

It is Well with my Soul
Horatio's Story

by Tara Johnson

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Chapter 1

“Christ has regarded my helpless estate, and hath shed His own blood for my soul.” ~H.S.

October 8, 1871

Chicago, Illinois

Horatio Spafford stared out the darkened parlor, watching the red flames stretch like gnarled fingers into the night sky. The distinct sting of smoke seeped into the house, coating his nostrils with an acrid stench.

As long as the fire moved away from the northern sprawl of Chicago, all would be well. *Almighty Father, I beseech You...*

“The children are tucked in. How do things look outside?”

He sighed as Anna slipped to his side and wove her fingers through his. If only she knew how comforting the sound of her soft Swedish accent soothed his troubled heart.

Pressing a kiss to her forehead, he nodded at the hellish vision beyond the window. “Growing larger. And closer.”

Anna bit her lip, worried lines deepening around her eyes. “Should we flee? I can vake the children if you tink it’s best.”

“No. Not yet, anyway. The fire looks closer than it is because of its size.” He swallowed and stared back out at the glowing red beast panting on the far side of the sky. “I would prefer to keep our home open as long as possible. Others may need our assistance.”

“Of course.” Anna snuggled close. “How many will be affected, do you tink?”

“Hundreds. Maybe thousands.” He shook his head. “The property loss alone will be horrendous. But the lives lost...” Horatio’s chest tightened. So many souls bustled through the heart of Chicago each day. How many had time to flee?

A heavy pounding on the front door yanked him from his dark thoughts. He moved to open the door and froze when his clerk appeared on the other side. Heavens, but James was covered in soot. The stench of smoke grew thicker in the foyer.

“James!” He ushered the young man inside as the thin fellow coughed into his fist. Horatio shut the door and met Anna’s gaze. “Can you fetch him a cup of water?”

“Of course.” The dear woman scurried off to the kitchen. Horatio patted the clerk’s back gently. “Were you caught in the melee, my friend?”

A raspy cough broke from his chest. James nodded. “I was out with friends when the blaze started. We passed the law office and I feared we would lose the most recent documents you prepared. I went in to retrieve them when I received the news.”

“What news?”

Anna returned, a cup of water in her hand. She pushed it toward James with a compassionate smile. “There you go.”

James gulped down the liquid, sputtering after a long pull. More coughs and wheezing.

A twitch formed between Horatio’s shoulders. “What is the news? What’s going on?”

James licked his dry lips, meeting his employer’s gaze. Regret filled his expression. “It’s the property to the north, sir. The ones you invested so much in.”

Horatio gripped James’ arms. He resisted the urge to shake the information from him. “Tell me!”

He swallowed. “It’s gone, sir. Burned to ash.”

Horatio’s breath snagged. No. His investment. His money. The future he’d so carefully prepared for Anna and the children...all of it snatched from his grasp.

He must see for himself.

Releasing James, Horatio bolted for the door and threw it open. He flew down the steps, his wife’s shout vibrating against his back.

“Come back! It’s too dangerous!”

He didn’t care. Couldn’t think. Sprinting down the darkened streets, his legs burned and air soon became unbreathable. He slowed and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket before pressing it to his nose. The breeze was warm. Screaming people clogged the streets. The clanging bells of the fire department grew louder. The inferno loomed ahead, belching what it devoured into the air.

His eyes stung as white ash floated down, coating his sleeves like a dusting of snow. Which way to his property? The mayhem of shouting bodies, galloping horses and screaming children muddled his mind. He turned, eyes blurring as the smoke grew thicker.

There. Just over that rise.

Pushing his burning lungs and limbs to move forward, he crested the rise and looked. His knees turned to jelly.

Chicago was destroyed. His life’s work wiped away, leaving naught but charred rubble in its wake.

Chapter 2

“Please eat, my love.”

Anna pushed a plate of fried potatoes and onions toward Horatio, her blue eyes flooded with worry. Pulling himself from his dark thoughts, he offered a weak smile and stared at the fare. He had no appetite. Everything he’d tried to eat for the past three days tasted like dust.

Just like his dreams.

“Thank you.”

Anna settled beside him at the dining room table. “I am worried about you.”

He sighed and picked at his food. “Just trying to figure out what to do next.” Dropping the fork, he funneled his fingers through his hair. “I still can’t wrap my mind around it.”

“I know.” She sighed, motioning toward the newsprint resting on the table. “It’s been so dry, what with de drought. Combined with the vind and the vooden buildings,” she shrugged helplessly, “Chicago did not have a chance.”

Digging his fingers into his scalp, he swallowed. “I know we’ve been blessed far greater than many. We still have our house and our children.”

“Very true. Think of Bro. Moody. He lost his home and both of his ministry buildings.”

“And yet he is busy finding shelters for the homeless.” A pang of guilt stabbed Horatio’s chest. “I should be helping him.”

“Papa?”

He turned to see his sweet daughter, five-year-old Maggie, staring at him with solemn blue eyes.

“Mag-Pie.” He smiled gently and ran his hand over her blonde braids. “I thought you were playing with your sisters.”

She looked down at her curled fist. “I heard you and Mama talking about Reverend Moody last night. Is it true that all of his children’s toys burned in the fire?”

Such loss for a little one to understand. “Yes, sweetie.”

Her chin trembled as she thrust her little fist forward and uncurled her fingers. Her miniature doll Tilly rested inside.

“I want to give them my toys, Papa.”

His eyes burned and he cupped her tiny hand within his own. “But, Maggie, you love Tilly so.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “But Reverend Moody’s children need her more.”

Such generosity. He wrapped her in a hug and inhaled her sweet scent. “What a joy you are to us, Mag-Pie.”

Anna smiled. “Yes. Your heart is so big, my love.”

Maggie sniffed. “What will our family do next, Papa?”

Resolve firmed his chest. “We will open our home to those without and see where the Almighty leads us next.”

Chapter 3

“Though trials should come...” ~H.S.

Two years later

September 2, 1873

Chicago, Illinois

“Papa! Wait until you hear!”

Horatio walked through the door of his home and had barely set his briefcase aside when twelve-year-old Annie burst into the foyer waving a letter in her hands.

“What is it?”

Her brown eyes sparkled. “Reverend Moody has written. He is requesting our entire family travel to England to join him with his ministry!”

“Slow down, sweetie.” He placed his hands on her shoulders, nearly laughing at how her frame trembled with excitement. “What are you talking about?”

“The Reverend is preaching a series of messages, great revivals he calls them, and wants our help with reaching the lost.” She thrust the letter into his hands.

Scanning the contents, Horatio drank in the distinct script of his old friend. “He requests we arrive before Christmas.” He pursed his lips. “I cannot say if we will go yet. I must speak with your mother.”

Annie shifted her weight. “It was Mama who showed me the letter.”

He chuckled. “I understand, but we must discuss it together before deciding.”

She bit her lip. “I’ll do whatever you ask me, Papa. Just please say yes.”

“Anything?” He arched a brow and grinned. “I could greatly benefit from this bargain.”

Eyeing him with a saucy smirk, she whirled and flounced from the room. He laughed as she departed but sobered as he considered the letter in his hands.

Life had been hard since the Great Fire. The business was slowly building, but the welfare of his family took preeminence. Thanks to rebuilding and his new investments, they could afford the trip overseas provided they didn’t stay overly long.

His heart lightened at the joy the children would find in such an announcement. But first, he must talk with his wife.

He called out, “Anna, how would you like to travel to England?”

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November 13, 1873

Horatio slammed his fist on his desk. "I don't have time for this!"

His secretary jumped, eyes wide as he clutched the telegram in his hand. "I'm sorry to trouble you with this news, sir."

Rubbing his fingers in his eyes, Horatio pushed through the headache that was quickly blooming. "I'm supposed to depart for England tomorrow, Mr. Lewis."

"I understand, sir. The zoning commission does not, however."

Heaving a thick sigh, Horatio tapped his fingers on his desk. "If they had told me a fortnight ago, even a week ago, I would have been able to handle this. There's no time before my departure."

Mr. Lewis pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, his expression thoughtful. "If I may, sir, you could consider giving this task to one of your junior partners in the firm. Let them handle the load so you might take a needed rest."

Horatio leaned back in his chair and pondered the suggestion. "I could, but the other lawyers are not skilled in the area of zoning and property rights. That is my specialty." He pressed his lips into a hard line. "There is no remedy for it. I shall have to delay my trip."

Mr. Lewis' shoulders sagged. "I'm sorry for the way this has come about."

"It's not your fault. If anything, I should have prepared a contingency plan ahead of time." He rubbed the back of his neck. "How I hate to disappoint Anna."

"You could send them on ahead. Join them once your business is finished. With the Almighty's blessing, the contracts could be altered and signed within the week."

"Mm. Splendid idea." He reached for the telegram from his secretary. "I will tell Anna of the change tonight. They can board the *Ville du Havre* and I shall book passage with another steamship once we finish. Why don't we get started now?" He smiled. "The sooner it's done, the sooner we can both enjoy a little break, eh?"

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November 23, 1873

There was no greater feeling than a job finished and well done.

Horatio whistled as he strolled down the street leading to his house. *Anna and my girls, I'm coming.* Tears had been shed as he'd hugged them goodbye nine days before. Annie was excited for the trip, but Maggie, little Bessie and baby Tanetta clung to his neck.

He had wiped away their tears as he'd gathered them in his arms. "Now, now, what's all this?"

"We shall be lost without you, Papa."

Anna chuckled. “Do you have so little faith in your mother, little ones?”

Horatio smiled and met his wife’s blue eyes. What a treasure she was. He returned his focus to the girls. “No need to fret so. You all and your mother shall be tucked safely within the ship and I’ll be coming right behind you.”

Tanetta placed her chubby fingers on either side of his face. “Papa come?”

He’d tickled her soft neck, eliciting a slew of giggles. “Yes, my love. I’ll come quicker than two winks.”

Nine days separated them. If his sailing vessel was blessed with strong winds and few storms, he should arrive on their heels. He pulled the small notepad he kept in his pocket to double-check the vessel’s schedule.

Smiling to himself, he jogged up the steps, eager to pack his trunk.

Pushing the door open, he tossed his briefcase to the side but froze as his housekeeper entered the foyer, her face pale, a telegram clutched in her fingers.

“Louisa?” Alarm pricked his heart. “What is it?”

She swallowed, hands trembling as she held the missive out. “A messenger arrived a few minutes ago. Said there’s been an accident.”

He cupped her shoulders. “What accident?”

Tears brimmed her eyes. “The ship... *Ville du Havre*...” Her voice choked and she pushed the paper into his hands.

His mouth turned to cotton as a stone sank in his middle. He released her and unfolded the small message, dreading its contents.

November 22, 1873

“Saved alone. What shall I do...”

Anna

Spots danced in his vision. His breath thinned as he sank to his knees.

“My girls! My life!” Tears clogged his throat and his body shook with violent tremors. “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

He sank his fingers into the thick carpet, the telegram crumpled in his fist.

Horatio could have sworn he felt his heart rip in two.

Chapter 4

“If Jordan above me shall roll, no pain shall be mine, for in death as in life, Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.”~H.S.

November 25, 1973

Horatio clutched the cold railing of the ship, shivering in his woolen coat as the frigid wind whipped his face.

The bobbing of the vessel on the water mimicked his riotous emotions. Numbness, anger, despair...all of it warred in his chest. The ship dipped and a mist of salt spray pelted his cheeks.

Gone.

The hollow ache had not abated. If anything, it only grew stronger in intensity. When he closed his eyes, he saw Annie’s sparkling eyes. When he woke, he saw Maggie’s trusting, earnest expression. When he walked the length of the ship, Bessie’s freckles and girlish giggles haunted him. When he lay down to sleep, Tanetta’s tiny voice and baby snuggled tormented his empty arms.

How could one go on living and feel so dead inside?

And what must his Anna be enduring? The sole survivor among the five. His breath snagged, caught in his constricting chest.

Footfalls approached. He looked up to see the ship’s captain walking toward him slowly, as if tired. Clapping him on the back, he settled beside Horatio at the railing.

“I don’t know how you are bearing up under the grief, Mr. Spafford.”

“With God’s breath. That is all I know how to do. Just take the next breath.”

Nodding, the captain tilted his head to meet his gaze. “I thought you would want to know...we are approaching the site where your dear family perished.”

“Where?”

He pointed. “Just ahead.” His jaw firmed, eyes flickering with sorrow. “The details are still coming to light, but from the reports, I’ve gleaned that the Ville du Havre was rammed by a British iron ship. The *Lochearn*.” He stared out to sea. “Two hundred and twenty-six people perished.”

So many. How could such pain be shouldered? A pain that reached tentacles to spread through every fiber of one’s being.

“Your wife, according to the officials in Wales, was found floating on debris, unconscious.”

Horatio squeezed his eyes shut. Had Anna watched the girls be swallowed from her arms by the surging water, or had God, in His mercy, left her oblivious...free to sleep in peace until help arrived?

“Who rescued my wife and the other survivors?”

He sighed. “A cargo ship named the *Trimountain*. They rescued the living and cared for them until they docked in Wales.”

Tears blurred his vision. “I owe them my deepest gratitude.”

“And so you shall be able to thank them.” Patting his back, the captain nodded ahead. “Here is where the ship went down.”

Horatio stared over the edge. Blue waves splashed against the side of the ship, the slapping sound a serene comfort. All was calm today. No sign of the tragedy which had torn his family asunder.

I was with them, just as I am with you.

Warm tears spilled from his eyes. The sun glinted off the water. Bright. Sparkling. Is that what it’s like to enter into Heaven’s gates? Pure beauty and light?”

The captain cleared his throat. “I’m told this coordinate is about three miles deep. There, your loved ones rest.”

Peace flooded Horatio’s heart, enveloping him in warmth.

All is well. They are with Me.

Swiping at his tears, he shook his head. “I do not think of my girls as being down there. They are safe with my Savior, the dear lambs.”

The captain cleared his throat and looked away. Perhaps fighting to regain control of his swelling emotions.

Tugging his small notepad and stub of a pencil from his pocket, Horatio scratched his thoughts on paper, pausing at times to study the vast expanse of ocean that lay before him.

“When peace like a river attendeth my way,

When sorrows like sea billows roll,

Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say

It is well, it is well with my soul...”

Chapter 5

“And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight...” ~H.S.

September 1881

Horatio slipped his arm around Anna’s waist, tugging her close as they stood at the ship’s railing. Eight years ago, he’d sworn never to step foot on another ship. A smile tugged his mouth. How the Almighty had changed his perspective.

Anna held her hat in place from the gusts that threatened to pull it from her head. “Is that it that I see, just ahead?”

“Yes, my love. Israel.” He inhaled a deep breath of briny ocean air, letting his lungs flood with hope. A new beginning for him. For Anna. For their children.

He swallowed. When little Horatio died, he’d nearly succumbed to despair. They had nothing left. He had pounded the floor of his study. “Why do you take away with such ferocity, Lord?” He had looked through the window at the dark night, his agony too much to bear.

But then Anna had slipped beside him, kneeling on the carpet, rubbing his back in small circles. He whispered, his voice broken and hoarse through his weeping, “What is the Almighty trying to tell us? Why?”

He listened to Anna’s soft weeping as she ran her fingers through his hair. “Look at me, Horatio.”

After a long moment, he slowly lifted his head to meet her gaze. Instead of the despair he expected to witness in her expression, there was nothing but peace.

“We may never know vy this side of glory, my dear. I can’t help but think back to the shipwreck.” She swallowed, her breath tremulous. “For days and veeks aftervard, I curled in on myself. Shattered. Hopeless.” A light glowed in her eyes. “But then, while waiting for you to arrive, I heard the Lord.” She cupped his cheeks in her hands, stroking his jaw with her thumbs. “I heard him, Horatio. He kept saying, ‘You vere saved for a purpose.’ I feel it.” She smiled and placed her hand on his chest. “I feel the beat of your heart. As long as it pulses, God has vork for you to do. A destiny to fulfill.”

Tears blurred as he cupped her hands in his and kissed her slim fingers.

“You are right, my love. This,” he waved his hands in the air, “massive house. My holdings. My business. None of it matters in eternity. But if there is some way the Lord can take my feeble efforts and use them, I am willing to forsake it all.”

And so they had.

Baby Grace's soft gurgle yanked his attention back to the present. He leaned over and kissed her downy blonde head. Anna smiled and nuzzled their daughter closer as they drank in the land.

Israel. Their new home.

"Papa, Papa!" Three-year-old Bertha ran across the deck and hugged his knees. "Are we here?"

Chuckling, he lifted her into his arms and pointed. "Yes, my angel. Do you see our new home?"

She squeezed his neck tight. "I have dolly there?"

He laughed and tickled her side. "Of course."

Turning slowly, he studied the people gathering to watch the land creep closer.

Thirteen adults. Three children. A new American colony of believers to settle in the land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Families united by Christ to start a new work. Feeding the poor, clothing the naked, and caring for the outcasts.

He smiled and hugged his family close.

A new home. A new life. A whole new purpose.

All was well.

All About the Author

Tara Johnson is an author and speaker, and loves to write stories that help people break free from the lies they believe about themselves.

Tara's debut novel *Engraved on the Heart* (Tyndale) earned a starred review from Publishers Weekly, and was a finalist in the Carol and Christy awards. In addition to being published in a variety of digital and print magazines, she has been a featured guest on Voice of Truth radio, Enduring Word radio, television and podcasts. She is a history nerd, especially the Civil War, and adores making people laugh. She, her husband, and children live in Arkansas.

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