

*Love*

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The author has tried to recreate events, locales, and conversations from memories of them. In order to maintain their anonymity, in some instances the names of individuals, some identifying characteristics and details may have been changed, such as physical properties, occupations, and places of residence.

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## **Dedication**

While the characters in my books are always fictional, a lot of them are based on my own experiences and relationships.

I have a very dear aunt and uncle who have encouraged me without fail throughout my life. I would like to dedicate this novel to my Uncle Darrell and Aunt Marcia Vanvleet, who continue to support and encourage me to this day. Their belief in my abilities, and the love and positivity they have expressed throughout my life, mean more than they will ever know. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I would also like to express appreciation to all of the dog lovers out there. Our own little Maltipoo, Bella Rose, looks much like the puppy in this novel. She is a constant source of love and companionship. I hope all of you who have fur babies experience this source of unconditional love.

*Watch, stand fast in the faith,  
be brave, be strong.  
Let all that you do be done with love.*

1 Corinthians 16:13–14

NKJV



## Prologue

**O**LIVIA ROBERTS DROVE ALONG the quiet Texas road with her eight-year-old daughter, Bella, chatting happily behind her in the back seat. Oh, to be young and innocent and so happy about getting to go to a birthday party. Bruce hadn't wanted her to go, but for once Olivia had trumped him. And he was furious. Olivia knew she was going to hear more about it when she got back.

"You spoil that kid rotten!" Bruce had yelled. "We don't have money for that crap."

"I can pick something up at the dollar store for next to nothing. Kids her age like everything. Let her be a kid for once."

"She has chores, and she needs to earn her keep. Besides, we need every penny you make to pay the bills. You aren't cutting your shift to take her, are you?"

“Of course not. I don’t work this Saturday. I’m working sixty hours this week. They won’t let me work more than that. I’ll see you tonight.”

That had been two days ago, and Olivia had worked long shifts ever since. Looking in the rearview mirror at her happy little girl, she was glad she had stuck to her guns. She had worked ten p.m. to ten a.m. and come straight to her brother’s house to pick up her daughter and take her to the party. Knowing she had a twelve-hour shift, Olivia had arranged for Bella to spend the night with Paul and his wife, Eleanor. They loved having Bella, since they didn’t have kids of their own, and had picked her up after school on Friday. Paul and Eleanor were happy to take her to get something for her little friend. Bruce didn’t need to know that. It was really none of his business.

She had met Bruce a little over six months ago, when she had taken her car to have the brakes checked out. The local auto repair shop near the hospital was a logical choice, and Bruce was working there. He had shown interest in her and talked her into having lunch after the repairs were made. Olivia had few friends and most of her free time was reserved for her daughter, so spending time with Bruce had seemed special. When he talked to her about sharing an apartment to save money a few weeks later, she thought it sounded like a good idea. She was struggling to make ends meet herself, and the

extra income would be a blessing. It wasn't long before she realized it was a huge mistake.

Bruce hadn't contributed a dime so far, claiming he lost his job the day after they moved in. He had plenty of time to fret about every move they made, but never found time to look for another job. She couldn't carry the financial load forever. And he ate all the groceries she bought, even Bella's special treats.

It hadn't taken Olivia long to figure out that Bruce was happy to live off what she made. And she was afraid he hated her daughter, because he found fault with everything she did and never had a kind word to say to her. He was critical of how she did her chores and often made her redo them while he watched and heckled her. Olivia couldn't tolerate it and really needed to find a way to get him out of their life for good. But it was going to be difficult. She had discovered he had a horrible temper, and at times he scared her to death! Her brother had warned her about moving in with someone like Bruce. Paul was more than ten years her senior, and he was all she had left, but she had still pushed his advice aside.

Distracted by her own thoughts, Olivia didn't see the old truck coming up fast behind her until it was too late. It bumped hard into the rear of her car and veered off, trying to come up alongside her on the passenger side where her daughter was sitting and screaming in fear. Seeing that the truck was planning to crash into her

car on that side, she raced ahead of it and whipped the steering wheel with all her might to the left and slammed on the brakes. Her car screeched to a halt. Now the driver came directly at *her!*

Bella screamed.

The truck crashed into them like a wrecking ball.

Unbearable pain exploded in her head.



## Chapter 1

**B**ELLA UNLOCKED THE DOOR of the quaint, cottage-style house she had shared for over two decades with her aunt and uncle. It was still hard to believe they were both gone. She smiled, picturing her uncle's tall, slightly bent frame that was such a contrast to his petite wife.

Aunt Eleanor had passed during Bella's second year of student teaching, and now her precious Uncle Paul was gone too. Pushing her straight, light-brown hair behind her ears, she eased her heavy backpack off her shoulders. Rubbing them to release the tension, she wished she could remove the heaviness from her heart as easily.

Almost a year now, but Bella could still picture her uncle sitting at the table working on his latest puzzle. So sad to think they would never work on another one, laughing and talking about anything and everything while

they fit the tiny pieces together. Though Bella was petite like her aunt, she had inherited her uncle's love of puzzles and reading. Over the years, Aunt Eleanor had often commented that they were like two peas in pod. They were always happy sharing the same space, enjoyed similar activities and loved being silly together. She often accused them of keeping her from getting her work done, but they pulled her right into their love and laughter anyway. If only they were both still here with her. But then Bella knew from experience that good things didn't last forever.

She carried her purse into the bedroom that was hers now. She had bought a new mattress for the double bed after her uncle passed and moved into the room that reminded her every day of the unconditional love her aunt and uncle had lavished on her. She had become the child they could never have, and they had called her their gift from God. She had used the twin bed in the spare room over the years, but the double bed was where her aunt had held her and comforted her many times, starting with the night Bruce dropped her off at this very house. She was only eight when it happened, still grieving for her mom who had been killed just days before. She was tired and sore from the accident, but she could remember that day in great detail. She would never forget the words Bruce had hurled at her.

"You killed her, you know. It's your fault," he had screamed at her. "You had to go to that stupid birthday party."

She still felt guilty after all this time, the weight of it compounded by years of feeling the loss of her mother. Even the love that had been lavished on her hadn't been able to take it away. But at least *he* was out of her life. Bruce had taken everything they had and disappeared. *Good riddance*. Bella's thoughts mimicked the words her uncle had said more than once.

Shaking off memories she really didn't want to recall, she left the bedroom. Bella tried not to let the sadness overwhelm her as she put the kettle on for some tea. She shivered, even though it was still warm outside, remembering that Aunt Eleanor always said, "Tea makes everything better."

Thinking of her aunt brought her uncle to mind almost immediately. She could remember him standing right where she stood today.

"And now abide faith, hope, love, these three," Uncle Paul would say. Uncle Paul had been an elder at their church, and they had created a little game over the years of her uncle reciting part of a verse from the Bible and expecting Bella to reply with the rest of the verse and name the book of the Bible it came from. The number of verses he knew had always astonished her. Without thinking about what she was doing, she spoke out loud.

"But the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13:13. I love and miss you so much, Uncle."