

# Unbound by Grace

By  
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For Jehovah-Pelet, my deliverer.

And for my friends and family who continue to walk beside me.  
I treasure you.

“Old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

2 Corinthians 5:17b

(NKJV)

## Chapter One

Tori Bishop plunged her fingers into the warm sand, then let the grains fall from between her fingers. She had a lot to be thankful for, especially today, and she counted off the blessings like a mantra, fending off the shadows of uncertainty toying at the edges of her thoughts.

Her soda was ice-cold, the weather was perfect, and her best friend, Jenni, was about to get married.

Tori watched Jenni nibble little Joshua's fingers and wave his chubby hand toward where his daddy was readying a volleyball serve. Friends filled Corona Del Mar beach, all gathered for the joint bachelor/bachelorette party.

"Great call on location, Jenni." This was Tori's favorite beach, and she felt relieved to have the event here on the sand, sun toasting her olive skin, instead of in the Bishop family's marble-floored sitting room.

Jenni leaned back on her hands, her dark hair blowing about in the salty breeze, while her adopted son scooped sand into a sieve nearby. "The beach is way more *us* than the tea party theme your mom suggested. Besides, I knew you'd be uncomfortable there."

Uncomfortable? Tori would most likely have a panic attack if her friends saw her parents' fancy house, found out what being a Bishop really meant. She'd spent years carefully avoiding that revelation, cultivating a safe zone for herself. It was the only way she knew how to function again after what happened in college. The merest thought of it now made her skin prickle.

She set her soda can into the sand and scratched both her forearms. "Couldn't have picked a better place, or a nicer day."

Jenni's cheeks stretched as she turned her face toward the net. "I'm having a wonderful time."

John and Derek stood on opposite sides of the net, sunglasses on, shirts off. Derek stretched and cracked his neck, then spit in the sand. Tori shuddered.

John launched the ball across the net. Derek ran to hit it back but missed.

Tori smirked. "I think those boys should stick to basketball."

"Hey, give my man a break." Jenni tapped her with an elbow. "He didn't grow up playing on the beach like we did."

How sad for him. Tori couldn't imagine life without a beach to spend countless hours on, or a view of the infinite ocean to carry off her worries. This had been her favorite go-to spot as long as she could remember.

"Okay, John's off the hook. Not because he's from Indiana, but because you have the hots for him." She winked.

"Yeah, I do." Jenni smiled wide, her cheeks reddening as she looked toward John.

"Such brazen drooling. Cool down, girlfriend." Tori returned her attention to the game and cupped a hand to the side of her mouth. "Is that the best you got, Derek?"

Derek lifted his sunglasses and squinted his rich, dark eyes toward her. "Quit razzing me, Tori."

"Quit playing so bad and I will!" She giggled.

Jenni tugged on a lock of Tori's hair. "You sure love pestering him, don't you?"

"Yep."

Derek's brows rose. "You wanna take me to school, then get your little self out here and try."

A wicked grin slid slowly into place. Oh, this would be fun.

Jenni cocked her head and gave her a reproving look. "Tori..."

Tori hopped up and brushed sand off her rear, then looked down at Jenni. "He literally asked for it."

John jogged toward the blanket, setting seagulls to flight, and tossed her the ball. "I need a break anyway. I miss my bride." He sat close to Jenni, draped an arm around her shoulders, and moved in for yet another kiss.

These two lovebirds were so syrupy-sweet it was a constant gag fest. "Which one of you is schmoopy?" Not waiting for a reply, Tori jogged to take her place behind the net.

Derek widened his stance and crouched, thick calves flexing. With his broad, sculpted shoulders and imposing build, he looked more linebacker than volleyball competitor.

The sun beat down on her neck and glinted off the golden sand. Tori adjusted the waist of her board shorts, secured her ponytail, and shot a half-grin to Derek. "Here it comes, Derek. Let's see you try to keep up."

Tori served the ball high and watched it soar across the net. Not her best serve, but it wouldn't take her long to warm up. The ball traveled back and forth a few times as her muscles loosened up.

"This the lesson you got for me?" Derek's ample lips slanted in a tease.

Tori shook her head. *Poor, poor man.* Time to unleash.

She smacked the ball to the far right, feeling the force shooting up her forearms into her shoulders. Derek hustled toward it, upper body contracting powerfully, and sent it back her way. She lobbed it to the left, just inside the line. Then far down the center. Each time, he surged for it, dark muscles bulging with exertion.

As fun as it was watching him zig zag all over the court, she had a game to win.

She shuffled left, anticipating the ball's trajectory. The set up was perfect. Tori ran forward, leapt high, arched her back, and spiked the ball at Derek's feet.

Panting, she planted her hands on her hips and jutted her chin. "That was chapter one. There'll be a test tomorrow." She winked at him and walked to her corner.

When she turned back around, Derek was staring wide-eyed, his bare chest – coated with glistening sweat and sparkling sand – heaving. Gaze scrambling from the image of his expanding rib cage, and the jagged scar beneath, she laughed. "Speechless? That's a first."

John and Jenni both snorted with laughter.

Derek swung his eyes toward them, while they continued their uncontained cackling. "And here I thought you were on my side. Why do I get the feeling I'm the butt of some joke?"

"Tori?" Jenni called out when she'd caught a breath. "Are you going to tell him?"

"Wasn't planning on it."

"Tell me what?"

Jennie gulped back another round of laughter. "Tori was a champion volleyball player. She won a full-ride scholarship to Penn State."

"Dang, girl."

Tori shrugged. "You asked me to bring it."

"I take it back. My ego's sufferin'. Now I gotta find a way to salvage my pride, princess."

"Don't call me princess." It came out sharper than she'd intended, but Derek didn't flinch.

Calmly, he held her gaze and nodded. "Okay."

Tori shook off the vulnerability she felt at his deep gaze and melted into the satisfaction at having humiliated him in front of their friends. "I think that's enough for today though, don't you? Catch your breath, big guy." Shooting him a final grin, she ambled over to the blanket and plopped down beside Jenni.

John's eyes sparkled as he looked at her. "You know what they say about teasing, right?" He stood, his boy in his arm, and walked toward the water.

"We both agree, Tori. About you and Derek."

"Ha! Yeah, right." Her gaze skittered to Derek's chiseled form and her belly dipped despite herself.

"Deny it all you want. There's something between you."

"Yes, mutual irritation. He's like an annoying brother."

"Mm hmm."

Jenni's cell phone dinged and she pulled it out of her beach bag. Tori watched her brows cinch tight as Jenni read the text. "Oh no. No, no, no." The color drained from her face and she turned saucer-eyes on Tori.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"The caterer. She just canceled." Her mouth fell open. "Oh my gosh. *Oh my gosh*. Tori! There's no time to find a new caterer this late." She pressed a hand to her sternum, her breath quickening. "I...I have to get John. We have to go. I don't even... I don't know where to start."

"Jenni, breathe." Tori pulled the phone from her friend's hands. "I'll take care of it. Okay? I promise."

"You?" She stared back at Tori, her eyes full of hope and uncertainty in equal measure.

"Yes. I'm the maid of honor and I'll handle it. It won't be a problem, I promise. Don't worry about anything."

A briny wind swirled around them as Tori peered at Jenni from the tops of her eyes.

Finally, Jenni's shoulders relaxed. "All right. Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Jenni squeezed her hands. "You're the best, Tori."

"I know." Tori smirked. "Now put it out of your mind. Go smooch your man and remember to be excited. Your wedding is around the corner!" The thought brought a lump to Tori's throat.

Jenni nodded and stood. "Thank you."

As she watched her friend wander toward the water to join her fiancé and son, Tori bit her lip. Everything was changing so fast. Part of her wished things could stay the same forever, but that was foolish. Life was carrying them all forward toward futures largely unknown. Jenni had found love, her future was with John and Joshua, and Tori determined to give her the best wedding ever.

But how on earth was she going to manage finding a wedding caterer in just five days?

Tori slipped her feet into her sandals, slung her beach bag over her shoulder, and climbed up the sand to the parking lot.

“Yo! Miss thang. One of these days I’m gonna repay you for all the harassment you dole out.”

She kept walking. “Yeah, sure. But not right now, okay? I’ve got a major crisis to fix.”

Derek frowned. “What’s up?”

“Full blown wedding rescue. I’ve got to go.” Her mind was spinning at a hundred rpms.

“Whoa, sounds serious. Need help?”

“From you? No. Got it covered.”

He screwed his lips to one side. “Of course you do. Don’t ever need anyone, do you?”

Tori rolled her eyes.

“All right. But seriously...” He stepped sideways in front of her so that his broad frame blocked the sun, then caught her gaze with a penetrating look. “If you change your mind, I got your back.”

“Okay. I’ll let you know.” She climbed into her Jeep and started the engine.

Derek gave her a compassionate look, no pretense in his molasses-colored eyes. He raised a hand. “Take care.”

Guilt tickled the back of her neck. She rubbed it away. Why did he have to be so nice? “Yeah. You too.” She smiled at him, and her next breath was strangely shallower than the one before. “Wish me luck.” She backed out of her spot and headed up to the exit.

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Derek Miller rubbed an arm across his brow and watched Tori drive away, her dark auburn locks fluttering out the window. The girl sure knew how to get under his skin. That sassy mouth of hers would get her into trouble someday. But even after knowing each other a couple of years, she still seemed determined to keep him at arms’ length. The banter could be playful, fun sometimes. Until it wasn’t. And she knew it. He’d read it in her soft gray eyes for split seconds at a time. Just before she plastered a smirk on her lips, lifted that straight, diamond-studded nose in the air, and threw another teasing comment his way.

If she could drop the sarcasm for one hot second, they might be able to get along.

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“Thanks anyway.” Tori pulled up to the red light and tapped the End Call button on her phone’s Bluetooth. Ugh. How could any professional leave a bride in the lurch like this? It boiled Tori’s blood to think of her friend’s special day being jeopardized this way. John and Jenni had been

through so, so much to get to this place. They deserved a happily-ever-after. And Tori? Well, it was time for her to buckle down and start building a life for herself.

She'd avoided it long enough, coasting from one excuse to another to delay the inevitable. It still surprised her that her parents forgave her for wasting her scholarship and dropping out of Penn State. She'd really had to think on her toes to come up with a believable explanation.

There was no way she could tell anyone the truth. Being dumped was one thing, being duped was humiliating.

Now though, she was older. Wiser. And it was time to act like it.

She'd fought to finish her degree closer to home, so all she lacked now was a decisive plan.

Her thoughts drifted to the envelope in her purse, the one with the letter offering her an assistant coaching job in Arizona, if she wanted it. Then to the fact she hadn't told anyone about it yet.

She gave herself a shake. Later. After the wedding, maybe. She had a few weeks to decide. Right now she had a wedding to save.

*Lord? A little help? If not with the food, then with my rising blood pressure?*

The lyrics to one of her songs burst into her thoughts. *My God, He strengthens my heart. My God, He blesses my soul. My God, through You, peace is mine.*

Based on Psalm 29:11, the song came to her years earlier, after the most painful experience of her life. Now, they rippled through her thoughts, washing over the laundry list of things stressing her out. With a quick twist of the dial, she powered on the stereo and let the sound of praise music fill her senses and relax her lungs.

*I know Who goes before me*, she prayed as she pulled up to her parents' house. The sky was turning pink as Tori jogged up the front steps to the door and let herself in. She spent a moment taking in the place, eyes pausing on the curio displaying her dad's collection of sports memorabilia, then traveling the wall to a decades-long row of family portraits.

Being back in her childhood home for the summer was a mixed blessing, but it might turn out to be providential. When her apartment complex suffered a series of break-ins and Tori decided not to renew her rental agreement, her parents suggested she move back home while she shopped for a new place. And that meant there'd be no lease to break if she took that coaching position. It didn't escape her notice that God might have had a hand in this, but she had no time to dwell on it now.

Mom was securing an earring as she came down the stairs, and Dad followed behind wearing one of his swanky suits.

"Hi, honey." Her mom's red hair was swept into an updo. "I didn't know you were going to be home this evening."

"Impromptu decision. I was hoping for help sourcing a serious foodie run, but looks like you're heading out."

Dad wrapped an arm around her shoulders and kissed her forehead, bathing her in the comforting spice of his aftershave. "We have an investor's dinner at the Harrisons' this evening."

Tori's stomach clenched at the thought. The glittering gowns and swaggering peacocks, the false laughter and thickly laid flattery. The insulting charade of pleasantries fronting obvious condescension. *Yuck.* "Have fun," she muttered.

He bent his graying head to the business of securing his cuff links. "You know, one of these days you'll have to step in and start learning a bit about this subject."

Tori swallowed the *yeah, right* on her tongue, then pinched the bridge of her nose. "Well, today's not that day. I have enough on my plate. Jenni's caterer fell through and I promised her I'd fix it. Have any friends in high places who could cater a wedding that is five days away?" She bared her teeth in a wide grin and batted her eyes.

"Oh, poor Jenni." Mom shook her head, her brows pulled tightly together. "Is she panicking?"

"She was. I swore I could take care of it, and I think I was convincing. Now I'm the one who's panicking. I called a couple of places on the way here and was basically laughed off the phone each time."

Dad finished adjusting his cuffs and pushed his mouth into that duck face he made when he was trying to think. "I'll float the dilemma around at the Harrisons', but I'm not sure it will help. You never know, though. There's going to be a lot of business owners there. And God is in the business of miracles, even ones as non-eternal as this." He spared her an eye-crinkling smile.

Tori leaned against the jam of the door as she released a sigh. "I hope so."

"His first miracle was providing wine for a wedding." Mom rubbed Tori's shoulders then smoothed a curl off her forehead. "I don't see why He couldn't provide food."

"Thanks, Mom." Her mother's faith had always bolstered her own. If Tori could be half the encourager her mom was, she'd do well.

"Tori, why don't you borrow one of my dresses and come along?"

Tori grimaced, her head limping to one side and she whimpered. "Nooooo."

"A few of the kids you went to school with have been coming to these gatherings the last couple of years. I'm sure you'll find someone to talk to."

Her inner child clung to her tantrum. She'd rather *not* talk to any of those people if she could help it.

"And you haven't seen the Harrisons in a while. You used to get along so well with those boys."

*Those boys.* The Harrison brothers *had* been like family growing up, but... "That was forever ago. I hate these kinds of parties. With a fiery passion that burns deep in my soul."

Never one to indulge theatrics, her mom just tipped a gentle smile at her and waited.

Tori stared back, slowly realizing she was stuck. This *was* her best shot at coming through for her closest friend, and she wouldn't jeopardize the most important day of Jenni's life for her own comfort. A groan pushed its way up and out of her throat. "Fine. I'll go. But I'm leaving early." She would *not* get sucked back in to that circle.

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Derek pulled into the car port and cut the engine. He hadn't noticed how loud the fan had been until it went silent. A couple of dudes in saggy pants leaned against a truck and eyed him as he walked by, claiming territory with a glare. Just like he used to do. He felt for them. Knew the lost feeling that propelled them to act the way they did. He lifted a prayer as he jogged up the concrete stairs and ducked into his apartment.

The carpet was an ugly brown, worn and stained. The kitchen hadn't seen an upgrade since the '70s. And the furniture had come from various yard sales. But this had been his home the last few years. He'd slowly made improvements. A coffee table instead of a crate, a recliner instead of a bean bag, a refurbished dining set instead of a card table. It might not be much, but it was progress. Hope for a better future, at least for himself.

On a shelf beside the TV, a display of framed portraits looked back at him. His mama, God rest her soul. His auntie, cousins, and Grandma. They were so proud of him, he knew. He'd crawled out of the rat hole that was his life, and was making good with his second chance. But what about Brandy and Kayla? At eleven and thirteen, those girls were smarter than anyone he knew. Always at the top of their class. They deserved better. His success would never be complete while they still lived with violence right outside their windows – and sometimes within their own walls.

His father had tried hard to keep *Derek* out of trouble, but he'd landed in it himself when Derek was nine, going to jail and never coming back. Prison yard fight took him just weeks before his release. The way Derek heard it, his father had been trying to stop the brawl and talk some sense to the riotous crowd, and had been rewarded with a -shank to the gut.

His uncle abandoned the family a decade ago, showing his face now and then when he needed money, a place to crash, and a wife and kids to beat. Derek beat the stuffings out of the man the last time, and he hadn't turned up again since. But it was only a matter of time. And meanwhile, keeping food on the table presented a struggle all its own. But Derek was determined to pull his family out of its nosedive, and to make something better of himself.

He dropped into the well-worn lazy boy, picked at a frayed seam, and pulled out his phone. Terrance answered immediately. "Hey, Derek."

"Hey yourself, my man. I'm not late, am I?" He always made every effort to check in with his parole officer on time.

"Nope, you're good. How're things going? What's new?"

Derek rolled a dangling piece of thread between his fingers. "My buddy's tying the knot, that's been something. Other than that, same ole story. Just go to work, go to church, come home. That's mostly it."

"How 'bout your family? You talk to them lately? Your grandmother, aunt...your cousin."

He shook his head. "No, sir. I'd call you if I'd seen my cousin." Eli was off limits according to the conditions of Derek's parole, leaving Derek helpless to shake some sense into him. "Grandma and Auntie though, yeah. I keep in touch, do what I can for them and the girls, grocery card here and there. I don't got much." He sighed and looked at their smiling pictures, wishing he had more to give them. "I worry."

"I know you do. But you gotta take care of your own situation first and foremost. Or you're no good to them."

"I remind myself of that every day. I know I gotta trust the Lord."

"I like hearing that. You're doing great, Derek. You're in the home stretch."

"Yeah. Home stretch."

"Any plans yet?"

"I don't know, man." He tugged on the thread, accidentally opening a hole in the seam. "Opportunities are hard to come by. I applied at a few places but no dice." The latest rejection had just come in that morning, and it took a couple hours after the phone call for Derek to shake off the disappointment. "Probably have to stick with the warehouse job."

"The one your buddy hooked you up with? Not happy there?"

"No, I am. Sorta. I mean, they took a chance on me and I appreciate that. Appreciate the friend who put in a good word for me too. Just wish I could do more, ya know? Something bigger. Worthwhile." He wanted to prove he was worth something. Maybe inspire others. He adjusted the phone on his ear. "Guess I should be happy with what I got. Lot of the other guys didn't do so good."

"That doesn't mean you can't dream. You're a good man, Derek. And I don't say that often or lightly. You'll figure it out, and when you do you'll go far."

"Thanks, man."

"It's the truth. Talk to you next week?"

"Like clockwork. Take care." Derek exhaled as he ended the call. A few more months and these calls would be a thing of the past. He could go where he wanted, talk to who he wanted. Hopefully get through to his cousin, convince him to go straight. The way Derek had, but hopefully his cousin wouldn't have to go to prison to change his ways.

Every day his past beat him down, but every day God's mercy lifted him back up.

God had been so faithful, was so much greater than Derek's stupidity and weakness. He'd met Derek in a prison cell of all places, prodding at him in the dark when sleep wouldn't come. Bringing to mind his parents' words from his childhood.

When he was released, He'd followed him out the prison gates, then He'd stood face to face with him in the form of a man. One who saw something in Derek that nobody ever had before – a redeemable life, someone worth dying for, worth a second chance. And Derek grabbed it. That man had shared the gospel, became both a friend and a mentor, met with Derek regularly for months, even recommended him for a job that Derek was sure he'd never have landed without someone vouching for him on record like that. He wanted to live up to the second chance he'd gotten, to be worthy of it. But most of the time, he felt pretty useless. Same as when he was a kid – until desperation drove him to the same path his parents had tried to keep him from: A life filled with cruelty, rage, violence.

And power.

For Derek, the benefits of power were more addictive than the substances he'd used and distributed. Because, for a kid who'd felt trapped and angry, the weight of a Smith and Wesson in his hand, and the response he'd gotten when he'd flashed it, had been freedom. Suddenly he'd

had some control over the world that had controlled him all his life. He had finally been able to take care of himself, his family. And that was it, that was all he'd wanted.

Turned out, that wasn't real freedom. Just a new kind of slavery, a prison he'd been locked in long before his arrest. And the lives he'd trampled along the way would haunt him forever.

Nostrils flaring, Derek pushed himself up out of his chair and abandoned his trip down memory lane. His life was different now. *He* was different now. He liked to think his parents saw and smiled down on him.

He went to his fridge and grabbed a grape soda, guzzling half of it in one go. The sun, and the grim memories, had sapped him. A shower and a couple hours of TV sounded like a great way to spend the evening.

Derek had just toweled off when he heard the knock at his door. Pulling on a white T shirt and jeans, he hurried to the peephole, then smiled.

He swung the door wide to let John in. "Hey man, what's up? Why aren't you with your woman?" He gripped John's hand and pulled him into a chest bumping embrace.

"Her family wanted to hang out. They're watching *The Notebook*."

Derek laughed. "Yeah, no wonder you're here. Want something to drink?"

"Have anything besides grape soda?"

"Tap water, apple juice, milk."

John smiled. "Grape soda sounds good. Thanks." He took the offered can and popped the top, then sat at the kitchen table.

"Less than a week to go. How's that feel?" Derek asked.

"Like the longest week of my life."

Derek chuckled. "Yeah, I'll bet."

"But I've got something special planned for Tuesday. I just could use some help pulling it off."

"Whatever you need, I'm your man."

John's blue eyes crinkled. "You sure are. Okay so here's what I'm doing. I made reservations at Elliot's – where I proposed. And I'll be giving Jenni a special necklace. It was my grandmother's locket. My mom put baby photos of Jenni and me inside it. It needed a little TLC to strengthen the hinges, get a new chain, and I decided to have it engraved at the same time."

"Dude, you're good. She'll love that."

"I think so too."

"So where do I come in?"

"Jeweler said it won't be ready until Tuesday afternoon. It was supposed to be done Monday. This puts me in a bind because I'll be on the other side of town on Tuesday, right up till picking up Jenni for dinner. The only thing I could think of was –"

"Hey, I'm on it. No worries."

John beamed and tapped his knuckles on the table. "Awesome. Okay, here's the receipt. You *sure* you don't mind picking this up for me?"

"No problem at all, man. I've got your back. That's my job." He took the receipt, tucked it into his wallet, then swigged his soda.

"Thanks, Derek. I can't wait to see Jenni's face."

"Spoken like a man in love."

"I don't deny it." John ran his thumb through the condensation on his soda can. "What about you, Dare? Any warm fuzzies for a special lady?" He lifted his eyes to Derek's. "Maybe, say, one who can play bass guitar *and* spike a volleyball?"

Derek shook his head. "You got it all wrong, bro."

Fighting a grin, John rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Okay."

"You do."

"I'm not arguing with you."

"Yeah, you are." Derek jettied a breath through his nostrils. "Just not in words."

Face masked in innocence, John raised his hands shoulder-height, palms forward in surrender, and shook his head. With a hint of a smirk.

Derek crushed his soda can and tossed it into the trash. How could John think he and Tori would be good together? Others might not see it, but the woman had some trigger points, to be sure. And whatever they were, Derek seemed to have a knack for setting them off. It wasn't hard for him to spot a woman who'd been mistreated. He'd known enough of them.

*Reach out to her. Help her*, came the prompting.

But how? He'd try. He wanted her to feel safe with him. But whatever it was about him that set her off... Imagine if she knew all there was to know about him.

Nah. There was nothing more for them than their shaky friendship. And even that was held together with rubber bands and pixie dust.