

## CHAPTER 1. THE ROMANCE SIZZLES

Would I trust God when he took away someone whom I thought he'd promised me? *A Shattered Heart* aims to minister to Christian single adults facing pre-marital break-ups. It declares the greatness and glory of God among real pain, pain that I have personally felt. The guiding principle of this book is simple: *In our brokenness, God is working out his perfect plan to bring us joy and to demonstrate his glory, as he defeats his enemy the devil.*

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"Can you come out and walk with me?" Barbara asked.

"Sure," I said, biting my lip, wondering what was on her mind. I'd already talked to her a few minutes ago. Our five weeks of missions training was winding down, and we'd soon be parting ways for a while.

Did she want to talk about us?

We strolled into the grassy courtyard. The stars glimmered above.

"Look at the moon," I said to start conversation.

"Here, let's get on the swings," she suggested.

She had just turned twenty-two but looked like a little girl, swinging with her legs stretched out, all cares cast aside. Her black hair brushed the ground as she swung forward, her head leaning back. I was twenty-nine, but I felt like a little boy, swinging with the girl I wanted to marry.

"The moon's the shape of a pink Hostess Snowball, isn't it?" I said.

Her hair kept swooshing back and forth on the ground, her feet pointed heavenward with every forward swing. I longed to reach out and caress her cheek, to let her know I cared, to blurt out my desire for her.

"Can you believe it? In a couple of months, we'll both be overseas in our separate countries," I said. We would each be serving terms as missionaries.

"I hope we like it."

"Two years is a long time to be unhappy," I said as I looked at the moon.

She turned toward me, like she wanted to share her secret thoughts. Her eyes met mine. My hands started shaking a little. I cracked a joke to lighten the mood.

"Kevin, I've been having some nightmares lately . . . would you pray with me that they stop?"

Man, did I launch my best prayer missile. I poured my soul into it.

"Thanks," she said.

I can't remember who moved first, but we hugged. It was our first embrace. Oh, did my heart race that night! I practically floated back to my apartment. I slept very little that night, thinking of Barbara, wondering about our future together.

My alarm screeched at 4:30 a.m. the next morning. My heart revived at the thought of last night. *I think she likes me . . . I've known her a few weeks, gone fishing with her twice, and taken walks with her three times. Last night was the clincher though. I think she really likes me.*

But it was a sad day. I had to wish her good-bye.

I showed up at her apartment next door, my eyes still fighting to stay open. Her suitcase weighed at least eighty pounds. I remember thinking, *this lady sure packs some heavy things*. She wore blue overalls, the ones she wore the day we met. Boy, could her smile inflate my goose bumps.

We chatted briefly until the bus gave hints that it was leaving. I hugged her 'bye, feeling her moist hair with my right hand. I inhaled the scent of her shampoo.

I can't tell you all of the emotions that filled my heart that morning as the bus crept away, Barbara's smile shining at me like the sun popping over the trees. Her wave soon faded as the bus wheeled down the road. I wanted to cry, missing her already, but that would have been melodramatic. And running after the bus didn't seem appropriate, either.

Yet I wanted to dance. We'd planted seeds of hope.

Later that same day, I, too, hopped on a bus to the airport. More than a month of missions training lay behind me, as I returned to my home state for six weeks before heading overseas.

Within a few days, Barbara called me. She was in New Mexico preparing for her trip abroad. We were both anxious about our assignments, but giddy about them, too. I was almost certain she liked me. But it didn't seem like the right time to talk about my feelings. I wanted us to get settled in our countries first.

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Several weeks later, I stood on a sidewalk in Asia, listening to the blare of motorcycle horns. Some people smiled at me while others stared, like I might be working for the CIA. I'd finally arrived to serve my two-year term. The country struck me with its Eastern differences--constant stares, pointing from small children, a plethora of bicycles filling the streets, people on the sidewalks bartering for goods, and the depth of hospitality from strangers--but I was committed to the full two years. And I was committed to making Barbara my girlfriend.

We e-mailed regularly within those first two weeks of my landing. By then, she'd already been in South Korea for several weeks. I mailed post cards to her, called her once, and sent e-mails daily. I also carried a tape recorder with me one day to randomly interview some local people who could speak English just so that I could send it to her. At the end of the tape, I pretended to be a DJ and dedicated a song to her from the band Chicago. I was going nuts over this gal.

I couldn't stand it any longer, so I e-mailed Barbara, asking her to be my girlfriend. She took several days to respond, which kept my adrenaline flowing. I played with my hair and patted my foot rapidly every time I checked my e-mail.

But eventually she wrote back with a *yes*. That was August of 2000, and I was close to heaven that day.

That began a ten-month journey of love (or romance, or whatever you might want to call it). I was dating the girl of my dreams and acting like a kid, showing strangers her picture, thinking up corny poems, and whistling as I walked down the street.

She sent me a box of candy for my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. It had every sweet nugget I could have wanted. She'd also sent me a nice letter with it.

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In December of that year, Barbara came to visit me for a week in my Asian country.

"I'm so glad to see you," I said. Her face brightened when she saw the flowers.

We held hands for the first time that night on our way back from the airport. It was a great week for the both of us, spending Christmas together with some friends. Several days passed and it was time for her to leave.

"I love you," she said, tears in her eyes.

Her words surprised me. I'd already told her of my love, but she'd not yet been able to return my words. Now, she was saying them. I ached when I said good-bye to her that night at the airport, after only seven days together. We didn't know when we'd see each other again, but we committed to make it happen.

The calls, e-mails, letters, and packages continued. These were some of the hardest months of my life, as I waited to be by her side again. The long-distance dating was getting old. I smelled everything in the packages she sent me, just to get a whiff of her perfume.

For Valentines Day of 2001, we sent each other gifts. I called her and sang Elvis' "Can't Help Falling in Love." (Yes, it was over the top, I know, but I was in love.) Although my guitar skills weren't too impressive, she cried. And I think it was because of my effort, but it could have been over my lack of skill.

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We vacationed together in China in May of 2001. By this time, we'd know each other a year. She brought a female friend to keep us accountable (and for the record we slept in separate hotel rooms). At this point in our relationship, we'd had a few arguments--over our future roles in marriage and another lesser issue--but we were working through these problems. Our trip to China gave us some face-to-face time to discuss our disagreements, and we experienced some tension, but mostly the vacation was positive.

I gave her a necklace, and she loved it. I also surprised her with a rose while we were there. She bubbled with excitement. With her permission, I'd recorded one of our conversations so that I could always have her voice around me in my country.

"I love you, Kevin Howard," she mumbled into my shoulder as I hugged her good-bye at the Beijing airport.

"I love you, too." Again, tears filled my eyes as I watched her wave from the bus that took her to the plane. I couldn't wait to see her again. We were within a year of being back in the States, and were now talking about marriage. I returned to my country to finish my assignment, happy about our prospects of matrimony.

Why did I want to marry Barbara? She was devoted to Christ. She seemed confident in who she was, independent but not anti-social. She was OK being alone or going somewhere on her own; she didn't cling to others. The word *intelligent* comes to mind when I think of her. She'd spent significant time thinking through crucial issues like gun-control, politics, gender roles, parenting and marriage. Barbara wasn't controlled by materialism either; she was content with the basics of life. Listening to

others came easy to her and serving was one of her gifts. Aside from her physical beauty, she possessed a soft heart and loved being feminine, like spraying on perfume, painting her nails, wearing her hair long, and occasionally donning a skirt. She enjoyed laughing. In fact, despite her shyness, she could roar with laughter that people could easily hear at the other side of a large restaurant. So, yes, I was happy about the thought of marrying Barbara.

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Two weeks after the trip to China, she called with trembling in her voice.

"We've got to work through some of our differences if this relationship is going to last," she said. Her statement rattled me. She sounded mad, like she'd been stewing over this for a while. We'd already talked in China about these issues bothering her. Why suddenly the frantic call? I hardly knew what to say during that conversation.

"Let me think about these things and talk to you more in a couple of days," I said.

Her call was the beginning of the end. The week that followed was filled with misery for me as I contemplated that she might be pulling away. She's the only woman who'd ever said she loved me. She was the only woman I'd ever loved. Surely she wasn't going to say good-bye forever.

"God, please, don't take her away from me," I prayed. "If you must, then I'll still obey you. But please, Lord, don't deprive me of her." I begged God for a morsel of hope, like a child asking for food.

A week later, the phone rang again. She'd e-mailed me earlier that day, saying she was going to call me Monday night. I still recall staring at the phone that night when she called. The chirp of the phone echoed off the concrete walls in my uncarpeted room. I wondered if her call would change my life. (Several years later, this seems melodramatic, but at the time it felt so ominous and life changing. If you're going through it, you'll likely understand the emotional drama.)

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### **Could you trust God if he took away something or someone that you thought he'd promised you?**

It's hard to know where to begin because this isn't just a subject, it's a place in my heart, a very tender place. Or, I should say, it was tender in the months following my break-up in 2001. By the grace of Christ, I have since recovered. This book comes out of my own experience of a break-up with a girl whom I cared for deeply. I long to be honest about the good and the bad, the pain and the joy of walking through emotional valleys.

Since *A Shattered Heart* aims at Christian single adults facing pre-marital break-ups, much of its contents won't make sense or apply to someone not following Jesus. That is, non-believers can't take comfort in the many biblical passages I give because these verses apply to believers. My hope, nonetheless, is that many hurting non-believers will read this work, and in the course of it, place their faith in Jesus.

This book entails a journey through a forest of pain in which tall trees had cast dark shadows over parts of my life. You are invited to travel along and see Christ among

the briars, bushes, and leaves. I'm writing about his glory amidst my past brokenness in hopes that others will see that they are not alone. God brings about his glory even in pain and tragedy.

Many readers will have suffered far more than I have. Whether my suffering ranks as relatively small or great compared to yours, I hope that this will be a chance for me, your Christian brother, to be vulnerable so that God's goodness shines through in each of our situations.

I pray you find yourself in these pages of neediness, connecting with my desperation and feeling the warm rays of hope. And more than anything, I pray you find Jesus walking there, too.

I penned most of chapters 1-3 shortly after my break-up but have added to them along the way. I mention when I wrote them, because I want you to know that although I've written the following chapters in past tense, they came from my heart, along with many tears. Any spiritual truths I set forth here, came to me, not as a removed third person dishing out Scripture insensitively, but as a man in sorrow, sorrow that I thought might actually stomp the life out of me. Throughout this work, I've interspersed my journal entries, which extend over a three-month period following my break-up. These entries will give you a closer look at the subjective journey through the terrain of my own brokenness. They reveal a lot about me, both good and bad. Hopefully, you will find them useful in your own shattered heart and see the grace of Christ intermingled. Sometimes in my journals, I'm writing to God, at other times to myself. And, in some entries, I seem to be writing to a mysterious third person. Perhaps that is you.

The fifth chapter will explain biblical love and discuss some important issues pertaining to dating. And chapter six will bring you up to date with how I am now, several years after my break-up.

Just in case you're wondering, Barbara is a pseudonym. I've also changed a couple of other minor details to obscure her identity, lest she be discovered and made fun of for having ever dated me in the first place.

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