

My Daughter's Legacy

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HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-6292-6 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-6293-3 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Clark, Mindy Starns, author. | Gould, Leslie, author.

Title: My daughter's legacy / Mindy Starns Clark, Leslie Gould.

Description: Eugene, Oregon : Harvest House Publishers, [2017] | Series:

Cousins of the dove ; 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2017005464 (print) | LCCN 2017011335 (ebook) | ISBN

9780736962926 (softcover) | ISBN 9780736962933 (eBook) | ISBN

9780736962933 (ebook)

Subjects: | BISAC: FICTION / Christian / Historical. | FICTION / Christian /

Romance. | GSAFD: Christian fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3603.L366 M93 2017 (print) | LCC PS3603.L366 (ebook) |

DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017005464>

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Printed in the United States of America

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 /LB-JC/ 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



*For our strong, creative, and devoted daughters,
Emily and Lauren Clark
and
Hana and Thao Gould.
You are our legacies.*





*Yea, the sparrow hath found an house,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young, even thine altars,
O LORD of hosts, my King, and my God.*

PSALM 84:3





CHAPTER ONE

Nicole

Sometimes a lie was the better choice—or at least that’s what I’d always told myself. After all, lying was easier, faster, and more efficient than the truth. “I’m sick” was a more prudent option than “I’m sick of working.” “I’m busy” was a lot kinder than “I don’t want to.” But for some, lying could become a habit, the proverbial spider weaving its tangled web. Problem is, once I’d made my own web big enough, I found I was no longer spider but prey, trapped by silvery threads of my own design.

I’d spent the last year and a half—ever since the night I got loaded and slammed my car into a tree at sixty miles an hour—slowly untangling my own threads. Now, after two months of convalescence, nine months in a drug rehab facility, and two full semesters away at college, I was nearly free of all that—save for one big, fat lie that remained.

“Nicole!”

My head snapped left to see the setter knocking the volleyball into an easy arc over my head. Telling myself to focus, I bent my knees, waited for the exact right moment in its trajectory, and then shot up from the ground to slam the ball as hard as I could, spiking it straight

through the upraised arms of our opponent and onto an empty space on the court behind her.

Set and game. Our victory, 3 to 2.

My team burst into cheers, jumping and hugging and laughing. When we finally calmed down, we lined up and did the high-five-and-thanks-for-a-good-game thing with the opposing team. Then we gathered for a quick huddle, mostly so our team captain could remind us, yet again, to stay in shape over the summer. Ours was just a local league in a small town in Virginia, but it was important to us.

“Together now,” she said, holding out a fist. We circled around and each placed a hand atop until all were in.

“*One. Play. At a time!*” We shouted the team motto in unison, and then our huddle was done.

After some quick goodbyes and see-you-in-the-falls, I gathered my stuff and headed for the locker room, eager to grab a shower before all the stalls were taken. This was our last game of the semester, and though I was glad to be heading home to Richmond tomorrow, I knew I was going to miss this over summer break. The court was where I brought everything—happiness, sadness, anger, fear, elation, confusion, frustration—and it had proven to be an almost better outlet than my weekly on-campus counseling sessions. Which was saying a lot, considering what a great counselor I had.

Of course, my teammates were almost like counselors as well, or at least like savvy older sisters, I thought as I snagged a stall, set my little mesh bag of toiletries on the shelf, and turned on the water. We weren’t just a sports team. We were a support group, former addicts and fellow students trying to make our way at a very conservative, totally non-partying university tucked away in the Shenandoah Mountains of western Virginia.

I’d come to Silver Lake University specifically because it was a dry campus, even though initially I never would’ve considered such a thing for fear I might stick out like a sore thumb. But then someone let me in on a secret back when I was fresh out of rehab and trying to choose the right college. My sister’s boyfriend, Greg, was a certified addiction specialist, and he’d told me about a small sobriety network that

existed here, one endorsed by the administration and geared toward students who had gotten themselves into trouble in the past but had gone through treatment, sobered up, and sincerely wanted to stay that way.

I'd been intrigued enough to check it out and found that he was right. Among the long-haired and long-skirted conservative student body of this all-female, drug-free, alcohol-free Christian university were a dozen or so freaky types like me who were clearly the opposite of conservative—or at least had been at some point in their lives.

My sister, Maddee, and I had taken a weekend trip to see the place, and the young woman who led our campus tour told us, straight out, that despite such differences in the student body, there wasn't much in the way of divisions or ostracism. According to the college's oft-quoted mission statement, the students here were all "one in Christ and all worthy of acceptance, respect, and a positive, mutually supportive environment in which to learn."

I was skeptical but decided to give the place a shot anyway, and now that I'd reached the end of my first full year, I had to say she'd been pretty much on the mark. I'd never felt anything but accepted and respected here, which in turn had made me a lot more open to the other side, to the kinds of girls I used to consider hopelessly naive, over-protected, and repressed.

I always figured kids like that were just time bombs waiting to go off, ready to turn wild the moment they were out from under their parents' thumbs. Instead, with few exceptions, they'd turned out to be intelligent, mature, thoughtful women who seemed perfectly happy with their theology and their life choices. They were actually comfortable wearing conservative dresses, dating only in groups, and saving their first kisses for their wedding days. And though I didn't hang with them often, I liked and respected them, something the old me would never have seen coming.

The locker room grew louder as more and more players got in line for the showers, so I finished up, quickly dried off, and wrapped myself in a towel. Then I made my way back to the locker, flip-flops slapping against the damp tile as I went.

My friend and sponsor, Riley, was on the bench, already fully dressed and tying her shoes, so I plopped my things next to her and stepped to my locker, which was at her back.

“Hey, Rocket,” she scolded, “I thought you needed a ride.”

“I do,” I replied, quickly pulling on my clothes.

“Why’d you take a shower, then? I told you I don’t have a lot of time.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Once dressed, I reached for my brush and ran it through my shoulder-length blond hair, gave my head a good shake, and then slipped my feet back into my flip-flops. “So let’s go.”

She turned, startled to see that I was as ready as she was despite the fact that she had simply changed clothes while I had gotten in a shower as well. She shook her head.

“You know me. I’m all about low maintenance.” I grinned, gesturing toward the line of women at the mirrors, busy with lip gloss and mascara and hair straighteners. I wasn’t averse to fixing myself up, but not on an evening when my agenda consisted of some final packing followed by a good night’s sleep.

“Low maintenance,” she repeated skeptically, waiting as I scooped everything into my tote bag and closed the door on the now-empty locker.

“Yep,” I said, swinging the bag over my shoulder and gesturing toward the exit. “That’s me. No drama, no muss, no fuss.”

“Uh-huh.”

Together we walked out of the locker room and down the hall. We both knew that drama and muss and fuss almost always came part and parcel with addicts. And though I was only teasing about the low-maintenance part, I really had worked hard this year to cut as much of that stuff down to a minimum as I could.

We headed to the parking lot—me feeling even shorter than usual next to my extra-tall friend—and got in Riley’s car, a rattletrap piece of junk held together by duct tape and prayer. She started it up, and we chatted as she drove the familiar route across town to the sleepy little campus we called home. At first we were just reviewing some of the highlights of tonight’s game, but eventually, as often with Riley, the conversation turned toward matters of the heart.

“So you’re really gonna be okay near your old stomping grounds for an entire summer?”

I knew what she was talking about, but I waved off her concerns, wishing I felt as confident as I pretended to be. Tomorrow morning I would get on the bus for Richmond, where I would spend the next three months living with my sister and working at a job in my field, one that would provide some pocket money and a college credit besides. These were positive things, happy things, and I refused to let my insecurities bring me down even if I would be in closer proximity to old temptations. I’d been sober for a year and a half, and I intended to stay that way.

“I have safety networks in place, including plenty of meetings to choose from. Plus, I have all my positive experiences from this past year to build on.”

“Good.” We were quiet for moment until she added, “You’re totally up to this, you know. You’ve come so far that a few months back home will be a good thing. I’m not worried about you at all.”

“That makes one of us.”

Riley chuckled as she turned into the parking lot for my dorm and rattled to a stop near the front steps. Before getting out, I gave her a big hug and told her I would miss her over the summer. “I don’t know how I could’ve made it through the school year without you.”

“Yeah. Well, just remember. What is this? The summer of...”

“Truth,” I responded. “The summer of truth.”

I grabbed my stuff and climbed out, and then I shut the door with a wrenching squawk. She started off again, her car chugging and clanking its way across the parking lot toward grad student housing, and soon she was out of sight, if not sound. I turned and headed up to my room, anxiety surging in my throat.

The summer of truth, including the truth about the secret I’d been holding inside since I was six years old, which I was going to share with my family at last. I loved my grandfather deeply and would always cherish his memory, but I knew that these truths—both what I’d witnessed back then and the fact that Granddad had sworn me to secrecy about it afterward—must finally come to light. At the time, he’d made

me promise I would take our secret to the grave. Now that I'd decided to renege on that promise, I only hoped it wouldn't be the biggest mistake of my life.

Forcing my mind away from such thoughts, I concentrated on the rest of my packing and was just zipping the last bag shut when I got a call on my cell. It was my grandmother, no doubt wanting to touch base yet again about my trip home. Lately she'd been a broken record on the subject.

"Hi, Nana." I took the big duffel from the bed and set it against the wall.

"Hello, Nicole. I thought you said you were coming home via the train."

I flopped onto the mattress. "I'm fine, thanks. How are you?"

Nana rushed ahead, ignoring my sass. "I'll have you know that there is no train between there and here," she said, almost triumphantly. "I checked."

I bristled. Was she kidding me? I understood we still had a ways to go before she could trust me implicitly, but since when did she feel the need to verify things like this?

"Well?" she prodded.

"Are you serious right now?" I rolled my eyes with great exaggeration. Too bad Nana couldn't see me because it was an excellent eye roll. "I wasn't lying," I said, forcing my voice to remain calm. "They take you by bus as far as Charlottesville, and then they switch you over to a train for the rest. It's one ticket for the whole thing." I didn't add that I hadn't yet bought that ticket. I would do it in the morning once I got to the station.

"No, no, no. I can't have you taking a bus even if it's just for part of the trip. It's too slow, and the people... Well, I just don't like the idea. I'll arrange for a car and driver instead."

"Nana! No. The bus is fine. Don't be such a snob."

"A car would be quicker."

"For your information, I'm actually looking forward to the long ride. I need time to think, to be alone. To process the transition from school back to home."

Nana huffed. “Well, at least let me arrange for a ride from your dorm to the station.”

I sighed heavily, making sure she heard it, and then agreed. I’d been planning to call an Uber, but whatever. With Nana, you had to pick your battles.

“Oh, and Nicole?” she added before hanging up. “I just want to acknowledge that you met all of my requirements this year. Good job.”

“Thanks,” I replied through gritted teeth. Then I added a quick “Bye” and hung up before I exploded.

Met all of her requirements? I’d done a lot more than meet them. I’d *exceeded* them by far. I’d slam-dunked the suckers. How dare she?

The deal we’d made last summer had been straightforward and simple. She would pay for everything—tuition, room and board, expenses, and more—and in return I was required to maintain a 3.0 grade point average, not miss more than two counseling sessions per semester, submit to four random drug tests during the school year, and keep her in the loop regarding how things were going.

Instead, I’d gotten a 4.0, never missed a single counseling session, and passed all four drug tests with flying colors. Better yet, not only had I kept her “in the loop”—I’d texted and emailed her regularly.

I knew I wasn’t an accomplished scientist or artist like my cousins Renee and Danielle, nor was I an up-and-coming psychologist like my sister, Maddee. But that didn’t mean our grandmother had to treat me like a poor stepchild. What was her problem? Now that I was sober, I was trying hard to believe I could accomplish anything I set my mind to, but Nana’s doubts didn’t help things.

Worse, our relationship was about to face a new challenge once I revealed my secret. With another heavy sigh, I got ready for bed, telling myself I could handle whatever lay ahead so long as Maddee stood beside me and believed me. The trick would be getting my sister to trust this recovered addict who used to lie as a matter of course and had proven over and over through the years that she could not, in fact, be trusted.



The next morning, I was sitting on the front steps of the dorm, waiting for Nana's ride to show, when a shiny blue mini SUV pulled to the curb in front of me. The driver turned it off, climbed out, and looked my way. "Nicole Talbot?"

"That's me." I stood and grabbed the handles of my various bags and lugged them toward the back of the car, where the man popped the hatchback and helped load everything inside. Then, to my surprise, he gestured toward the driver's door and offered me the key.

I looked at the gray fob dangling between us and then back at him. "Um, excuse me, but aren't you supposed to be the one at the wheel? I think that's why you're called the *driver*?"

He responded by reaching into his suit jacket and pulling out an envelope, which he handed over to me. Puzzled, I opened it up and slid out the contents. First was a printed note, like the kind that might come with a mail-order fruit basket.

For going above and beyond in every way this past year.
I'm so very proud of you.

Love, Nana

There was a second page, and I turned to it, realizing it was the title to the car in front of me—with my name on it.

"This car?" I asked in disbelief. "It's mine?"

"Straight from the lot and loaded with every bell and whistle we've got."

"Is this some kind of prank?" I knew I was staring at him stupidly, but I couldn't help it.

"Nope. It's legit." He turned and walked to the passenger side. "Get in. I'll show you everything you need to know."

With shaking hands, I took my place behind the wheel, still too stunned to speak. I listened in a daze as the man gave me a quick orientation, pointing out the touchscreen navigation system, keyless ignition, and a bunch of other stuff I knew I wouldn't remember.

He asked for a lift back to the dealership, and somehow I managed to get him there. But as soon as I was alone, I pulled into a parking lot,

took out my phone, and dialed Nana's number. She answered on the second ring.

"Are you crazy?"

To my surprise, my grandmother actually giggled, a sound I'd never heard from her before. "Do you like it, dear?"

"Are you kidding me? How? Why?"

"You earned it, Nicole. Now come on home, will you? I can't wait to see you tomorrow."

I shook my head in wonder. My exacting, critical, demanding, crazy-making grandmother, of all people, trusted me enough to give me this? Tears filled my eyes, and I grabbed a tissue from the complimentary packet in the cup holder to wipe them away.

"Nana, I—"

"Hush, now. I know. Just be sure to wear your seat belt. Drive safely."

With that, she was gone.

Between the high of my grandmother's approval and the smooth ride of my new—*my* new—car, I was in heaven as I headed out on the two-hour journey to Richmond. It took a while before I came down from the shock of it all, but by the time I reached the halfway point at Charlottesville, I was fully in the zone and doing what I'd told Nana I would, using the travel time to process the transition from school to home.

I'd learned a lot in the course of my first successful year back in college, and not just academically speaking. I'd learned I could stay sober even out of rehab and on my own. I'd learned how to make friends in places other than bars. I'd learned that I actually enjoyed myself a lot more without the fog of drugs or alcohol dimming every experience. In a way, this had been a year of narrowing down, of figuring out what I did and did not want. I wanted to stay sober, and I wanted to tell my secret. I wanted to be completely honest from here on out. I was pretty sure on all of that.

Unfortunately, in other areas, mostly what I'd managed to figure out thus far was what I *didn't* want. I wanted to try dating for the first time since the accident, but I didn't want to end up with the kind of guy I'd always gone for before—the tough, sexy, dangerous sort. I

wanted some kind of career in psychology, but I was pretty sure I didn't want to be a therapist who just sat in a room all day, working with people one on one.

In both of these things, I knew what I didn't want, but what did I want? Growing anxious at the uncertainty of it all, I reminded myself to take it one day at a time. I simply had to trust that God would reveal each of these things to me according to His will, His plan. When it came to church and men and career, I could simply trust and wait.

But then there was the police investigation, which was a bit more...complicated.

Twenty-two years ago, when I was just six years old, a man had been stabbed and killed in an old hunting cabin in the woods next door to my grandparents' estate. My sister, who was eight at the time, our two nine-year-old cousins, and I had gone for a hike soon after it happened and accidentally stumbled upon a lifeless, bloody body with a huge knife protruding from his chest. We'd run screaming back to the house, but by the time police arrived and made it out to the cabin to investigate, the body was gone and all traces of the crime had been cleaned away. Not one person—not even our own parents—believed our story. Some of the boy cousins taunted us, laughing behind our backs and naming us “the Liar Choir.”

All four of us had been traumatized by the incident, albeit in different ways. My cousin Renee had been hurt most by the mistrust and doubt of those who said we'd simply imagined it or made it all up. My cousin Danielle suffered primarily from the visual assault. As an artist, she saw the world differently than others and retained it all too well. As she'd said many times since, she hated that she could never unsee that body. That knife. That blood. It hovered in her dreams and sometimes even made its way into her artwork.

For my sister, Maddee, the worst part had been me. Older by two years, she'd always been deeply maternal, and the fact that she hadn't protected me from such a horror weighed heavily on her. It was even worse afterward, when she had to sit helplessly by for years as I struggled first with night terrors and, later, with addiction. She hadn't

understood the full cause of my trauma, however, because she hadn't known the whole story.

My own scars were different than theirs because they included seeing a man I loved and idolized do something wrong, and when I told him what I'd seen, he made me promise not to tell anyone else. According to my counselor, we'd never know how much of my addiction was rooted in that mess, but it definitely played a part. Now that I was sober and stable and ready to reveal the truth, I could only hope I would find healing in the same way the others had.

Fortunately, both Maddee and Renee had managed to work through much of their trauma and were doing much better, starting nearly two years ago when Renee had used her skills as a scientist to prove our tale was true, that there really had been a dead body in that cabin when we were children. In response, the police had reopened the case, and though they still didn't have all the answers, they certainly knew a lot more now than they had before. Once I shared my secret, would it help them figure out the rest?

Or would it serve only to smear my grandfather's good name and muddy the waters even more?