

THE RESTORATION SERIES • 3

—◆— *The* —◆—  
DESIRE

A NOVEL

DAN WALSH  
AND GARY SMALLEY



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About that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” Jesus called a little child to him and put the child among them. . . . “Anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. And anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me.”

—Matthew 18:1–2, 4–5



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# 1

Michele didn't know why she'd come here, why she tortured herself this way. The place stirred all kinds of emotions inside her. None of them good.

They were just children playing on a playground. They were just moms chatting on a bench under a tree.

"Watch, Mommy, watch!"

Michele walked along the sidewalk in one of the many shaded playgrounds in River Oaks. It was Friday afternoon. A little boy, maybe three years old, stood at the top of a yellow kiddy slide, facing the moms on the bench. But Mommy didn't watch. None of the women did. They just kept yakking away.

"Mommy, watch me!" He stood there a few moments more.

One of the women glanced his way. Long enough to say, "Great, Sammy," then back to her little group.

Sammy looked at her, waited, then went down the slide.

How could she do that? What could she possibly be talking about that mattered more than her son? Some new sale at the mall? Some new coupon deal on the internet? Michele watched Sammy land softly on his rear end, stand up, and brush the sand off his pants, then run around to the ladder again. Sure enough, when he got to the top: "Mommy, watch!"

This time, his mother only looked, then offered a dismissive wave. Back to her friends, who received the fullest measure of her attention.

*I would watch you. If you were mine, I would watch every single time. And listen to every word you said, whether it mattered or made no sense at all.*

As Michele reached a picnic table at the other end of the playground, the little boy went down the slide again and looked over at his mom when he stood. He registered no disappointment, none that she could see. It was amazing how resilient and forgiving children were at that age, and even older. At the school where she taught kindergarten and first grade, she saw that resilience all the time. Due to cutbacks and having almost no seniority, she could only work part-time, which left her afternoons free.

She counted five children on the playground. Three boys, two girls. All preschool age. Two babies in strollers over by the moms. So many kids for three ladies. *Aren't they the lucky ones?* They looked to be her age, maybe a few years older. Must have married young like she had. Probably waited a year then started popping babies out at will, one right after the other.

How nice for them.

And look, they brought them to the playground to play. Such good mothers. But how good were they really if they could blot their kids out of their consciousness so completely?

Her anger stirred. *That's what happens when things come too easily. They don't mean as much.* Like the way her younger brother Doug treated his little red Mazda, the car her parents had bought for him when he got his license. He'd been back from college this past weekend, and the car, as usual, was a mess. And Doug, as usual, was oblivious to it. She and Tom,

her older brother, never had a car handed to them like that. They had to work for their beat-up used cars all through high school, come up with the money for their gas and insurance by themselves.

“Mommy, come push me.” Another little boy stood on a tire swing, trying to shift his body weight back and forth. He didn’t weigh enough to generate any motion. “Mommy?” he cried out again.

“I can’t right now, honey,” one of the other women said. “Ask your sister.”

“She’s not big enough.”

Michele waited for the mother’s reply, as did the little boy on the swing. She didn’t answer. She did laugh extra hard at something the woman at the far end of the bench said. Michele wanted to scream, or at least say something. Really, she wanted to walk out to the playground and push the little boy herself.

Wouldn’t that get their attention?

Her cell phone rang. She lifted it out of her purse. It was her mom. Should she answer it? Generally, she enjoyed talking with her mom, but they weren’t on the same page about this issue. Her mom tended to side with Michele’s husband, Allan. Their opinion was simple: not getting pregnant after a year of trying wasn’t that big of a deal.

But it was a big deal to Michele, a very big deal.

What if her mom asked Michele where she was or what she was doing? Should she lie? That wouldn’t be right. She answered on the third ring. “Hi, Mom, what are you up to?”

“Hey, Michele, I’m just doing some shopping for our big Sunday dinner. Doug will be coming back from school, and of course—”

“Two weekends in a row? Isn’t that some kind of record?”

“I know,” her mom said. “Of course, Tom and Jean and the kids will be here, and so will Charlotte. Even Audrey Windsor is coming.”

“Mrs. Windsor? Haven’t seen her in a little while. How is she doing?”

“I’m not sure. I think she’s okay. Your father talked to her. She called a few days ago saying she had something important to talk to him about, so he invited her to the dinner.”

“I wonder what it is,” Michele said.

“I have no idea. I’m just calling to make sure you’re still coming.”

“I am. But remember, Allan’s not home yet from his mission trip to Africa.”

“When does he get home?”

“Tuesday night. He’s flying in to the Orlando airport.”

“We’ll miss him. We’ll have you guys over some night soon after he settles in to hear all about it.”

“That sounds good. So should I come right after church on Sunday?”

“About an hour after. But not much later than that. You know how your father is. He wants to eat as soon as we sing the closing song.”

Michele laughed.

“Well, I better go. Talk to you soon.”

Michele put her phone back in her purse and turned to face the children on the playground again. The situation was the same. The children playing and laughing, occasionally calling out to their moms for attention; the moms’ attention still mostly focused on each other.

It was sad.

But as upsetting as it was seeing these children taken for granted, Michele was aware of a peculiar conflict inside. An-



other part of her longed to be sitting right there under that tree with the moms, chatting away.

A few minutes later, when tears welled up in her eyes, she knew she had to move, to do something else, anything. She pulled out a tissue and dabbed her eyes, then gathered her things. As she did, she noticed a slim, brown-haired girl a few yards away, standing by a tree, looking right at her. She wore jeans and a baggy pullover sweatshirt, which seemed odd to Michele. It was quite warm out. As Michele looked closer, she understood why. The baggy sweatshirt did a poor job of hiding the fact that the girl was pregnant. When she saw Michele noticing, she looked away.

Michele pulled out her keys, but she did it too fast, and they fell to the pavement. Bending down to pick them up, she heard footsteps behind her and turned. It was the girl who had been standing by the tree.

“I couldn’t help but notice you looking at the kids on the playground.” She had a slight accent, maybe New York. “And how it made you cry.” She hesitated a moment. “I’ve seen you here a few times. I’ve been coming too. But I don’t think for the same reason. Mind if I ask you a question?”

Michele restrained a sigh. Had she not dropped her keys, she’d be on her way to the car right now.