

Robin Lee
HATCHER



Heart Rings

Dear Reader:

Novelists are the world's best eavesdroppers, spies, and busybodies. Everything we hear, everything we see, everything we read, everything in life is grist for our imaginations, and much of it ends up in our books in one form or another. But some stories are a bit closer to a writer than most.

So it is with *Heart Rings*, a story first published in 2001 in a collection called *The Story Jar*.

Motherhood comes with no guarantees. But like centuries of women who have gone before, I plunged into the experience with joy. God blessed me with two beautiful daughters, Michaelyn and Jennifer. Over the years, we've laughed together and cried together. We've fought and we've made up. We've experienced extreme highs and devastating lows. Through it all we've been held close with bonds of love, even in the most difficult of times.

While Leah's and my stories are not identical, I understand the broken heart of this character. I understand because when Jennifer was sixteen, she ran away from home. My pain went deep, but God kept her safe and restored her to me. Still, things were quite different after her return, and I still had lessons to learn—like caring more about the character of a person rather than appearance.

When I first got the idea for *Heart Rings*, I called Jennifer, now a wife of over 26 years and a mother of four, and I asked her permission to use our story for inspiration. Her answer: "Sure, Mom. Hey, I'm a writer, too. I know you'll take creative license."

She was right, of course. I did take plenty of creative license, but the essence of what I learned from our journey as mother and daughter is what I most wanted to share in *Heart Rings*. God taught me to look at the beautiful heart of my beautiful daughter, to see the inside of the cup, and to rejoice at what I see there.

I thank God for the blessing of my daughters, for entrusting them to me to raise. I thank Him for the privilege of being able to watch them grow into beautiful young women, for the joy of seeing them become wives and mothers themselves. I thank Him for His patience as He taught me what is and what isn't important in my relationships with others, especially with my family. Most of all, I thank Him for drawing me into a deeper relationship with Him.

May we all, dear readers, cease judging others by their outward appearance and instead may we seek to see a person's thoughts and intentions, the way God does. May we care more about the inside of the cup than the outside.

In the grip of His grace,
Robin Lee Hatcher

Excerpt

“The LORD doesn't make decisions the way you do! People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at a person's thoughts and intentions.”
(1 Samuel 16:7b)

“You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.”
(Matthew 23:26)

CHAPTER ONE

March 1986

Seated at the head table overlooking the banquet hall, Leah Carpenter fought to keep her anger in check.

“Relax, honey,” Wes whispered near her ear. “Give her some time. Traffic’s bad out there. Shoshanna will be here. She promised.”

Leah glanced at the empty chair below the podium, then at her husband. “She’s doing this to spite me.”

He shook his head, sadness in his eyes.

She was thankful he didn’t argue. Not tonight. Not this night of all nights.

How many women had been honored by the town of Beaker Heights as Citizen of the Year? None. Leah was the first.

She’d been selected for this honor because of Together We Can, a non-profit organization that helped homeless women, especially single mothers, get on their feet and back into the work force. In the years since it was founded, Together We Can—Leah’s brainchild—had become a model for similar community programs around the country.

Leah had given countless hours to make certain her labor of love succeeded. She'd poured herself into it, giving a hundred and ten percent. There were times, especially in the beginning, when others on the non-profit corporation's board of directors had wanted to give up, but she hadn't let them.

Tonight, the people of Beaker Heights were recognizing her accomplishments.

And her daughter wasn't there to see it.

Why am I surprised? I should have known she'd do this.

She'd had a horrible argument with Shoshanna last night. Her sixteen-year-old daughter had announced she wanted to get her nose pierced, like her friend Krissie Jenkins. Leah had exploded at the very suggestion, grounding Shoshanna for a week and forbidding her to see Krissie.

A pierced nose? No child of Leah Carpenter's was going to have such a thing. Leah had her position in the community to consider. What would people think if she allowed her daughter to parade around town with a ring in her nose? She didn't care if body piercings were more common among young folk these days. No daughter of hers was going to have one. It was an act of rebellion, and she'd seen firsthand where such rebellion led. Just look at the women who Together We Can helped.

It wasn't much comfort when Wes had suggested she was overreacting. "She's sixteen, for crying out loud," he'd said after Shoshanna fled the room in tears. "She's *supposed* to push the boundaries. It's part of growing up."

He's always been too easy on her, Leah thought now, her resentment increasing. *I have to play the heavy, and he gets to be the favorite adult. It isn't fair.*

She picked up her fork and moved the food around on her plate. Reluctantly she admitted she wasn't being fair to Wes, her husband of three years. When he entered her life, he'd filled a place in her heart that she'd thought could never be filled after twelve years as a widow. He was good to her in countless ways, and he loved Shoshanna as if she were his own daughter. The feeling was mutual, too, so much so that Shoshanna had legally changed her last name to Carpenter.

Leah glanced at Wes. When their gazes met, she gave him a tiny smile. In return, he squeezed her hand beneath the table.

Maybe I overreacted. Maybe forbidding Shoshanna to see Krissie was a bit harsh.

Wes's grip on her hand tightened. "Look who's here."

Leah turned and saw Shoshanna being escorted to her table. She felt a rush of relief. Thank goodness. Tonight meant so much to her, and if her daughter hadn't come to share it with

Her thoughts died as the small silver ring in Shoshanna's left nostril glittered in the light of the crystal chandeliers.

Something twisted in Leah's chest.

Something painful.

Her baby. Her beautiful, loving, sunshine girl. Her precious child—who for the better part of her sixteen years had brought her mother nothing but joy—had defied Leah's wishes and had her nose pierced.

No matter what happened next, the evening was ruined.

“How could you do it?” Leah stood in the doorway of Shoshanna’s basement bedroom. “How could you embarrass me in front of all those people? Did you see the way they looked at you?”

“There’s no reason for you to be embarrassed, Mom. *I’m* the one with the nose ring. Besides, it’s no big deal.”

“It’s a big deal to me. Good heavens! Don’t you realize how you look? Don’t you know what people think of kids who mutilate their bodies like this? They’ll think you’re on drugs.”

Shoshanna flicked a stray strand of long blond hair over her shoulder. “You know what your problem is, Mom? You’re always worried about what other people think. What about what *I* think? Doesn’t that count for anything in this family? I think this ring is cool. I like it. Besides, it isn’t any different than an earring, you know.”

“It *is* different, and you will remove that hideous piece of metal from your face. I won’t allow a daughter of mine to have a pierced nose!”

“But, Mom, I—”

Leah clenched her hands into tight fists. “Tonight,” she interrupted, her voice rising. “Do you hear me, Shoshanna Marie Carpenter? When I see you in the morning, that ... *thing* ... will be gone. We’ll discuss your punishment then.” She turned and strode from the room, wincing when she heard the door slam closed behind her.

Wes waited for her in their second story bedroom. “How’d it go?”

She gave her head a slight shake, then went into the walk-in closet and began to disrobe. Her husband appeared in the doorway. “Leah?”

“I told her she had to remove that ugly thing from her face.” She draped her tailored suit jacket over a padded hanger. “I told her we would discuss punishment in the morning.”

Wes was silent for a few moments before saying, “She loves you, honey. Try to remember that.”

“Well, this is a fine way to show it.” With her back toward him, she closed her eyes against an unwelcome urge to cry.

“Didn’t you ever rebel as a teen?”

“Not like this.” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “How can you defend her? If it was up to you, I suppose she could do anything she pleased.”

His hand alighted on her shoulder, and he gently turned her to face him. “I’m not saying what she did was right or that she shouldn’t receive appropriate punishment. I’m just asking you to think carefully about what you do or say next.”

Unable to reply, she pressed her forehead against his chest. Anger, disappointment, frustration, and a host of indefinable emotions roiled inside her.

When does it get easier?

Surely she’d had enough turmoil in her life. She’d been widowed while still in her twenties. She’d raised her daughter alone. She’d scrimped and saved and struggled to get by and given up many things so Shoshanna wouldn’t feel deprived. Why did her once perfect child have to turn against her like this? After all she’d done. After all she’d given.

It wasn't fair.

Wes stroked her hair. It felt nice. If only she could let him handle this. She was tired of being strong.

But she couldn't. Shoshanna was her daughter and her responsibility. She would have to decide on the punishment and then see it through.

"She's a good kid," Wes said. "You've raised her right. She'll come through this. What's the Bible say? Raise up a child in the way she should go, and when she's grown, she won't depart from it."

"Oh, Wes." She stepped out of his embrace. "That's no help. Not now. I need *real* answers."

He shrugged. "Some folks think God's word *is* a real answer, Leah."

She sighed as she turned away while unzipping her skirt. The tension in her shoulders made her want to scream. She knew Wes wanted to say something more. But finally, she heard him leave the walk-in, his thoughts unspoken.

She felt a sting of guilt. It wasn't that she didn't believe the Bible was God's word, although she knew that was how it had sounded to Wes. At one time, she'd found comfort when reading the Scriptures, something she hadn't found time for in ages.

She shook off the thought and her guilt. Right now she needed to find a solution to her problems. She hadn't the patience to wait upon God to see what He would say. She had to have an answer tonight.

But it didn't matter what solution she arrived at.

For by morning Shoshanna was gone.