

Where Love Once Lived



Sidney W. Frost

To my wife Celeste Johnson

For her love and for her understanding
of why I had to finish this book.



In memory of Lois DeJong Frost

For her unselfish approach to helping others.



In memory of Jack McCowan

The real life Combine member
who made us laugh and enjoy life.

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Chapter One

“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

—Matthew 6:14

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.”

—Romans 8:28

“Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’”

—Isaiah 30:21

Karen felt loved on Tuesdays.

She was fifty-three and divorced with a college-aged daughter at home who’d probably flee the nest soon, leaving Karen to live alone. She’d missed her chance for happiness. Still, she wasn’t sad. Teaching and her volunteer work as a lay minister, hospital chaplain, and member of her church choir fulfilled her. To be honest, she wanted more. She wanted the special kind of love she felt on Tuesdays.

She glanced at the clock on the wall as the familiar knock sounded. The third graders snapped to attention, turning their heads in unison toward the door. Today was the day. Every Tuesday about this time for the past six weeks, a fresh bouquet of flowers arrived. Karen opened the door and felt a rush of warmth when she realized today would be no exception.

Peeking around the blooms with his usual grin, his black curls poking out from under the well-worn blue cap that sat too far back on his head, the deliveryman thrust the vase toward her.

“Morning, Ms. Williams.”

“Good morning, Sam. It must be Tuesday.” She took the flowers, admiring this week’s selection of red roses. Her friend, Cathy, warned her to be cautious because the flowers might be from a stalker, but Karen didn’t think so.

“Yes, ma’am, ‘tis.”

Sam wasn’t much for words, but his facial expressions said it all. He knew something she didn’t know, and his eyes bragged about it.

“You can’t tell me who’s sending these, right?”

The scent of the roses overpowered the usual classroom odor. Without the flowers, her room smelled like a combination of peanut butter and floor cleaner.

“Nope.” After he said it, he pursed his lips as if to hold in his secret.

Karen imagined the Tuesday delivery was a highlight for Sam because of the way he acted each week. She didn’t want to disappoint him today.

“Don’t know or can’t say?”

“Can’t say.” He turned to leave, but suddenly spun around. “And don’t know.” His eyes sparkled as he backed out of the room, keeping his gaze on her all the while.

After Sam shut the door, she held the bouquet for the class to see. Let the children make their jokes so they could get back to the lesson. Nine year olds loved distractions, but they enjoyed this mystery most of all because it involved their teacher. The student teacher, Fran Rush, sitting at the back of the classroom, smiled and shook her head as if she knew what was coming next.

“Who are the flowers from, Ms. Williams?” Jose asked.

“Well, let’s see.” She placed the vase on her desk and pulled out the card, repeating the weekly ritual. As usual, all it said was, “To Karen, with love.” She peeked over the card to watch Jose’s response as she continued. “Oh, no. It’s not signed.”

“Again?” Haley asked, playing along.

Jose pumped his hand high in the air, his eyes opened wide. “I know! I know! It’s from your secret a’mirer.”

Karen couldn’t guess who that might be or why the flowers came on Tuesdays, for that matter. Could it be Leon? He’d asked her out once, but she turned him down and never encouraged him. Besides, Leon wasn’t the type to do something in secret. He’d be bragging about it to everyone in the church choir.

As she wondered about the mystery, Karen peered out the window at the florist’s delivery van in the school parking lot in time to see it leaving. As it disappeared behind the administration building, another vehicle came into view, one that looked like a bus with no windows. On its side in large letters was *Austin Public Library Bookmobile*.

She’d once loved a bookmobile driver. Memories of that time with him poured in so rapidly she caught her breath. It’d been long ago, but her heart remembered. At first she thought of the love she’d felt back then, but the good memories didn’t last long. She’d gone to the bookmobile as usual that last day, but nothing was to be the same again. She went to Brian with love and exciting news. She left alone. Not just without him, but alone in the world and apart from God.

This couldn’t be the same bookmobile. Nevertheless, she had to see it. She had to walk into it and face her fears. She grabbed her jacket to shield her from the damp November day and rounded up her class.

“Get your coats on, kids. We’re going to the library.”

The children grumbled at the notion, but when they saw what kind of library it was, they stepped livelier. Karen walked inside the bookmobile after making sure Miss Rush had control of the children. She inhaled the familiar odor of used books. She traveled back thirty years with a single whiff. The librarian just inside the front door welcomed her with a smile. A man sat at a desk near the back of the vehicle. Karen pulled a book off the shelf and held it next to her chest, not caring what the title was. With her eyes closed, she could feel Brian standing next to her, loving her, and it was so real, she felt her eyes moisten.

Enough. That was too long ago. She dabbed her eyes and looked around. Fran was up front letting the children in a few at a time. “Fran, will you watch the children? I’m going to the room.”

Fran nodded in a way that said she’d seen Karen’s tears and was concerned. Explanations would be needed, but not now.

When Karen reached the back door, she gasped and froze. He wasn’t supposed to be here.

“Brian?” she asked.

He looked more like a professor than the student she’d known in college. His blue eyes sparkled, and she recognized his smile at once. The neatly trimmed beard was new, but it didn’t hide the strong jawline she’d once loved.

He jumped to his feet and moved toward her with his arms open. “Hello, Karen. I knew you’d come.”

His movement frightened her, but there was nowhere to run. She blocked the embrace he was heading for by taking his hands in hers and pretending to want to shake hands.

“What are you doing here?” She was composed on the outside, but the rhythm of her heartbeat told her she was anything but calm. “I thought you were in California.” She dropped his hands and pushed away, putting as much distance between them as possible in the cramped quarters of the mobile library.

“I was, but I moved to Austin about six months ago.”

“Mister?” asked a piping voice.

“What’s up, Haley?” Karen asked the student who was peeking up at Brian.

Haley pointed to the woman sitting near the front door. “She told me to ask the man where to find the biographies.”

Brian moved to the shelves on his left and knelt eye to eye with Haley. “They’re right here, young lady.”

She loved the way he focused on her student, but knew she should get away now before she said something she’d regret. He’d hurt her in a way she couldn’t easily forgive.

Then she saw the ring. On his right hand was the wide gold band with the Greek letters Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. She knew there was a date engraved inside that marked the start of their life together. She knew it was there because she had a matching ring in her jewelry box. A relic of the past she couldn’t bear to toss when she’d married Steve.

“I’ve worn it ever since you gave it to me,” he said as he stood and moved toward her.

Could he still read her mind, or had she focused on his hand a bit too long? She peered into his eyes, as blue as his shirt, and ignored what he said. “I see you have your old job back.”

He laughed. “I tried, but the city doesn’t have bookmobiles anymore. I had to buy this one myself.”

His laugh. She remembered that, too, and it took her back to a pleasant time of her life. Their two-year relationship was with laughter. Even so, it ended with sadness so deep there was little laughter for Karen for years afterward.

“Why did you buy a bookmobile?”

He shrugged. “Looking for happiness, I guess. I’m not sure it was because of the job or because it was the time when you were in my life.” He moved closer and gazed into her eyes as if waiting for a response.

She felt the heat of his body and his familiar scent, both so strong she turned away. The last time she saw him was in a bookmobile long ago when they were students at the University of Texas. That was the day he broke up with her and left her alone. She didn’t want to think about that day. She walked as far to the rear of the vehicle as possible, motioning him to follow.

When they were near the back door, she stood close to him so the children couldn't hear her voice. She felt her body shiver. "Why are you here? Why are you doing this?"

"Because of you," he said and smiled.

For years, she knew what she'd say if their paths ever crossed. She even rehearsed it from time to time for the first few years they were apart. Too many years had passed for that speech. All she wanted to do now was to find out what was going on and leave. A thought came to her.

"Did you send the flowers?"

"Yes," he said. "Did you like them?"

"Don't send any more." The secret admirer dream burst, or rather fizzled. "I still don't understand why you bought a bookmobile."

He beamed. "You should know."

An image leaped into her head. This time it wasn't one of the day he said goodbye. She remembered a time before that when they were alone in the bookmobile. It was a time when his lips were on hers as she leaned against a bookshelf. For a split second, it was as if they were still there, still in love, still touching.

"All I remember is your dumping me in a vehicle like this."

He grimaced then looked her eyes. "I'm sorry. I was thinking about a different time. I never wanted to break up with you."

She wanted to forgive him for everything and move into his arms where she once felt so safe and loved. Instead, she stared at him, waiting, listening. He'd never told her why he'd left her, and her pride had kept her from telling him her news. It was too late.

His eyes focused on hers, and his voice comforted her with his sincerity. "I knew you wouldn't want to see me again. That's why I bought this bookmobile. I wanted to make you curious enough to come in."

Sunlight streamed in through the door window, highlighting new wrinkles around his eyes. She remembered his birthday. He was fifty-four, more handsome than when they'd first met so long ago.

"It worked. You got me to come in, but don't count on seeing me again. Goodbye."

She went out the door without looking back, finding it easy to resist the urge to forgive him.



Brian had planned this reunion for months after dreaming about it for years. He'd considered a multitude of possible reactions on Karen's part, but he hadn't expected her to walk away before he could tell her why he had broken up with her. If she would hear him out, she'd forgive him. After that, anything was possible. He had to stop her.

"Liz," he hollered toward the front of the bookmobile, "I'll be back."

He ran to catch up to Karen. "Please wait. Let me explain."

She was halfway to the school building when she stopped and turned toward him. "Why?" Her voice was stronger now, but her eyes were moist.

He hadn't counted on the tears. He'd hurt her enough for a lifetime and didn't want to see her in pain, but he felt he had to continue. "I know you're angry, but please let me tell you what happened."

She was silent. Could it be his long journey home would end like this? She had the power to extinguish the hope he'd carried for so long. He would've come back sooner if it hadn't been for his daughter. Was it too late?

“Okay, I’ll listen. But just long enough for you to tell me why you walked out on me the way you did.” She pulled back the left sleeve of her jacket and glanced at her watch.

This wasn’t the way it was supposed to be. The reunion he’d dreamed of had them sitting together in front of a warm fireplace. He had his arm around her, and she looked at him lovingly, chin up-raised slightly, ready and waiting for his kiss. Here they were standing in a parking lot outside an elementary school, and he was on the clock. He almost prayed for help before he remembered God had forsaken him. All he could do was hope honesty was enough.

“It happened when I went back to my parents’ home for the holidays. That trip I took before we split up. I didn’t want to go, but Mother begged me to. She wanted the whole family home for Christmas. I was so in love with you, all I could think about was our future together. I left here vowing by the next Christmas, we’d never be separated again.”

“So, what happened?” Karen’s voice was monotone and her face expressionless.

He’d never told anyone what he was about to tell her, not even his best friend. Phil probably guessed what happened, but he’d never brought it up.

“When I got to Redondo, a girl I knew in high school invited me out. It seemed okay at the time because it wasn’t a date and she wasn’t anyone special to me. It was like a reunion with a classmate, talking about old times.”

Karen crossed her arms. He felt her tenseness and wanted to wrap his arms around her and comfort her.

“I still don’t know how things went beyond that. Up until that time, I always thought of myself as an honest, moral person. If there’s a God, I was tested and failed.”

She raised both hands with palms down. “Look. You don’t have to say anymore.”

“Please. I need to tell you everything. I need your forgiveness.”

When she dropped her arms, he continued. “I can’t justify what happened next. I’ve often wondered why I did it. It was stupid, and I’ll always regret it. Before I knew what happened she was pregnant, and she assumed I would marry her to give the baby a name. I never loved her, and she never loved me.”

“You stayed married?”

“Yes. We raised our daughter together. Otherwise, we lived separate lives. I immersed myself in my work and she in her social life. As soon as Amy was grown, I filed for divorce.”

“Where is your daughter now?” Karen asked.

“She lives in Redondo Beach, not far from where I grew up. Raising her kept me sane. We’re very close.” He heard children behind him and looked back to see Karen’s class walking toward them with the other teacher. His time with Karen was ending. He’d told her the truth. Was it enough?

She sighed. Not a sigh of relief, but one associated with an onerous task.

“Thank you.” Karen’s voice softened. “I saw the pain in your face as you spoke, and I know it wasn’t easy for you to tell me what happened.” She paused and cleared her voice before continuing. “I’m just sorry you made your decision about marrying without discussing it with me at the time. I could’ve helped if you’d confided in me.”

He loved the sound of her voice, but didn’t understand her words. “What do you mean? I had to do the right thing. I had no choice.”

“You had choices,” she said. “You were my first love, the first person I trusted with my deepest feelings.” Her head bent forward

slightly as she swallowed, and Brian saw new tears forming. “And you broke my heart.”

Her words hurt, but no more than the ones he’d said to himself over the years.

“But—”

“Wait.” Her eyes pierced through the film of tears. “I listened to you. Now, you listen to me. I loved you then, and I knew you loved me. We had something special, and I, too, had begun to think about future Christmases together. Think how shocked I was when you broke it off without an explanation. Then later, when I learned you were married, I thought you must have been dating both of us at the same time, and I wasn’t as important to you as I’d believed.”

“I loved you. Only you.” He moved toward her, wanting to take her in his arms and show his love. “Karen, I . . .”

She pushed him away. “You had a funny way of showing your love. Now, here you are, back in town with flowers and a bookmobile and your fancy words of remorse. I suppose you want to pick up where we left off.”

She was mocking him, but he didn’t care. “Yes.”

“Alright then,” she said with a strong voice. She pushed her open jacket away and placed her hands on her hips. “Where we left off was at the point where I didn’t care for you at all. Nothing has changed.” She turned toward the school.

He’d expected her to be mad about the way he’d broken up with her, but she was angrier than he thought she’d be, especially after so many years.

“Can’t we back up to where you said you loved me?”

“Impossible.” She shook her head. “Too much happened after that.” She joined the students when they reached the place where Brian and Karen stood, and she walked with them toward the school building.

“How about meeting after school?” he asked. “We need more time to talk.”

She continued walking away. “There’s no reason to talk more. And stop sending the flowers.”

“Is he your secret admirer, Ms. Williams?” a student asked.

“Don’t talk, Haley,” Karen said.

“Think about the good times we had together,” Brian said. The children giggled. He didn’t care.

He stood in the parking lot until she disappeared into the classroom and the door closed behind her. When he turned to go back to the bookmobile, he saw Liz standing in the door, watching him.

Chapter Two

When Karen got home from school, she called Cathy and asked her to come over. Karen had kept the secret from everyone, even her best friend. Maybe it was time she told her what happened thirty years ago.

Cathy arrived in five minutes. She took one look at Karen and pulled her into a hug. “Oh my, you’re shaking. What happened?”

Karen led Cathy to the family room without answering, and they sat next to each other on the sofa.

“Ever since Steve and I divorced, you’ve been my closest and dearest friend.” Karen looked down at her hands. “But there’s a part of my life you know nothing about.”

“Oh dear,” Cathy said. “Tell me about it.”

Now that she’d made the decision to tell someone her secret, Karen couldn’t find the words. She thought about the day she lost the baby and how she’d believed her anger had caused the miscarriage. Hadn’t she wished, prayed even, more than once the pregnancy didn’t exist? She wished she hadn’t called Cathy. It was hard enough to think about all that, much less say aloud.

“I don’t know where to begin.”

“Tell me what happened today.” Cathy’s voice was soft, not brassy the way it usually sounded. She had a rough side to her and often let it out in front of Karen.

Karen slid to the opposite end of the sofa. “Yes, something happened today, but this story goes back about three decades.” She took a deep breath. “I was deeply in love with a fantastic young man while we were students at the University of Texas. We were happy, and I knew it was just a matter of time before he asked me to marry him.”

“Obviously, he didn’t. What happened?”

“We . . . I mean, I . . .” Karen wanted to tell her about the pregnancy and how she’d killed the unborn baby with her negative thoughts, but she couldn’t bring herself to confess even to her best friend. “I don’t know.” She stared at the floor. “One day, for no reason, he dumped me and moved back to California. I learned later he’d gotten married.”

“Men! You never can trust ‘em. You know that.” Cathy scooted over and put an arm around her. “Forget him. Now, what happened today?”

“He came back,” Karen said. “Brian Donelson. He showed up at my school driving a bookmobile like he used to when we were college students.”

“No kidding. You recognized him for sure?” Cathy kicked off her shoes and crossed her legs.

Karen looked at her and nodded. “It was him. We talked.”

“So? Tell me all about it.” Cathy smiled. “You let him have it big time, didn’t you?”

“All I wanted to do was leave and never see him again.” Karen shook her head slowly. “But he kept pushing. Said he’d planned to ask me to marry him back then, but he got someone pregnant. Now, check this: He’s divorced and wants to get back together with me.”

“Really? Talk about nerve!” Cathy’s anger on her behalf was more soothing than a good cup of tea.

“If he hadn’t made me so mad, I’d be laughing about it. We haven’t talked to each other in more than thirty years. How could he still have feelings for me after all that time?”

“I just realized he’s your secret admirer. He’s the one who sent the flowers every Tuesday, right?”

“Yeah, I figured that out, too, soon as I saw him.”

Cathy gazed into her eyes. “Are you going to do it?”