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Church Love: Love Worthy of a Second Chance
Book One in the Seasons in Savannah Series

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Scripture Quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible and are put into modern-day context and application.

“Holy Love” and “Hour of Chivalry” taken from Upon the Tables of My Heart
By Kristie Kennedy © 2004 Quiet Streams Publishers

All characters in this book have no existence outside the author’s imagination and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention or based on the author’s own personal experience.

The author makes no apology for how the presence of God in this book may impact the reader’s spiritual life.

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What Readers Are Saying About Church Love

“For a change, a spirit-filled romance!”

-Anita Wholuba

“This book shows that even church folk have issues.”

-Reinaldo Duval

“This is a good, clean romance where the church is portrayed as a safe haven--refreshing!”

-Padeitra Moorer

“Believers (new and mature) will benefit from reading this novel. I can’t wait to read the next book in the series.”

-Felicia Pierre

“This novel is an in-your-face look at the issues believers go through. It is written without sugar coating and it will make you look at yourself and say, ‘help me Lord.’ This book draws a clear distinction between friendship and what God has in mind concerning romantic love.”

-Melissa Dalvery

“Shantae Charles does an excellent job of going where very few *men* are able to go...into the female psyche. This is a *must read* for men who want to get an understanding of women.”

-Andrew Dalvery

“This novel not only speaks to the heart, but the spirit as well. It has brought forth great deliverance in my life, helping me to discover that God speaks in all situations—even our everyday problems.”

-Felicia Mordica

“One thing is for sure, this is a book where the love relationship these characters portray with God will make you eager to pursue your own relationship with God.”

-Benetta Wholuba

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Love Worthy Of A Second Chance

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ for making this possible. It has been a pleasure to write for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. I am blessed among women to have been purposed to bring forth this life-changing novel.

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Special Thanks

To my entire Life Changers Church Family, for without them this book would not have been possible. Through fiction I share what I know to be truth: we are inextricably woven together as One Body. What I do, what I say, how I give and how I live matters to our local community of believers and to the Body of Christ at large. The world is watching us. Thank you for *being* the essence of this novel- the **Church that Loves**.

Foreword

There is one thing you must know from the beginning of this novel: I never set out to be an author. I was only a tool in the hand of God yielded to fulfill the plan of God that has been destined for my life. When I was seventeen years old and attending a church service (one of my last as I was on my way to Tallahassee, FL. to attend college), a prophet from Coconut Grove, Florida was ministering in this particular service. He spoke prophetically to me. At the time, I had no idea what the prophetic was. I was wavering back and forth in my faith in God and I was living on the edge of righteousness. He spoke these words to me: "There are books in you. You are going to write a novel. This novel will gain notoriety and you will be asked to be interviewed by a very famous talk show host." Back then I thought to myself, *this guy has no idea what he's talking about! I'm an artist. I don't write books. I don't even have any interest in writing books!* At the time I had not written any songs or poetry either.

It was not until 2003 that God placed this novel in my heart and I began to write. This is the result. Here I am ten years later, and in your hands is the fulfillment of the very thing that was spoken in my life. I believe it is just the beginning.

Many lives have already been touched through this novel. As you read for enjoyment, I pray that you will have a life-changing experience and that your dreams, your heart, and your soul will be awakened. I pray that you will find yourself, and that you will find healing and deliverance laced throughout these pages. I pray that you will find the God who offers a second chance for whatever situation you need. It doesn't matter if it's with a family member, a co-worker, or with someone you loved dearly who may not be a part of your life anymore. Jesus Christ offers us the renewal we so desperately need. So come to the waters and drink...Church Love. Real Characters...Real Issues...God Answers.

Shantae A. Charles,

Author

This Novel is Dedicated To

My Grandmothers

**Missionary Ruth Page
&
Mother Leary Mae Davis**

**Women Worthy of Double Honor
Whose Lives Have Been
A Living Epistle**

Thank You

Church Love: Love Worthy of a Second Chance

“Holy Love”
©2004 Kristie Kennedy

This here what we have is a holy love

No one can touch this gift from above

This here is the real, the genuine, the pure, and the true

A river of life flowing unto the depths of my soul

This here what we have is a holy love

More precious than diamonds and costly pearls

Anything that is available in this temporal world

This here what we have is a holy love

Sweeter than the scent of a calla lily

Stronger than a fortress in the ancient city

This here what we have is a holy love

With this here love I can run through a troop

And leap over walls

On this love I can always depend

To answer every beck and call

This here love is the greatest

Of them all!

Prologue

I never imagined I'd have the courage to come back to this place, Savannah Evangeline Charles pondered to herself. Poignantly painful memories flittered across her mind, creating an unwanted cloudiness in her usually perceptive thoughts, mirroring the early morning sky before her. In flowing white linen she stood facing the River Street dock, allowing the wind to dance about the hem of her dress.

Savannah closed her eyes, enjoying the wind's caress of her hair, while the sun seemed to bend itself toward her scooping her in its arms and enveloping her in its radiant embrace. Vannah, as her friends fondly called her, soaked in every second of the heat, allowing it to soothe her aching muscles from last night's tumultuous sleep. Though The Riverside Inn was famous for its luxury and quiet respite for the travel weary soul, she hadn't cashed in on its promises yet, having been awakened several times during the night drenched in a cold sweat rivaling that of a marathon runner.

As much as Vannah wanted to drive back to Tallahassee, she knew that God had put her in Savannah, Georgia for a reason in this season. *I have to let my past rest by facing it, not running away,* she contemplated.

The Spirit of God whispered gently, "***You have much to gain by facing your trials.***"

Yes Lord, her heart responded.

She'd spent the last five years running from her hometown. It had been hard to stay away, with countless, precious childhood memories waiting to be unlocked and pulled out to reminisce upon at nearly every juncture. Not to mention Savannah was one of the most beautiful cities in the entire world, its old world style and elegance preserved for future generations to appreciate. The squares, architecture, expansive porches, antique shops, quaint boutiques, and canopy streets were among some of the things she missed about Savannah. *My Savannah,* she mused to herself.

Vannah took in a breath of the fresh air, savoring the pungent seaport smell, hoping to carry the scent back with her to Tallahassee until she visited once more. She had turned her back on her safe haven five years ago, because she hadn't gotten what she wanted. *I thought if I made myself more appealing, showing an interest in his affairs, that he'd want me. Surely he'd find me suitable for a wife. I can cook and clean. I sing, dance, draw, paint, and write. I'm athletic. I'm witty, full of adventure, yet level headed, and highly intelligent, not to mention beautiful. I love the Lord...*

Wait a minute, Savannah laughed within herself, I sound like I'm placing a singles' ad!

She'd wanted Josiah Edward Worth III to choose her over the hundreds of women who were enamored with him. She'd spent her high school years pining for Josiah, never once considering the many requests for courtship that came her way.

Josiah had everything going for him. Nothing short of perfection and three years her senior, he seemed to be the epitome of masculinity, elegance, and success. A gift, six feet five inches tall to be precise, wrapped in mocha and accented with dreamy hazel eyes. He was God's gift to a blessed woman. Josiah was not showy, conceited, or arrogant although, according to worldly standards of success, he had every right to be.

Josiah had an impressive resume even before his departure to college: All-American football star, Student Body President, Homecoming King, Salutatorian of his senior class. He bid farewell to the 'Hostess City of the South' with a full scholarship to a Florida University – not that he would have suffered any hardship without it. The Worth family owned everything from a local grocery store chain to Net Worth, Inc., his father's computer network company.

Josiah Edward Worth II was one of Savannah's most prominent pastors. Spiritually and secularly, both ends of the city spectrum held him in high esteem. Second Chance Ministries, his local membership of 2,500 members, was established in 1980. It was at Second Chance that Vannah had received her foundational spiritual upbringing, maturing in spiritual truth and simultaneously developing an admiration for and infatuation with the pastor's son.

Her admiration for Josiah extended well past his engaging charm, muscular physique, and enthusiasm for anything athletic. Josiah wasn't just handsome, charming, intelligent, sensitive, and witty, but what set him apart from so many boys in men's clothing was his integrity. Even in his youth, Josiah had maintained his principles. He had allowed no one to force his hand, suffering ridicule at times even from his closest friends. Yet he was not swayed, proudly reserving himself he said, 'for that appointed woman.' *Charisma could get you into a woman's heart, but character would keep you there*, Savannah mused. It was obvious that Josiah held a special place in the hearts of many females, but only one woman had received that place in his.

Yes, she sighed wistfully. Josiah was a taken man, and how well she knew. Her mind wandered back to that terrible night when her hopes for matrimony had been dashed. What had she been thinking, telling Josiah that she was in love with him, after all those

years? He was *practically* her brother! What a fool she had made of herself recalling the look of utter surprise on his face. Only her close friends knew the extent of her embarrassment.

Savannah had been heart broken at the congratulatory dinner held in the church fellowship hall for the launch of Worth It, Inc. Josiah had been appointed as the CEO the financial management company a spin-off of the parent company Net Worth, Inc. Everyone including Savannah had come out to celebrate due to the fact that the fellowship had been conveniently planned during Spring Break. She had come to the party ripe with expectation and full of hope, only to depart devoid of any emotion.

Less than an hour after pouring out her heart to Josiah, he'd announced his proposal to Angelynn Cortez. It was enough to silence Savannah her love unrequited. Amid all the cheers and felicitations, her heavy heart sank dejectedly to the floor. She allowed it to be trampled upon by well wishers speaking encouraging words to the handsome, beaming couple. Every word had been a deathblow to her soul, eulogizing her notions of romantic fantasy and grandeur love.

Coming home for Spring Break her senior year had seemed like the will of God in the beginning but felt like a taste of hell when she left the next evening. Vannah felt like the brunt of a longstanding joke, having worn a 'Kick Me! I'm Infatuated with Josiah!' sign on her back for the last 8 years.

It wasn't until Josiah's pronouncement sunk in that Savannah realized her feelings for Josiah were no mere childhood crush. As she flew back to Tallahassee to complete her semester, she had forced herself to treat it as a bad nightmare; an episode in her life meant to be erased and deleted from her memory. But she never forgot.

In spite of the turn of events, Vannah could honestly say, Josiah had been clueless. One thing about Josiah was that he was straightforward. He had always been cordial to her, treating her and all of the sisters in the church with utmost respect and delicacy. They had spent time together studying the Word of God, getting insight from each other, encouraging each other, praying together, and sharing parents and grandparents. Josiah never compromised their friendship, not even once. He always left her home before 9p.m. He always made sure she had a ride home from school events.

Josiah was a protector by nature. He had simply viewed her as a friend, she reflected now. When she had followed in his footsteps to the same university, she'd done so hoping to take their relationship to another level. Much to her chagrin, outside of going to the same campus ministry, Josiah had spent his spare time studying

for his Master's in Business Finance and playing various intramural sports. It wasn't until his proposal to Angelynn that she'd realized she'd misunderstood Josiah's intentions. By that time, it was too late to take back her hasty words of infatuation. 'Josiah,' she'd said, 'I think I have loved you all my life.' If the Saints at Second Chance had discovered how smitten Vannah was with the pastor's son, they would never have let her live it down. *The Saints of the Most High God just don't let certain news die down*, she mused to herself. And *certainly* not with such a prominent man like Josiah Edward Worth III at the center of attention.

Even though he was married, there were some women, 'Proverbs 7 Women' grandma called them, who'd stop at *nothing* to chase after him. *Well, my name won't be listed among those casualties*, Savannah smirked to herself. *Lord, all I need is You. I don't need a man.*

"Even Jesus had to come as a man to redeem you sweetie," the Holy Spirit corrected her.

Okay, Okay, Lord. I get the point. I'll make an addendum- if there is a man crafted for me I want him to be Spirit-filled. I just hope Josiah wasn't the last good man.

Vannah had spoken all of five words to Josiah at her college graduation. 'Thanks! I gotta' go now' she had said, excusing herself from his presence. She had been shocked that he had made any effort to attend since he and Angelynn were firmly ensconced in the throes of wedding planning. Angelynn had been unable to make it, but sent her best wishes. It had taken all of Savannah's strength to get herself together and pretend his presence had absolutely no effect on her. But the fact that he knew how she felt ate away at her resolve. It had been humiliating to face him. And since that day, she had decided not to.

After her senior year, she'd resolved within herself that she would live *anywhere* after college graduation except Savannah. *There's nothing to go back to*, she reflected. Yes, her immediate family was there, but she needed more than family ties to keep her in Savannah. She'd kept her self-imposed promise, visiting only on holidays, and keeping as far away from Second Chance Ministries as possible without offending her former pastor. If Vannah stopped by the Worth's home, she made sure Josiah the younger was not present. His father was such a source of wisdom, welcoming collegiate and career laymen into his home to fellowship, talk, eat, and just relax.

During her brief sojourns, Savannah mainly divided her time between hanging out with Aliya and Augusta Peyton, twin sisters and

best friends extraordinaire and her 'Mothers of Zion'. Choosing to fellowship at New Life Ministries with the Peyton twins had been a hard decision for Savannah especially because she was kept abreast of ministry progress at Second Chance through her grandmothers who added their rebuke and chastisement for not attending services there.

Though she had never told her grandmothers what occurred between her and Josiah, she surmised that they were women of keen discernment. Josiah and Angelynn had married the following spring after her graduation. Savannah had conveniently planned a personal mission trip to Trinidad for that particular weekend, and sent a gift certificate along with her condolences. *Ministry is my marriage*, she'd written. *I wish you all the best*. How she'd wished those words were true *then*. By the end of her mission trip, Vannah had found an anchor in Christ. She came back with a deeper love for the things of God. She came back feeling as if God were closing the wound in her heart. *Surgery almost complete*, she mused.

Along with his business endeavors, she'd been informed that Josiah was now the Youth Pastor and Collegiate Bible Fellowship leader. Angelynn had started a Young Women's Ministry called H.A.P.P.Y. (Holy and Pure Pursuing Yeshua) that attracted women from all over with various backgrounds, including some Messianic Jews. Mrs. Josiah Edward Worth III was definitely following in the footsteps of her mother-in-law, Vivian Elaine Worth: homemaker, pastor's wife, a woman of class and virtue, former attorney and formidable in or out of a courtroom. Vivian had been a role model for Savannah, having not grown up in a Christian household.

On many occasions she had driven in the direction of Second Chance, only to find herself detouring to New Life. Distancing herself from the loving fellowship of the Worth family had been painful but necessary for her emotional survival. She couldn't stomach the pity she knew that would be reflected in Josiah's eyes when he saw her. Vannah remembered his words to her that night, nearly six years ago now. *'I didn't know that you thought of me in that way, Vannah. If I had ...' what would you have done differently?* She wondered. But their conversation had been cut short by his friends steering him to the center of the fellowship hall to end their anticipation of his surprise news. And then it came. Looking straight into her eyes he said, *'I proposed to Angelynn last night. And she accepted...'* That was all she heard, feeling suddenly faint, as she grasped the back of her chair for support.

Vannah groaned inwardly, remembering her humiliation. The Peyton twins had been her *only* natural comfort that night. *He's*

moved on with his life. Why can't I move on with mine? She questioned herself vehemently. I'm 27 years old and every time I step foot into this city, it's like I feel transported back to being 15 with braces and gangly legs. I am a woman! I am not a little girl anymore she chided herself. *Pull yourself together, Savannah!*

She had come out to the dock to think, to sort things out, not to wind up entangled in thoughts of her past that she had no power to change. As she began to pray, she cried within her spirit, *I don't want to be here, Lord.* In fact, if it had not been for her mother's condition, she wouldn't even be standing in Savannah right now. *Marilyn Robinson is a woman to be reckoned with,* Savannah smiled to herself, wiping the tears from her face. It had been her call on Thursday that had caused Vannah to put her life on pause and head to Savannah. She prayed even now that everything would be all right.

Despite all of their faith and hope in God, neither Savannah nor Marilyn, had been prepared for this trial before them. Her mother had been through so much already. Having given her life fully to Christ over two years ago had been a monumental answer to Savannah's prayers. God had delivered Marilyn from backsliding, bad relationships, and alcohol addiction, among other things. Then, she'd had a routine checkup and the doctors had found a malignant lump in her breast. The prognosis was not good.

Savannah drove up on Friday night after a hasty departure. She'd told her mom, *'This is only a test.'* Yet even as she imparted words of encouragement, she held her own fears at bay. *Lord, please don't take my mom,* Savannah cried out to God. *Not when she's just begun to taste and see that You are good, drawing with joy from the well of Your salvation.* As Vannah prayed, the peace of God comforted her.

The Spirit of God spoke then: ***"Trust in the Lord, and lean not to your own understanding. All things will work for the good. I brought you here to create new memories. Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him. Healing will come.***

Walking back to The Riverside Inn, Savannah felt more strengthened than she had in years. *I am more than a conqueror, and so is my mom. We will not be defeated! We will come out victorious! Lord, while I'm in this place of rest, I ask that you reveal yourself the more to me and cause me to be at peace. I want to love you and serve you as you desire. Create in me a clean heart, and renew the right spirit in me. Make me into a new creation. By the authority of your Son Jesus I pray, Amen.* Little did Savannah know fulfilling her request was next in line on God's agenda.

Chapter One

A plethora of memories assailed Vannah as she drove leisurely to her mother's home. Situated on the Southside of Savannah, the house was surrounded by an array of historic attractions. She was glad her mother had purchased the home a few years back, moving right outside of the much vied for and envied Historic District property. Seventy-Eight Hundred East Huntington Street had been a blessing from on high when an elderly couple had decided to sell their home and move out to Tybee Island. It was exactly the kind of home Savannah had always dreamed that her family would own.

The Victorian-style home built in the early 1800's had survived slavery, Civil War torn Savannah, and various other trials. During the 1950's and 1970's groundbreaking movements took place to preserve the integrity and beauty of the Historic District. If it had not been for those philanthropic efforts, the window to the glorious past for the 'Hostess City of the South' might have been forever closed.

Pulling up in front of the house, Vannah could smell sweet potato pie mingled with the fragrant scent of azaleas lining the walkway, swaying to the wind's tune, lifting their petals in unison like Las Vegas showgirls. She closed her eyes, imprinting her senses with all that was Savannah. *I can do this Lord, because you are with me*, Vannah whispered to herself.

"Vannah, honey, is that you?" The familiar voice of Leary Mae Robinson brought her back to her present frame of mind.

"It's me, Grandma Tot!" Vannah said, filled with the joy of seeing her Grandma. She hurried up the palatial steps, gripping her grandmother in a fierce hug. It was so good to see her.

"My, but you sure have filled out in Tallahassee!" Grandma Tot grasped her by the hand, and twirled her around extending her body like a glorious garment. "What those folks been feedin' you, gal?"

"Nothing but the best, Grandma," Vannah laughed heartily, "And I am *not* complaining, let me tell you."

"You've grown into such a beautiful young lady," Grandma Tot said, with pride resonating from her eyes, "and I'm sure the Ministers at Second Chance will notice too." An all-knowing smile widened her lips, from corner to corner, illuminating her caramel colored face.

"Oh no-you-don't, Mama Tot!" Savannah said shaking her finger, drawing attention away from the very *real* tremor that had

started at her shoulders at the mention of Second Chance Ministries. “I’m not in town for the ‘hook up’, and you know that,” she said, her tone becoming serious. “How’s Mom?” A fully loaded question under the present conditions, Savannah needed to know how much damage control would need to be administered upon entering the house.

“Well honey, I reckon under the circumstances, she’s doing as good as any of us can expect. This morning she went for the biopsy. She’s upstairs resting soundly.”

“I believe everything is going to turn out alright,” Savannah said pasting a half-hearted smile of hope upon her pallid face, “because that’s all we have Grandma Tot. Hope is all we have.”

“Sure you right, Vannah. We’ve got to trust in the Lord, and not doubt His purpose and plan. Lord knows I would have loved for you to come and visit for any occasion other than this, but I *sure* am glad you came,” Grandma Tot said, hugging her tightly, “now young lady, come on in the house, and we’ll take care of your things later.”

Three hours later, Savannah stretched her limbs like a feline roused from sleep, unfolding from the pretzel which she had converted her body. The leather recliner had been such a Godsend to her tired limbs, receiving her with joy for the past few hours. After she had checked on her Mom upstairs, she had helped Grandma Tot prepare the dinner table, not being much of a cook herself.

She smiled ruefully reminiscing on the times she’d hang onto her mother’s apron at the stove, desperately attempting to peer into the pots. Her mother would shoo her away time after time, unknowingly driving the desire for culinary arts right out of Savannah. *It’s not like I have to cook for anyone*, she mused. Grandma Tot had requested the table be set for five, informing Savannah that she had a few guests coming over for dinner to bring some encouragement and cheer to her mother. Vannah looked at her watch. *Five minutes till seven*. The guests were to arrive at half past seven, giving her just enough time to freshen up. *Nothing like a long, hot, shower to bring refreshment to my weary body and soul*.

Josiah Edward Worth III, (known to his friends as Siah) had no idea what to expect as he drove into town, entering the Historic District. He pondered once more on what God would have him say to Marilyn Robinson this evening. She was a strong woman of God, capable of preaching and singing even *him* out of depression. Marilyn had come through many trying times living on the Southside. He admired her strength, having raised Savannah in a single-parent home.

He counted his blessings, grateful for the strong family he'd grown up in, and all the privileges God abundantly provided for him: one home in Richmond Hill, another on the Southside, a beach house on Tybee Island, and several luxury cars, not to mention the lavish dinner parties for Net Worth, Inc. hosted by his mother. His father was jokingly nicknamed Solomon Jr. by his friends and colleagues. His name had become synonymous with wealth, wisdom, and honor. They seemed to be his constant companions.

He admired her daughter Savannah for her diligence and determination to make something of herself. He knew instinctively that Marilyn's present condition would affect her strongly. Even now he wondered about her. As childhood friends, he and Vannah had prayed many a day for her mother's salvation. Back then, Savannah could only attend church when her Grandmothers came to worship. Trying to live a godly life, while not having Christian values reinforced at home had been hard on her. His father and mother had all but adopted Vannah, making sure she had every natural comfort and abundant spiritual guidance. Then, through nothing short of God's intervention, Marilyn had accepted Christ for herself, not for her family or out of duty to societal standards but because she'd realized she needed the Savior, the *Living Hope*. Only Jesus could bridge the gap between disappointments and destiny for her. Once she had firmly planted herself in the truth of God's word, there was no stopping her.

Marilyn Robinson passionately began to run after the heart of God-- and not just God, but the ministry of the Church. She served wholeheartedly, furthering the Kingdom of God and causing the administrative affairs of Second Chance to run smoothly. She was every pastor's dream concerning the zeal of a new convert. This illness merely a distraction from the enemy came like a blow to the head leveled by a seasoned boxer.

Lord, if there is any way to make this woman happy, do it for her—and then some. She may be down, but she is not out. I thank you in advance for her healing. I pray that the words I speak on tonight will bring healing, comfort, and deliverance to your daughter. In Jesus name, I pray, Amen.

Josiah smiled to himself. God was going to work everything out for her good. He hadn't realized how close he was to Huntington Street, having spent the last 45 minutes on the road. *Let Your presence be felt, revered, and received as we create an atmosphere for You to come into, Father.* Siah was assured and at peace as the Holy Spirit spoke and said, ***"Tonight, God will be glorified in more ways than you can imagine."***

Josiah understood more than anything else that if God spoke the promise it was as good as fulfilled.

“Grandma Tot, is there anything else we need to set on the table?” Savannah shouted from the kitchen.

“No darlin’,” Grandma Tot hollered back, pulling her brocade curtains closed, “but I do believe our guests have arrived.”

Savannah suspected that one of their guests was her other Grandma, Ruth Ann Parker, but she couldn’t fathom who the other guest might be. *It’s probably one of her friends from the Senior Center.* Savannah finished setting the casserole dishes in the center of the table with an artistic flair, creating a gourmet bouquet for the senses. *No use in letting my Art degree go to waste,* Vannah thought wistfully. She surveyed the bevy of dishes; barbecue chicken, macaroni and cheese, red beans and rice, black eyed peas, potato salad, sweet potato pie, and not weighing very heavily on the scales was a Caesar salad. *Boy, if Gram keeps cookin’ like this here, I’m never going back to Tallahassee!* Savannah laughed within herself, while rubbing her growling stomach that verified the validity of her thought. She lifted the buttermilk biscuits off the rack and buttered them lightly, setting them in a casserole dish.

The din of voices from the hallway floated effortlessly into the dining room. She heard her mother’s voice clearly. It resonated with strength. Savannah heaved a sigh of relief. She didn’t think she could bear her mother sounding pitiful or helpless. She was a soldier of the Lord. She’d been in combat with the enemy before and had come out victorious. She would again. Vannah hurried into the dining room with the last dish, not wanting to delay the festivities. As she rounded the corner, she came to a screeching halt, nearly dropping every buttered biscuit to the carpeted floor.

“Vannah? Is that you?” Josiah halted his conversation mid-sentence when he saw his childhood friend. *No one told me she was home.* He hadn’t seen Savannah in years but she had only grown more beautiful with the passing of time.

Savannah blinked several times, not sure she was seeing correctly. She had to make sure. If this scene right here... right now... was real, someone was going to have *a lot* of explaining to do. Picking up her tongue from off the ground, and putting her heart back together quickly, she responded with ease and calm.

“I take it you’ve gone blind.” Savannah’s sarcasm was biting and blatant.

Whoa, Josiah pondered. *What a chilly reception. I know our friendship has been sitting on the shelf for quite some time. But Lord, when did it rot, decay, and all semblance of it wither away?*

“About five years ago,” was the Holy Spirit’s answer, bringing back memories of his congratulatory/engagement party to his wife Angelynn.

Holy Spirit, why didn’t you warn me of what I was about to face?

“Would you have come willingly?”

Okay, I get your point.

“A lot more than Marilyn’s physical healing needs to take place, Josiah.”

And you think I’m qualified to do it?

“You’re not just qualified, Josiah. God has elected you to do it.”

How so?

“Because you are the root cause of the pain.”

Wow, Josiah heaved deeply. He stared at Savannah now, realizing that neither one of them had changed their stance- he at the head of the polished, mahogany table, Vannah, in full military stance, at the corner of the far end. No one had said a word. *Not with our mouths anyway*, he thought ruefully. It was not until this moment that he realized how bad she’d been hurting over his marriage to Angelynn. She was still hurting as a matter of fact, but he’d never get her to openly admit it at this jSUVture. *Lord, I never wanted to hurt her.* Her militant greeting had sliced through him. He feared it would be the first of *many* wounds before they could honestly talk and he could seek her forgiveness for any past hurt. He only prayed that she would give it.

“Vannah! It is sooo good to see you!” Grandma Parker stood up wrapping her matronly arms around her.

“It’s good to see you too Grandma Parker,” she said hoarsely, closing her eyes breaking her gridlock glare with Josiah.

Thank God for Grandma Parker, thought Josiah. Her warm embrace seemed to relieve Vannah’s tension at seeing him, at least for the present. She was a mighty, peacekeeping warrior, that Grandma Parker.

“You look fabulous Savannah! I see you’ve been working out, keeping those love handles at bay,” she chuckled.

“I *know* about the Parker hips and the Charles’ thighs. You don’t have to warn me,” she smiled lovingly at Grandma Parker. It was a rarity that she was in town. Her responsibility as head of Foreign Missions for Second Chance kept her constantly abroad.

Placing the biscuits among the lavish dishes, she walked over to the woman that meant the world to her, fixing her gaze upon her alone.

“Momma.”

“Evangeline.”

No one was allowed to call her that-- *but* Mom. Vannah knew she'd been named and declared before birth to be the bearer of glad tidings. Her mother had wanted her to be an evangelist, and so she was. God had honored her requests, making Savannah multi-faceted in gifting and talents. *I don't have to like that name though*, she reflected wryly.

“You look great,” Marilyn said unpretentiously, “on the *outside*. But I'm waiting for that smile to reach *way* down and lodge itself in that heart of yours.”

“Ma...” Savannah warned her in a gentle but chiding tone, “Don't *Ma*, me,” Marilyn said fervently. “I can *tell* when my baby is happy, and when my baby is *joyful*.”

“Things are going well, Mom. Besides, I am not here to talk about me. My concern is *you*.”

“I could be better,” Marilyn conceded, “but I have breath in my body, life, health, and strength. The people I love surround me and you all reciprocate that love greatly. I have Christ, and the Holy Spirit lives within me. I refuse to complain or regret anything that God has allowed. I know that no weapon formed against me shall prosper. No plan of the devil has *ever* succeeded.”

Nope, Savannah thought within, inspired by her mother's strength of will. *This woman is not going down without a fight!*

“Amen to that,” Josiah chimed in. Savannah looked up then, giving Josiah a scathing glower.

“Mom, we'll talk later about this testimony in the making. Right now, I'm thankful that you're here with us,” she squeezed her tightly, planting a firm kiss on her cheek.

Amid much food, fellowship, and talk, Savannah was already contemplating an escape plan. Josiah had engaged her family in lively conversation, explaining his father's absence due to a wedding ceremony he had to perform out on Tybee Island. Josiah had been sent in his stead to visit her mother and encourage her in the Word of God.

Savannah had an opportunity to scrutinize him under veiled lashes. He really hadn't changed very much in the past five years. *Blast it Lord! Why did he still have to look so good?*

“He renews thy youth like the eagles...”

That doesn't mean he had to look as if he hasn't aged at all! Couldn't you give him a pimple or something?

“He beautifies the meek with salvation...”

Well, why do I have to use cucumber masks, then?

“Your beauty is not based on outward adorning.”

Well, no use arguing with the very Spirit of God. He’s got the answer to every question, Savannah thought wryly. Lord, just let me not have to face him tonight. Her emotions raged within her, torn between wanting to wipe that smile off his face, and hug him for his care and concern for her mother. She really did miss their friendship and camaraderie. But it’s too late for that. I might as well let bygones be bygones she contemplated within.

Josiah, for all his conversing with the genteel matriarchs seated before him, had not missed a moment of Savannah’s mental struggle, evident by the pensive look transfixed upon her face. He studied her as she directed her food like a policeman in traffic, creating a pile up in the intersection of her plate, but never clearing the haphazard jumble by depositing the food where it needed to go-- in her belly.

As beautiful as Savannah was, it would have been hard for a man not to notice but his mind had been on other pressing matters, then. He knew that she’d had a crush on him, but he figured it would wear off in time. As she’d matured and blossomed, he’d fought back *many* urges not to fall into temptation where she was concerned. What young teenage boy couldn’t help noticing creamy caramel skin, luscious lips, long legs, and chocolate eyes that could envelope you in playfulness one moment, and righteous indignation the next?

Though many a boy would have tried to manipulate and morally compromise Vannah, they dared not. The fire of holiness was upon her so, that respect was not what you showed her-- it was what God demanded of *any* man-- righteous or not. No matter how her gentle curves slowly burgeoned, fitting her slender 5’8” frame perfectly, Savannah was God’s anointed, and she was not to be treated lightly. She was his warrior-princess, stomping on the devil’s head while balancing her social life with grace and poise. She was not just beautiful but ravishing, completely guileless and unassuming. Though cognizant of her comeliness, Savannah did not *openly* flaunt her good looks like so many other women whom he was acquainted with.

Vannah’s life was worthy of emulation, marking her as a virtuous woman, whom many of her contemporaries respected. Her strong will, sagacious mind, and quick-wit, complimented her incomparable beauty. No, Savannah was *no* man’s plaything, but a treasured vessel of glory and honor to God.