

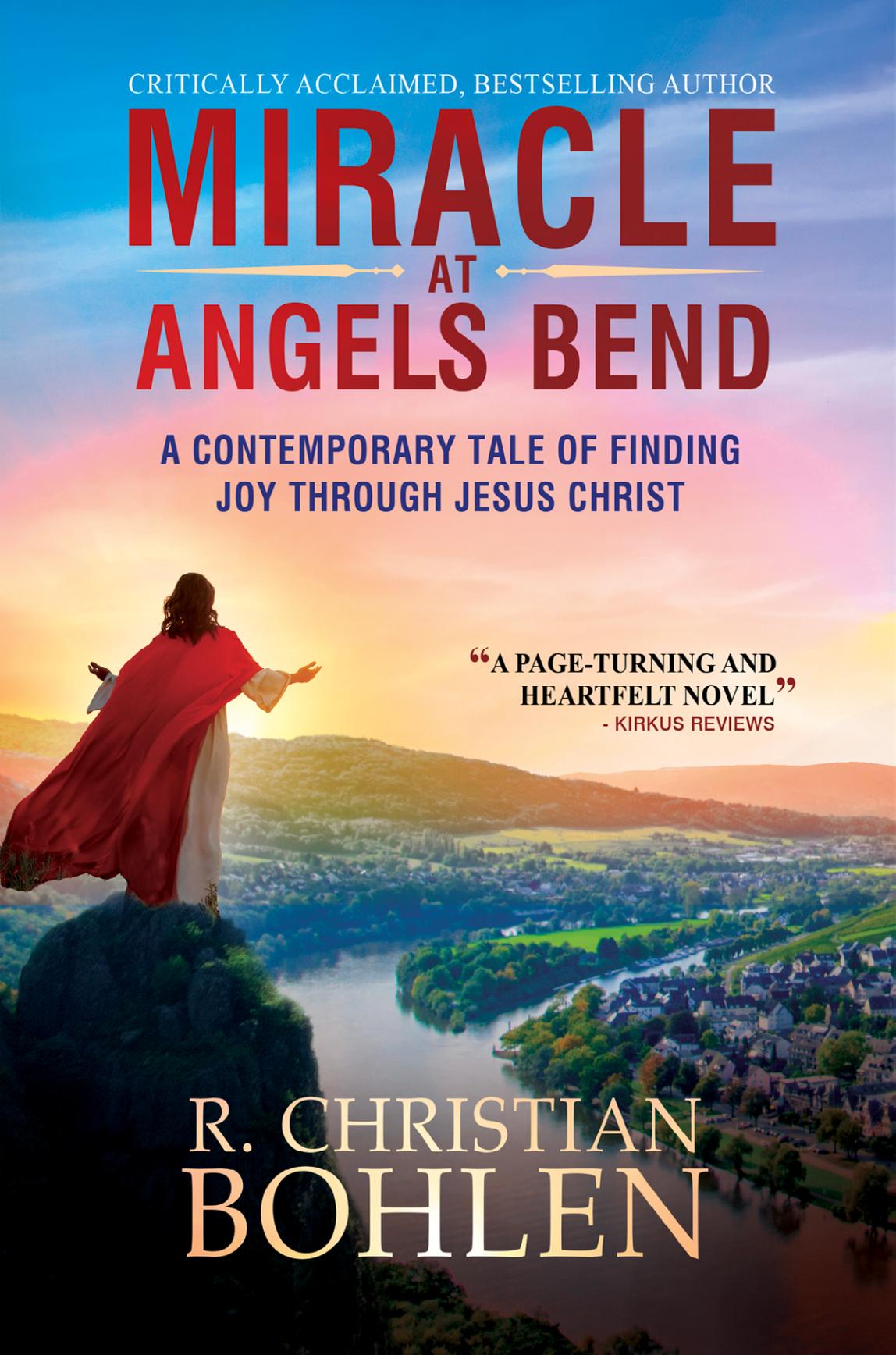
CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED, BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MIRACLE AT ANGELS BEND

A CONTEMPORARY TALE OF FINDING
JOY THROUGH JESUS CHRIST

“A PAGE-TURNING AND
HEARTFELT NOVEL”

- KIRKUS REVIEWS



R. CHRISTIAN
BOHLEN

What Critics and Readers are Saying

“A gripping tale of suspense and redemption . . . offering fresh insights and perspectives, especially about how the [scriptural] narratives intersect with the messy, complex realities of life.”

— BookLife Reviews (straight A production grades)

“The book truly stands apart . . . highly recommended for individual Bible study and Christian reading groups . . . a creative approach, artfully tailored to our times . . . with spiritual insights not to be found in many other fictional pursuits.”

— D. Donovan, Senior Reviewer,
Midwest Book Review

“Wisdom with the power to change readers’ lives . . . this book is on a mission to help people find the root of their being—their souls and their faith.”

— BookTrib

“Transcends the typical Christian inspirational novel . . . an imaginative integration of scriptural events, vividly brought to life in a modern setting . . . packed with inspiration and spiritual wisdom.”

— Readers’ Favorite Book Reviews

“A page-turning and heartfelt novel . . . a refreshingly straightforward and reality-focused example of Christian fiction, convincingly depicting everyday people with everyday problems.”

— Kirkus Reviews

“A masterfully woven story of struggle, community, and hope that will connect to every reader. Although the story is fictional, the truths are biblical, eternal, and well-applied to modern life. Perfect for personal reflection or to use as a discussion starter in a small group setting.”

— Dr. Tim Riordan, pastor and bestselling author of
New Every Morning: A 31-Day Devotional and *Songs from the Heart*

“Don’t let the simple approach fool you. This book is dense with insights into the biblical plan of salvation that reflect a lifetime of sincere discipleship . . . superbly crafted fiction that kept me glued from cover to cover . . . makes the greatest medicine in the world—the gospel of Jesus Christ—desirable to one’s craving!”

— Robert Reich, pastor and global synod leader,
Board Chairman of Bethesda Family Services Foundation

“Brilliantly put together. How the life of Jesus is intertwined with the thoughts of the characters is remarkable and unique. I read it in a couple days and felt the Holy Spirit throughout, with tears much of the time.”

— Rita H., reader

“An exhilarating read . . . biblically on point . . . a must-read for teens and adults with questions about how Jesus can love and help us in our fast-paced world.”

— Angelina H., reader

“Mystery, suspense, and romance . . . and a rewarding conclusion! The characters are consistently believable and nuanced in effective ways. They exude humanity and it’s easy to care about them. Great stuff!”

— Stuart H., reader

“I picked up this book to read a nice story but I got a lot more. I love the new insights I gained into the Bible. The author beautifully explained so many passages, like the Beatitudes, which I didn’t really understand before.”

— Lynda B., reader

“Not your typical Christian fiction . . . a realistic narrative on how God is always working even when we can’t see the changes taking place. An inspiring story to help readers connect with Jesus.”

— Ty G., reader

Miracle at Angels Bend

*A Contemporary Tale of
Finding Joy through Jesus Christ*

R. Christian Bohlen

Miracle at Angels Bend

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Introduction



What lies ahead is a metaphorical tale inspired by actual people and events. Their problems and passions are deep and troubling, just as we might find in any town or family: tragedy, mental illness, unbelief, self-doubt, drug addiction, marriage conflict, lust and adultery, sibling rivalry, passionate ambitions, compulsive distraction, superficial application of Christianity, rebelling against God, and more.

If you're dipping your toes in the waters of faith for the first time, you'll find that this story requires no prior knowledge of Christianity or the Bible.

Watch Jesus's life, from His birth to resurrection, as viewed through the lenses of four modern individuals. Peer into the windows of the characters' deepest thoughts and feelings as they wrestle with God's word. Experience the Spirit of God speaking to your unique circumstances through the words of Jesus and the characters' experiences and choices.

This book can be enjoyed as a suspenseful, uplifting story, or as a Christian study to deeply internalize and apply the life and teachings of Jesus, or both.

Like the characters in this story, experiencing the life of Jesus with others can be even more rewarding and magnificent. Therefore, the last chapter of this book is titled "Discussion and

Application” (page 289) to enhance personal learning or small group discussions. A printable *Facilitator Guide* is also available at no cost via the link provided for pastors, parents, and influencers who wish to maximize the impact of this resource.

Step into Angels Bend and begin your own miraculous journey.

PART ONE

The Fallen World



Life on our own, with God outside,
makes long and hard the day.
How strange it is, in spite of our pain,
we determine there to stay.

R. Christian Bohlen

Chapter 1

Josh and Nate



Josh leaned through his open bedroom door at the top of the stairway, straining to hear the heated conversation between his parents. The words “Nate” and “bail” and “four thousand bucks” cut through the rest of the murmurs.

Please don't let me be the one who tipped off the cops.

As much as he hated his brother, Josh feared him and his crew even more.

He wondered if there was a connection to last night's incident with the police. Josh had been walking alone after midnight through a decaying, drug-infested neighborhood in Parrington when, for the first time in his life, a police car pulled up next to him and two cops stopped him.

“Yep, it's Jenkins,” the one cop had said to his partner as they approached Josh.

“No, this must be his *brother*,” the other cop said as he read Josh's driver's license, clearly referring to Nate. “So, where's your brother?”

“Honestly, I have no idea, Officer.” It was the truth.

Josh had broken into a sweat as he realized the cops had made a visual connection between him, his knucklehead, look-alike brother, and this known criminal breeding ground.

Mom's heels echoed across the tiled kitchen floor followed by a slam of the door to the garage. Now silence. He envisioned his dad slumping into a chair, gazing nowhere.

Josh rubbed at the prominent scar on his forehead, remembering his violent run-in with Nate a year ago—the one that got Nate kicked out of the house.

What did I possibly give away?

Thanks to Nate, the Jenkins family lived on an emotional fault line, never knowing when the next quake would erupt or who would get shaken the worst. Mom usually defended Nate, while Dad sided with anyone except Nate. Eventually, this ongoing battle over his brother became a battle about the church, causing Mom to gradually pull away from the church, blaming their Christian faith for driving Nate to rebellion.

As Josh spun around the room, flinging his hands in disgust, his eyes stopped on his dresser mirror. A picture of Jesus healing the blind beggar was taped to the corner. The compassion emanating from the scene had touched Josh when he first saw it in a church magazine at the innocent age of nine.

The face of Jesus was nearly meaningless and transparent now. But Josh never had the heart to take the picture down. So, there it hung, corners curling and the tape partially peeling off the mirror, a reminder of a time before his family had imploded.

He sighed, picked up his electric guitar, sat down on the bed, and buried himself in his music. For Josh, playing guitar was like breathing. And being on stage was like sucking pure oxygen. He lived for it. Flashing lights, vicious guitar chords, alluring girls with intoxicated smiles. Pure adrenaline. He was a natural on stage and already respected as one of the best guitar players in the area. This Saturday, he wouldn't have to think about anything else—not Mom and Dad fighting and especially not Nate.

A knock at his door interrupted his thoughts. The golden retriever lying at his feet lifted his head and perked his ears.

Josh kept playing, hoping whoever it was would go away, but the door opened and his dad stood there.

“What?” Josh said, a bite to his voice.

“Can I come in?”

“No.”

“We need to talk, Josh.”

“What did Nate do now?”

“You heard us?” His dad looked surprised.

“What did he *do*?”

“Nate? Nothing that I know of.”

“What was all that about bail money?”

Dad scrunched his brows. “No, I was just trying to make a comparison for your mother about something else. Nobody’s goin’ to jail, JJ.”

Confused, Josh struggled to adjust his thoughts. “So what do you want, then?”

“Son, I have a suggestion. A request, really.”

Josh kept doing his guitar runs and braced himself. Dad’s requests usually led to a lecture.

“Take a break for a second,” Dad said. “Please?”

Josh looked defiantly into his dad’s face. “If it has anything to do with going to church again, I’m out.”

He looked away from the pain reflected in his dad’s eyes, refusing to soften.

Dad sighed, his shoulders sagging. “Actually, it’s a favor for Dave and Ellen. They’re getting a bunch of people to read a book written by a friend of theirs. I guess this friend wants opinions from different ages and backgrounds. I told Dave you might be interested.”

“Why would you do that?” He knew he was being rude, but he didn’t care.

“You like to read.”

“What’s it about?” Josh asked, running his calloused fingertips through his disorderly brown hair.

Dad shifted from one leg to the other. The long pause was warning enough. “It’s about the Savior’s life.”

Josh groaned. “Forget it.”

“C’mon, Josh, what can it hurt? You like Dave. Let’s help the guy out. It might even help you out.”

“I don’t need help.” He picked a few notes out on his guitar, avoiding his father’s gaze. Didn’t Dad realize he was the good son?

Dad was quiet for a minute, and Josh looked up to see him biting his lip, his brow furrowed.

“What if I throw in that Marshall amplifier you’ve been wanting?”

Seriously? Josh tried to remain poker-faced. Was that what the four thousand bucks had been about?

“Let me guess. Mom didn’t want me to have it.”

“I’ll take care of Mom, JJ. I’m offering it.”

Josh wanted that amp for over a year. “When do I have to read it by?” This was a no-brainer. Who would ever know if he actually read it?

“Eight weeks, I think.”

“I guess I could do that,” Josh said, looking down at his guitar again and picking out a melody, imagining what it would sound like with the amp.

“There is one other thing.”

Josh stopped picking and closed his eyes.

“He wants everyone who’s reading it to come to a few group meetings,” Dad said.

Josh cringed. “No. Way. I’ll read it, but I’m *not* going to any book club.” He could just imagine other members of their congregation being there, trying to coerce him back into the fold. No wonder his dad was willing to shell out that much money.

“I understand Hannah will be there. She’s back from college, you know.”

Dad was really pulling out all the stops. “Whatever,” Josh said, playing it as cool as possible.

He felt nervous about seeing Hannah again. If she only knew what he was up to lately. Still, the thought of seeing her again made his heart race.

“What do you say?”

“Whatever.”

“Does that mean yes?”

“Maybe.” Josh looked away with a little hesitation in his voice.
What will she think if she never sees me at church?

Chapter 2

Hannah



Hannah rolled over in bed after a restless night, jarred by their only rooster, Jake, crowing directly under her window.

Mom and her chickens.

She lay still, staring straight up, thinking incessantly: *Dad isn't here anymore. Cody isn't here. They'll never be here again.*

Minutes later, Mom poked her head in the doorway.

"Morning, Nannie. How did you sleep?"

Hannah barely turned her head.

"Early to rise, baby girl."

Hannah pulled the covers over her head for a moment and then abruptly snapped them back down.

"Let's eat him for dinner. I'll even pluck him," she said.

"Who, Jake?! You monstrous child." Mom tried to joke as she stepped inside the room.

Her mom's flannel robe hung loosely on her thin frame, and her graying blonde hair fell into her stark, sad eyes. She looked horrible. Hannah wanted to be cruel, pouncing at her weakness anyway, but she stopped herself.

Five months ago, during Thanksgiving break, Hannah had driven the family off an ice-slick road, rolling their SUV into the massive, snarling oak that reached down and plucked her father and older brother, Cody, from this life. Mom had escaped with minor head trauma, so it seemed, and Hannah had suffered a broken thigh, but they had survived.

Hannah had plunged their life into unspeakable tragedy. It was the worst accident the town of Angels Bend had ever known.

I killed my own father and brother, she had agonized over and over. If only it was Mom instead, she wished with shame at times.

Jovial and kind, her father had always been the spring of life and inspiration in their home. Mom was okay, sometimes, but she mostly grated on her. It was Dad who held Hannah up as God's angelic gift to the world. Even as a toddler, lifting her overhead, Dad's eyes kindled Hannah's sprouting identity as he peered into her soul. He gave her vision itself, it seemed, and now it was gone. Something precious and core to her worth had been ripped from her innards. It had simply vanished.

Christmas had been unspeakably cruel. "I wish I died, too. I can't take this!" she had howled over and over to her mother who sobbed along, her head resting on Hannah's in the few tender moments they shared that month.

Hannah had fled back to college in January to escape the crushing emptiness of their house, with its mocking family photos, even if it meant leaving Mom all alone. She took a half-load of classes and enrolled in an intensive grief counseling program at the insistence of her micromanaging mother. By the end of the semester, Hannah reluctantly acknowledged to herself that the therapy had helped a little.

She was still unprepared for the impact of being in her childhood home again. Last night was her third nearly sleepless ordeal in a row since returning from college. Each morning, she regretted opening her eyes, being forced to submit to its spiteful confinement.

"Ellen loved seeing you again," Mom said tenderly as she settled on the foot-end of her bed.

"You look tired." Hannah ignored her mother's words.

"I'm fine. Honest," Mom tried to smile, but it came out as more of a grimace. She closed her eyes, and Hannah was certain she was fighting another dizzy spell.

“I’ve been thinking.” Hannah gradually sat up. “I’m not sure running off to be a missionary right now is such a good idea.”

Mom opened her eyes. “God does provide, you know. It will be good for both of us.” She raised her eyes to Hannah’s. “And Dad is waiting on the other side to help you somehow, I’m sure. You’ll feel closer than ever to him.”

“What did the doctor say about the dizziness?” Hannah asked.

“They think it’s related to the accident.”

Of course it was. One more thing Hannah had ruined.

Mom leaned over to kiss her forehead, then stood. “Chin up, sweetheart. You’ve wanted to be a missionary your whole life. It will all work out. I’m gonna fix breakfast,” she said as she left Hannah’s room.

How did her mom stay so strong? She was definitely not a whiner, and her faith was immovable. As irritating as she was, there was one anchoring fact in Hannah’s life: Mom trusted that God was good.

Her eyes still heavy, Hannah rolled off the bed onto her knees and started to pray. As often as she asked herself why all this tragedy had to happen, she kept trying to trust in the wisdom and love of God, but that wasn’t getting any easier.

Her mind wandered to the book she’d agreed to read last night when Dave and Ellen had visited.

“What’s it about?” she had asked as she flipped through it.

“The life of Jesus,” Dave had answered.

“Is it any good?”

“I don’t know. That’s what we’re supposed to find out. I’ve been asked to read it, too.”

“Who wrote it?”

“We’re not allowed to know, to keep us objective.”

“All right, I’m in . . . but just to be with Ellen.” Hannah leaned in and gave her a loving squeeze. Ellen had been like a second mom to her.

“Oh good,” Dave had said. “I’m on the hook to get this group going, and I need you. Josh agreed to do it based on the assumption you would be there!”

“You didn’t,” Hannah had puffed. She liked Josh well enough, but being used as bait didn’t sit too well.

Her prayers ended in swirling thoughts unrelated to God, so she gave up and grabbed her phone. She flipped, swiped, tapped, zoomed, posted, deleted, and swiped some more as her mind raced restlessly. Close to an hour passed.

“Are you coming for breakfast, Nannie?” sounded Mom from the kitchen.

“Not now, maybe later.”

“Give your phone a break, sweetie! Please come eat.”

This is what people do today, Mom! Hannah thought mockingly. They had fought more than once about her phone usage since she came back from college. True, her weekly Screen Time report came in at an average of 14.4 hours per day last week. Sure it was kind of high, but just sitting and looking around was stupid and lazy and—uncomfortable.

A familiar stabbing pain shot up from her thigh, forcing her to roll to her back.

She scrambled to grab her pill bottle, carefully buried in a box deep in the bottom drawer.

Four. What am I gonna do? Where am I gonna find more? Hannah had received opioid pain relievers after the accident, but after three weeks, her doctor refused to prescribe more.

Her college roommate had kept her supplied for a while after her prescription ran out. Hannah then searched high and low until she found a shameful source: a girl who stole pills from others in her dorm. Thank God she had them. Yes, it was wrong, but it was worth it.

But out here in nowhere land? Living without them was hell. Going to a local doctor wouldn’t work. He would never prescribe

more after so long and all those opioid deaths and lawsuits making the news.

She threw one back with a long drink of water, craving the drug-induced blanket of comfort she knew it would bring.

Maybe Mom takes something. Dear God, help me.

Slowly she stood and headed quietly to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom she shared with her mom.

Chapter 3

Hannah and Mary



A day later, Hannah sat bundled up in a heavy jacket, scrolling through her phone on their back porch. She loved the outdoors, and the brief April chill was worth it to watch the sun rise into the blue. She glanced now and then at the plain white cardstock cover of “Dave’s book” lying on the side table.

Well, somebody’s book.

She hadn’t read anything for pleasure since ninth grade. And the Bible? *Well, not much lately. I have enough to read for college*, she told herself. So instead, she looked out for Jesus posts and scripture memes on social media, clicked Like or Love, and even created a bunch to share her faith, eagerly counting the number of “amens” she received in comments.

The pills she’d borrowed from her mom’s bottle in the medicine cabinet were weak, nearly useless, but they did keep the nausea down. *Tramadol. What a waste.* She hadn’t dared to take more than three and now she was out.

She picked up the book and turned to the first page, pausing to absorb the image of Christ with His arms extended and an inviting countenance.

Why do people reject You? she pondered, thinking such a book might become useful for the faithless multitudes around her.

Hannah opened to the first page with the chapter heading “Before Christ” and began scanning and flipping pages, reluctant

to slow down and actually read until she was seized by the description of hundreds of people being crucified at the same time by the Romans.

She gasped. How had she never known that?

The cruelty of the Romans, who ruled over the people of the land of Israel at the time of Jesus, was unlike anything she'd ever envisioned. She imagined driving down a major roadway today and seeing it lined with people she knew hanging on crosses, still alive, suffering at the hands of merciless soldiers from a foreign nation.

She couldn't think about that. She focused on the next section of the book, concentrating on anything but the horrors her mind envisioned.

“North of Jerusalem, in a hilly region dotted with small towns, stood an unremarkable town called Nazareth. It was a simple Jewish farming community with less than five hundred inhabitants, where many were related and likely knew each other.¹ It was here, in this ordinary place, that two seemingly ordinary people, Mary and Joseph, were engaged to be married. Through them, the Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah were about to be fulfilled.

“Let's go back to that ancient time and place and walk along those fertile fields past farmers bent over in their labors. We enter Nazareth, among clay-colored stone-and-brick structures, past women and children with water pots, and come to a private setting where we find Mary, alone in her thoughts, going about her daily chores and tending to prayers.”

Some time ago, Hannah had learned that Mary was probably a teenager—fourteenish? She couldn't comprehend that. When Hannah was fourteen, she was listening to boy bands and worrying whether her nail color matched her outfit. She continued.

“See Mary slowly lifting her eyes from her work, becoming aware of a light and another presence in the room. She gazes in growing astonishment at a bright, glorious-looking personage—an angel—hovering in the air quite near her, dressed in white.

“The angel tells Mary she has found favor with God and that she will ‘conceive in [her] womb and bear a son, and . . . shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High’ (Luke 1:31–32, ESV).”

Hannah had never considered Mary’s reaction to this. She wasn’t married yet. Did she think this was all going to happen later? Once she was married?

“And Mary said to the angel, ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?’ And the angel answered her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God . . . For nothing will be impossible with God’ (Luke 1:34–37, ESV).”

So, she finds out she will get pregnant, but not by a man. And she’s already engaged to Joseph. And they stone people to death for illicit sex back then. Who would possibly believe her? Even today that would be an issue. Maybe people had more faith in those days.

Her phone kept lighting up and vibrating, enticing her back to her life online. She resisted the urge, puffed hard, and turned it over.

“And Mary said, ‘Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.’ And the angel departed from her (Luke 1:38, ESV).”

Hannah marveled with a bit of jealousy at such a brave and wise response. She couldn’t imagine any of the guys she knew being willing to go along with such a thing.

Just like Hannah feared, Joseph got suspicious before too long. It appeared Mary didn’t tell him about the vision or the pregnancy.

Mary had mysteriously left Nazareth for three months to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who also miraculously got pregnant and would soon give birth to the baby John the Baptist (see Luke 1:39–56). When Mary returned to Nazareth, she had a noticeably swollen belly.

Hannah's stomach twisted at the thought of what might happen next, but she was now fully absorbed and read very carefully.

“We don't know what conversations they may have had. The scriptures make it clear, however, that Joseph struggled in knowing how to deal with this. He was very close to ending their engagement, planning to do it as privately as possible—which would have been to his disadvantage but possibly saved Mary from stoning. To end their engagement without publicly blaming Mary would have required Joseph to give dowry and ‘bride price’ money to Mary and her family anyway, assuming the Nazarenes followed the Jewish customs of the day.² No wonder the scriptures refer to Joseph as a righteous man. (See Matthew 1:19.) Even in this distressing situation, Joseph thought first about Mary's well-being.

“But then we read in scripture: ‘But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins”’ (Matthew 1:20–21, ESV).”

Hannah envisioned such a tale unfolding in gossipy Angels Bend or online at college. Joseph would have been criticized by everyone in this town.

She closed the book and looked up, far beyond the forest that edged their backyard, her thoughts suspended for a time in Mary's ancient world. She appreciated the diversion.

A wave of empathy washed over her. *I wonder how many townspeople never believed them or thought Joseph was simply a fool. Did Mary*

or Joseph even try to explain it? Is that why later in Jesus's life people would say, "Isn't this Joseph and Mary's son?"—implying Jesus was the illegitimate son? Maybe that reputation followed Him everywhere He went.

She considered how much Mary and Joseph knew or did not know about what lay ahead for them. Would their lives be easier because of this privilege? Or harder?

Mary's calling had also come in an instant, not unlike Hannah's life-altering tragedy. Tragic or glorious, Hannah felt a kinship with Mary, who also had to walk into the dark without knowing what was ahead.

She had to be terrified.

But she didn't kill her own father and brother.

The ancient world instantly rolled up like a scroll, gone from view. The brief escape was over. Her therapist at college had done his best, talking all about fear and grief and guilt and acceptance. Words. Words. Words. Nothing was the same anymore. Hannah was serving a surreal prison sentence she could not escape, and she was thrust back into her cell.

Her cravings and racing thoughts returned with force.

"Cast your burden on the Lord" (Psalms 55:22) her dad used to say when things were hard. She never understood those words and didn't feel like trying to figure it out now. Falling into a cold stare, she pictured Mom's pill bottle again.

There must be a way to get some online. She grabbed her phone and researched how to get opioids. She found mostly helplines, government warning sites, and research articles. *Ugh.* The word "addiction" made her wince every time it popped up. *That's so not me.* She found some sketchy-looking links that offered opioids without a prescription. Nothing that looked safe or legit.

She stumbled onto an article about opioid myths.³ The article's message was hopeful and compassionate. It recommended taking

methadone. Hannah had heard of it. She scanned the article further. *It's medically sound and it helps. It restores the brain to normal function. It calms withdrawal symptoms. You need a prescription, medical clinic visits, ongoing oversight, and therapy.*

Oh crap. The last thing Hannah wanted to do was talk to a local doctor and raise suspicion that she might be addicted. She imagined her mother's freak-out reaction. *No. Way.*

Chapter 4

Dave, Ellen, and Larina



U h, what was that?” Dave responded to Ellen without looking up from his phone. He sat on the bed, half listening.

“Says right here, ‘Nine Arrested in Parrington Heroin Ring.’”

“And Nate was one of them?”

“I didn’t say that. But everyone’s surprised about Nate’s girlfriend. Her name is in the article. I guess he lived with her. But I don’t see Nate’s name,” Ellen said. “Chelsea texted me this morning and said she heard the guns were his. Don’t know if that’s true, but it does say they seized illegal weapons, cash, and drugs. Wow. Are you listening to me?”

“Yes, I’m listening.” *I have a lot to think about, Ellen, so cut me a break.*

Dave stood from the bed and brushed out the crease from his slacks. “That poor family,” he said, trying to prove he had been paying attention. He didn’t want to start a fight. He was already late for “office day” when all employees were required to be physically present at the main office—a two-hour trip for Dave.

“I’ll see you tonight,” he said, walking out of the room. He didn’t bother to go back and kiss his wife goodbye.

At 8:00 a.m., it was unusually warm, bright, and cloudless. Tinder dry, just like it had been for the past week, with nature’s kindling of dried leaves and dead weeds carpeting the forest. The leafless trees along the road stretched their bony arms and fingers

skyward, like beggars asking the sun for a drop of rain. This was peak fire-hazard season.

He winced as he realized which dirt road he'd just passed. *It's been six years.* The dreaded memory interrupted the beauty of the morning, again. Dave swallowed hard. He wanted to close his eyes and not remember but the scene replayed anyway.

It had started as a normal day, but then Ellen had had another of her mental health episodes and would not stop arguing. After a full unrelenting hour, his nerves were shot, and his self-control ran out. He'd locked her out of the garage and loaded up their camping gear without telling her where he was going. He drove down that dirt road to a favorite little clearing along the creek, just to hide out for a night and calm down. He'd enjoyed the silence as he set up his tent, camp stove, and chair, trying to calm and ground himself again.

He thought back to his twenties when he could imagine nothing more satisfying than being married. But what did he know about mental illness at age twenty-four? There had been warning signs while dating, to be sure, but he adored her wit and faith and infectious laughter. Within weeks of getting married, she had flared with intense anger over things that didn't seem to make sense. She wouldn't "get back to normal" for a day or more, and then begged him to never leave her. But it would happen again in a few days. And again. And again. And with physical attacks at times.

Gradually, poking at his campfire, he'd felt himself relax. The escape worked great for a few hours. But then the text messages from Ellen started. Bizarre, inflammatory stuff. Maddening threats and manipulations. He'd shut off his phone, but the damage to his psyche was already done. His sanctity and refuge had been violated. *Again.*

Aahhh! He'd kicked the chair violently and stood breathless, infuriated, his right hand digging into his scalp, trying not to feel.

Barely conscious of anything outside of his pain, he spotted wisps of smoke passing by his car along with increasing crackles and snaps.

The smell of smoke finally shook him to his senses. Dave whipped around to see a small line of flames creeping with the wind, fanned higher to the bone-dry bushes around his tent. Panicked, but still barely thinking, he ran and grabbed his sleeping bag, hoping to suffocate the blaze. He threw it over the right flank of the fire and managed to put it out, but the bag held tight as he tried to pull it up and snagged on a bush. He tripped, falling over the tray table that had been toppled by the kicked chair.

Dave had fallen face down, right beside his toppled citronella candle lying on its side with a tiny flame still visible.

He could still feel the shock, realizing what he had done, as he struggled to his feet, whacking embers off his pants and jacket while fighting with the sleeping bag, only to see a thirty-foot line of flames moving into the brush toward the creek and further along the dirt road.

Like a madman, he'd stuffed his gear into his car, raced to a country grocery store down the road, and asked the kid at the counter to call it in. It wasn't until he saw the news article online the next morning that he learned about two hunting camps and twelve acres that were destroyed by a forest fire of unknown origin.

Dave had his local volunteer fire company to thank for efficiently responding and preventing a disastrous mega-fire. His best friend, Arman, was a faithful volunteer fireman and had told him all about fighting the blaze the next day. Dave had acted as surprised and guiltless as he could, doubly shamed by his own cowardice because he was also a volunteer fireman.

The sight of semitrucks crossing the overpass ahead and road signs for Route 15 snapped Dave back to his driver's seat. He

shamefully drove past the entrance to that dirt road at least twice a week, regretting that he had been too afraid to ever confess that he was the one who had started the blaze.

In the six passing years, the agony and fear of that moment had never been extinguished. He used to blame Ellen. But that was hard to sustain. So, he dropped that and sort of blamed himself, at first anyway. But he could never muster the courage to publicly own up to the deed, so he stuffed it under the sleeping bag of “an unforeseeable accident” and went on living. Often, however, he felt a smoldering finger creepily point back at him.

He pushed his truck up to 70 mph on Route 15 South. Light traffic. Still far from the city, his mind raced with deadlines, office conflicts, and, of course, always Ellen in the background.

At times, Dave wanted God to be a bigger part of their marriage. Ellen deserved that, and God seemed to expect it of him. She had an emotional disorder, an illness, after all. “*Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it,*” he recalled reading in the Bible. *That’s a really high standard to live by—too high.*

Despite all the books he’d read about borderline personality disorder, it still seemed like a Gordian Knot. An intractable mystery.

I don’t know what Jesus would do in my situation. Things get so crazy, so unpredictable, so unfair. So incredibly unfair.

For the life of him, true as the morning sun, Dave could not figure it out. Shortly after the forest fire incident, the stress at home and being pulled in so many directions had become so overwhelming he was hospitalized for heart attack symptoms and severe anxiety. His doctor strenuously warned him to find a way to reduce his stress.

His doctor obviously didn’t know what it was like to be married to Ellen.

He hungered for relief and understanding. In the past year, his trusted friend and work associate Larina had helped more than he could say. His heart warmed whenever he spotted her bright eyes and pleasing smile.



The downtown office was already bustling when Larina arrived. Unlike many, as a thirty-something single, she didn't care for the work-from-home lifestyle. She loved the energy of being with others, most of all, seeing Dave.

Today, he wore a lavender polo and perfect-fitting slacks. His piercing, spectacled eyes found her as he exited the elevator.

"Hey, Dave," she called as he whisked by in the crowded hallway.

"Larina," Dave said with a sigh and smiled. "I'll see you in a few."

Dave wasn't her boss, but he assigned and managed many of the projects she supported as a journalist. He knew she appreciated any assignment that "meant something" to the world. She hated gossipy, shallow stories but loved the environment, social causes, and politics.

Around 9 a.m. they sat side by side, alone, in a small conference room near Dave's office with the door nearly closed, which had become increasingly common. Her relationship with Dave at the office had become so close that coworkers jokingly referred to her as his "work wife." She didn't mind. Dave was influential—the guy who got anything done and broke through any wall to do it. If anyone wanted to know his thoughts on a brewing problem, they would go to Larina. She loved how he implicitly trusted and confided in her about the troubles he faced at home and the havoc it wreaked on him. She was happy to be a friendly shoulder to lean on.

"How goes the hacking?" Dave asked.

"Shut up!" Larina hissed under her breath, eyes bulging. "You can't breathe a *word* about that here."

I shouldn't have told him about that.

“Oh yes, got it. So, guess what,” he continued, unfazed. “I’ve got the assignment of a lifetime for you. Well, maybe not quite that big. It’s kind of a personal favor, but . . .”

“Interesting,” she grinned cautiously, trying to settle herself.

“On a lot of levels, I think, yes. Very different. Would you be willing to read a mysterious book by an unnamed author?”

She puzzled, looking harder at him.

“And would you be willing to come to our house every other week for a total of four meetings with a small group to discuss the book?”

“Do you have this book? Where’d you get it?”

“I have it. I’m not allowed to reveal the author or even the person who gave it to me. That’s part of the deal. *I’m* not even allowed to know who the author is.”

“Mysterious! And the topic?”

“The book is a brief history of arguably the most influential person of all time, based on the most influential book of all time: the Bible.”

Larina’s eyes narrowed and betrayed her mortified astonishment. “It’s a book about Jesus?”

“Yes, actually. Here’s the deal. I’m doing my contact a favor by assembling a diverse group of people to provide feedback about the effectiveness of the book, that’s all. I’m supposed to have six participants, youth to middle age, but I guess I don’t have as many friends as I thought.” He laughed.

“You’re pathetic, but God, I love you anyway,” she said, swinging her head demonstratively.

She loved how Dave used to wince at her tart comebacks and bold overtures, but he clearly relished them. In a private conversation once, he shared that he was high-functioning autistic and had

worked hard for years to understand humor and emotions better, but it was a struggle.

“So you’ll take pity on me?” he asked.

“I don’t know, Dave.” She liked Dave and wanted to help him, but most of Larina’s adult friends were atheists or agnostic. One was employed by a premier investigative journalistic publication—a place where Larina might truly fulfill her dreams. Together, they were nursing a job opportunity for her that would place her beside Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists. She feared to be found reading any such thing about Jesus.

But he was a historical figure. And he was a rebel, wasn’t he? She loved rebels and underdogs.

“Look, Larina. I know religion and stuff are taboo in the workplace, but this is outside of work. Nobody here writes better than you. Nobody would have insights like you. And I would love to see you.” He paused, then almost as an afterthought added, “You’ll enjoy meeting Ellen. This whole thing will be an intellectual delight.”

Larina sighed. “Where’s the book?”

Most of all, Larina looked forward to spending more time with Dave, even if Ellen would be around. And she had heard *so* much.

“It’s in my car. There’s a sticky note with your name on it.”

“You’re a *turd!*”

“Tuesday night, 7 o’clock. I’ll text you the address,” Dave said with her favorite handsome smile.

Chapter 5

Dave and the Lamb



Would you like to read the next chapter together?" Dave asked as he picked up the spiral-bound manuscript, realizing the first group meeting was tomorrow.

Ellen sat silently for a moment. "You just had to take on one more commitment, didn't you? Anything so you don't have to spend time with me, huh?"

"I just offered to read together, sweetheart." No one could say he wasn't trying.

Unmoved, Ellen went upstairs.

She was impossible.

He tried to turn his frustrated thoughts about Ellen to compassion by reminding himself of her severe hardships. Eventually, the nastiness in his heart cleared and his love for her resurfaced; it was his typical pendulum swing. He would flood with anger, then relent and determine to be kinder.

She wasn't always so difficult. In recent years, she had weeks at a time of being pleasant and positive. But it never lasted. And where did that leave *him*? Dave was squished between the rock of Jesus and that very hard place he'd lived for nearly twenty years. "Jesus is the sure foundation for us to build upon," he'd always heard, but it never felt that way. Jesus was more like the frowning fountain of guilt, and it hurt.

Alone on the couch, he put his phone aside, reluctantly, and leafed through the chapter titled “The Lamb of God.” He bowed his head and clutched the book. *Heavenly Father, this is a big sacrifice. You know that. I don't have time for this, at all. So, please let this help us. I need help. I just want peace. Please. Peace. Stability. Please.*

He began to read:

“Do you think the Father would be careless about how He sends His Son into the world? The way Jesus was born tells us a lot about Him and His Father. In fact, everything He did teaches us something—even His birth.”

Dave read the familiar tale of Caesar’s order to all the people of Israel to go to the city of their ancestors to be registered and counted for tax purposes. Mary’s womb was fully rounded now and very near to delivery, so she had to balance herself on the back of a donkey for eighty miles—about four days.

Poor girl. No car. Sleeping who knows where along the road. Ugh. But I'll bet Mary wasn't a nightmare to deal with the whole way.

The description of the inn where they stayed in Bethlehem intrigued him:

“The word in the Bible we see translated as ‘inn’ most likely referred to a sleeping compartment in what was known as a khan. Khans were places where travelers could stay with their animals. Instead of having closed rooms, as we would expect in a hotel today, a khan had open sleeping compartments surrounding an inner court where the travelers’ animals were kept. Mary and Joseph may have been unable to find space in one of the compartments. So, they may have spent the night in an open central area with their animals.”¹

He liked the description and allowed himself to be there. *So that's where it all happened.* Maybe a fellow traveler nearby heard Mary’s tormented screams and helped with the delivery as the animals looked on, unaffected by nature’s familiar act.

After a bit of gentle cleaning, as Dave imagined, Mary laid the little newborn in a nearby feeding trough, which he already knew was commonly called a “manger.” The whole scene played out vividly for Dave, with so many details—the smells and sounds of animals as people quietly whispered in the surrounding compartments. Finally, quiet and rest for the new family of three.

Phone notifications kept buzzing and lighting up. He picked it up and read, causing his thoughts to dart again.

Maybe I do have too much going on for this. I have major stuff happening tomorrow. Dave wasn’t one to break a commitment though.

He exhaled and turned to the next section of the story, which described the miraculous appearance of angels to the shepherds nearby. He read that some Bible scholars teach that shepherds were considered untrustworthy scum back in those days,² while other scholars disagree and suspect that the shepherds near Bethlehem that night were actually the stewards over the sheep used for temple sacrifices in nearby Jerusalem.³

The book vividly depicted the terrified shepherds with their arms flailing and faltering backward, shielding their eyes from the piercing brightness of a night sky suddenly filled with angels, singing praises to God. One angel spoke to the group:

“For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger” (Luke 2:11–12).

Dave imagined the shepherds gradually calming down, looking at each other, listening, and beginning to smile, realizing that they were experiencing a colossal privilege, not a terrible danger. He continued reading:

“Every soul in the land of Israel knew that the title ‘Christ’ (which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word ‘Messiah’) referred to the Anointed One, the Savior and Redeemer of Israel.

The shepherds must have overflowed with emotion, thinking, *‘The Messiah, born tonight? Generations have waited for this and here it is, tonight?’*

“Following the instructions of the angel, the shepherds run to nearby places in search of a baby in a manger. We don’t know what other instructions the angel may have given them, but somehow, they find the child. Perhaps as they approach the place they lean against the walls, stopping to catch their breath.”

So here are Mary and Joseph, Dave pondered, just trying to figure out how they’re gonna do this parenting thing, and now in comes this whole group of shepherds, staring at them in astonishment.

Dave was absorbed as he continued:

“One of the shepherds reverently asks permission to come closer, and they see Him: the baby lying in a manger, of all places! Now they know they have found the promised Messiah.

“The shepherd tells Joseph what they just experienced and how they found them. Joseph and Mary exchange surprised glances and look again at the winded shepherds whose eyes glisten with reverence. The shepherds kneel near the manger as they relate what the angels said: ‘In the city of David . . . you will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.’”

It had never occurred to Dave that Mary was now being publicly recognized by angels as the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. Through this simple, worshipful act, Mary and Joseph were exonerated from the harsh suspicions of their townspeople and were honored as the humble servants of God they were. He continued:

“What does the birth story teach us about God the Son, the Creator of all things? He didn’t make a grand entrance to prove by His power and magnificence that He was God. He sacrificed the glory of His heavenly home so He could teach us in person despite the pains He knew He would face. His very first act on earth—His

birth—was the embodiment of humility.”

Dave stewed for a minute, feeling self-accused that he lacked humility and sacrifice. He was so used to being criticized by Ellen about everything that his self-awareness had become self-weaponized.

“Are you coming to bed?” Ellen called from upstairs with irritation.

“Yes, soon.” *I’m so tired of having to be everything to everybody—all the time. Just leave me alone, Ellen.*

He exhaled and tried to let it all go as he intentionally pictured the God of heaven squeezing into a tiny infant’s body. The vision touched him positively and sweetly. As a former Sunday School teacher in his church, the words of the birth story were familiar. Yet something different stirred inside. The surpassing humility of God Himself, to come to earth as He did, settled gently into Dave’s senses. He’d never thought of Jesus being so utterly meek and humble.

Jesus had always seemed so full of demands. Wasn’t He the refiner who was searing his soul?

The fires in Dave’s marriage had raged, then smoldered, then flared up again for so long. Merciful rains came now and then, sure. But the fires never went out completely, exhausting him. Plus, there was that constant sense that he was somehow part of the problem.

Yet, in the glistening eyes of the shepherds, he perceived something important that he lacked, and he envied them.

His mind lingered among the animals in the khan, the worshiping shepherds, and the little baby. He closed the book and walked away, suddenly eager for tomorrow’s meeting with the whole group of readers. A pinprick of God’s light poked through Dave’s tightly wound mind. Overall, the reading was hopeful and restful.

Chapter 6

The First Group Meeting

Dave was far more nervous than he thought he would be. Ellen, of course, would be the biggest wild card tonight.

“You did *what*? So, who all’s coming?” she’d asked angrily when he first mentioned the book meetings at their home.

For a woman who loved entertaining, this was not how Dave had hoped the conversation would go.

“Just five or six people. It’s Josh Jenkins, Hannah, you, me, and a lady from work, Larina. You’ve heard me mention her before, right? I’m supposed to have six, but I don’t know who else to ask.”

Ellen looked away.

“She’s probably pretty.”

“Yes, she’s pretty, just like you, sweetheart.”

“Yeah, right. Your eight-hundred-pound hippo wife.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. *Stop* that.”

“Well, that’s what you keep telling me.”

“I absolutely did not say *anything* like that. Please, sweetheart, like I said, I agreed to this because I was kind of curious. But more importantly, this is about Jesus and, well, I don’t feel very close to God lately. I don’t think either of us has focused enough on God lately. Here’s a chance for us to . . . you know . . . do better. I hope it will be a blessing for us, and maybe for them, too, who knows?”

“Why do you have to bring a woman from your work? So she can see what a loser you have for a wife? You’re going to embarrass me . . . and yourself.”

“Larina is a very kind, gracious person.”

“Unlike me, of course.”

Dave turned away, sighed, and rolled his eyes, silently wrestling for a way out of the conversation.

“Hey, I just thought who else I could get to come: Arman. Let me go next door,” Dave said, congratulating himself on changing the subject and getting out of another bottomless pit.

Arman was Dave’s best friend and next-door neighbor. He was far from religious, but what the heck? Ellen loved him, he’d known Hannah since she was a girl, and he’d add some energy.



There went the bell, followed by the yipping of a feisty wiener dog.

“Larina!” Dave welcomed as he swung the door wide.

“Hey! Oh, this must be Tootsie,” she said in doggie-talk, kneeling to rub the little tail-swinging sausage.

“Yep, the one and only. You finally get to meet her. Hey, Ellen!” Dave called toward the kitchen. “I’d like you to meet Larina.”

“Busy!” sounded the reply.

“Sorry,” Dave whispered.

Larina stiffened and shrugged.

“She’s getting some stuff ready. Let me see if I can help. Why don’t you have a seat on the couch? I’ll be right back. *Wait*, here’s Arman. Hey, man!” Dave said, turning to open the door for Arman.

“It smells good in here, man. What’s Ellen cooking up?”

“Ellen needs help, I think.” He stepped toward the kitchen. “Oh, this is my colleague and rock star extraordinaire Larina. You’ve heard me mention her a time or two, I think?”

Dave noticed Arman’s admiring eyes absorbing Larina’s beauty.

“I have,” said Arman, standing more erect, extending a polite hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m actually friends with this guy.”

Larina chuckled. “He’s not too bad.”

In the kitchen, Dave could hear Ellen deliberately banging pots. He sighed. If only the woman he'd sworn to love and honor thought he wasn't too bad.



Josh walked past dirty little mounds of late April snow toward Dave's home looming ahead.

Marshall amp. Marshall amp. Marshall amp, he kept rehearsing at the thought of a whole evening with old people.

He'd just seen a woman enter the home.

Hannah better be there.

Yesterday, Josh's mom bumped into Hannah at the store. "She didn't look good, not at all. I felt bad for her," she'd told Josh and his dad last night.

"Like *ugly* not good?"

"Hannah will never look ugly, Josh. Just sick or depressed or something. I'm sure it's the accident. What that girl and her mom have been through, oh my." His mom sighed.

Josh had gone to the funeral but hadn't been able to approach Hannah. It was too intense and scary to even take a chance of saying something stupid. But he'd hoped the whole thing was kind of "over."

Guess not.

As he approached the steps of the front porch, Dave swung the door open.

"Come on in, Josh! How are ya, man?" he said warmly, extending his hand. "I'm so glad you came."

"Hey." Josh stepped in coolly, glancing around. The house felt small and old but welcoming, thanks to the powerful aroma of chocolate.

Dave led him around the corner into a tiny sitting room where he saw a dark-haired, olive-skinned man in an easy chair and the

woman he'd seen entering the home just getting settled on the L-shaped couch.

"Arman, this is Josh," Dave said. "He goes to the same church as Ellen and me. Josh, meet my best friend, Arman."

"What's up?" said Arman cheerfully, reaching energetically to shake his hand.

Josh saw Arman eyeballing his T-shirt covered with savage-looking zombies and sword-shaped guitars. He wore it just to annoy old people.

"Hey." Josh grunted.

"I used to work with Arman," Dave said. "You'll love him—he's awesome. But watch, he'll probably derail the whole thing tonight."

"Naw, I'll leave that to Ellen," Arman hollered toward the kitchen, laughing.

"Thanks, Arman!" Ellen called from the kitchen, with a squeaking laughter that made Josh compulsively smile.

"Those two are insane when they're together," Dave said to Josh. "Have a seat."

Josh planted himself on one of the kitchen chairs that had been squeezed in. He glanced again at the woman on the couch as she pulled her long black hair behind both ears. Despite her youthful bangs and pleasing face, he started to wonder if she was older.

"I'm Larina," she said with her head tilted and a warm smile.

"Hey." Josh gave a polite but awkward nod.

"Josh used to be in my Sunday School class," Dave said. "And he still came tonight!"

Josh looked at Larina, smirking. "I didn't think anyone else would come. I felt sorry for the guy."

"Good one, Josh," Ellen said, giggling as she entered the room and presented a plate of warm brownies to Josh. "Take and pass."

Josh appreciated the lighthearted vibe.

“Hi, Larina, I’m Ellen. I’m sorry, I was chained to the oven earlier. Sometimes it’s a whip. Sometimes a chain, but that’s how he likes me.”

Josh was too startled to blink or swallow.

Larina laughed hysterically. “Well, hi, Ellen. You know how to make an entrance.” She seemed to choke on the words. “It’s so nice to meet you!”

“And I’m the lucky one to call her my own,” Dave said with a wry tone, to which Ellen’s face went flat.

The doorbell sounded, followed by Tootsie’s piercing barks.

“Yay, it’s Hannah. *Tootsie!* Relax,” Dave said to the bouncing pup as he swung the door wide. “Welcome home, Hannah!”

“Hey, Dave.” Hannah flashed a brilliant smile. She bent down rubbing Tootsie as her sun-bleached hair hung to her knees. “I’ve missed you! Too many treats, looks like, you little Tootsie Roll.”

Hannah stepped inside and, after wrapping Ellen in a bear hug, sauntered in with a general wave and seated herself on the end of the couch next to Josh’s chair like she was right at home.

Keeping his head down and picking at his fingernails, Josh tried hard to look uninterested, but her deep golden tan and snug, colorful top weren’t making it easy. *No, definitely not ugly.*

“Ooh, love the hair,” she said to Josh with a tone impossible to discern.

Josh appreciated the chance to look her way. “Yeah. Yours too.”

Ugh, lame. He cringed at himself and glanced subconsciously around the room, hoping no one could tell how he felt. He noticed Arman eyeing Hannah.

Dude, get a grip. You must be like forty or something.

Dave broke Josh’s icy glare as he walked between them, helping Ellen get seated on the couch beside Hannah before sitting beside his wife.

“Hannah, you know Arman and Josh, of course, but you haven’t met my colleague Larina.”

Ellen interrupted, proudly. “Hannah just got back from her freshman year at the University of Miami. She wants to do a mission trip for our church soon. And then she’s gone again.” Ellen pouted, patting Hannah’s knee. “Her mom is my best friend. She’s been in this house since she was a baby.”

Hannah smiled and snuggled closer to Ellen, prompting a warm smile.

“Hi, Hannah. Great to meet you,” Larina said.

“She’s studying architecture,” Dave said. “Always been her dream.”

“Wow,” exclaimed Arman. “This girl’s got plans. How’d you grow up in Angels Bend and decide to be an architect?”

Hannah lit up briefly and then shrugged, looking toward Josh.

Josh started to relax, welcoming the thrill of sitting near his now grown-up childhood sweetheart, briefly forgetting where he was.

Suddenly, an alarming thought snatched the feeling away. *If she knew what I was doing last night, she wouldn’t even sit beside me.*

But then again, she must have seen his posts on social media, right? He watched Hannah’s eyes for any sign of revulsion or recognition of his changed lifestyle, but she seemed detached from everything, head mostly down using her phone.

“Thanks for coming tonight,” Dave started. “And for being willing to read this book. I know you’re all busy, so taking the time to do this is big. It’ll mean a lot to my friend who shall remain unnamed.”

“So, here’s the deal. I don’t even know who the author is. My friend knows the author, and she said the author wants totally straight feedback. Like what parts are effective, and what’s not making sense. Is the book inspiring and clear? All that. I thought

maybe we could meet four more times, a few chapters at a time. That's just a few pages a day."

Four more times? Josh sighed.

"Do you think we can do this in eight weeks or so?" Dave asked the group.

Marshall amp. Eight weeks.

He glanced again at Hannah but stayed poker-faced as he nodded along with everyone else.



Dave finally calmed and commended himself. He'd managed to assemble the group and everyone actually showed up, even Josh.

"Why don't we tell a little about ourselves, and since you all have a copy of the book, share if you've read anything and what you think so far?"

"So, honestly, I'm a no-religion kinda guy," Arman jumped in, "especially with all the fanatics about religion everywhere. My dad was born in Egypt, so he was raised Muslim. He met my mom in New Jersey. By the way, they always called me *AR*man, not *ArMAN*, like traditional Arabic—just to be clear," Arman said emphatically. "My mom was Christian, but they never talked about religion, except that they hate the fighting in the world over it. So, this is all gonna be new to me. Are you sure you want me to do this? I mean, I know absolutely nothing about it."

"Absolutely, man! You're perfect," Dave said. "Actually, that's one of the reasons I thought of you. Except I'll be smarter than you for a change."

Arman exchanged a playful eye roll with Ellen.

Dave continued, "My friend told me the author specifically wrote this to be comfortable for any reader, even people with no knowledge of Christ or the Bible. You should be fine."

"All right, I'm good," Arman said.

“My mom would pass out if she knew I was reading this,” Larina said. “I mean, happy pass out. Puerto Rican culture, and especially in my family, there is a lot of religion. But they probably think I’m a complete heathen now.” She chuckled. “I’m curious, too. And can I get this as a PDF? Paper kills me . . . and trees, of course.”

“I forgot to mention that. I do have it as a PDF if you’d prefer. By the way, Larina has friends who are highly successful authors and journalists. And she’s brilliant,” Dave added. “I’m no dummy. With her background and objective eye, she’ll be perfect for this. She’s a superstar on my projects at work.”

There was more to it than that, Dave knew, but certainly not anything he would share.

Larina looked at Josh and then Dave. “So, how’d you get this nice-looking guy to spend a Tuesday night with us?”

“All right. Why’d you come tonight?” Dave asked Josh.

Josh paused uncomfortably, then lit up with a smile and sat up erect, opening his arms. “Because I like old people.”

Larina and Arman chuckled as Ellen eek-eek-squeaked and smacked Josh’s knee.

Dave noticed Hannah shifting uncomfortably on the couch. He thought back to when Hannah sat in that very spot as a three-month-old baby with a face like a glazed donut. The poor thing had been sick, blowing little bubbles from her nose, while Ellen joyfully mothered her.

“I read the first chapter. Gotta like that, right?” Josh looked up at Hannah again, who was staring at the floor, oblivious.

“What about Ellen? Are *you* gonna read it?” Josh poked.

“If I have to,” she said. “I do love the Lord, and I’ll try to be good. But whoever wrote this has their work cut out for them to keep me interested.”

“No kidding. Attention span is not Ellen’s strong suit,” Dave said and then recoiled, regretting the nastiness in his tone.

Larina shot him an instant look of disapproval as hurt and embarrassment settled over Ellen's face.

Crap. That was really bad.

Hannah looked up from her phone and broke the silence. "Guys, I'm so sorry, but I have to go. I'm just not feeling well all of a sudden. I'm really sorry." She slowly leaned over to hug Ellen. "I am so glad you're here for me," she whispered.

Ellen stood to follow Hannah to the door where they talked quietly.

"Nice to meet you, Hannah, and hope you feel better," Larina called after her.

Josh looked down somberly as the mood in the room crashed.

You're going to embarrass me and yourself, Dave recalled Ellen saying. He'd done just that.

"What about you, Dave?" Arman asked, mercifully shifting focus. "You're already into your faith. Isn't this gonna be boring, I mean, like old news?"

"Oh yeah, me? Well, I think it'll be good for me to really get into the life and teachings of Jesus again. Nobody knows *all* this stuff, and it could help me. We can all do better, right?"

Larina watched Ellen and Hannah, and Dave wasn't sure she was even listening.

After Hannah left, Ellen returned to the kitchen and stayed there.

God, help me, this is a disaster.

After a few minutes, Ellen's deliberate absence was noticed by all, but mostly Dave. A familiar sadness dampened his mood, smothering his high hopes for tonight's meeting.

I didn't think I was that rude. Geez, talk about overreacting.

A kinder prompting stirred him. *How would you have felt to be publicly insulted? You know she gets nervous in front of your colleagues. Ellen is a kind soul and didn't deserve that.*

“So, guys, I have read a couple of chapters so far,” Dave finally spoke, soberly and slowly. “I think it’s good quality stuff, to be honest. I like that it doesn’t just tell the story, but it points out things for us to apply. I look forward to the rest because”—he paused nervously—“I believe in Jesus, but I should learn to trust Him more. And, of course, the whole point is that the author will get our thoughts on it, right? So, let’s get together again in two weeks when we’ve had a chance to read through the first several chapters.”

The room dissolved into awkward casual conversation, and once everyone had eaten a bit more and helped Ellen clean up, they began to filter out, starting with Josh darting like a man on a mission, followed by an ever-cheerful Arman, bearing a plateful of brownies.

Dave watched from the front door as Larina lagged behind, popping her head into the kitchen. “Ellen, you are so much fun! I’m so glad I got to meet you. I’ll see you next time.”

“I’m so glad. Thank you, Larina. You’re even sweeter than Dave said you’d be. Thanks for coming.”

Larina smiled politely as she bid Dave a good night, followed by a wide-eyed look of “you idiot!” on her face.

Great.



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