

DAMAGED GOODS

THIRD BOOK IN THE STEWARD SERIES

DAMAGED GOODS

CHARLES DE ANDRADE



Damaged Goods

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To our daughters, Jennifer, Stephanie, and Kathryn

Each of you is so special, so different yet so much alike. True sisters designed as family and destined to be our heritage from the one who blessed us with each of you. You are each uniquely gifted by the Lord, formed from both the fleshly and spiritual cloth of your mother and father. You did not choose us to be your parents, just as we did not choose you to be our children. You were given to us, and for our part, we rejoice in such a great gift.

You each inherited our best and our worst. The Lord knows of your doubts, your fears, and your own wondering whether he is real and whether the faith of your youth was real or not. He knows of our sins, and the tendency we have as humans to think that we need to earn his love, to be worthy of that greatest gift. But that is the wonder of it all. Nothing we do earns his love.

He loves us because of who he is and what his son did. It is what Jesus did that permits us to run to the Father, crying, "Abba, Father." Our love of each of you is a mere shadow, an imperfect reflection of this far greater love that granted you each life.

Of all of the books I have written, this one is special for me, and I dedicate it to each of you. One of you told me once that you did not need any preacher to make you feel worse. The reality is, we know all too well we are sinners. You do get tired of trying to look good knowing how far short you really are.

We don't get better first and then come to Christ. We get better by coming to Christ. Only Christ can change you to being good. I wish I had shone forth with the gospel when you were younger. It took many years for me to fully appreciate what another author said, "I am a great sinner, but Christ is a greater savior." He came to restore us to what we were meant to be—His sons and daughters, His family, His stewards. It is my prayer that you will always remember that.

When doubts occur, and they will, when unbelief is evident, which you will face often, be like the man who admitted, "Lord, I believe. Forgive my unbelief." Run back to the source of all light as he did. He knew he needed Christ, even as you and I need Christ.

Amazingly, when you turn, you will discover that Christ was already running after you like the Father who ran to meet the prodigal son. He truly did come to find his lost sheep. He gave up heaven. He submitted to a human life. He accepted death on the cross and our father's righteous anger so that we would not have to. He came for those who know they are damaged and hopelessly broken. He came for you, for your mom, and me.

Love you.

Dad

Acknowledgments

So many have read, commented on, and helped me improve each of these stories it's hard to know where to begin to say thanks! To all those friends and family members who have spent hours reading and relaying thoughts, thank you.

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In the end, any errors in the story are mine, but the story is so much better because of each of you.

To God be the glory.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

—Ephesians 6:12 (NAS)

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Prologue



John 8:1–12

The crowd surrounded her. They dragged her from his house, leaving him untouched even though he shared equally in the sin. She understood. No one would speak for her. There were many excuses she would have given if she had been asked why she had sought out his bed. She had longed for the intimacy. She had never asked him why he was interested in her. It was enough for her that someone found her desirable.

The voice had told her this is what she had longed for. Even though she knew it was wrong, she had agreed with the voice. The passion in the lovemaking had driven her emotions to new heights. But those heights became the ledge from which she fell when the group of men had burst in and tore her from her lover. She heard the voice laughing as she was dragged out. As she looked at those who were dragging her to judgment, she heard the same voice urging the men on. She never was asked to explain what she had done. It was all too obvious to everyone.

She might have shared that he made the first move, the first gestures of friendship that morphed into something more. The fact that he was married had stopped neither of them. His promises of support and love vanished when they were caught. Yet he had not been dragged through the streets or made a public spectacle of. It was as if she had committed the act by herself. As they dragged her along, her thoughts were suddenly clear. He was rich; she was poor. He was a man; she was a woman. She was guilty, and her lover's absence in the end would change nothing.

The crowd had grown in anticipation of what was to come. Men who knew her were picking up stones. There were no tears of sorrow or despair, only faces livid with anger and eyes crazed with a longing for blood, her blood. It was as if she was now nothing more than a dog. The voices around her told her that was all she was.

That same voice echoed their accusations where before it had encouraged her in the very activity it was now urging the crowd to judge her for. She saw young men, who had once been boys, also picking up stones, following the example of the older men. At least she had no children to witness this. She wondered if they too would have deserted her to join in the crowd that now seemed to be looking forward to ending her life.

She feared the pain and what came after. They were right; she was guilty, and there was no hope for her, either now or in the future.

No hope, no hope, the familiar voice repeated.

She wondered just what really happened after she was dead. Was it really true what she had been taught? Was God going to be even angrier with her than these people?

She wondered where they were taking her, but soon she realized they were dragging her to the temple. Of all places, they were dragging her there to die. She would exit this life in the very place where she had been told life was to be found. The crowd finally stopped, still surrounding her, and then like a horseshoe, the crowd opened, and the men that had dragged her, threw her to the ground. She expected the stones to start immediately, but they didn't.

She looked up and saw a group of men before her. They were all sitting, watching the unfolding scene. There was one man in the center who had been speaking. He turned to look and watched as she had been thrown to the ground close to where he was sitting.

One of the leaders of the group who had dragged her to this place spoke, "Teacher, we caught this woman in the very act of adultery. Now Moses commanded us to stone such women as this. What do you say?"

She saw several more men bend down, picking up more stones, obviously expecting this man to turn his thumb down, sealing her fate. She had no hope of any other outcome.

But the one identified as “teacher” said nothing. The leader of the group, a man known for his strict obedience to the various demands of their religion spoke, attempting with words to prod a response. She realized that her life was not the only thing at stake here. This was some type of test, and many in the crowd were waiting with interest as to what the teacher would say.

The teacher stared deeply into her eyes. She finally turned her eyes downward, realizing that he knew she was guilty. Instead of speaking, the teacher had stooped down and, using his finger, wrote on the ground. She saw the words and trembled. The teacher knew much more than what she had been caught doing. At that moment, she knew she deserved what was about to happen.

The man who had been demanding an answer became more insistent as were others in the crowd. Finally, the teacher stood, and she realized her time was at an end. He would reveal so much more that she was guilty of, the current sin just the surface of a deep black ocean. The depth of her own wickedness was to be revealed to everyone before she would die. Then he spoke.

“Let the man without sin be the first to cast their stone.” His voice was firm but not raised in anger. His tone revealed a sadness, which seemed to seep out from within as if a deep well of sorrow had spilled over.

The words stunned her. He had not exposed her any further. Instead, he had issued the caveat that would permit her death, but there was no one present who could fulfill that requirement.

That’s not right, she thought.

Looking at the teacher who was again bent over, again writing on the ground, the thought hit her, *The teacher is the only one present who could cast the first stone.* Instead, he continued to write on the ground. This time, the words were names, some she recognized, for they identified some of the men who had dragged her here.

She heard the stones begin to fall but not cast at her. Instead, the oldest men dropped their stones first. They were the first to realize their inability to fulfill the requirement the teacher had placed on executing her just judgment. Then the other stones began to fall, and the crowd began to

disperse. Finally, there was only the teacher, and the men he had been speaking to before the crowd had brought her to him.

She had looked around and then at the teacher. Amazement swept through her, and then fear bubbled up right behind it. The teacher was studying her again and appeared to be reading her thoughts. She looked down again. She knew she was in the presence of one who could judge her, and she already knew what the judgment must be.

His voice drew her eyes up to his.

“Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?”

The question begged the obvious. She was still here, undamaged by the promised violence. She was guilty, and she knew that as well. She knew that the man asking the question knew the answer as well. He was waiting, and she now understood who this man must be.

“No one, Lord.”

Three simple words spoke volumes of truth. There was only one who deserved the title she spoke.

“Neither do I condemn you. Go your way. From now on, sin no more.”

His response both broke and lifted her heart at the same time. She stood slowly, straightening the clothing that hid little of the former activity. The man returned to his teaching, and she walked away from the place of her intended execution, alive.

She knew the truth: she, a broken and hopelessly damaged person, had been rescued by the One who had come to rescue what was lost and restore all those who would acknowledge their need of such saving.

She did not see the voice that took on form after she had left. The great shadow that was draped with a cloak with thousands of eyes staring howled in anger. Once again, the One had thwarted his plans. He had intended not only the destruction of the woman but also the potential marring of the One’s plans. He had misjudged the One again. But even in defeat, the shadow knew there was still much potential for additional damage. He looked forward to his next conquest. There were still many who the One had not reached. But even as he considered his next victim, an apprehension shattered his contemplation. How many more would the One set free?