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BILL  
MYERS

Rendezvous  
with **GOD**

VOLUME ONE



*Discussion questions have been included  
to facilitate personal and group study.*



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DEDICATED TO:

|           |         |
|-----------|---------|
| Alexandra | Jared   |
| Audie     | Jim     |
| Brett     | Joel    |
| Chazz     | Kyle    |
| Danae     | Kyle    |
| Daniel    | Megan   |
| Dee Dee   | Rich    |
| Devon     | Sherrie |
| Jade      |         |

*Oaks of righteousness, frontline warriors, every one.*



Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
    If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:  
    Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,  
    I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
    Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
    My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
    So I did sit and eat.

*Love (III)* – George Herbert 1593–1633



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# PART ONE

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## CHAPTER

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# ONE

IT'S CHRISTMAS EVE. Fifty minutes have passed since I last checked the mail—that would be one Diet Coke, a half-bag of Doritos, and a handful of grapes. It's not that I was hungry. I wasn't even interested in the mail. Just bored. And grazing, along with these little excursions through the muddy gravel to the mailbox, gave me something to do. I know I should be grading papers, but I'm only good for so many essays at a time on, "The Contemporary Relevancy of Emily Dickinson," before my brain grows numb.

The pewter light of what was supposed to be day had faded and the perpetual fog had turned to heavy mist—though it's hard to tell the difference out here. I tugged open the mailbox to find the mother lode of junk mail—scores of holiday grocery specials, a real estate ad, one AARP magazine, two going-out-of-business furniture flyers, and a last-minute donation plea from some church I visited once in July.

It wasn't until I pulled them out that I saw the Christmas card tucked inside. My sixth for the season—if you

count my chiropractor and insurance agent. The breezy scrawl and a stamped, *Postage Due* with a little red arrow pointing to fifty-two cents, meant it could only come from one person. It was postmarked, Barcelona, Spain. I saved it for last. Best to let anger and self-pity fester in anticipation. Tucking the bundle under my arm, I lowered my head against the drizzle and slogged back down the driveway to the house.

Sigmund, our golden retriever, greeted me at the kitchen door like I'd been gone a week. His neediness was always a comfort—and irritation. "Like father, like son," Cindy used to say. It was supposed to be a joke but we both knew better. Not that Cindy didn't have her own issues. But, somehow, we always managed to ignore them so we could focus more clearly on mine.

I kicked off my shoes and padded across the kitchen tile onto the living room carpet. Removing our shoes was something we agreed upon but it never stuck—the dark path on the ivory-colored carpet a testimony to our failure. When we first bought it, the light color seemed a great idea; no kids, indoor pets, responsible adults.

Well, two out of three wasn't bad.

Clenching his gooey chew toy and wagging his tail, Siggy followed me to one of the two recliners in the glass-enclosed alcove overlooking the beach. The tide was out. Through windows pebbled with mist I could see the mud-flat stretching into darkness. In twelve hours, it would all be different. The bay would have slipped back in, raising

my beached rowboat, and lapping at stray pieces of driftwood. That was the beauty of living on the islands of Puget Sound. The scenery was in constant flux—not in great, unforeseen drama, but in safe, predictable patterns.

I noticed the cat had taken my chair. Again.

“Karl, move.”

He didn’t even bother opening his eyes.

“Karl.”

I picked him up, all sixteen pounds of overindulged, *Special, Prime Cut Kitty Filet*, and dropped him to the floor. Why he always chose my chair instead of Cindy’s was a mystery, considering our mutual lack of affection. But mine clearly became his go-to day bed. And at night? Don’t even get me started on the under-the-covers, turf wars for foot space. Still, I’d promised to take care of him until Cindy and her boy toy—seven years her junior—got back from Europe and found a place. Ours was an amicable divorce.

I snapped on the table lamp with its patina of dust and started through the mail. Not that I could focus with that card lurking at the back. But it didn’t stop me from going through the motions of examining each piece, one by one—a warm-up act for the main event. When the time came, I carefully opened the envelope and pulled out the card. It was a generic Santa Claus waving from a generic sleigh with generic reindeer. The text was equally original:

*“Merry Christmas. Happy New Year.”*

But it was the signature that got me. After all these months . . .

*Love ya! Cindy and Buster.*

Buster. What a stupid name.



“I’m telling you, dude, she wants you.” Sean’s words from the faculty party continued rattling in my brain. I remembered scoffing and glancing down at the Merlot I held as a prop. “Have you been out of circulation so long you don’t know the signals?” he said.

“Signals?”

“My point exactly.”

I pushed the words out of my head and looked back into the bathroom mirror where I’d been flossing. It had been four days since the faculty party and I still couldn’t shake them. Flattering? Sure, even at my age. And silly? Like being back in junior high.

I closed the cabinet and started for the bedroom then stopped just long enough to check my profile in the mirror. Even under my pajama top there was no missing the slight paunch slowly gaining ground—alright, maybe not so slight—but the operative word was *slowly*. And slowly could be reversed. In the meantime—I lifted the pajama top and sucked in my gut. I shook my head. Definitely junior high.

I barely entered the bedroom before my mind was back at the party. Sean Fulton—my associate in the English department who sported John Lennon glasses and bow ties—coughed and glanced away. “Here she comes. Good

luck, partner.” Before I could stop him, he disappeared into the festivities.

“Hi, Will.”

I turned and there was Darlene Pratford, late forties, dressed to kill, with more cleavage showing than a Norwegian fjord.

“Hey there,” I said, careful to keep my eyes locked on her face. “How are things in the biology department?”

“My biology couldn’t be better.” She grinned, smoothing the dress on her thigh. “How ’bout yours?”

I coughed. It’s hard swallowing and pretending to laugh at the same time.

“You okay?” she asked.

I nodded. She took another sip of her drink. By the color in her cheeks and the watery eyes, I’m guessing it wasn’t her first. “How are you?” she said. “Adjusting okay?”

“Adjusting?”

“You know, out there on the island, all by yourself. Holidays coming up. They say the first year is the hardest.”

“Actually, I’m doing all right.”

“Not too lonely?”

“You get used to it.”

“Well, if it gets too quiet, you can always give me a call. I could hop the ferry and we could grab some coffee. Compare war injuries.” She took another sip. “I could give you some tips on how to recover.” As an experienced veteran of two divorces, I’m sure she could.

We stood awkwardly amidst the holiday music and party conversations. Well, *I* stood awkwardly. I hate parties. I don't mind people. Despite Cindy's accusations, I like them. Mostly. It's just small talk that kills me. The superficial clichés. I'd take a deep, one-on-one conversation with anybody—shoe salesman or serial killer—over a room full of people speaking on autopilot. Which probably explains Cindy's mantra: "You don't know how to have fun. There's a whole world out there just passing you by." As always, she missed the point. I like the world. But instead of mobs, I'd prefer experiencing it one person at a time.

So, there we stood, my mind racing to find small talk while Darlene continued on her own, not-so-hidden agenda. "Rumor has it you're up for department chair," she said.

I cupped my ear to better hear over the music; some rapper's rendition of "O, Holy Night." There should be a law. "Pardon me?"

"Department chair," she repeated. "With Seneca's retirement, they say you're next in line."

"Yeah, well you know rumors." I caught Sean's eye across the room, smirking like Yente the Matchmaker.

"I think you'd be great."

"Really, why do you say that?" I wasn't fishing for compliments, just a little reality to anchor our conversation.

"I don't know. Smart, witty, educated." She took another sip of her drink. "All the right qualifications in all the right places."

“Oh, hey,” I said, “there’s Sean. Excuse me, I need to talk to him.”

Back in the bedroom, I shook my head as I pulled down the covers. Actually, I was honest when I told Darlene I was getting by. Well, on good days. And the others? A few weeks ago, I began feeling a tightness around my chest. I hate self-pity. People get divorced every day. But the tightness wouldn’t go away. I originally noticed it when I sat at the Golden Fin Sushi Bar enjoying my first solo Thanksgiving dinner. Somewhere between the edamame and the spicy tuna roll it grew harder to breathe. And things got no better. As the days turned to weeks, Christmas carols began to mock. Holiday wishes rang hollow. Each day grew just a little worse. And each night? Well, thank God for Ambien.

I peeled off my socks, folded them neatly on the dresser, and sat a moment on my side of the bed. Always my side. Finally, I slipped under the quilt and cool sheets only to discover the cat had already taken up residence.

“Karl.”

No response.

I nudged him with my foot. “Scoot over.”

Nothing.

I tried again but with the same results. Truth be told, his warmth didn’t feel all that bad against my cold feet. So, instead of fighting, I slipped them under his massive, fur-lined belly and reached for the light. “Alright,” I sighed, “but just this once.”



## CHAPTER

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# TWO

IT WAS TOO realistic for a dream. And I never dream in color. But off in the distance I saw a cobalt blue horizon smeared with growing traces of pink. I seemed to be standing on some sort of bluff. Below, stretched a large, flat plateau; black, except for the pockets of fog. Then there were the smells—cool dampness, the roasted-oat smell of dried grass, and the feted mixture of dirt and animal. But it was the quiet sobs that drew my attention. They came from a boy, I'm guessing around six, silhouetted on a boulder overlooking the plain. The light was too dim to see much detail, except for his wavy, black hair, and the coarse robe he was wearing.

I quietly cleared my throat so I wouldn't startle him. He didn't even flinch, just slowly turned to face me.

"Hi there," I said. "Are you okay?"

He nodded, rubbing an eye with the heel of his hand. He gave a quiet sniff and asked, "Who are you?"

I stayed where I was so I wouldn't frighten him. "My name is Will."

“You’re not one of them,” he said.

“Them?”

He motioned to an empty tree limb not far away, then to a couple boulders. Suitable locations for any imaginary friend.

“Um, no,” I said. “I’m real. Well, sort of.”

He gave his eyes another swipe and giggled.

“What?”

“Your clothes, they’re funny. You don’t live here.”

I glanced down to see I was still in my pajamas. “Apparently not.”

He grinned and looked back over the plain. The horizon was growing more pink.

“Should you be up here by yourself?” I asked.

He motioned to the empty limb and boulders. “I’ve got them.”

“Right,” I said. “And your parents?”

“Mom’s visiting my aunt and uncle. He’s old. He’s going to die.”

“And your dad?”

“Which one?”

*Ah*, I thought, *a blended family*. I said nothing more, just sat in the silence broken only by a slight breeze. The boy also remained silent. I thought it odd to see a child sit so patient and still. But as the designated dreamer, I knew it was my responsibility to move things along, so I asked, “Were you crying?”

He shrugged.

“You can tell me. I’ll forget everything by morning.” I eased toward the closest boulder and pretended to address his imaginary friend. “May I?”

The boy giggled again. Permission granted. I turned back to him and was drawn to his eyes. Golden brown with lighter flecks that almost sparkled.

“You sure you’re okay?” I said.

He took a deep breath. “I just wish—I wish I had some friends.”

“Ah,” I said as I sat. “I can relate to that.”

“You can?”

I nodded. “Big time.”

“You’re a bastard, too?”

“What? No. Is that why you don’t have friends?”

He looked to the ground.

“What is this, the Dark Ages?”

“Not yet,” he said. Then with another breath, he added, “It wouldn’t be so bad if I could do stuff for people. You know, like healing Ben Hazarah. He lives next door and—”

“Hold it. ‘Healing’?”

He grimaced. “Sorry, I’m not supposed to tell.”

“I bet.”

“But doing stuff for people, that’s the best way to stop being lonely, you know.”

“Pretty insightful, for what, a six-year-old?”

He gave a heavy sigh. “Another one of my problems. But it’s so hard.”

“Hard?”

“To see everybody hurting. And knowing you can do something but just having to sit around and wait.”

“Wait?” I said. “For what?”

“I’ve got so much to learn.”

“About?”

Another sigh. “Feeling what you feel, thinking like you think.” He paused and looked back out over the plain. “Everyone’s so sad and lonely. That hurts the most. How can you stand it? What do you do?”

“I have a dog.”

“A dog?”

“And a cat.”

He gave me a look.

It was my turn to shrug.

“Maybe if you helped people more,” he said. “That’s why we made you, right?”

“Excuse me?”

He started to answer, then shook his head as if he’d said too much.

“What about you?” I said. “Up here crying all by yourself?”

“I told you. Nobody wants to be with me.”

“Right,” I motioned to the empty tree and boulder. “Just you and your little buddies.”

Another giggle.

“What?”

“They’re not so little. And they can be real helpful, but . . .”

“But?”

“They’re not like you. They don’t have our . . .” he paused. “They weren’t made in God’s image.”

I scowled. “Six years old, right?”

He ignored me. “They weren’t made to be his friends.”

“His friends—God has friends.”

“That’s why he made you. To be his friend so you can play with him.”

“God wants to—play with me?”

He nodded.

“So that makes me like what, his toy, a little puppy dog?”

“You’re silly.” Before I answered, he continued. “Is that why you have children? Why your mommy and daddy made you?”

“Of course not.”

“So, why would it be different with God?”

“Um, because he’s God.”

“And you’re his boy. And like a good dad, he wants to play with you.”

“And if I don’t want to play with him?”

“It makes him sad.”

“So—without me, God is sad.”

“Without God, you’re alone.”

“How’d talking to some kid turn into a deep, theological discussion?”

He sighed again. “It happens—a lot.”

“No wonder you don’t have friends.”

He nodded. “Tell me about it.”

“You might want to work on those social skills. Oh, and for the record, you’re barking up the wrong tree. I don’t have children.”

He gave what might have been a smile. “Not yet.”

That’s when the doorbell rang. Then again. I forced my eyes open to see the ceiling fan above the bed. The smells and sound lingered just a moment longer. The bell rang a third time. I fumbled for my glasses, threw off the covers, and nearly fell over the sleeping dog.

“Atta boy, Siggy,” I grumbled. “Sic ’em.”

He thumped his tail twice and went back to sleep.

The bell continued to ring as I staggered through the living room to the entry hall.

“Alright, alright!”

I unbolted the front door and opened it to meet—a pudgy teen, face ripe with acne. Her purple hair clung in strings from the rain, her cheeks streaked from an overabundance of makeup giving her raccoon eyes.

“Uncle Will.”

“Amber?”

“Ambrosia,” she corrected.

I stood a moment trying to understand.

“Can I come in or what?”

“Oh, sorry.” I opened the door wider and she passed through.

“Took you long enough.”

## CHAPTER

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# THREE

I LAY IN bed listening to the muffled voices from the TV in the living room. But there were other sounds—from the kitchen, the bathroom, my office across the hall. She was still up and roaming. I went down a mental list of concerns. Wallet and credit cards? They were in the room with me. Computer password book? Locked in the desk. I had no guns. But what about the knives in the kitchen? The last time her mother and I spoke she was experimenting some with cutting herself—Amber, not her mother. Though I wouldn't put it past my sister either, since she tried just about every other form of self-destruction and medication known to man.

In high school, it was booze, grass, and pills; anything to escape the abuse of an alcoholic father and the passive aggressive outbursts of our mother. While I was hiding out with Charles Dickens, John Donne, and George Herbert, my sister, Terra, became the all-school pharmacy. In college it was acid, then coke. As a young adult, meth. And now? She was trying, I'd give her that but having skipped the

opioid epidemic, she went directly to heroin. She'd been in and out of rehab at least twice that I knew of. But she was a fighter. She'd kick it. It was just a matter of when.

I heard the toilet flush and noticed the TV went silent. Maybe she's finally worn herself out and is going to—No, now I heard the scrape of metal barstool against kitchen tile.

How many hours has it been? Two, three? I turned to the glow of the radio alarm and groaned. Eighty-five minutes? That was all? Only eighty-five minutes passed since this creature, this half-girl/half-woman arrived, tracked mud on my carpet, and complained there was nothing in the fridge for a vegan to eat? How time crawls when you're lying in bed fearing for . . . What was I fearing for? I wasn't sure. But I already sensed if I wasn't careful, all peace and orderliness would unravel.

"What's wrong with that room?" she'd asked earlier. We were each carrying an armload of blankets and pillows from the linen closet, past my office, to the living room sofa.

"That's my office," I said as I cradled the phone against my ear, waiting for my sister to pick up.

"There's a couch in there."

"Futon," I corrected.

"Perfect."

"Actually, the sofa would be better."

"For who?"

"Pardon me?"

“Better for who?”

“I’ll be working early in the morning.”

“It’s Christmas.”

“Trust me, the sofa is better.” She gave no answer, so I repeated, “I think the sofa will be—”

She cut me off. “*Fine.*”

The message on my sister’s phone kicked in: “*The mailbox of the person you’re trying to reach is full. Please try again.*”

I sighed and disconnected.

“She never picks up,” Amber said.

“Her mailbox is full. What about text messages?” I asked.

“Same thing.”

“Isn’t she worried about you?”

“I stayed at Jerry and Kevin’s last night.”

“You were gone last night, too?” I said as we dumped the bedding onto the sofa.

“And the night before. But, tomorrow being Christmas and all, I figured I should spend it with family. You know, home for the holidays and all that crap.”

I unfolded the sheet. “Which is why your mom must be sick with worry.” She looked at me puzzled. “Not being home, I mean.”

“She’d have to be there to know.”

“She’s not home? She just leaves you?”

“I’m almost fifteen,” she said while fighting to stuff a pillow into a pillowcase. “I can look out for myself.”

I let the comment go and motioned to the pillow. “Pull it in,” I said. “Don’t push. Here, let me show—”

She turned from me. “Did I mention I’m fifteen?”

I watched as she continued the struggle. “You sure you’re dry enough?” I asked. “I bet Aunt Cindy’s got something you could wear for the—”

“I’m sorry, did I hear somebody say they didn’t need help?”

I blinked, unsure how to respond.

She tossed the half-covered pillow on the sofa and reached to unfold the blanket.

I wondered if I should take the other end and help or would that be equally offensive? What was going on? How had some fourteen-year-old managed to switch roles on me? How had I become the one feeling awkward and unsure?

“Is there an all-night store around here?” she asked.

“Pardon me?”

“To fix breakfast. It’s the most important meal of the day.”

“Right. Well, I’ve got plenty of bacon and . . . but you’re a vegan.”

“Scrambled tofu,” she said. “Add some refried beans, avocados, and you’ve got a breakfast burrito—*if* they sell lard-free tortillas.”

“Um, it’s Christmas—”

“Oh, look, a kitty.” She’d spotted Karl, spying from under the coffee table. “Hi there, sweetie.” She stooped. “What’s her name?”

“It’s a he and—”

“Hi kitty, kitty, kitty. It’s okay, you don’t have to be afraid.” She reached out her hand. “Nobody’s gonna hurt you.”

“Karl.”

“What?”

“His name is Karl.”

“That’s a stupid name for a cat.”

“Well, I, we . . .” I stopped and watched as Karl rose, stretched, then casually sauntered toward her, making it clear it was all his idea.

Amber continued cooing. “That’s a nice kitty. Yes, you are. Come here. You’re just the sweetest thing, aren’t you?” He arrived, letting her scratch him behind the ear. “Sabrina, that’s what we’ll call you.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Sabrina, that’s a much cooler name.”

“But he’s, uh—”

“He’s been fixed, right?”

“Right.”

She shook her head in disgust. “Figures.” He moved closer, gave his back a slight arch and, to my amazement, started rubbing against her. She giggled then looked to me. “So, if he’s been fixed, it’s obvious he’s just as much a Sabrina as a Karl.”

“We’ve always called him—”

“What a good Sabrina you are, yes you are.” She lowered her face to his. “We’re going to be great friends, aren’t we? Yes, we are.”

That had been—I glanced at the radio alarm—ninety minutes ago. I turned to stare at the ceiling. Tomorrow. First thing in the morning. Tomorrow we’ll hop in the car, drive the two hours to Seattle, and drop her off at her mom’s.



“Hey there. It’s been a while.”

I shaded my eyes from the morning sun and saw a boy, around twelve. He was tying blankets and bundles to the back of a donkey. A dozen men milled about, loading their own animals. Like the kid, they wore the same style of rough, woolen shirts and robes. Not far away loomed a huge structure of white limestone further reflecting the sun’s brightness.

The kid continued talking. “Remember? Back in Nazareth, when I was a little boy?”

I recognized the curly black hair and, squinting against the brightness, saw those same golden brown eyes.

“You always wear those clothes?” he asked.

I looked down to my flannel pajamas.

“Yeshua!” A bearded man, mid-thirties, ambled toward us. He wore the same clothing as the others which made me even more self-conscious of my wardrobe selection.

I expected to hear something but he completely ignored me and addressed the kid. “We’re leaving in an hour. You packed?”

“Yes, sir.”

He nodded and reached over to tug at the rope the kid had just tied.

“It’s good,” the boy said.

He nodded but also checked the other side. “Old habits die hard.”

“So, I’ve noticed.”

The man cut him a look which might have included a smile.

The kid returned it, then added, “What I told mother—”

“When she chewed you out?”

“It was my fault,” the kid admitted. “I should have paid more attention.”

“We all should have.”

“But, what I said. You know, I meant no disrespect.”

“Of course,” the man said. Then a little softer and perhaps a bit sadder, he added, “We all knew this day would come, didn’t we?”

Just as quietly, the kid answered, “Yes, sir.”

The man looked away. “So many years of you being my little boy. After all we’ve done together, all we’ve been through. And now . . .” He took a quiet breath, still not letting their eyes meet. “Now I must let go.” He nodded to

the brilliant, white building. “Those priests, they’re a hundred times smarter than me—”

“Smarter, but not wiser.”

He paused, then continued. “You said it yourself, *that* is your father’s business.”

The boy swallowed. “I’ll always love carpentry.”

“What’s not to love—long hours, unreasonable clients, slave wages.” He threw a glance to the kid and they chuckled, though for both it seemed a little forced.

“I’ll still stay with you, you know that,” the boy said. “Until it’s time.”

The man looked to the ground and nodded. Then, slapping the donkey on the rear, he turned to leave. “One hour.”

He had barely stepped away before the boy called to him. “Joseph?” He stopped and turned back to him. “You’re still the most important man in my life. You always will be.”

“Are you traveling in the women’s caravan?”

“No sir, the men’s. Why do you—”

“Then stop chattering like a woman and get to work. One hour.”

“Yes, sir.” The kid turned back to the donkey and rechecked his ties.

“Your dad?” I asked.

He nodded.

“He didn’t see me.”

“You’re not from here, how could he?” Glancing over to me, he asked, “So what do you think?”

“I think I’ve got quite a vivid imagination.”

“That’s what this is?” he asked.

“What else could it be?”

“You still don’t understand, do you?”

“I’m open to suggestions.”

He shook his head then turned back to watch Joseph join the other men. “It’s tough on him,” he said. “On all of us. Every day I want to show him how smart I am. I want to prove how much better my decisions are than his.”

“But you don’t.”

“I won’t.” He crossed to the other side of the donkey. “Every day I change, just a little. Every day I become less of the little boy he thinks I am. Oh, he tries, but it’s all *I* can do to keep up with those changes, I can’t imagine what it’s like for him.” He gave the donkey a slap on the rear exactly as his father had. “But in a few months, it’ll all be over.

“Over?”

“My thirteenth birthday. I’ll stop being a child and become an adult.”

“Really?” I asked. “Just like that? One minute a boy, the next a man?”

“Of course.”

“No troubled adolescence, no angst-ridden teen years?”

“Years? Why would anybody want to drag this out? It’s hard enough as it is. He shook his head, snorting at my suggestion. “*Years.*”

I nodded. He had a point.

“So,” he said, “are you traveling home with us, or returning to your own world?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“You always have a choice. That’s our greatest gift.”

“Your greatest—”

“Uncle Will.” The voice was faint, far away, but it quickly grew louder. “Wake up. Come on.”

The boy’s face faded as he said, “Stop by any time. I enjoy our little . . .” And then he was gone.

“Are you hungry or not?”

I pried open an eye to see Amber staring down at me—baggy sweatshirt pushed up to the elbows, tatted arms, and her thinly veiled contempt. “It’s Christmas. You going to sleep all day?”

## CHAPTER

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# FOUR

I'M NO BIBLE reader. To be honest, I haven't cracked it open since high school youth group which I'd mostly attended to get Sharon O'Brien's attention. But I remembered enough, at least the New Testament, to know there was something eerily familiar about my dreams. So, as Amber clamored about the kitchen looking for "something humans actually eat" for breakfast, I hid in my office, found an online copy of the Bible, and did a little research.

There was nothing about him as a boy—him, being Jesus and, yes, I discovered in the Hebrew it was Yeshua (how I'd have known that beforehand is beyond me). But what really caught my attention was, as a twelve-year-old, he told his parents he had to ". . . be about my father's business." Had I read that before? I must have. What other explanation could there be? Regardless, I was intrigued enough to keep reading but I only made it through a couple chapters before Amber summoned me to breakfast.

The good news was she'd found some old pancake mix in one of the cupboards. The bad news was her culinary

skills were untested enough to require waiting several minutes for the syrup to soak through and eventually soften her efforts. So, there we sat at the dining room table enjoying our Christmas breakfast—Amber lost in some pounding cacophony under her bright pink headphones, me trying not to break a tooth.

After a suitable amount of time I addressed the elephant in the room. “So, I was thinking. We should probably be getting you back to Seattle.” She didn’t hear. “Amber?” I raised my voice. “Amber?”

She looked up. I motioned to her headphones. Obviously annoyed, she pulled them off. “It’s Ambrosia.”

“Right. Listen, it’s no problem if I take a few hours off this morning and drive you back down to your mom’s.”

“Can’t.”

“Why is that?”

“She won’t be home. Not ’til after New Year’s.”

“What? How did you find out?”

“She called.”

“She called?”

“Yesterday, ’fore I got here.”

“She called you?”

“Why wouldn’t she call me, I’m her daughter?”

“Right, but last night. When I called, I—”

“Got her voice mail. I was there.”

“Okay,” I took a moment to process. “So, you told her you were coming here?”

“Of course.”

More processing. “Then she’s coming up to get you.”

“You’re not a very good listener, are you? I told you, she’s not around ’til after New Year’s.”

“And where does she expect you to stay until then?”

She cocked her head at me like I was an idiot.

My gut tightened. “Not here? You can’t stay here.”

“Maybe you should call her.”

“But she doesn’t pick up. And her mailbox is full.”

“Hmm. I see your problem.”

“Amb—brosia. New Year’s a week away.”

“It sucks, I know. But like you said, you’ll be out from underfoot in your office all day. I’ll be all right.”

“*You’ll* be all—”

“Sides, that’ll give us more time to figure out how to tell her.”

“Tell her? I’m sorry, did I miss something?”

“You really aren’t a good listener.”

I reminded myself to breathe, “Okay—So, tell me, what did I miss?”

“Not much. Just the fact that I’m pregnant.”

“You’re preg—”

“Four months. Are you going to eat those pancakes or what?”



Surprised? A lot. Irritated? What past-life evils had I done to earn this?

Luckily, I had the good sense not to blurt out what I was thinking—which was fairly easy since I didn't know what to think. I excused myself, reheated my coffee in the microwave, and retreated to my office—"my cave," as Cindy calls it. This and the beach were my favorite places to think and work things out. And believe me, I had plenty on both accounts.

I popped open my laptop and brought up the online Bible. Again, I'm not a big believer, if at all. To put it simply, religion isn't that important. When Sean and I get together with the occasional cigar, it's to discuss Chaucer or Donne or Sean's latest escapade with the ladies—he considers himself a babe magnet—but never to talk about God.

Seriously, mythology is somebody else's department, not mine. But, considering the way things were unraveling, I figured I needed all the help I could get—subconscious or otherwise. I just didn't expect it to happen so soon. In fact, I'd barely settled in my chair and gotten through the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark before, without falling asleep, I found myself slipping on a steep, grassy slope, and swearing, "Jesus!"

"Present," came the slightly amused voice.

I spilled nearly half my coffee as I caught my footing and spun around. There, sitting on the bank before me, was a man with those same golden-brown eyes. His hair was longer, but just as black, and now he sported a beard.

"Sorry," I said. I didn't mean to, you know . . ."

"You're forgiven."

I started to answer but had no response. The air was hot yet smelled moist and green. I turned to see a stream two dozen feet from us, its bank choked with tall grass and reeds. In the center, under the pounding sun, stood a man—sun-ravaged face, gnarled hair, moth-eaten beard. He wore what looked like animal skins stitched together. And he was shouting:

“I’m only baptizing you with water! But get ready, there’s somebody far more powerful than me coming!”

On the bank to our right stood twenty or so men dressed in the same simple shirts and robes I saw earlier. Separated from them by several yards, stood a smaller group, decked out in fancier tunics and robes. And further up the bank, all by themselves, stood three men in soldier outfits right out of some gladiator movie.

“I tell you,” the man shouted. “I’m not even worthy to untie his sandals. I’m baptizing in water but he’s going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit—and with fire!”

My companion motioned to the trampled grass beside him. “Have a seat.”

I eased down, careful not to spill any more coffee.

“You’ve changed your clothes.”

I looked down to my worn jeans and baggy Western Washington University sweatshirt. Trying to sound as casual as possible, I said, “I didn’t even fall asleep this time.”

He nodded but didn’t speak.

“So—am I dreaming, or what?”

Still no answer, he directed his attention back to the shouting man.

I didn't appreciate being ignored and pressed in. "Why does this keep happening?"

He finally turned to me. "You haven't noticed the similarities?"

"To what?"

"Life."

I frowned.

"*Your* life." he said.

"What does something that happened over 2,000 years ago, *if* it happened, have to do with me?"

He raised his eyebrows. "It's been 2,000 years? That long?"

"You didn't know?"

"Time's a relative thing. What's that you're drinking?"

"I'm sorry?"

He motioned to my mug.

"Oh. Coffee."

"May I?"

I passed the mug to him. He took a sip and made a face. "Seriously?"

"I'm in it for the drugs," I said.

The man in the stream threw open his arms and shouted even louder. "I am the voice of someone crying in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord!"

"John the Baptist?" I asked.

"He does go on."

“And he’s setting the stage for your big debut, right? The thing you’ve been waiting for since you were a kid.”

“Not just me.”

I turned to him.

He quietly answered. “All of humanity has been waiting.”

“That’s some statement.”

He nodded. “I’m about to draw up an entirely new contract.”

“Contract?”

“Between man and God. The old version says if you do right, God rewards you. You do wrong, he punishes.”

“Sounds about right.”

“You sign your side of the agreement, he signs his.”

“Okay . . .”

“But you folks haven’t exactly kept up your end of the deal, have you?”

“Some of the terms are pretty tough.”

He ignored me and turned back to the Baptist. “So—here I am.”

“Say again?”

“I’m here to sign *both* sides of the contract.”

“Both sides?”

“God’s side and yours.”

I wrinkled my forehead.

“Is that a problem?” he asked.

“Well, yeah,” I said. “I mean that sounds pretty one-sided.”

“It is.”

“But—what’s *our* responsibility? In this new contract, what are *we* supposed to do?”

“Let me.”

“Let you . . . ?”

“Believe enough to let me sign both sides.”

The Baptist’s voice grew shriller as he continued his rant. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? I tell you, you must produce the fruit in keeping with your repentance!”

I motioned toward him. “Doesn’t exactly sound like a new contract to me.”

“Old school,” he explained. “Under the old contract, John’s the greatest prophet to have ever lived. But compared to the new one, even the least in the Kingdom of heaven will be greater than he.”

“You’re kidding?”

“It’s there in your book.”

The shouting continued. “And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you—” he pointed a boney finger at the aloof group in their fancy clothes, “—out of mere stones God can raise up children for Abraham!”

The men scowled, began to murmur.

“They’re definitely not feeling the love,” I said.

“The super religious seldom do.”

I started to nod, then caught myself. “Hold it, *you’re* super religious.”

He shook his head.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s the religious who are going to kill me.”

“Whoa.”

“What?”

“You’re starting to sound a little anti-Semitic there.”

He chuckled. “*I’m* Semitic.”

“Then what do you mean by—”

Cutting me off, he said, “Every faith has them. The rule keepers. More focused on their regulations than their God. And without God, those rules and regulations wind up killing.”

“Killing in the name of religion.” I nodded. “Like the Crusaders or Jihadists . . . or even human sacrifices.”

“That’s right, but not just killing the body. Killing a person’s soul. All that hating and judging. The rules by themselves can completely suck away life.”

I turned to him. He wasn’t finished.

“But connecting to me, my power, that’s where real life begins.” He saw my hesitation and encouraged me to respond. “Go ahead.”

“What you’re saying—I mean, without rules, anybody can cash in on this contract you’re talking about—thieves, rapists, murderers.”

“Exactly.”

“But—”

“If they come to me, I’ll change them—but from the inside. They’ll eventually follow the rules, but from the

inside out. Religion is just the opposite. It's nothing but behavior modification."

I gave him a look. "Where'd you pick up that term?"

"You're not the only one who gets around." He continued more seriously. "My point is, religion can only change people on the surface, from the outside. And it often fails. What I'm offering is a change from the inside. Spiritual transformation—not character modification."

I paused, taking a minute to digest the comment.

He continued, "It's like marrying the person you fall in love with. People don't marry for rules, they marry for love."

"Right, but without *rules* people have affairs."

"No."

"No?"

"Without *love*, people have affairs."

Again, I let the thought set, while half-expecting him to bring up Cindy and me. If he knew, he didn't let on.

"It's not a matter of breaking my rules," he said.

"Then what's it a matter of?"

"Breaking my heart." He looked back over to the religious elite. "Sadly, most people choose the rules, figuring it's easier to obey rules than grow a relationship. And by following rules, they can pat themselves on the back for their success."

"And judge others for their failures."

He gave a quiet sigh of acknowledgment. “They think it’s easier to listen to their religion than to my heart. And by doing that they miss my deepest desire.”

“What’s that?” I asked. “Your deepest desire?”

He fixed his gaze on me and said only one word. “You.”

I hesitated, looked down, glanced over to the stream.

Reading my discomfort, he changed subjects. “But I’m not the only one on a new adventure, am I?”

I looked back to him and caught a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. If he was talking about Amber, I chose to play ignorant. “What do you mean?” I asked. He broke into a smile. I continued, “What do my personal situations have to do with yours?”

“I told you, time is relative. Intertwining.” His smile grew. “*Everything* is related.”

“Okay—” I took a cautious breath. “So, if that’s true and I’m not saying it is, what do you propose I do? With *my* situation?”

“The answer is always the same, my friend.”

I waited for more.

“Love. It’s always about love.”

“Right,” I smirked, “even when she’s being a brat to me?”

He motioned to the religious elite. “They’re not exactly going to be my friends.”

“Behold!” the Baptist shouted. We looked up to see he now pointed at us. “The Lamb of God who will take away the sin of the world!”

“There’s my cue.” My companion rose to his feet. “Stick around, this could get interesting.”

“You mean the dove?” I said. “And the voice from heaven and—”

“Shh, don’t tell me, you’ll ruin the surprise.” He took a deep breath, paused to gather his courage, then started down the grassy slope to the stream.

“Good luck!” I shouted.

He glanced over his shoulder and called back, “Luck?”

I shrugged.

He smiled. “You, too.”