrontation behind him. He could hear Eve laughing in disbelief as he walked away.

“Don’t you walk away from me!” she yelled, the people on the sidewalk with them turning in surprise at the pastor’s daughter, some realizing that Malachi was the focus of her anger. Malachi turned in shame, his anger roiling inside of his chest, his concern one of selfish pride sticking him with pins all over his skin.

“Not here, Eve,” he said, his eyes averting to the stares around him, his smile false as the people turned from staring at him to cautiously moving on. “Not *now*.”

“When?” she called out as he turned his back on her and continued to walk away. “What’s going to stop any of this from happening?”

Getting back into his car, Malachi put it in drive and sped away from his parking spot, narrowly avoiding a car moving along in his lane of traffic. He nervously glanced into his rearview mirror and saw an image of Eve on the sidewalk in the distance, shaking her head in disbelief that only made his anger that much fiercer. *She is her mother’s daughter. She is just as dirty as Leah. God have mercy on me, wash me clean of all of them.*

Malachi Noble drove on towards his church, wishing nothing more than to hate those he loved the most.

* * *

It was days later that he saw Eve again, this time leaving the house without speaking to him. Malachi looked out the front window of the house to see Adam and his daughter walking across the front lawn holding hands.

Something in his heart, Malachi knew, was breaking apart, severed as was his connection to his own wife and daughter. He had only briefly talked with Leah the night before, asking her if she had talked with Eve in any way about what had happened.

“What do you want me to tell her?” she asked. “Do you really think adding that hurt to her right now is the right

thing to do? She had enough,” Leah said, “to deal with in what’s going on with Adam?”

“*Adam?*” he said in surprise. “You’re blind, Leah. She’ll go wherever he tells her to, even if it’s away from us. Is that something you want?”

She could only shake her head. “Do you think I really wanted all *this?*” she asked her husband. Malachi’s only response was to walk away from the conversation. And that was how he was living his life in the wake of the devastation, in walking away, by avoiding them.

As he watched Adam and Eve walk out of view, Malachi stood in the eerie silence of his own home, for a moment considering what Joshua Thorne felt about his son. In the few times they spoke about the issue, Malachi was convinced that Joshua wanted nothing more than for Adam to be apart from Eve, as if the mayor of Eden didn’t care for the preacher’s daughter becoming yet another tragedy in the tale of a young man gone wrong.

With little concern for being at the office or feeling trapped in the house, Malachi chose to drive out to the Thorne estate hoping to find Joshua. Upon arriving he didn’t find Joshua at the main house but was told by one of his workers that Malachi would find him on the high hill where his wife was buried. Malachi knew the way, opting to walk through parts of the vast estate instead of driving out. The warm sunshine and pleasant breezes of late August tempted his heart to invite God in for a visit but as his steps took him closer to the long field that led towards the hill, Malachi kept

thinking about all of the trouble Adam had already visited upon Eve's heart.

He found Joshua sitting on the marble bench near the grave site. Malachi cleared his throat as he approached but Joshua didn't turn his way to recognize him. The pastor walked over and stood a few feet away so that Joshua could see him.

"Pastor," he said.

"Joshua," Malachi responded. "It's a beautiful day to be alive, no?"

He turned and looked at Malachi. "Most of them are, pastor. And most of them would be a lot better if she were still here."

Malachi nodded his head, walking over a few steps towards the gravestone.

"Isn't it right, Joshua, that we never know how much we had until it's gone."

"We both still have plenty," he said to Malachi. "You have your family, I have all this land and more money than even God knows what I should do with. Isn't that enough?"

"Do you ever think about their futures?"

"Whose?" he asked Malachi.

"Adam," he said, "and Eve."

"Doesn't seem to matter what I think," Joshua told him. "How's that been working with you and Eve?" He was smiling at Malachi, but it was a sarcastic grin that blended in with the sunshine.

“More than I want to she’ll probably do whatever Adam tells her to.”

“More so than God?”

Malachi shook his head. “I just don’t know anymore, Joshua. The more I try to figure her out...to figure them out,” he said with resignation hiding anger, “the more I wish that God hadn’t brought them together.”

“We’ve all played our roles,” he said to Malachi. “Sounds like you’re regretting yours, pastor.”

“Don’t you ever?” Malachi noted. “Don’t you ever wish that you hadn’t listened to Rachel and gotten into the mix sooner?”

Joshua was silent for a few moments. “There are *lot of things* I wish I did when Rachel was still around. I’ve done the best I could with Adam. There are some things he’s going to have to figure out on his own from this point out. Even if I did protect him, it wouldn’t make a difference.”

“To whom?” Malachi asked.

“God,” Joshua said. “I think God’s got totally different plans for that young man than even I can figure out right now. And for me.”

“For us all, Joshua,” Malachi said, turning to look at Rachel’s grave.

“What’s on your mind, pastor?”

“Let’s not kid ourselves, Joshua. We both want the same thing and don’t want to admit it.”

Joshua laughed, looking at Malachi.

“Say what’s on your mind. I’m listening.”

Malachi turned from Leah's grave. "To put it bluntly, mayor, and out of respect to you, of course, I think it's best that Eve have the opportunity to follow God's will in her life. As her father, I have a responsibility to make sure she's shepherded in that direction. Call it a sense of fatherly duty."

"And you believe," Joshua said to him, "that it's my *fatherly duty* to convince my son it's in his best interest to get out of her way?"

"Something like that," Malachi said, not feeling any distaste in his mouth for having spoken the words. He looked Joshua squarely in the eyes. "Come now, mayor, do you really believe in your heart that what Adam has to offer her isn't more of the same that he's offered you, offered Rachel when she was here, or Eden for all his life?"

Joshua stood up from the bench and thrust his hands into his work pants, taking in a deep breath and exhaling it loudly.

"Maybe I should take offense at your suggestion, pastor? After all," he said, "isn't it also a father's duty to believe in his son or daughter when no one else will?"

"Only *you* can answer that question, Joshua," he said. "Or maybe you already have." With that he turned and walked away down the hill, leaving the seed planted and knowing that Joshua was smart enough to till the ground and wait to see what grew from it. They both knew that it might be the only way to avoid the deepest cut in both Adam and Eve's hearts.

* * *

It was in the morning when Malachi heard the whispers in his heart the deepest: *Go and preach the Gospel to the most wicked man in Eden. He is waiting to hear My truth.*

As pastor, Malachi knew that Judge Herod Stone attended service each week, more so as an act of theater than a show of obedience. He also knew that Stone liked to spend money for the church as a means of leveraging his power among those more influential members of the congregation. Yet as his marriage continued to fall apart and his family continued to abandon him in their silence and their shame, Malachi couldn't shake the feeling that God was asking too much of him in light of Herod's blatant rebellion.

So when he found himself at the courthouse in Eden one day, searching out Herod's office, Malachi knew that he was just following orders, taking his cue from both the necessity of his own guilt and this latent sense of how deep the enemy of God had built his footholds into the heart of many in Eden who respected Stone for his wealth, power and influence.

"Pastor Noble," the Judge said once Malachi was ushered into his office, giving him a firm handshake, "this is a *pleasant* surprise." He offered Malachi a plush seat next to his massive desk. "Care for anything?" Herod's face was a twist of temptation, his smile as insinuating as his secrets.

"No, thank you," Malachi told him, watching as the Judge lit up a dark cigar and sat down in his own leather

chair behind the desk. “I appreciate you seeing me without an appointment.”

Herod laughed. “The door is always open to you, Malachi. You should know that by now.”

“I should?” he countered. “I thought I told you the same thing once, but rarely have I received the same pleasure in return.” He looked at Herod, who was smiling in the smoke.

“Keeping score, pastor?”

It was Malachi’s turn to smile. “That’s God’s providence, not mine, Herod, though I am here today on His business.”

“The *business* of God?” he asked. Herod squinted as he looked at Malachi. “Aren’t the checks I write to Walnut Grove big enough?”

“More than generous,” Malachi told him, “but your money isn’t what I want to discuss.”

Stone took a huge draw on his cigar, blowing the smoke directly across the desk and into the face of Malachi.

“You’ve come to tell me that God still has a spot in his heart to forgive me, haven’t you?” He leaned back in his chair. “Or maybe you’ve come to tell me that a man of my age isn’t guaranteed tomorrow so *today* might be the only chance I have of accepting this Christ of the cross. Which is it, Malachi?”

Measuring his words, Malachi told him, “Both, actually. You’ve never struck me, Herod, as a fool, albeit a man who is foolish in his rebellion against God.”

“A man must have his enemies to know his friends,” Stone told the pastor. “But I also know that any man, including you, must be aware that even God has his times when he is silent and missing in action.”

“That’s where *faith* comes in, Herod. But for a man without faith, what is a man to do in such times? Rely on his money, his power?”

“Not bad bridges to have when the rains come pouring down as they will.”

“Bridges fail, get washed away, burn. All these things happen to Christians, too, Herod. A life in the Lord is not guaranteed to be easy.”

“But only in Christ is my ticket guaranteed into a life I can’t see?”

“The Gospel is clear, Judge. In John it says, ‘*For God so loved the world that He gave His One and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.*’ To come to God the only way is through the cross.”

Herod was silent for a moment.

“So the choice is simple,” he finally said. “Believe and be saved or reject the truth and be damned.”

“Plainly put,” Malachi noted, “and, yes, Herod, that simple, to be blunt.”

“Heaven or hell,” Herod said, laughing so loud that Malachi almost startled in his chair. “And this son, Jesus himself, is waiting with open arms, nail holes in his hands, waiting for a man like me to abandon a lifetime of

selfishness, greed and lust to come walking to him and just be *forgiven*? Me?”

Malachi smiled at the picture. “Yes, Herod, *you*. Is that so hard to believe?”

“You tell me, Malachi. You’ve seen enough of my life here in Eden to testify to the fact that my rebellion against God is enough proof of a hardened heart.”

“So what do you believe in the light of the Gospel, Judge?”

Herod’s face softened, and he laid his cigar down in a large crystal ashtray on top of his desk.

“You may find this impossible to believe, pastor, but at this point in my life, I am convinced of several things. One of them is that I have enjoyed all of my lusts and all of my money and all of my sins. The pleasures they have brought me, well, I’ll just say that no man should be denied such satisfactions. Nothing my flesh has sought has been kept from me, and it’s certainly been a long life spent pursuing such tastes. But even I understand there is still a choice.”

“And what’s that, Judge?”

Herod Stone looked at Malachi. “I still have to decide whether or not I can stand before God himself and tell him I’m not interested in what he has to sell me. I’ve taken many huge risks in my life, and they’ve paid off because I made sure that they did. And I’ve felt the sting of losing things that were very, very important to me.” He stopped speaking for a moment, his eyes welling up wet but then Malachi could see something deep inside of Herod shut the door and lock the

key on such intimacy. “So this choice keeps knocking on the door, pastor. Am I willing to risk it all and be right or is there still hope for someone like me? I guess you’re right when you preach that the eternal question is going to be answered one way or another for each of us.”

Malachi sat in the chair, his breath taken away to hear Herod speaking in such tones. He looked at the man and tried to see the humanness behind the story of power and greed, searching his face for a clue to the real man behind the mask.

“Who are you fighting, Herod?” Malachi asked him, sensing the battle in the man’s heart.

“*Everyone* wants a piece of me, pastor. Even God is standing in line waiting. But if he doesn’t care, doesn’t exist, then I’ll be damned to lose a fight I should have won all along. I’m old,” Herod confessed, “but I can still fight the dirtiest fight any man’s ever seen.” He chuckled, picking up the cigar again, drawing on it until the smoke billowed from between his lips. “Wonder what God would say if I made him bleed again?”

Malachi felt the chill of being in the presence of such an evil heart, one that was hardened and had no capacity for love but knew only the blackness of its own destruction.

“If you keep swinging at him,” Malachi said, “he might surprise you with a few blows of his own. Eden isn’t going down without a fight, either. You must know this, Judge, even from a position as lofty as yours.”

“And who in Eden can stop me?” he asked, staring at Malachi. “*You*, pastor? Mayor Thorne? Who? No one has the power I do.”

Malachi smiled. “Keep fighting, Judge,” he told him. “And remember that Christ took the wrath that was due you for your sins. Keep fighting until you choose to surrender for the victory that was never yours.”

“Maybe,” the Judge said, “maybe. Or maybe Eden will take me down before I can kneel.” He leered at Malachi. “And maybe I’m not the *only one* in Eden with something to lose.”

Malachi sat there, feeling as if the Judge could see the stain on his own heart, knowing that the secrets of Eden had now enslaved the one man that many turned to in order to find God.

* * *

Alone in the darkness of the living room, Malachi sat numb. He had checked his watch just moments before and knew the hour was approaching midnight. Eve still had not come home. Leah had prepared dinner for the two of them and had eaten in mostly silence, as had become the norm. He knew that the communication with his wife was dying a little more each day as their spirit was attacked with the remnants of a marriage that was being torn apart by the shame of the story now between them.

“When will you tell her?” he asked Leah earlier that evening, referring to Eve learning the truth from her mother.

“What would you have me do?” she responded.
“Contact her on Facebook and say, oh, by the way, your mother’s an adulterous whore who’s been sleeping with one of your friends?”

As he sat waiting for his daughter to come home from spending time, he assumed, with Adam, Malachi could feel the jealousy crawl over his skin. *Why didn’t I see the signs in Leah? Why didn’t I see her love for me stolen away?* He felt his throat tighten, the answer stuck in a dark place somewhere inside of him.

It was the same chill down his back feeling, the same uneasiness in his own skin that he felt when his meeting with Herod ended after further discussion. The Judge, as they walked to his office door, took hold of Malachi’s arm with a grip that was both malevolent and firm. He looked at Malachi and said, “I do hope what evil does lurk in our Eden hasn’t yet touched the beauty of your wife or your daughter.” It sounded, to Malachi, more like a threat that had come to pass and knowledge that Herod knew in secret more so than a man toying with God uttering phrases of passing judgment.

His thoughts were interrupted as he saw a pair of headlights pass through the living room curtains, indicating Eve’s presence in the driveway. When she came into the house and walked into the living room from the foyer, turning on a small table lamp, she startled to see him sitting alone.

“Whoa,” she said, her eyes alive with a momentary fear, Malachi noticing that she look flustered, scared, “didn’t see you there.”

“Sorry,” he said. “You didn’t know I was here.”

Eve looked around her at the living room, the rest of the lights off. She turned to look over her shoulder past the foyer and towards the dining room.

“Mom still up?”

Malachi shook his head. “Went to bed hours ago,” he said. “She wasn’t feeling...”

“Stop it,” Eve said to him. “Don’t make excuses for her.”

“What do you mean?”

Eve put her bag down on a table by the lamp and stood facing him, crossing her arms in anger in front of her. She kept looking at him as if expecting more of an answer.

“*I know,*” she said, “*what’s going on.*”

Malachi felt the lump in his throat, the racing of his heart causing him to break out in a sweat. He sat there holding her stare until he had nothing left to do but drop his gaze and look at his hands.

“No,” he said in a voice that was near tears, “I don’t think you do.”

“You’re a *fool,*” she said. Malachi couldn’t look at her. “You don’t even have a clue as to what’s happening to me, to the people I love. Or do you think I don’t care about you or Mom?” She laughed. “No,” she added, “you just think I’m out

with Adam, sinning up and down in Eden, just waiting to bring more shame to this family.”

He looked up at his daughter in anger. “Eve,” he warned, “don’t do this.”

“Do what?” she asked, her face flashing with rage. “Tell you what you don’t want me to know? Wake you up, Dad? What? Make believe it doesn’t rip my damn heart apart to know that one of my friends had an affair with my own *mother*? What do you want me to do about that?” Her voice was pitched, not afraid to wake Leah, Malachi hoping that it wouldn’t turn into a screaming match but fearing neither of them was willing to hold back their fear.

“Pray for her,” he said, wishing he could disappear into the couch, wishing he could hide from his daughter, or the dark truth his wife’s indiscretion had visited upon them. “Pray for *us*.”

“*Us*?” she said in disgust. “Maybe God’s just getting around to punishing *us* for all of our sins. Funny, don’t you think?”

“What?” he asked, looking at Eve.

“Adam,” she responded. “He had nothing to do with Mom and Silas, so you can’t *blame him* for that.”

Malachi felt the sting of the arrow pierce his heart. *I do hate him, Lord. Forgive me for my wanting to be her father more than her friend.*

“Would it make you feel better if it had been him?” he said. Eve’s face flinched, as if he had gotten up off the couch and walked over and slapped her.

“Answered prayer comes in many ways, Dad,” she said. He noticed, as she hugged her arms tighter to her chest, that she was trembling. “Maybe there are things about *me* that would cause you to forget how ashamed you are of Mom.”

“I’m not ashamed of either of you,” he said to her.

“You amaze me,” she hissed. “When did it become so easy or so convenient for you to *lie* to me? No wonder she turned to Silas.” She was shaking her head in amazement and disgust as she looked at him. “And you’ll *never* accept the fact that Adam asked me to marry him because he loves *me*, all of me, whether it’s beautiful or ugly.”

“So just because a man who doesn’t love God loves you I’m supposed to give him a free pass to wound you?”

“You don’t know him,” Eve pleaded. “Even his own father stopped trying to fight for his heart. What do you think that did to him? Make him believe more than ever God was *really* on his side?”

“Don’t lecture me on God, Eve,” he snapped back. “God is right to turn His face from the sins of your mother, even the sins of you.”

“Better him than you, huh?” She sighed, picking up her bag from the table. “Maybe Judge Stone is right.”

“What do you mean?” Malachi asked Eve, his chest freezing in fear.

She was idly swinging the bag in one hand while looking down at the ground.

“I saw him earlier tonight,” she said, glancing up at him, “in town. He said you came by to see him the other day. He said you’re a man who is searching.”

“Searching for what?” he asked his daughter.

“Searching for a fig leaf because you’re afraid and you’re hiding. And you know that God is coming to look for you,” Eve said, “just like he knows that God is hunting for him.”

She didn’t even say goodnight to him as she walked out of the living room, instead just stopping long enough to shut off the table lamp and leave him alone in the darkness.

* * *

“Malachi, why are you here?” Solomon Judah looked across at him with compassion, his face passive as he waited for the pastor to speak.

“What other solace is there for an aching heart other than to share the burden with another?” He stared at Solomon, feeling no better for having confessed the burdens of his life to the man but feeling as if he couldn’t stop the words from exiting his mouth. “Even in my position, I still have moments of doubt and disbelief. I know God can, and does, forgive me for such things. But I still can’t bear up.”

“It is a great weight you’re carrying,” Solomon told him, “as is Leah and Eve and Silas.”

Malachi flinched in hearing that, his hands grasped together on his lap, his fingers gripping each other as if to choke something evil away.

“Who deserves God’s forgiveness,” he said.

“But not yours?” Solomon asked.

“We forget about Rebekah,” Malachi told him. “Her heart must be shattered.”

Solomon smiled at the pastor. “I’m not sitting across from Rebekah right now, am I?” He paused. “This is about *you*, Malachi. God understands that, sees that. It’s not selfish to have your anger, your fears, or even your unwillingness to forgive. But even you know, pastor or not, that the only way out of this *is to forgive* them all for what they’ve done, to each other and you.”

“Easier said, as the saying goes.”

Solomon looked away from him, Malachi watching as he opened a drawer on his desk and reached inside. Solomon stood up from his chair and walked around to hand Malachi something. As he opened his palm to receive it, he saw it was a simple gold wedding band. Malachi sat there, quiet, as Solomon walked behind his desk and stood at the window.

“At first,” he began to tell Malachi, “I thought God was mistaken. *Imagine that*. How can God make a mistake?” He laughed, looking out at the vista before him, his back to Malachi. “She was beautiful, the closest thing I could ever imagine to an angel or even what the first Eve must have looked like. If I close my eyes and take in a deep breath, I can still feel what God did to my heart the first time we met. And it was that first time,” he said, “that I knew she was to be my wife.” Solomon stopped, turning to look at Malachi before sitting down in his chair again. “She was a gift I never

deserved, who took my imperfect love and loved me perfectly.”

Malachi looked down at the wedding band in his palm, noticing that his hand had a slight tremor to it.

“What happened to her?” Malachi asked. The obviousness of the question sounded childlike, innocent.

“Five years into our marriage, I made the mistake I could never erase,” Solomon told him, the tears in his eyes sudden. “I chose to ignore God’s strength and believe in the lies of my flesh. I had an affair,” he confessed to Malachi, “and, in the end, she found out. At first, the anger I felt from her seemed like a penance, a just pound of flesh in return being ripped from my heart. As time moved on, the words stopped flowing with hatred and retreated into silence on both sides. I think I wanted to believe she forgave me and I think she wanted to believe I needed to be. But somewhere in me I knew there was an unwillingness to open my heart to hers again. *The damage had been done.*”

“So,” Malachi asked, “what happened?” He held up the ring in his fingers. “She divorced you?”

Solomon shook his head. “It was a day in February, about a year before I came here to Eden. Something in me was broken and I knew God was calling to me fix it, to come to Him to have it fixed. I remember being in fear driving home because I knew I wanted to ask her to forgive me, to look at me and forgive me. Even at the cost of her leaving me, I wanted nothing more than to confess to her with the brokenness in my heart that I wanted her to forgive me for

the arrow I had shot into her heart.” His tears were now freely dropping down his cheeks. “When I walked in the door to our house, I kept calling her name. ‘*Andrea. Andrea.*’ She didn’t answer. I went room to room downstairs, looked outside in the back yard, but she wasn’t there. And as I started up the stairs to our bedroom, I remember feeling a hand on my shoulder as if someone were right behind me, holding me back.” Solomon stood up from his chair, walking around to Malachi and taking the ring from his hand. A tear from Solomon’s cheek fell into his open palm. “I found her in our bed, both of her wrists cut deep.” He stopped talking, returning the ring to his desk drawer, standing once again at the window, looking out.

“Solomon,” Malachi finally said in a tone barely above a whisper, “you couldn’t have known...”

“*What?*” he said. “That my wound to her heart couldn’t be healed? That forgiveness wasn’t because I wanted it but because God commanded it? That whatever love I thought I had given to her was taken away by my hardened heart and willing flesh?” He turned around and looked at Malachi. “And still God wasn’t finished with me. He was still asking me to ask for the forgiveness I couldn’t ask for when she was still there to ask it of her. *He wanted me to ask Him for it.* All along, Malachi, God was standing there waiting for me to ask.”

They were quiet for a while, Malachi listening to Solomon weep while the echoes in his own heart spoke of the