



THE THING ABOUT
CRACKED SCREENS

When Life Happens — Not If, But When

A LATTER-DAY SAINT CHRISTIAN VIEW

MICHAEL MOREH MASKIL

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The Thing About Cracked Screens: When Life Happens — Not If, But When. A Latter-day Saint Christian View

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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Holy Bible and from the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price, as published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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Abilene and Asher, Owen Hadlock and his friends and families, and the other people in the story scenes are imagined characters, and the scenes are works of fiction, offered to illustrate the scriptures, not to add to them. Henry's Fork High School is imagined. The modern characters in this book are fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

A Note from the Author



This book is for you if something in your life has cracked. Maybe your parents split up. Maybe a friend turned on you, or the whole school seemed to. Maybe you feel invisible, or you feel like you have to be perfect, or you have done something you think God can never forgive. Maybe nothing big has happened, and you just feel far away from Him.

Spilled milk, cracked screens: some things we break ourselves, some things other people break, and some things just happen. The Lord can use every one of them to remind us to come back to Him. Mormon saw it plainly: when life is easy, people forget God, and when it gets hard, they remember to pray (Helaman 12:2–3).

Here is what I want you to take from this book more than anything else: the answer is Jesus Christ. Not just knowing about Him, but knowing Him. A personal relationship with Him is what heals, soothes, guides and warms. He was lonely, betrayed, mocked and misunderstood, and He understands you (Alma 7:11–12). He still says, **“Come unto me”** (Matthew 11:28).

The teenagers in this book, and the two narrators who watch over them, are made up. Their stories are fiction, offered to help you feel what the scriptures teach. They are not doctrine. Measure everything in these pages by the scriptures and by the quiet witness of the Holy Ghost.

It is not the intent of the author to introduce any new doctrine, practice or revelation. Any errors here are mine. When questions come, as they will, open your scriptures and ask God: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God” (James 1:5).

About the Author



Michael Moreh Maskil is a student of the scriptures and a faithful member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He writes for Latter-day Saints and for all Christians who love the Bible and want to know the world in which it was written. He writes as a fellow traveler rather than an expert: a man on a spiritual journey who does not claim to have every answer, but has found enough to share.

His method is the same in every book. He begins with the LDS Standard Works (Canon) and the words of latter-day prophets, then turns to Latter-day Saint scholarship, and finally to the ancient writers, from Josephus and the apocryphal books to the sages of Israel. He keeps revealed doctrine, tradition and scholarship clearly apart, and lets the reader see which is which. Every page is meant to point to Jesus Christ.

His books are *On the Sixth Day*; *Nevertheless Thou Mayest Choose*; *Books from the Ethiopian Bible: Beyond the King James*, in three volumes; *From Tabernacle to Temple*; *Resurrection*; *Out of Their Prison*; *Stirred to Remembrance*; *The Thing About Cracked Screens*; and *My Father's House*, in two books, *What Manner of Stones* and *Not One Stone Upon Another*.

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I am a man on a spiritual journey. I have walked a path, but there is still much that lies ahead. I do not have all of the answers, but I have enough of them to be confident enough to share this with you. As you ponder these things you may have doubts or further questions. I challenge you to open your scriptures and dive into these topics. Pray as you study and He will walk with you.



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How to Read This Book



The book. This book follows Owen Hadlock and his friends through one school year in Rexburg, Idaho. Each chapter is about one kind of crack: the hard things that remind us to come back to God. Some we cause, some other people cause, and some just happen. In every one, the answer is the same: a real, personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

The chapters. Each chapter opens and closes with a story. Near the start, a blue box sums up the chapter. Stories from the Bible and the Book of Mormon are retold along the way, because the people in them felt what you feel.

Abilene and Asher. Two imagined narrators tell the story. Abilene is a ministering spirit of this earth, not yet born, who watches over Owen and his friends. Asher is a singer from ancient Jerusalem who now lives in the spirit world. Their scenes are fiction, set in brown and marked “A Work of Fiction.” They cannot read minds, they do not carry prayers (prayers go straight to the Father), and the still, small voice belongs to the Holy Ghost alone.

Scripture. Scriptures are quoted in short pieces, with the reference beside them so you can look them up and read the whole story yourself. Words spoken by Jesus Christ are printed in red.

Spotlights. Brown boxes marked with the sun are Spotlights: a short story, a scripture moment or a practical idea worth pausing over.

Walk with Him. Gold boxes near the end of each chapter give one simple way to know Jesus Christ better this week, and one question to think about.

The Cast

The people in the story (all imagined)



Who	About them	The crack in their year
Owen Hadlock	15, a sophomore at Henry's Fork High; a teacher in the priesthood; sweeps at the auto shop on Saturdays	A cracked phone, a group chat gone wrong, cut from the team, too many expectations
Tyler Winsor	15, Owen's best friend since Primary	A secret he thinks puts him too far from God
Mia Castellaw	15, plays the piano; brother Theo	Her parents' divorce
Jace Wendling	15, sings in the choir	Bullied at school and online
Ruby Varga	15, new in town from Houston	Lonely in a crowd; not fitting in
Hannah Prestwich	15, the oldest of six	Feels invisible and unloved
Brayden Kolstad	16, runs the "soph squad" group chat	Pressure, parties, and pain he hides
The Hadlocks	Steve and Erin; Kate (22), Owen, Lily (9); Grandma Marjorie	Grandpa Lowell died two years before the story begins
Abilene	A ministering spirit of this earth, not yet born	Watches over Owen and his friends
Asher	A Levite singer of ancient Jerusalem, now in the spirit world	Knows Grandpa Lowell there

If You Are Hurting



Some of the stories in this book are about teenagers who feel alone, unloved, ashamed or hopeless. If you feel that way, you are not the only one, and you do not have to carry it by yourself.

Tell someone today. Talk to a parent, a grandparent, your bishop, a Young Women or Young Men leader, a seminary teacher, a school counselor or a doctor. If the first person doesn't understand, tell someone else.

If you ever think about hurting yourself, tell an adult right away. In the United States you can call or text **988** at any time, day or night, to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. If you are in danger, call **911**.

If someone is hurting you, or you see something online that frightens you, tell a trusted adult. It is never your fault.

And pray. Your Father in Heaven hears you, and Jesus Christ knows exactly how you feel. "The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart" (Psalm 34:18).

The Crack



“Sophomores,” Tyler Winsor announced, dropping onto the top row of the bleachers like he owned it. “We are officially not the babies anymore.”

“We’re still babies,” Owen Hadlock said. “We’re just not the *newest* babies.”

“Speak for yourself. I grew a mustache this summer.”

Owen leaned in and squinted. “That’s chocolate milk.”

“It’s a *start*.”

It was the first day of school, Thursday, the twenty-fourth of August, and every student at Henry’s Fork High had been herded into the gym for the welcome assembly. The place smelled like floor wax and new shoes. The big doors at the end were propped open, and a hot wind came in off the potato fields and did nothing at all to cool it down. Owen and Tyler had claimed the top row, the best row. You could lean back against the wall. You could see everybody.

Six rows down, Brayden Kolstad turned around, spotted them, and fired two finger-guns. Owen fired back. Brayden was sixteen already, one of the oldest kids in their grade, and he made a room louder just by walking into it. Right now he was laughing at something below the bleachers, where his two friends from open gym, Kade Dunlavy and Ridge Kesselring, had disappeared a minute ago with a backpack and the kind of grins that meant nothing good.

“What are they doing under there?” Owen said.

“Probably finding gum,” said Tyler. “There’s, like, forty years of gum under there. It’s an ecosystem.”

Down on the floor, the principal tapped the microphone. It squealed. Four hundred kids groaned at the same time.

Then something under the bleachers went *POP*.

It was not loud, exactly. It was the kind of pop a car makes when it backfires a block away. For half a second nobody moved. Then a fat, hissing cloud of gray-white smoke came pouring up between the seats in the sophomore section, thick as a snowbank, and somebody screamed, and somebody else laughed, and then everybody was standing up at once.

“Is that—” Tyler said.

“Smoke bomb,” Owen said. “Homemade. Has to be.”

It should have stopped there. It would have been a dumb story by lunch. But under the bleachers, the thing in the soda can was still spitting sparks, and it had rolled into a drift of old paper: programs from last spring’s games, a crumpled poster, a lost foam finger. The paper caught. A little orange tongue of fire licked up behind the smoke, and the smoke turned darker, and the smell changed from fireworks to something that made your eyes water.

The fire alarm went off. It was so loud it felt like it was inside Owen’s teeth. White strobe lights flashed on the walls.

“Everyone,” the principal said into the squealing microphone, “please walk calmly to the—”

Nobody walked calmly. Four hundred kids poured down the bleachers like water out of a tipped bucket. Feet pounded on the boards. Backpacks swung. A freshman lost a shoe. Owen grabbed his bag and his phone and started down the end of the row, and a big senior came barreling past him, and an elbow caught Owen’s hand.

The phone flew.

He watched it go. It was the one thing he had paid for himself, mostly, with Saturday money from sweeping floors and handing wrenches at Ostergard Automotive. It was not new. It was the kind of phone that was nice two years ago. But it was his, and the screen was perfect. Not one scratch. He had kept it in a case all summer, until last week, when the case split down the side and he took it off and meant to buy another one.

He meant to.

The phone hit the bench, bounced once, and slipped through the gap at the back of the top row, between the bench and the wall. There was a small sound, a *tick*, and then a hard, flat *crack* on the floor eight feet below.

“No,” Owen said. “No, no, no.”

“Leave it!” Tyler yelled, already halfway down. “Owen! There’s a *fire*!”

Across the gym, Coach Bramhall came sprinting out of his office with a red fire extinguisher, ducked under the bleachers like a man going into a cave, and blasted it. A white cloud bloomed out from underneath the seats. The orange glow went out. The smoke kept rolling, but the fire was gone.

Owen hesitated for one second at the end of the bleachers. Then he ran outside with everybody else.

They stood on the football field in the hot wind for forty minutes while two fire trucks came screaming up from town, lights spinning, for a fire that was already out. The firefighters walked in with their big coats open and walked out again a few minutes later, shaking their heads, one of them carrying a blackened soda can in a pair of pliers like it was a dead mouse. Nobody was hurt. Nothing was really burned except a pile of old programs and one very sad foam finger. The vice principal, Mr. Lusk, marched Kade and Ridge across the parking lot toward the office, one hand on each of their shoulders.

Ridge was doing all the talking. He was the biggest sophomore in the school, loud even when he whispered, and he was waving both arms. “It was a *can*! It *rolled*! Somebody kicked it into the paper! How is that my fault? This whole gym’s a fire trap, you should be thanking us!”

Kade wasn’t talking at all. Kade was laughing. He was skinny and quick, with a buzz cut and a grin that took up half his face, and as they passed the sophomores at the fence he turned around, walking backward, and gave the whole crowd a slow, royal wave, like a king on a parade float. Half the field cheered. Mr. Lusk turned him back around by the collar of his shirt.

Owen didn’t cheer, but he almost smiled. He and Kade had been partners in small-engines class in eighth grade. Kade could take a lawnmower engine apart blindfolded and get it back together with no leftover pieces, which Owen had never once managed. He used to pass the sacrament in Owen’s ward, too, back when they were deacons. That felt like a long time ago.

Everybody else had their phones out. Everybody except Owen.

“Bro, you’re in the chat,” Tyler said, holding up his own phone. “Brayden made a group. ‘Soph squad.’ He’s adding everybody.”

On the screen, someone had already posted a video of the smoke pouring up through the bleachers. Under it were nineteen crying-laughing faces. Brayden had added a picture of the principal mid-squeal, with a filter that made him look like a surprised fish. The chat was moving so fast that Tyler had to scroll to keep up.

Owen laughed. He couldn’t help it. The fish filter was funny.

While they waited, he looked around the field. It was a strange first-day way to see everybody: all of them out of their seats, mixed up, blinking in the sun.

Down by the goalpost, the choir teacher had gathered her singers, because what else are you going to do with a choir on a football field? They sang the school song right there on the grass. Owen spotted Jace Wendling in the front, the shortest guy in the group,

standing very straight with his hands folded like he was at church. When Jace's part came, his voice rang out clear and high over the others, and for a few seconds the whole field got almost quiet. He was good. He was really good.

Somebody in the crowd made a sound like a squeaky door. A few kids laughed. Jace kept singing. His ears turned pink, but he kept singing.

Owen didn't laugh. He didn't say anything either.

A few yards away, Mia Castellaw was fanning herself with her schedule and laughing at something her friend said. Mia played piano in sacrament meeting sometimes, and once, in seventh grade, she had beaten Owen in a ward spelling bee on the word *rhythm*. He still thought about it more than was normal. She glanced over at him. Owen looked very hard at the fire truck.

By the fence, Hannah Prestwich stood by herself with her backpack hugged to her chest. She looked tired, the kind of tired that sleeping in doesn't fix. A little dinosaur lunch box stuck out of the side pocket of her backpack. Nobody asked her about it. Nobody really asked Hannah about anything.

And at the far edge of the crowd, near the end zone, a girl Owen had never seen before stood alone. She had dark hair pulled back tight, a gray hoodie even though it was hot, and a lanyard with a brand-new student ID on it. She was looking at her schedule, and then at the school, and then at her schedule again, like she was trying to find a map of a place nobody had told her about. There was a gap of about four feet on every side of her, the kind of gap that just happens on the first day, when everybody stands with the people they already know.

Owen noticed her. Then Tyler shoved his phone in front of Owen's face to show him another video, and he looked down.

* * *

When they finally let everyone back inside, Owen went straight to the end of the bleachers, ducked under the rail, and crawled into the dim, smoky space under the seats. It smelled like burnt paper and fire-extinguisher powder. The floor was covered with old gum, a white crust of foam, and a single lost flip-flop. His phone lay face down by a metal support beam.

He picked it up and turned it over.

The crack started in the top-left corner. It ran down and across toward the middle of the screen, and it split there into three thinner lines, like a little river reaching a delta. Tiny chips of glass caught the light.

Owen stared at it. He felt his face get hot. He felt like he was going to cry, and he felt stupid for feeling like he was going to cry over a phone, which made him feel worse.

He pressed the side button.

The screen lit up.

The lock screen was a picture of Lily, his little sister, at Island Park in June, holding up a trout almost as long as her arm and screaming with joy. The crack ran right across her face. But there she was. Her grin came through. The light came through. He swiped up. The phone opened. A notification sat at the top: **Brayden Kolstad added you to "soph squad."** Thirty-four people now, and somebody asking where everybody was eating lunch.

It still worked.

Tyler's head appeared upside down at the edge of the bleachers above him. "Is it dead?"

"It's cracked."

"Does it work?"

"Yeah."

"Then it's not dead." Tyler said it the way he said most things, like it was obvious. "Come on. They're doing the T-shirt cannon. Apparently we still get the T-shirt cannon."

Owen climbed back up. He sat against the wall and held the phone in both hands and ran his thumb over the crack. The glass was rough along the line, but it didn't cut him.

He thought about how much a new screen would cost. He thought about how many Saturdays of sweeping that was. He thought about how his dad would say, *That's why you keep it in a case*, and how his dad would be right. He thought, *I didn't even drop it. Somebody knocked it.* And then he thought, *It doesn't matter whose fault it was. It's still cracked.*

The T-shirt cannon went off. The gym cheered like the morning had been perfectly normal. Brayden caught a shirt and held it over his head like a trophy.

When the bell rang and four hundred kids stood up at once, the new girl in the gray hoodie waited until almost everyone was gone. Then she went out the side door by herself.

Owen saw her go. He meant to say something. He meant to, the same way he had meant to buy a new case.

Mia went past, three rows down, and looked up, and smiled at him. Just a little. He smiled back, and then he looked at his phone again, because that was easier.

By lunch the word was out: three days' suspension, both of them. By sixth period Kade had posted a picture in soph squad of his own feet up on a couch, with the caption *day vacation, thanks henrys fork*. Twenty-six laughing faces. Under it, Ridge had written *wasnt even my can. lusk has it out for me*.

Owen laughed at that one too. It was hard not to like Kade. But later that night he thought about the way Kade had waved at the crowd, too big and too bright, like somebody who had decided a long time ago that if he was going to get in trouble anyway, he might as well get a laugh out of it.

That night at home, Owen set the phone on his nightstand, face up, and lay on his bed in the dark. When a message came in, the screen lit, and the light came up through the crack and threw a thin, broken line across the ceiling. It looked almost like a crack in the sky.

He didn't fix it. Not that week, and not that year.

He would find out later that most people go through life with some kind of crack. Some cracks we make ourselves. Some are made by other people. Some just happen, the way a phone gets knocked out of your hand when somebody else sets off a smoke bomb on an ordinary Thursday. You can't undo them. You can't pretend they aren't there. But a cracked screen still works, and light still comes through the cracks.

And there is Someone whose whole work, from the very beginning, has been to take broken things into His hands and make them whole. He was sent, Isaiah said, "to bind up the brokenhearted" (Isaiah 61:1).

PROLOGUE

The Gentlest Reminder



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Ten Trays of Water

“Ten trays,” Tyler Winsor said. “Why do we have ten trays? There are like eighty people in this ward.”

“There are like three hundred people in this ward,” said Owen Hadlock.

“Feels like eighty.”

“That’s because you only count the ones who bring treats to activities.”

“That’s the real ward, Owen. Everybody else is just visiting.”

It was 8:40 on a Sunday morning, twenty minutes before sacrament meeting, and the two of them stood in the little preparation room behind the chapel, filling trays with water. Owen held the pitcher. Tyler lined up the tiny cups. They had done it a hundred times. They could do it half asleep, and Tyler, judging by his hair, was.

Owen filled one row a little too fast, and a drop jumped out and hit Tyler on the wrist.

Tyler looked at the drop. He looked at Owen. Then, very slowly, he dipped one finger in the pitcher and flicked it at Owen’s face.

“You can’t flick sacrament water,” Owen said, wiping his cheek. “That’s like, a rule.”

“It’s not sacrament water yet. It hasn’t been blessed. Right now it’s just tap water with big dreams.”

“Then this is just tap water too.” Owen flicked back.

Tyler ducked, spun, and reached for the last empty tray on the far end of the counter, and his elbow caught the edge of the one Owen had just filled.

It tipped.

I saw it go: a whole silver tray, twenty-four little cups, every one of them full, sliding off the counter toward the floor like a sled off a roof. Owen dropped the pitcher in the sink and lunged. He caught the tray with both hands about a foot above the carpet, at a terrible angle. Water sloshed. Three cups launched off the edge. One of them landed upside down on Tyler’s shoe, and two of them emptied themselves, with great accuracy, down the front of Owen’s white shirt.

Neither of them breathed. Owen held the tray level, very carefully, like it was a bomb. Twenty-one cups were still full.

"Nice," Tyler whispered. "Nice, nice, nice. Do not move."

"I am not moving."

"Your shirt is see-through."

"I know my shirt is see-through, Tyler."

"Gentlemen," said a voice from the doorway.

Bishop Kenley stood there with a loaf of bread in a plastic bag, chewing a sunflower seed. He looked at the tray. He looked at the cup on Tyler's shoe. He looked at Owen's shirt.

"Bishop," they said together, very seriously.

He chewed for a moment. "Nice save," he said. Then he smiled. "Thanks for coming early. You're good men." He set the bread down and went out, and they heard him laughing quietly all the way down the hall.

Owen and Tyler looked at each other. *Good men*. Neither of them felt like men, especially Owen, who was dripping. But they refilled the three cups, and they stood a little straighter as they carried the trays out to the table at the front of the chapel and laid the white cloth over them, smoothing the edges flat.

I was there. I am nearly always there. Let me tell you who I am, now that you have met them, so you will know who is talking.

My name is Abilene. I am a spirit, a son of our Father in Heaven, the same as you. I belong to this earth. I have not been born yet. My turn will come, and when it does I will forget all of this and learn to walk and fall down and get up again, the way you did. Until then I am a minister, which is an old word for a messenger and a helper. I go where I am sent. I watch. I remember. Most of the time, that is all.

I do not have wings. No angel does. I do not whisper in anyone's ear, because that is not my work; that belongs to the Holy Ghost. I cannot hear your thoughts, and I cannot hear the prayers you say inside your head. Those go straight to your Father, who alone knows your heart. What I can do is see your face, and hear what you say out loud, and stand near you. It is more than you would think.

That Sunday was the twentieth of August, the Sunday before school began, in a town called Rexburg, Idaho. Rexburg was hot and dry and brown at the edges. Up on the hill, the temple stood white against a sky so blue it looked painted. Owen was fifteen, a teacher in the Aaronic Priesthood, which meant that on Sundays he helped get the

sacrament ready: the bread and water the members of the Church take each week to remember Jesus Christ. His tie was a dark green one with tiny gold diamonds on it. It had belonged to his grandpa Lowell, who died two years before. Owen wore it most Sundays. He never said why. Tyler had been his best friend since they were three years old in nursery, when Tyler bit Owen on the arm and then cried harder than Owen did.

I had watched Owen for a long time. I was there the winter he was twelve, when his father fell off a ladder and broke both legs and the family did not know how they would pay the bills. I watched Owen pray that winter, out loud in his room at night, kneeling by his bed, with real words. “Please help Dad’s legs heal. Please help us have enough. Please help Mom not be so tired.” I could not hear the prayers he said in his heart, but I heard those. And I watched the answers come, one at a time, mostly through people. I was there the next fall, too, when his grandpa died, and Owen sat by the bed and held the old man’s hand.

Hard years make you pray. That is true for almost everyone. And then the hard years pass, and things get good, and something quiet happens that no one notices. I was about to watch it happen to Owen.

There was one more thing I noticed in that little room. While Owen was wringing out his shirt, Tyler went quiet. He was looking at the trays, but not really seeing them. That morning there was something tight around his eyes, something tired. Owen didn’t see it. Tyler shook it off and grinned and flicked one last drop, and Owen let him have it.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Always

The chapel filled up. Let me show you who was there, because you will meet them all again.

The Hadlocks sat where they always sat, on the left side, two-thirds of the way back. Steve, Owen’s dad, was on the end. He was a mechanic, broad and quiet, with grease that never quite came out from around his fingernails. His right leg still ached in the cold, though it was August and there was no cold yet. Next to him was Erin, Owen’s mom, a nurse who helped deliver babies at the hospital. She noticed everything. Then Lily, who was nine, swinging her feet and drawing a horse on the back of the program. Grandma Marjorie sat at the far end. She had come in from Sugar City. Her hands shook a little when she opened the hymnbook. She held it open anyway.

Owen sat with them after he finished with the trays, his shirt still damp down the front, and he kept his phone in his lap.

Three rows ahead, on the right, sat the Castellaws. Mia was fifteen. She had played the prelude on the organ that morning, nervously, and missed one note. I saw her wince. No one else noticed. Her little brother Theo, who was ten, was building a tower out of hymnbooks. Her mother, Shauna, sat very straight. Her father, Dan, sat at the far end of the bench with a little space between him and everyone else. A small space. You would not notice it unless you were watching. I was watching.

Near the back sat the Prestwiches: six children in one row, and only one adult-sized person among them, and she was fifteen. Hannah held the baby on her hip and kept one hand on the shoulder of a four-year-old who wanted to crawl under the bench. Her father was away at work in North Dakota. Her mother was home in bed. Hannah had dressed all six of them. She had done the twins' hair. Her own hair was still wet, pulled back in a hurry. She looked toward the front of the chapel, and she looked very, very tired.

Not everyone I will tell you about was in that room. Early that morning, before I came to the chapel, I had been sent past every one of them, the way a teacher walks the rows before a test. Across town, a family who had just moved up from Houston, Texas, was still unpacking boxes, and a girl named Ruby was lying on a mattress on the floor of her new room, looking at the ceiling. A boy named Jace was practicing a song in his bedroom with the door closed. And a boy named Brayden was asleep, because he had been up until three in the morning on his phone.

There was one more empty place I noticed that morning, though no one else did. Halfway up the right side, there was a bench where a family named Dunlavy used to sit: a mother, a little girl, and a boy named Kade, who had passed the sacrament with Owen when they were both twelve and had once dropped a whole tray of bread and caught every piece before it hit the floor. Two summers before, Kade's father had packed his truck and driven to Nevada and, after a few months, stopped calling. Kade's mother, Tanya, worked nights now at the truck stop out by the highway, and on Sunday mornings she was asleep. Kade had stopped coming the fall his father left. He was fourteen. Nobody had ever really asked him why, and he had never really said. Across town that morning he was in his garage with a friend of his named Ridge Kesselring, a big, loud boy who had never come to church much at all, and the two of them were filling an empty soda can with things that should not go in a soda can.

I would come to know all of them.

The sacrament hymn began. Owen's thumb was moving on his phone. I want to be fair to him: he was not doing anything bad. He was looking at a video of a truck pulling another truck out of a mud pit. But his eyes said his mind was not in the room.

Then the hymn ended, and the special hush fell, the one that only comes in that hour of the week. One of the priests knelt at the table and began the prayer on the bread. His voice cracked on the first word. He was sixteen.

He prayed that the people would eat “in remembrance of the body of thy Son,” and that they would “always remember him” (Moroni 4:3).

Always remember him. I have heard those words in more places than I can tell you. In chapels like this one. In living rooms. In a hospital room, where a bishop blessed the bread on a lunch tray for a man who could not come to church anymore. The words never get old to me. They are some of the gentlest words in the world.

And they are an invitation, not an order. Notice how it works. Our Father does not force anyone to remember His Son. He asks you to promise that you will, each Sunday. Then He gives you a week to try. Then He asks again. Week after week. Year after year. He never gets tired of asking. That is the gentlest reminder there is.

It started with Jesus Himself. On the last night before He died, He sat at supper with His friends. He “took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it,” and gave it to them. Then He said, “**This do in remembrance of me**” (Luke 22:19). He knew what was coming: the garden, the betrayal, the cross. He knew His friends would be scared and scattered. So He gave them something small to hold on to, a piece of bread they could eat with their hands, so they would never forget Him.

The deacons came down the aisles with the trays Owen and Tyler had filled.

Lily took the bread with both hands, very carefully. Grandma Marjorie’s hand shook, and a little piece fell into her lap, and she picked it up and ate it and smiled. Hannah held the tray for every one of her brothers and sisters before she took a piece herself. Mia took the bread and closed her eyes. I could not know what she was thinking. I only saw that her face was very still.

Owen took the bread with one hand. The other hand was still holding his phone.

Then his grandma reached over. She did not take the phone. She did not frown at him. She just put her shaking hand on top of his, very gently, and left it there.

Owen looked at her. She was looking at the front of the room, not at him. Her hand trembled on his. He sat like that for a few seconds. Then he turned the phone off and slid it into his pocket. When the water came, he took the little cup and held it for a moment before he drank it. I saw his lips move, just slightly. Whatever he said, he said it to Someone else, not to me.

I felt a warmth come into that row. I did not make it. I cannot make it. But I know it when I see it. It comes when the Holy Ghost is near, and it settles on people like sunlight on a cold morning.

Owen's face changed. Just for a second. He looked like a boy who had remembered something.

I wish I could tell you that it lasted. It did not, not that day. By the closing hymn his phone was back out. By that afternoon he was laughing in the kitchen and arguing with Lily over the last roll and planning how he would spend the last few days of summer. Four days later, at a school assembly, his phone slid off the top of the bleachers and cracked. You already know that part.

But I have learned something in a very long time of watching: the remembering does not have to last all week to matter. It only has to come back. That is why the bread and water come every Sunday. Jesus Christ knows how quickly we forget. He made a way for us to come back to Him again and again, as often as we need. He knows each of His sheep. He "calleth his own sheep by name" (John 10:3). He knew Owen's. He knows yours.

What follows is a year when a group of friends forgot Him, and then remembered Him, and all the things, gentle and hard, that helped them remember: cracked phones and cracked hearts, and how He reaches into every one of them.

And it begins, as I said, on an ordinary Sunday, with ten trays of water and a boy wearing his grandfather's tie.

But to understand that Sunday, I have to take you back to June, to a cold river in Island Park and a nine-year-old girl with a fishing pole.



WALK WITH HIM • One Minute of Remembering

This Sunday, when the bread and water come, put your phone all the way away: not in your lap, but in your pocket or your bag. While the tray is coming down the row, think of one thing Jesus Christ did when He lived on earth that you love: a person He healed, a child He held, a time He was kind. Then, when you take the bread, tell Him silently, "I remember You." That is all. It takes about one minute.

Think about it: What is one thing about Jesus that you never want to forget?

PART ONE

Lest Thou Forget



Why God Stirs His Children

Lest Thou Forget



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Best Summer Ever

“I bet you can’t sit down in it,” Lily said.

“I bet *you* can’t,” said Owen.

“I asked first.”

“That’s not how bets work.”

“It’s how *my* bets work.”

They were standing knee-deep in the Henry’s Fork River at Island Park, in June, and the water was so cold it felt like it was biting their shins. The river ran clear and fast over green stones, and pine trees leaned over the bank like they were watching. Lily was nine. She had a fishing pole in one hand that was taller than she was, and a look on her face that meant she was about to do something that would make their mother yell.

“On three,” Owen said. “We both sit.”

“One,” said Lily. “Two—“

Her fishing pole bent nearly in half.

“OWEN!”

The line went screaming off the reel. Something under the water had taken her worm and was heading for Montana. Lily yanked back with both hands, and the fish yanked harder, and her sneakers slid on the slick green rocks, and down she went: not sitting, but flat on her back in the current, pole held straight up over her head like the Statue of Liberty.

The river grabbed her and started to carry her.

Owen did not think. He threw himself after her, belly first, into water so cold it punched the air out of him. He caught her by the hood of her life jacket, dug his feet into the rocks, and hauled her up onto a gravel bar, both of them gasping and coughing and shrieking all at once.

“Are you okay? Lily! Are you okay?”

Lily was not listening to him. She had not let go of the pole. She was reeling.

“I’ve got him!” she screamed. “Owen, get the NET!”

Up on the bank, Steve came crashing out of the trees with the net in one hand and a half-eaten sandwich in the other, and Erin came right behind him, yelling exactly what mothers yell. Two minutes later Lily stood on the gravel bar, soaked to the bone, teeth chattering, holding up a rainbow trout almost as long as her arm, and screaming with joy.

Steve took the picture. It would end up as the lock screen on Owen’s phone, and you already know what happened to that phone.

Owen didn’t catch a fish all week. Lily reminded him about it every hour.

I was there for most of that summer, so I can tell you that if you had asked Owen that August to describe it, he would have said, “Best summer ever,” and he would have been right. The Hadlocks had borrowed a tent trailer from the Ybarrolas next door. Steve fixed its broken jack with a bolt and some wire and was proud of himself all week. At night they built a fire, and Steve told the same three stories he always told, and Erin laughed at all of them as if she had never heard them. The stars came out so thick over the trees that Owen lay on his back on the picnic table and tried to count them, and gave up, and just looked.

In July there was the stake youth trek: three days of dust, sunburn, blisters, bad jokes, and singing around a fire until the leaders made everybody go to bed. Owen came home with a peeling nose and six new friends from other wards.

And every Saturday he worked at Ostergard Automotive. He swept the bays. He handed wrenches. He learned to hear the difference between a worn belt and a bad bearing. Travis, one of the mechanics, called him “Professor” because he asked so many questions. Marco let him run the tire machine. Dale Ostergard paid him in cash on Saturday afternoons and said, “Good work, kid,” every single time, and every single time Owen walked out to the truck like he was ten feet tall. His dad worked at the same shop. They rode home together in the truck with the windows down. Some days they did not talk at all. They didn’t need to.

His dad’s legs were healed. The bills from that hard winter nearly three years before were finally paid off. The family had enough.

It was good. All of it was good. Back in the preparation room, I told you that something quiet was about to happen to Owen, something no one would notice. This is it. And I want you to understand that it is not about anything bad that Owen did.

It is about something he stopped doing.

When Owen was twelve, in the hard winter, he prayed every night on his knees, out loud, with real words. When his grandpa was dying, he prayed in the car and in the hospital hallway, sometimes out loud, sometimes in a whisper. Prayer then was not a habit. It was a lifeline.

That summer, the prayers I could hear got shorter. And it was made known to me, by those I answer to, that the ones I could not hear were thinning out too.

It was not sudden. It was like a puddle drying up in the sun: a little less every day, until one morning you notice it is gone. At dinner, when it was his turn to bless the food, he said, “Dear Heavenly Father, thanks for the food, bless it, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen,” all in one breath, the way you might rattle off a phone number. At night he said, half asleep, “Thanks for today. Amen.” Some nights he didn’t say anything at all.

He was not angry at God. He did not stop believing. If you had asked him whether he believed in Jesus Christ, he would have said yes, right away, and meant it.

He just forgot to talk to Him.

I stood by his bed on one of those nights in late July. Owen was asleep with his mouth open and one arm hanging off the mattress, still sunburned from trek. Outside, the sprinklers ticked across the neighbor’s lawn, and the summer night was warm and smelled like cut grass.

I was not sad because he was doing something wrong. I was sad because I knew Who was waiting for him to say more than “thanks for today.” And I knew how much he would need that Friend before the year was over.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: If everything is going great, why do I stop praying?

What scripture says: When life is easy, people forget the Lord who gave them everything. He never forgets them.

In the story: Owen has the best summer of his life, and his prayers shrink to “thanks for the food.”

Key verses: Deuteronomy 6:12; Deuteronomy 8:2–3, 11; Helaman 12:2; Luke 17:15–17; Isaiah 49:15–16

When Life Is Good

Here is something strange about people: we usually forget God when things are going well.

You would think it would be the other way around. When we have food and friends and a good summer, you would think we would be the most thankful. But a prophet in the Book of Mormon named Mormon noticed something about his people. He wrote that at the very time when the Lord blesses His people with everything good, “then is the time that they do harden their hearts, and do forget the Lord their God” (Helaman 12:2).

That doesn’t mean blessings are bad. Good summers are gifts from God. Friends are gifts. Food is a gift. A working body is a gift. Every one of them is a way your Father in Heaven is saying, “I love you.” The problem is not the gifts. The problem is that when we are full and comfortable, we stop feeling like we need Him. And when we stop feeling like we need Him, we stop talking to Him.

Moses saw this coming a long time ago. Before the children of Israel entered their new land, he warned them that soon they would have houses they did not build and food they did not plant. Then he said: “beware lest thou forget the LORD” (Deuteronomy 6:12).

Beware. That’s a strong word. It means: watch out, this can sneak up on you.

A Story: Bread That Fell from the Sky

Here is the story Moses was thinking about when he said that.

The children of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for a very long time. They made bricks in the hot sun, and they were beaten if they did not make enough. They cried out to God, and God heard them. He sent Moses. He sent plagues. He opened the Red Sea so they could walk through on dry ground. They watched the water close behind them. They sang and danced on the shore.

About a month later, they were hungry.

They were in the wilderness, a dry, rocky, empty place, and the food they brought from Egypt had run out. And they started to complain. They said they wished they had stayed in Egypt, where they “did eat bread to the full” (Exodus 16:3). That’s how fast they forgot. One month after the Red Sea, they were missing slavery.

God didn’t give up on them. He said to Moses, “I will rain bread from heaven for you” (Exodus 16:4).

The next morning, when the dew dried up, the ground around the camp was covered with something small and white, like frost. The people came out of their tents and stared at it. They said to one another, “It is manna” (Exodus 16:15), which in Hebrew sounds like “What is it?” because they had no idea. Moses told them, “This is the bread which the LORD hath given you to eat.” It tasted “like wafers made with honey” (Exodus 16:31).

Every morning for forty years, it was there. Every single morning. They gathered it, they ate it, and when the sun got hot, whatever was left melted away. They could not store it up (except on the day before the Sabbath). They had to trust God for it again the next day.

And here is the part that should make us laugh a little, and then think hard: after a while, they got bored of it. Miracle bread fell out of the sky every morning, and some of them complained, “there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes” (Numbers 11:6). The miracle had become normal. And when a miracle becomes normal, people stop seeing God in it.

Forty years later, Moses stood in front of their children and told them why God did it that way. He said the Lord fed them with manna “that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only” (Deuteronomy 8:3). In other words: the bread was never just about food. It was about learning to look up every morning and remember Who was feeding them.

Then Moses warned them about what would happen when they finally reached their good land, with real fields and real houses: “When thou hast eaten and art full... then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the LORD thy God” (Deuteronomy 8:12, 14).

That is exactly what happened to Owen that summer. Not a big sin. Just a full stomach, a full schedule, a full phone, and a heart that slowly stopped looking up.

Your summer is probably full of manna, too. Food in the fridge. A ride to practice. Friends who text you back. A body that works. Look at how much of it you did not make yourself.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • The Pride Cycle

The Book of Mormon tells the same story over and over, so many times that people have given it a name: the pride cycle. It goes like a wheel, around and around.

1. Blessed. The people are humble and close to God, and He blesses them. They have peace, good harvests, and safety.

2. Proud. Because things are good, they start to think they did it all themselves. They get proud. They look down on people who have less. They stop praying.

3. Forgetting. Little by little, they forget the Lord. Mormon wrote that they forgot Him “because of their ease, and their exceedingly great prosperity” (Helaman 12:2). *Ease* means life got too comfortable.

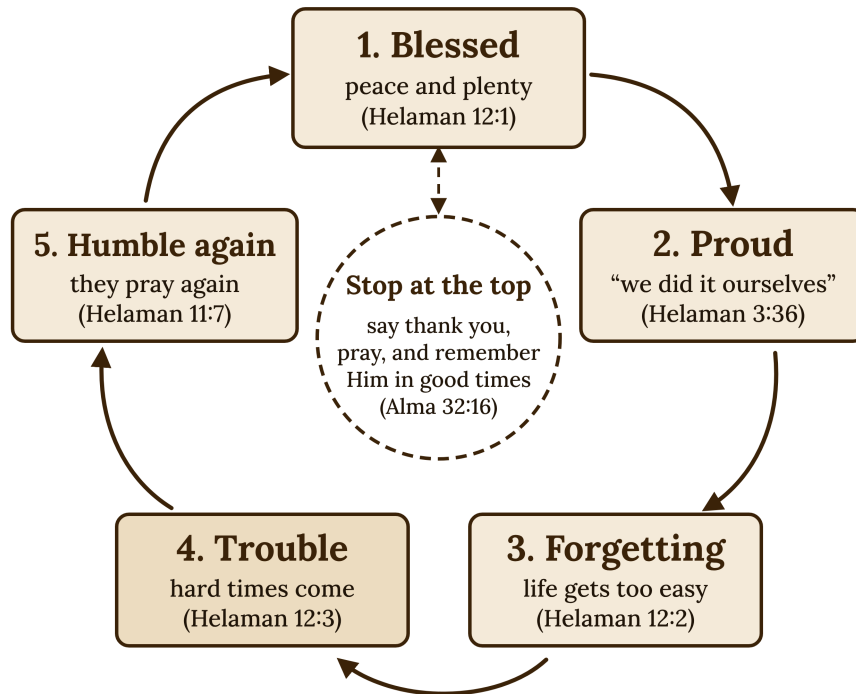
4. Trouble. Then hard things come: war, hunger, sickness, loss. Mormon wrote that unless the Lord lets them have trials, “they will not remember him” (Helaman 12:3).

5. Humble again. In the hard times, the people remember God. They pray. They change. And God blesses them again, and the wheel turns back to the top.

You can see the cycle in whole nations. You can also see it in one teenager’s life. Maybe you have seen it in yours: you prayed hard when your grandma was sick, or before a big test, or when your parents were fighting, and then when things got better you stopped.

Here’s the good news. You don’t have to ride the whole wheel. You can stop at the top. You can choose to remember God while things are good, so you do not need something hard to wake you up. That is what this whole book is about.

The Cycle of Remembering



Stopping at the top of the wheel can be as simple as two words: thank you. Ten men once got the same miracle on the same day. Watch what each of them did with it.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • The Ten Lepers: Where Are the Nine?

Ten grown men were yelling at the top of their lungs from across a field: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us” (Luke 17:13). They were not being rude. They just were not allowed to come any closer.

All ten had leprosy, a terrible skin disease. People who had it could not live with their families. They had to stay far away from everybody, so they stood at a distance on the edge of a village and shouted. Jesus was walking toward Jerusalem, and He heard them.

He told them to go and show themselves to the priests, which is what a person did when they were healed. And as they walked, they looked down at their hands, at their arms, at their faces in the water of a stream, and the disease was gone. All ten of them. Clean.

Imagine that walk. Imagine running home to your mom after years away.

Nine of them kept going.

One of them stopped. He turned around. He came back, shouting praises to God at the top of his voice, and “fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks” (Luke 17:16). He was a Samaritan, an outsider, the kind of man the others probably looked down on.

Jesus asked a question that is still worth thinking about: **“Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine?”** (Luke 17:17). Then He spoke to the one who came back: **“Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole”** (Luke 17:19).

The One Who Came Back

The nine were not bad men. They were probably just happy. They were busy. They were going home. They meant to say thank you. They just forgot.

But the one who came back got something the nine never got. He got to kneel at the feet of Jesus and look at His face. He got to hear Jesus speak to him personally. All ten were healed in their skin. Only one came back and got to know the Healer.

That is the difference between being blessed by Jesus and knowing Him. Going back to say thank you is how you get to know Him.

He Has Not Forgotten You

Here’s the thing to hold on to from this chapter. You might forget Jesus Christ. Everybody does sometimes. But He will never forget you.

Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord asked: “Can a woman forget her sucking child?” In other words: can a mother forget her own nursing baby? Then He answered: “yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee” (Isaiah 49:15). Then He said something even more amazing: “Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands” (Isaiah 49:16).

Graven means cut in, carved, engraved. Think about that. When Jesus Christ was crucified, nails went through His hands. The marks are still there. He showed them to

His disciples after He rose from the dead. In a way, your name is written there. He paid for it. He doesn't forget what He paid for.

So when you notice that your prayers have shrunk to "thanks for the food," don't panic. Don't decide you are a bad person. Just turn around, like the one leper did. Come back. He is not standing there with His arms folded. He is waiting, and He is glad to see you.

Jesus told His disciples, "**I have called you friends**" (John 15:15). A friend is someone you talk to. Not someone you talk to only when you need a favor. Someone you tell about your day. Someone you laugh with and cry with. That's the kind of relationship He wants with you. It does not start with a giant prayer. It starts with a real one.

WALK WITH HIM • Say Thank You Like You Mean It

Tonight, before you fall asleep, kneel down for two minutes. Don't use your usual words. Instead, tell Heavenly Father five specific things that went right this week, like you are telling a friend about them: the burrito at lunch, the friend who saved you a seat, the test you didn't fail. Then thank Him for His Son, by name. Notice how you feel when you stand up.

Think about it: What blessing in your life has become so normal that you stopped seeing it as a gift?



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION
The Prayer at Grandma's Table

The Sunday after school started, the Hadlocks drove to Sugar City for dinner at Grandma Marjorie's.

Her house was small and smelled like roast and rolls and the lavender soap she kept by the sink. Grandpa Lowell's recliner still sat in the corner of the front room. Nobody sat in it. Above it hung his old Army photo: a skinny young man in uniform, maybe nineteen, with big ears and a serious face. Owen always looked at it when he came in. He never said why.

They crowded around the kitchen table. Lily told everyone about third grade. Steve told about a customer who had driven for two hundred miles with the parking brake on. Erin laughed. Owen kept his phone under the table, face down on his knee, and every time it buzzed he flipped it over. The soph squad chat had grown to thirty-nine people, and it never, ever stopped.

"Is it true a kid blew up the gym?" Lily asked.

“Nobody blew up the gym,” Owen said. “It was a smoke bomb. Kade Dunlavy and Ridge Kesselring. They got three days.”

Steve looked up from his plate. “Kade Dunlavy. Rick’s boy?”

“I guess. His dad’s not around anymore.”

“No,” Steve said. “He’s not.” Rick Dunlavy used to come by the shop for parts, he told them, back when Kade was little. Kade would sit on the tool chest and ask what every single part was for. “Smartest hands I ever saw on a kid that age. Then Rick took off for Nevada, and that was that.” He pushed a potato around his plate. “Tanya’s working nights out at the truck stop now. That’s a lot for one person.”

“He doesn’t come to church anymore,” Owen said. “He told me once it’s because God doesn’t do anything. He said it like a joke.”

Nobody laughed. Grandma Marjorie set down her fork, slowly, with both hands.

“People say a lot of things like a joke,” she said, “when it isn’t one.”

“He’s funny, though,” Owen said.

“I’m sure he is,” said Grandma. “Funny boys need friends too. Maybe more than most.”

Then Lily knocked over the gravy, and the talk moved on, the way it always does at a crowded table.

“Owen,” Grandma said. “Would you bless the food?”

He put the phone down on his knee. Everyone folded their arms.

“Dear Heavenly Father, thanks for the food, please bless it, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.”

It took about four seconds.

Grandma didn’t say anything. She passed the rolls.

After dinner, while his parents did dishes and Lily ran in the backyard, Owen sat on the couch, scrolling. Grandma came and sat down beside him. It took her a while to sit. She was seventy-six, and her hands shook so much that she had to hold one with the other in her lap.

She nodded at the phone. “What happened to the screen?”

He showed her the crack. He told her about the senior’s elbow and the long drop behind the bleachers.

“Does it still work?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, then.” She looked at the crack for a long time. Then she said, “Can I tell you something your grandpa told me?”

Owen put the phone down.

“When he came home from the Army,” she said, “he didn’t pray for almost a year. He wasn’t angry. He just got busy. Got a job, got married to me, bought a truck. Everything was good. And one night he was out in the shop working late, and he dropped a wrench, and he heard himself say, ‘Thanks, Lord,’ when he found it under the bench. And he stopped. He said it was the first time he’d said anything to the Lord in months, and it was about a wrench.” She smiled. “He said it felt like running into an old friend at the store, a friend you used to talk to every day, and you’d forgotten how much you liked him.”

Owen didn’t say anything. He looked up at the Army photo above the recliner.

“That winter your dad fell,” Grandma said, “I used to hear you praying through the wall when I stayed over. You remember?”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t have to have a bad winter to talk to Him like that.” She patted his knee with her shaking hand. Then she got up, slowly, and went to help with the dishes.

Owen sat there. The phone buzzed on the cushion beside him. He didn’t pick it up.

I watched his face. I could not tell you what he was thinking; I never can. I can only tell you what I saw. He looked at the crack in his phone. He looked at the photo of his grandpa. He looked at his hands. And then, sitting on his grandma’s couch with the dishwasher running in the kitchen and Lily shrieking outside, he bowed his head and closed his eyes.

His lips moved. I did not hear the words. They were not for me.

But I saw it take longer than four seconds. Much longer. And I felt the room change, the way a room does when the Spirit comes into it, a quiet warmth that was not there a minute before. Owen’s shoulders came down. He stayed still for a long time.

When he opened his eyes, he wiped them quickly with the back of his hand and looked around to make sure no one had seen. No one had, except me.

That night at home, Owen knelt by his bed for the first time in weeks. It was not a long prayer. He was tired, and it was a school night. But he said it out loud, quietly, and I heard part of it.

“Thanks for Grandma. Thanks for the river and for Lily’s fish, even though it was bigger than any of mine. Thanks for the shop. Thanks for Dad’s legs. I’m sorry I forgot about You. I don’t want to forget about You.”

Then he climbed into bed, and he put the phone on the nightstand instead of on his chest.

It buzzed twice before he fell asleep. He let it.

I would love to tell you that this was the end of the forgetting. It was not. The noise of the world was about to get much louder, and Owen would forget again, and so would his friends, and so would many people who should have known better. That is how it goes with people. But he had turned around, like the one leper. He had come back once. And once you know the way back, you can find it again.

He kept the phone on the nightstand for three whole nights. On the fourth morning, a moose walked out of the willows, and everything got loud.



As It Was in the Days of Noah



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Forty Voices

“Mr. Fennimore,” Tyler said. “Final answer.”

“Mr. Fennimore is not a vampire,” said Owen. “Mr. Fennimore has a tan.”

“Spray tan. That’s what they want you to think.”

It was 5:58 on a Thursday morning, still dark, and the two of them were slumped in the back seat of the Winsors’ minivan on the way to early-morning seminary. Tyler’s mom drove the carpool that week. She had a travel mug of hot chocolate in the cup holder and the radio turned down low, and she was pretending very hard not to listen.

Brayden had posted a poll in soph squad at 5:41: *which teacher is secretly a vampire*. Nineteen people had already voted. Owen had not even gotten out of bed until 5:40.

“It’s Mrs. Oakden,” Owen said. “She never eats lunch. She just drinks red stuff out of a bottle.”

“That’s cranberry juice, Owen.”

“That’s what they want you to think.”

Sister Winsor laughed into her hot chocolate. Then she said, “Oh,” in a small voice, and stood on the brakes.

The minivan slid. Owen’s seat belt grabbed him across the chest like a hand. Tyler’s backpack flew off the seat and hit the back of his mom’s headrest. The hot chocolate jumped out of the cup holder and went all over the dashboard. Owen’s phone shot out of his fingers, bounced off the floor mat, and skidded under the seat in front of him.

In the headlights, three feet from the bumper, stood a moose.

It was enormous. It was taller than the minivan. It had come up out of the willows along the canal, and now it stood in the middle of the road with its long, sad face turned toward them, steam coming out of its nose, chewing something, completely unbothered. It looked at the van like the van was the one who had made a mistake.

Nobody said anything. The moose blinked.

“Mom,” Tyler whispered. “Mom. Don’t honk.”

“I’m not going to *honk*, Tyler.”

The moose chewed for a while longer. Then it walked across the road, slowly, the way a grandpa crosses a parking lot, and stepped down into the ditch on the other side and disappeared into the dark.

Sister Winsor let out a breath. She looked at the dashboard dripping with hot chocolate. “Well,” she said. “That’s the most exciting thing that’s happened to me since the fourth grade.”

Owen dug his phone out from under the seat. The crack was still just one crack. He let out his breath too.

By the time they walked into the stake center at 6:15, Tyler had posted that they almost hit a moose. By 6:16, three other kids had posted that they had seen it too, from three other cars, from three other angles. By the time Sister Quintanar finished the opening prayer, there were eleven moose videos in the chat. By lunch, somebody had given the moose a name (Gerald), a fake account, and a girlfriend. By the end of the day, forty people had sent four hundred messages about Gerald, and nobody was really talking about the moose anymore. They were just talking.

That was soph squad. By the end of the first week of school it had forty people in it. Brayden Kolstad added them the way some people collect stickers: kids from his English class, kids from the bus, a kid from Sugar City nobody really knew, a girl who had moved away in sixth grade and still somehow knew everyone. Most of it was silly. Some of it was funny. Some of it was Gerald.

And it never stopped.

That night Owen lay in bed with the phone over his face. The crack ran across the glow like a lightning bolt. Somebody posted a meme. Somebody posted *bro go to sleep*. Somebody posted Gerald again. At 12:20 a.m. he finally put it down.

He did not pray that night. I was told later that he meant to, and fell asleep thinking about it.

There was something else in that room with him. I will tell you about it plainly, because you should know.

Long ago, before this world was made, I had a friend named Sethar. His light was a hard, bright blue. He chose to follow Lucifer, the one who rebelled against our Father, and he was cast out with him. His blue turned a dull red, like a coal going cold. He has no body and never will. He cannot make anyone do anything. But he can crowd. He can hurry. He can fill every quiet space with noise so there is never a moment left over to listen.

That week I saw him more than once, a smear of dull red at the edge of the light from Owen's phone. He did not need to do anything dramatic. He just leaned in close and waited for the next buzz, and the next, and the next. He looked pleased. He did not even look at me.

The Holy Ghost is never loud. He does not shout over noise. He waits for quiet.

That same Thursday, at lunch, Owen walked right past someone who had been waiting for somebody, anybody, to notice her. I will tell you about her at the end of this chapter. Owen didn't see her. He was naming a moose.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: I'm not doing anything bad. So why do I feel so far from God?

What scripture says: In Noah's day, people were not only wicked; they were so busy with ordinary life that they "knew not" what was coming. God still speaks, but in a quiet voice.

In the story: The group chat grows to 40 kids and fills every quiet minute; Ruby eats lunch alone in the library, and nobody notices.

Key verses: Matthew 24:37–39; Moses 8:20–22; 3 Nephi 11:3–5; Genesis 9:13

Eating and Drinking

Near the end of His life, Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives with His disciples and told them about the last days, the time before He comes again. He compared it to a time long before, the time of Noah.

You might expect Him to say that in Noah's day people were murdering and stealing. And they were; the Bible says the earth was full of violence. But that is not what Jesus talked about. He said: **"For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark"** (Matthew 24:38). (*Noe is the Greek way of saying Noah.*)

Eating. Drinking. Getting married. Those aren't sins. That's just life. Lunch. Weddings. Parties. Plans.

Then He said the scary part: they **"knew not until the flood came, and took them all away"** (Matthew 24:39).

Knew not. They didn't know. And it wasn't because no one told them.

A Story: The Man Who Kept Talking

Noah was a preacher before he was a boat builder. The book of Moses, in the Pearl of Great Price, tells us more about him than Genesis does. It says “Noah called upon the children of men that they should repent; but they hearkened not unto his words” (Moses 8:20).

Picture it. Noah walks into the busy part of town. People are buying and selling. Music is playing. Somebody is getting married, and there is a feast with long tables and lamps. And here comes this old man saying, “Believe and repent of your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Moses 8:24). He tells them a flood is coming.

And they did not even argue with him very hard. They just brushed him off. They pointed out that they were eating and drinking, marrying and having children, and that everything was fine (see Moses 8:21). They were too busy and too comfortable to take him seriously.

So Noah went home and started building. For a long time, he built. The sound of his hammer rang out over the hills. People walked by and shook their heads. Some laughed. Most of them probably just stopped noticing. A man building a giant boat on dry land became one more noise in a noisy world, like a car alarm that goes off so often that nobody looks up anymore.

Noah kept going. The Bible says he “walked with God” (Genesis 6:9). While everybody else was busy, Noah was listening.

Then one day the animals came. Then Noah’s family went in. And the Bible says something so simple it can give you chills: “the LORD shut him in” (Genesis 7:16). The door closed. And then the rain began.

The people outside were not shocked because no one had warned them. They were shocked because they had stopped listening.

Here is why that matters to you. Most teens are not tempted to throw their lives away in one big terrible choice. The danger is quieter than that. It is being so busy, so entertained, so rushed, that when the Lord speaks to you, you don’t hear Him. Not because He is silent. Because you are never quiet.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • Noise and the Still Small Voice

After Jesus rose from the dead, He came to the people in the Americas. The Book of Mormon tells about it in 3 Nephi. Before He appeared, the people heard a voice from heaven. It “was not a harsh voice, neither was it a loud voice,” but “it did pierce them” all the way to the center (3 Nephi 11:3).

Here is the interesting part. The first time, they did not understand it. The second time, “they understood it not” (3 Nephi 11:4). The third time, they “did open their ears to hear it” (3 Nephi 11:5), and they turned and looked toward heaven. Then they understood. The voice was Heavenly Father, introducing His Son.

The voice did not get louder the third time. The people got quieter.

That is how the Holy Ghost works in your life, too. He usually does not shout. He comes as a feeling of peace, a thought that keeps coming back, a warmth when you read about Jesus, an uneasy feeling when something is wrong. If your life is full of noise every minute, you might miss it, not because it isn't there, but because it is quiet.

Try this: build one or two quiet spaces into every day. The first five minutes after you wake up. The car ride. The walk between classes. The last ten minutes before bed. Leave them empty on purpose. “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalms 46:10).

The Bow in the Cloud

People sometimes wonder: if the world is getting as noisy and as wicked as it was in Noah's day, will God send another flood?

He promised He would not. After the waters went down, God told Noah, “neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth” (Genesis 9:11). And He gave a sign. He said, “I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth” (Genesis 9:13).

A token is a reminder. A covenant is a promise between God and His people. So every rainbow you have ever seen is a reminder of a promise.

But look at who the reminder is for. God said, “I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant” (Genesis 9:16). The rainbow is not mainly for us. God says it is so He will remember.

Of course God does not forget. He is telling us something. He is saying: “Even in a world that has forgotten Me, I keep My promises. I remember you.” The next time you see a rainbow over the fields after a summer storm, let it remind you of that. In a noisy world, He is still keeping His word. He is still watching. He is still kind.

People God Likes

“Hadlock!” Kade Dunlavy said. “My old partner. You still put the spark plug in last and then cry about it?”

“That was one time,” said Owen. “In eighth grade.”

“You cried, though.”

“I did not cry. I had oil in my eye.”

“Oil,” Kade said to the room. “He had *oil* in his *eye*.”

It was the next afternoon, Friday, sixth period, in the shop wing at the back of Henry’s Fork, where the Small Engines class met in a long room that smelled like gasoline and old rags. Kade was back from his three-day vacation. Mr. Haddix, the shop teacher, had taken one look at the two of them and put them at the same bench, with a dead snowblower engine that a farmer had donated back before either of them was born.

Kade did most of the work. Owen let him. Kade’s hands moved over that engine the way Mia’s moved over a piano, quick and sure, never looking. He cleaned the carburetor with a toothbrush. He found a crack in the fuel line by feel. He talked the whole time, about nothing, about Gerald the moose, about how Mr. Haddix’s mustache was the only thing in the room older than the engine.

“Okay,” Kade said finally. “Moment of truth. Stand back, church boy.”

He wrapped the starter rope around his hand and pulled.

The engine coughed, choked, and then roared to life so loudly that the whole class jumped. A ring of blue smoke blew out sideways and hit Owen full in the face. The bench shook. A wrench walked itself off the edge and clanged on the floor. Kade threw both arms in the air and yelled like he had just won a championship, and Mr. Haddix came running across the room, waving his clipboard, and hit the kill switch.

In the sudden quiet, Owen’s ears rang. Kade was grinning so hard his eyes almost closed.

“First pull,” he said. “*First pull*, Hadlock.”

I saw his face in that second, before he remembered to look cool. He looked about nine years old. He looked like a boy sitting on a tool chest, waiting for his dad to say *good job*.

Nobody said it. The bell rang.

After school, Owen cut through the student parking lot on his way home. An old green pickup idled by the fence with the windows down, rattling. Ridge Kesselring was at the wheel. Ridge was sixteen, but he did not have a license yet, which everyone knew, and which did not seem to bother Ridge at all. Kade sat in the passenger seat with a little vape cupped in his hand like a secret he wasn't trying very hard to keep.

"Hadlock," Kade called. "Want a ride?"

"Ridge doesn't have a license."

"Cops only pull you over if they already hate you," Ridge said. "And they already hate me. So it's not my fault either way."

"That's not how that works," Owen said.

"Everything's how it works for me." Ridge revved the engine.

Kade looked at the backpack on Owen's shoulder. The corner of Owen's scriptures was sticking out of it, the old blue ones from seminary that morning. "You still doing the six a.m. church thing?"

"Seminary. Yeah." Owen hesitated, and then said it anyway. "You could come. Sister Quintanar brings doughnuts on Fridays."

Kade laughed. It was a real laugh, not mean. "Nah," he said. "Church is for people God likes."

He said it lightly, like the punch line to a joke. Then Ridge popped the clutch, and the green pickup lurched out of the lot, spitting gravel, and a freshman on a bike had to swerve onto the grass to get out of the way.

Owen stood there with the dust settling on his shoes.

I stood there too. And I will tell you what I saw that Owen did not. For half a second, through the back window of that truck, I saw a smear of dull red in the middle of the seat between the two boys, close and comfortable, the way a dog curls up where it knows it is welcome. Sethar did not look back at me. He did not need to. Kade had said the sentence for him.

Word came to me later that, in all the noise of that loud September, it was the one sentence Owen kept hearing. He did not know what he should have said back. Most fifteen-year-olds would not. I would hear Kade say it many more ways before that year was over.



Making Room for Him

Jesus Himself was busy. Crowds followed Him everywhere. People begged Him for help all day long. Once, so many people were “coming and going” that He and His disciples “had no leisure so much as to eat” (Mark 6:31). That sounds a lot like the week before finals.

So what did He do? He said to His friends, **“Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while”** (Mark 6:31). And for Himself, Mark tells us that early in the morning, “rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed” (Mark 1:35).

If the Son of God needed quiet time to talk with His Father, so do we.

Here is the good news. He does not ask you to leave your friends, quit everything and live in a cave. He just asks you to make a little room. And when you make room, He comes. He told John, **“Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him”** (Revelation 3:20). *Sup* means to eat dinner together. He wants to sit at the table with you. But He knocks. He doesn’t kick the door in. You have to hear Him, and that means turning down the noise long enough to hear the knock. And He knocks on every door, even the ones that have been shut a long time, even the ones where somebody inside has decided He isn’t interested in them.

 AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • Rookie Numbers

One Sunday afternoon in September, Owen's phone showed him his weekly report: seven hours and twelve minutes a day. He laughed, took a screenshot, and posted it in soph squad with the caption *rookie numbers*. Brayden answered in seconds: *9 hr 40. bow down*.

Here is an honest aside, not a lecture. Phones are not evil. Owen's phone held Lily's trout, his grandma's texts, the scriptures, and a moose named Gerald. Some of the best laughs of his whole year happened on that cracked screen.

But hours are hours. Seven of them a day is close to half the time you are awake. Those hours come from somewhere: sleep, the people at your table, the walk home, the quiet minutes when a thought from the Holy Ghost might have had room to land.

So try this, just once. Look at your own number. Don't feel guilty about it; just be curious. Then ask one question: *What is this crowding out?* Pick one thing (sleep, your little brother, ten quiet minutes with the Lord) and give it back a little time. That's it. Nobody is grading you.

WALK WITH HIM • One Ordinary Minute

This week, pick one ordinary moment you already have every day: the walk to the bus, shooting free throws in the driveway, doing the dishes. Use it to talk to Jesus Christ. Tell Him what is on your mind, the way you would tell a friend walking next to you. Then stop talking for a minute and just listen. You don't have to kneel for this one, and you don't have to say it right.

Think about it: What is the one thing that matters most and keeps getting crowded out of your day?



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Girl in the Library

Now I have to step back a few days, to the start of that same week, because nobody else was watching her.

Her name was Ruby Varga. What I know of her life before Rexburg was given to me from above; I was never sent to Houston. She was fifteen, and two weeks before, she had lived in Houston, Texas. Her dad, Gabe, was a respiratory therapist who had taken a job at the hospital in Rexburg. Her mom, Lucia, was still unpacking boxes. At home they spoke Spanish. In Houston, Ruby had been one of only four youth in her ward, and they had been close, the way people get when there are only four of you. She had been so excited to move somewhere with lots of Church members. She had imagined walking into school and making friends in a day.

It did not happen in a day.

Everybody at Henry's Fork had known everybody else since kindergarten. They had grown up in the same Primary classes, gone to the same birthday parties, been on the same soccer teams. The friend groups were already set like concrete. Nobody was mean to Ruby. That was almost the worst part. Nobody was anything to her. They were all busy with each other.

On Monday she stood at the edge of the commons with her lunch tray and looked at the tables. Every seat was taken or saved. A boy glanced up at her, then down at his phone again. She stood there for eleven seconds. I counted. Then she turned around and walked out, down the long hall, and into the library, where students were not supposed to eat.

The librarian looked at her over her glasses. Then she looked at Ruby's face and said nothing.

Ruby sat at a table in the back corner, behind the shelf of old encyclopedias, and ate her sandwich in small bites. She took out her phone, and I saw the screen as she texted her friends in Houston: *how was ur first day*. One of them answered before lunch was over: *good!! miss u*. The others didn't answer at all.

She went back to the library on Tuesday. And Wednesday. And Thursday.

On Thursday, Owen walked right past the library doors on his way to the gym. The doors had a window in them. If he had looked to the left, he would have seen her, the girl in the gray hoodie from the first-day assembly, sitting alone in the corner. But he was looking at his phone. Somebody had just posted Gerald the moose wearing a graduation cap, and forty people were reacting to it, and Owen was typing.

He walked by. He did not see her.

I do not tell you this to make you think Owen was cruel. He wasn't. He would have sat by her if he had seen her. That is exactly what I mean. The noise did not make him mean. It made him blind.

I stood in the library with Ruby that Thursday. I could not sit with her the way a friend could. I am not sent to be seen. But I could be there. And I want you to know something: I was not the only one who saw her.

When she finished eating, she put her head down on her arms on the table for a minute. Her shoulders shook just a little. Then she sat up, wiped her face with her sleeve, and took a small, worn copy of the Book of Mormon out of her backpack. It had a blue cover with her name stamped in gold, a gift from her abuela on the day she was baptized. She opened it somewhere near the middle, and she read for the rest of the lunch period.

I watched her face while she read. Something in it softened. Her breathing slowed. I felt it come into that dusty corner of the library: that warmth, quiet as sunlight through a window. It was not from me. It never is.

She did not have a single friend at that school yet. But she had found the one Friend who had seen her standing at the edge of the commons for eleven seconds. He had counted too. And He had not looked away.

That Sunday night, in a house on the other side of town, Owen did something small. He opened soph squad, and he tapped *Mute*, and he chose *Until tomorrow morning*. He set the phone on his desk across the room. Then he sat on the edge of his bed in the quiet. It was so quiet he could hear the furnace click on, and Lily talking in her sleep through the wall, and the wind out over the fields.

He opened his scriptures. Real paper ones, the ones his grandpa had given him for his baptism. He turned to 3 Nephi 11, because Sister Quintanar had mentioned it in seminary. I had been there. He had not been listening. He read about the voice that came three times, and the people who finally got quiet enough to hear it. He read it twice. Then he got down on his knees.

I did not hear what he said. I only saw that he stayed there a long time, longer than he had all month, and that when he got up, he looked lighter, like someone who had set down a heavy backpack.

He did not know about Ruby yet. He would. But first he had to learn how to see.

Later that night I was sent four blocks over, to the Castellaws'. Mia lay awake listening to her parents talk downstairs. They were not yelling. I could see in her face that this was what scared her. They were talking low and careful, the way people talk when they have already decided something.



Neither Hath This Man Sinned



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Family Meeting

“And the T. rex comes in from the left,” Theo said, in his best sportscaster voice. “Nobody saw it coming. The crowd goes wild.”

“The stegosaurus has spikes, Theo,” said Mia. “The stegosaurus is fine.”

“The stegosaurus is *not* fine. The stegosaurus has a brain the size of a walnut. Look it up.”

“So do you.”

“*Look it up*, Mia.”

It was Sunday afternoon at the Castellaw house, the tenth of September. Mia was still in her church dress, sitting on the piano bench with her back to the keys, the way she always sat. Theo was ten. He lay on the living room carpet with a plastic dinosaur in each hand, staging the battle of the century on the coffee table. Mia had joined in as the other announcer, mostly to argue with him. I was there too, by the piano, though none of them knew it. What I could not see that day was given to me later.

“The T. rex leaps,” Theo announced. “It’s over the couch. It’s—”

The smoke alarm went off.

It was the loud kind, the kind that makes you want to cover your ears and also hide. A gray ribbon of smoke was curling out of the kitchen. Theo dropped both dinosaurs. Mia jumped up so fast the piano bench scraped.

“The roast!” their mom said, from somewhere. “Dan, the *roast*!”

Their dad came around the corner at a run, grabbed two oven mitts that did not match, yanked the oven open, and pulled out the Sunday roast. It was black on top. Smoke rolled out of the oven door and up across the ceiling. He set the pan in the sink and ran the water, and it hissed like an angry cat.

“Open the windows!” their mom called.

Theo did better than that. He grabbed a dinosaur placemat off the table, climbed onto a kitchen chair, and fanned the smoke alarm like he was trying to put out a forest fire, yelling, “Go away! Go away! GO AWAY!” until it finally gave one last chirp and stopped.

Everybody stood there in the sudden quiet. The kitchen smelled like burnt beef.

Mia laughed. She could not help it. Theo, still on the chair, took a bow. Even their dad laughed, once, standing at the sink with the mismatched oven mitts on his hands.

Then her parents looked at each other across the kitchen. Her mom had forgotten the roast. Her mom never forgot the roast.

Her mom pulled the pan out of the sink and looked at what was left. “Two hours,” she said quietly. “I asked you to watch it, Dan. One thing.”

“You asked me while I was on the phone with work.”

“On a Sunday. You’re always on the phone with work.”

“Because somebody has to be.” He peeled off one oven mitt and slapped it on the counter. “Somebody has to pay for the lessons and the cleats and the gas to Idaho Falls every Saturday.”

“Oh, so it’s the lessons now.” Her voice went up. “Say it, then. Say it in front of them.”

“I didn’t say anything about—”

“You never say it. You just sigh it. Every Tuesday. Every Thursday. Every single—”

“Because I’m the one leaving work at four o’clock to drive across town!” He was not laughing anymore. Nobody was. “And then I’m the one who forgot the roast. Fine. It’s my fault. It’s always my fault.”

“I did not say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

They were both talking at once now, louder and faster, the way two cars race to the same parking spot. The smoke still hung up by the ceiling. Mia stood in the doorway with her hands in fists at her sides. Theo stood on the kitchen chair with the dinosaur placemat hanging from one hand, looking from one parent to the other like he was watching a tennis match he did not want to see.

Then Theo said, very loudly, “I’m hungry.”

It worked. It always worked. Both of their parents stopped in the middle of a word and looked at him. Her dad’s face went from red to tired all at once. Her mom put a hand over her mouth.

For a long moment nobody moved. The faucet dripped into the black pan. Then her mom took the dinosaur placemat out of Theo's hand, gently, and helped him down off the chair, and held onto him a second longer than she needed to.

Her dad pulled off the other mismatched oven mitt and set it down carefully on the counter, like it might break.

"Let's just sit down," her dad said. "All of us. In the living room."

Sometimes a family sits down together because something has to be said, and everyone can feel it before a word comes out.

Mia went back to the piano bench. Theo picked up his dinosaurs and sat on the carpet. Their parents sat on the couch. Dan Castellaw sat on one end and Shauna sat on the other, and there was a whole cushion between them. Mia looked at that empty cushion for a long time. All week their voices had come up through the floor at night, low and careful. I had heard them, and so had she. I think she knew before they said it.

Her dad cleared his throat. He tried twice to start. Then her mom reached over the empty cushion and put her hand on his arm, just for a second, and said, "Let me."

She told them gently and plainly. She and their dad had been trying for a long time to fix things between them. They had gone to counseling. They had prayed. They had talked to the bishop. And they had decided that they were going to divorce. Dad would move to an apartment in Idaho Falls next month. The kids would stay in the house. They would see their dad every other weekend and on Wednesday nights, and more if they wanted.

"We both love you," Dan said. His voice cracked on the word *love*. "That doesn't change. That's not ever going to change. This is not because of anything you two did. Do you hear me? Nothing."

Theo started to cry, the loud, open crying of a ten-year-old who does not care who sees. His mom slid off the couch onto the carpet and pulled him into her lap, even though he was really too big for it, and he let her. After a while he lifted his wet face and asked the question only a ten-year-old would think to ask. "Is Dad still coming to my birthday?"

"Buddy, I wouldn't miss it," Dan said. "Not for anything. I'll bring the cake. The dinosaur one. Okay?"

Theo nodded. His dad reached over and rested a hand on his back, and for a moment the two parents were touching the same child at the same time. Then the moment passed, and they each sat back.

Mia did not cry. She turned around on the bench, lifted the cover off the keys, and began to play scales. C major, up and down. G major, up and down. Fast and loud, harder

than anyone should play a piano. Her parents looked at each other. Nobody told her to stop.

Halfway through D major, she stopped by herself. Her hands stayed on the keys.

“Is it because of my lessons?” she said, without turning around.

“What?” said her mom.

“You fought about my lessons. In the summer. I heard you. Dad said he couldn’t keep leaving work to drive me and you said I was good enough to keep going and then you both yelled and Dad slept in the basement.” Her voice stayed flat. “So is it because of that?”

“No,” her dad said. “Mia. No. Honey, look at me.”

She did not look at him. She closed the cover over the keys, very carefully, so it would not bang. She walked to her room and shut the door, and the click of the latch was the loudest sound in the house.

I cannot see inside a person. I only know what I saw: a girl who sat on her bed with her knees pulled up and her phone in her hand, not typing, for a long time. Then she typed four words and sent them to a boy who lived four blocks away.

can u come outside



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: When something terrible happens in my family, is it my fault?

What scripture says: Jesus said a man’s hard life was “neither” his sin nor his parents’. He knows our pain from the inside and promises not to leave us alone.

In the story: Mia’s parents tell her they are divorcing, and she decides it must be because of all the driving to her piano lessons and soccer. Owen sits with her on the curb.

Key verses: John 9:2–3; Alma 7:11–12; John 14:18; 2 Nephi 2:1–2

“Who Did Sin?”

When something breaks, we want to know why. And very often, the first answer our hearts come up with is: *it was me*. If I had been easier to live with. If I had not needed braces, or lessons, or rides. If I had been quieter. If I had been better.

People have been doing this for a very long time, even in the days of Jesus.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • The Man Born Blind

Mud. Cool, wet mud, pressed over his eyes by a stranger's fingers. The man had never seen a sunrise or his mother's face, and now somebody was putting dirt on his eyes. Not exactly how he expected his day to go.

A few minutes earlier, Jesus had been walking with His disciples near the temple in Jerusalem when He "saw a man which was blind from his birth" (John 9:1). The man sat by the road and begged. Most people walked past without looking at him at all.

But the disciples looked, and they had a question, the kind everybody in town had probably asked behind his back: "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Only two choices. Somebody had to be to blame.

Jesus did not take either choice. He said, "**Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him**" (John 9:3). Then He spat on the ground, made the mud, and told the man, "**Go, wash in the pool of Siloam**" (John 9:7). The man could not see His face. But he got up and felt his way down the streets to the pool, and he washed, and he "came seeing" (John 9:7).

Imagine the first thing he saw. Water. Light on the water. His own hands.

You would think everyone would celebrate. They did not. His neighbors argued about whether he was even the same man. The religious leaders were angry, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath. They questioned the man. They questioned his scared parents, who said, more or less, "Ask him, he's old enough." They questioned the man again, and finally he lost his patience. He said, "One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see" (John 9:25).

"And they cast him out" (John 9:34). He was alone again. Healed, but alone, kicked out of the place where his people worshipped.

Then comes the best part of the whole chapter. "Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when he had found him" (John 9:35). Jesus went looking for him. He did not wait for the man to come back. He found him, and for the first time the man saw the face of the One who had healed him. The man said, "Lord, I believe." Then "he worshipped him" (John 9:38).

Why We Grab the Blame

Neither. Not him. Not his parents. That man's blindness was not a punishment.

Why do our hearts jump so fast to blaming ourselves? Partly because it feels better than the alternative. If it is my fault, then at least somebody was in control. Then maybe I can fix it by being better. It is a lot scarier to admit that some things are bigger than us, and we could not have stopped them. So we grab the blame and hold onto it, because at least it is something to hold.

But blame you do not deserve is a heavy thing to carry around. It does not make you a better person. It only makes you tired. And it keeps you from bringing the real hurt to the One who can heal it.

So let's say it as plainly as we can. When parents divorce, it comes from choices made by grown-ups, about things between the two of them. It is not the kids' choice. And it is not God punishing anybody. Your Father in Heaven does not break up families to teach somebody a lesson.

Some kids skip blaming themselves and go straight to blaming God instead: *Where were You? I asked You to keep them together.* If that is you, you are not the first, and you are not in trouble for feeling it. People in the scriptures said hard things to God, and He did not throw them away. We will come back to that later in this book. For now, hold onto this: He can handle your anger. What would truly hurt is if you stopped talking to Him at all.

A Boy Born in the Middle of a Hard Family Time

The Book of Mormon has a boy who grew up in a hard family time too. His name was Jacob. He was born in the wilderness and never knew an easy, settled home. He grew up in tents and on a ship, in a family where his older brothers Laman and Lemuel fought, shouted and even tied up his brother Nephi.

Near the end of his life, his father Lehi spoke to Jacob. He did not pretend those years had been fine. He said, "in thy childhood thou hast suffered afflictions and much sorrow, because of the rudeness of thy brethren" (2 Nephi 2:1). Lehi named the hurt. He did not tell Jacob it was his fault. It was not.

Then Lehi promised him something: God "shall consecrate thine afflictions for thy gain" (2 Nephi 2:2). *Consecrate* means to make holy, to set apart for good. God would take the hard years Jacob did not choose and turn them into something that would bless him.

And He did. Jacob grew up to be a prophet. Some of the tenderest words in the Book of Mormon are his. The boy from the hard family became a man who knew how to comfort hurting people, because he had been one.

He Knows How It Feels

Here is something that helps when you are hurting: Jesus Christ does not just know *about* your pain. He knows how it *feels*.

The prophet Alma taught that the Savior would go "suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind" (Alma 7:11). Why? So "that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people" (Alma 7:12). *Succor* is an old word. It means to run to someone's help.

Jesus knows what it is to have His family not understand Him. He knows what it is to be lonely in a crowd. He knows what it is to have everything change in one night. He is a Friend who has been in the dark places and knows the way out.

On the night before He died, Jesus could see that His friends were afraid of being left. He told them, **"I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you"** (John 14:18). Your family may change shape. Someone may move out. Holidays may be split in two. But He will not move out. He will not leave you comfortless.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • When Parents Divorce: What Is Not Your Fault

If your parents are divorcing, or already have, here are some true things to hold onto.

It is not your fault. Not your lessons, your grades, your braces, your attitude, or the fight you had with your mom last week. Parents divorce because of things between the two of them. Kids do not cause it, and kids cannot fix it.

You do not have to pick a side. You are allowed to love both of your parents. That is not your job.

You do not have to carry messages. If one parent asks you to tell the other something, it is okay to say, kindly, "Can you tell them yourself?"

You can be sad, angry or numb. All of those are normal. Feelings are not sins. Tell them to someone safe: a parent, a grandparent, a youth leader, the bishop, a school counselor.

Your home is still a place for the Spirit. Two homes can both be places where you pray, read scripture and feel peace. Kneel by your bed in both of them.

God is not divorcing you. Your Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, love you the same today as they did yesterday. Tell Them what you feel, out loud, in your own words. They can take it.

WALK WITH HIM • Tell Him the Real Thing

This week, find a quiet place and tell Jesus Christ what is actually hurting, not the polite version. Say it out loud if you can, even in a whisper. Then read John 9 slowly, and notice how He went looking for the man who had been thrown out. Ask your Father in Heaven, in the name of His Son, to help you feel that He is looking for you too. Then wait a minute before you get up.

Think about it: What is something you have been blaming yourself for that might not be yours to carry?

The Curb

Owen Hadlock got the text while he was lying on his bedroom floor, throwing a tennis ball at the ceiling. He read it, sat up, read it again, and was out the front door in his socks before he remembered shoes. He went back for them. He was out again in under a minute.

It was early evening. The September light was long and gold, and the sprinklers were going up and down the street, *tick tick tick*, with that smell of wet grass and warm sidewalk. Up on the hill the temple caught the sun.

Mia was sitting on the curb in front of her house. She had changed into a hoodie that was too big for her, and she had her arms around her knees.

Owen slowed down when he saw her face. He did not know what had happened yet. But I could see that he knew it was something.

He sat down next to her on the curb, not too close. For a while neither of them said anything. A car went by.

“My parents are getting divorced,” Mia said.

Owen opened his mouth. Nothing came out. He closed it again. I watched him try to think of something to say. He had been to youth lessons about almost everything, but nobody had ever given one called *What to Say When Your Friend’s Parents Get Divorced*.

“I don’t know what to say,” he said finally.

Mia almost laughed. “Yeah. Me neither.”

“I’m really sorry.”

Mia pulled the strings of her hoodie tight. “You know what they fight about? Me. Driving me.”

Owen turned and looked at her. “What?”

So she told him. It came out fast, staring at the gutter, like she had been rehearsing it in her room. Piano on Tuesdays and Thursdays at four-thirty, clear across town. Soccer practice in Sugar City at five. Games on Saturday in Idaho Falls. Who was leaving work early. Whose turn it was. Whose job was more important. “My dad says, ‘You sign her up for everything and then I’m the one who has to drive.’ And my mom says, ‘Then you sign her up for something.’ Every week. Same fight.”

She picked at a scab of old paint on the curb.

“And here’s the dumb part. When they start yelling, I go find something I need. A ride. A form to sign. My cleats. Help with math. Theo does it too. He comes downstairs and says he’s hungry, even if he just ate.” She almost smiled. “It works. They stop, and somebody drives somebody somewhere. We’re like the off switch.” The smile went away. “So if they didn’t have to drive me everywhere all the time, maybe they wouldn’t have fought so much. So.” She shrugged. “So it was us kids. And I blame myself, because my brother doesn’t know any better.”

Owen did not say *That’s dumb*. I was glad. He was a boy who sometimes said the fast thing. This time he waited. He picked at a weed growing out of the crack in the curb.

“You remember when my dad fell off the ladder?” he said. “When I was twelve?”

She nodded. Everybody in the ward remembered.

“I thought it was my fault,” Owen said. “For real. I was inside playing a game. I saw him drag the ladder out past the window, and I thought, I should go hold it. And I didn’t. I just kept playing. And then he fell.” He was quiet. “I thought about that every night for, like, a month. If I’d been out there holding the ladder.”

“Was it your fault?”

“No. The patio was frosty. The ladder slid. My dad told me like twenty times it wasn’t me. My grandpa told me too.” He threw the weed into the gutter. “But I still thought it. It’s like your brain wants it to be somebody’s fault. Even if it’s you.”

Mia did not say anything. But her shoulders came down a little from where they had been, up by her ears.

The front door opened behind them. It was Theo, in pajamas with rocket ships on them, though it was not even dark. His eyes were red. He stood on the porch, not sure if he was allowed.

Mia looked back at him. Then she scooted over on the curb and patted the cement on her other side. Theo came down the steps and sat in the space she had made, and leaned against her arm.

So there were three of them on the curb.

After a while, Owen said, “Can I say a prayer? Like, out loud? A short one?”

Mia looked at him the way you look at someone who has just said something you did not expect. Then she nodded.

He folded his arms right there on the curb, in front of the whole street. He kept his eyes open at first, then closed them. It was a spoken prayer, and so I heard it, but it was not mine, and I will only tell you a little of it. He thanked his Father in Heaven for Mia and Theo. He asked Him to help their mom and their dad. And he said, "Please help Mia know it's not her fault. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen."

That was all. Thirty seconds, maybe.

I cannot tell you what Mia felt. I can tell you what I saw. Her face changed. It did not crumple, and it did not smile. It just softened, the way ice softens at the edges on a spring morning before it lets go. Then, for the first time that whole day, she cried. Theo patted her knee with his small hand, very seriously, the way he had seen grown-ups do it.

The porch light came on behind them. The door opened, and Dan Castellaw came out with the old knitted blanket from the back of the couch. He did not say anything at first. He came down the steps, shook the blanket out, and laid it over the shoulders of all three of them, Owen included, the way you would tuck in little kids. His hands stayed on Mia's shoulders for a moment.

"Not the piano," he said quietly. "Not soccer. Not the rides. Not ever. Your mom and I both want you to keep playing. We already decided that. Okay?"

Mia did not answer. But she reached up and held onto his hand for a second before he let go. He went back up the steps. In the front window I could see Shauna standing in the living room, watching her children on the curb with her arms folded tight across her chest, wiping her eyes with the back of her wrist. Two parents, in two different places, loving the same three kids on the curb.

The Holy Ghost does not need me to clear the way every time. Sometimes a fifteen-year-old boy in mismatched socks clears it himself, just by sitting down and staying.

Owen did not fix anything that night. He could not. But when his phone buzzed in his pocket a while later, he did not look at it. The cracked screen stayed dark against his leg.

The sprinklers ticked. The sun went down behind the houses. The streetlights came on, one by one. Three kids sat on a curb, and none of them got up for a long time.

Up on the hill, the temple lights came on too.



That night Theo knelt by his bed with a plastic stegosaurus in one hand. His door was open, and so was Mia's, across the hall, and I heard every word because he said them out loud, the way ten-year-olds do.

“Please make Mom and Dad change their minds,” he said. “And please let Dad still bring the dinosaur cake. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.” He climbed into bed. “Mia? Did you say yours?”

“Already did,” Mia called back.

She had not. I was told so later, by those I answer to.

For as long as I had watched her, Mia Castellaw had knelt by her bed every night. All that summer, when the voices came up through the floor, she had prayed with her forehead on her quilt, and sometimes she whispered loud enough for me to hear: “Please help them stop fighting. Please help them be happy again.”

That night she lay on top of her covers in her too-big hoodie and looked at the ceiling. After a long time she said one sentence out loud. It was very quiet. It was the only thing I heard her say to Heaven that whole week.

“I asked You all summer.”

Then she rolled over and faced the wall.

I want to be careful with what I tell you about that sentence. It was angry. It was hurt all the way through. But she did not say it to the ceiling. She said it to Him. People who have truly given up on someone stop talking to them. Mia had not stopped. Not yet. Not all the way.

She did not kneel the next night, or the next.

On Monday she told one friend at seminary. By third period it seemed like half the sophomore class knew. That is how news moves in a town where everybody’s mother is in the same Relief Society. People were kind about it, mostly. They said *sorry* and looked at their shoes.

Only one person said something real, and he was the last one she expected.

Kade Dunlavy stopped at her locker after lunch on his way to the shop wing. They had been in the same Primary class about a hundred years ago, and they had not said ten words to each other since.

“Heard about your folks,” he said.

Mia went stiff. “Yeah.”

“Mine left two summers ago. My dad. Nevada.” Kade spun the dial on the locker next to hers, which was not his. “He called every Sunday for like three months. Then every other Sunday. Then he didn’t.” He shrugged, as if he were talking about the weather. “Everybody tells you it’s not your fault. It’s not. Doesn’t help, though, does it?”

“Does it get better?”

Kade thought about it. For once he did not make a joke. “You stop waiting by the phone,” he said. “That’s the better.”

He started to walk away. Then he turned around, walking backward, the way he had walked across the football field on the first day of school.

“And don’t bother praying about it,” he said. “I tried that. Nobody picked up.”

Then he was gone around the corner, and Mia stood at her open locker with her math book in her hands.

I do not think Kade meant to be cruel. I think he meant to be kind, in the only way he knew how, by warning her away from a road that had hurt him. That is how blame passes from one hurting person to the next. Not like a punch. Like a hand-me-down coat that does not fit anybody.

In the space of two days, I had watched three ways of carrying a broken thing. Mia blamed herself. Kade blamed his father, and God. And Ridge Kesselring, I would learn, blamed everyone in the world but Ridge. None of the three ways made the broken thing one ounce lighter.

That night Mia did not kneel again. But she left her scriptures on her nightstand instead of putting them away. I notice small things. Sometimes small things are all a person can give.

As for Owen, he did not know it yet, but two weeks later, at his own grandmother’s kitchen table, he would learn that some things get handed down in a family whether anybody wants them or not.



The Son Shall Not Bear It



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Same Hand

“Owen. Owen. Owen. Can I see the raincoat dog?”

“Later.”

“Clair said it’s the funniest thing ever made. In the *world*. He has little boots, Owen.”

“Lily. Later.”

“You always say later. Later is not a real time.”

“Later is a real time,” Steve said, in a deep, slow voice that sounded exactly like his father’s. “Later is after the dishes.” Everyone at the table laughed, even Grandma Marjorie, who put down the gravy boat to wipe her eyes.

It was Sunday dinner in Sugar City, the last Sunday of September. Owen sat where he always sat, next to Lily. His phone lay face down beside his plate. It had been buzzing all through the blessing on the food. Some of it was the group chat. Some of it, since the night on the curb two weeks before, was Mia. She texted him most days now. Mostly small things. A picture of Theo asleep on the piano bench. *my dad found an apartment*. A cat video. Owen answered every one.

The phone buzzed again. It slid a little on the tablecloth, and it flipped halfway over, and the name on the screen lit up through the crack: **Mia**.

Lily saw it. Her eyes went huge.

“MIA?” she sang. “Owen’s texting MIA! Owen and Mia, sitting in a—”

“Lily, stop.”

“—*tree*, K-I-S-S—”

Quick as a cat, she reached across his plate and grabbed the phone.

I saw what happened next very clearly. Owen’s hand came down flat on the table. *Bang*. The glasses jumped. Lily’s milk tipped and ran across the tablecloth.

“Don’t touch my stuff!” he yelled. Loud. Much louder than the kitchen. “What is wrong with you?”

Lily dropped the phone like it was hot. Her face went red, then crumpled. She did not cry right away. She just stared at her brother, the way little sisters stare when the person they love most has turned into somebody else.

And then the kitchen went very quiet.

Owen looked down. I watched him look at his own hand, flat on the tablecloth, fingers spread, right beside the spreading milk. He stared at it like it belonged to someone else.

Grandma Marjorie's kitchen smelled the same every Sunday: roast beef, rolls, and the lavender soap she had used for fifty years. The table was the same old oak table with the scratch where Steve dropped a socket wrench on it when he was eight. Most of the people around it were the same too. One chair was not. That Sunday was three days before the second anniversary of Grandpa Lowell's death. Nobody had said that out loud. But Grandma had set out the good gravy boat, the one with the blue rim that Lowell liked, and everyone noticed and nobody mentioned it. Her hands shook as she poured. They had been shaking more this year.

I think I knew why Owen stared at his hand. I think everyone at the table over thirty knew too. Almost three years before, at this same table, his father had brought his hand down just like that, in a fight about money. And then his grandfather, Lowell, had stood up with both hands flat on this same oak, his face dark red, ready to shout back. Owen had been twelve, sitting right in this chair, watching the same hand come down twice.

Now there was a third.

Owen pulled his hand back into his lap. His ears went pink. "Sorry," he mumbled, to no one in particular. He did not look at Lily.

Steve set his fork down. I braced myself a little. Steve Hadlock had a temper too, and a son yelling at the dinner table on a Sunday was the kind of thing that used to light it up. But Steve did not yell. He did not even raise his voice.

"Hey," he said. "Bud."

That was all. Owen looked up. Steve was not angry. He looked sad, and something else too, something like recognition.

Grandma Marjorie picked up a dish towel and began to wipe up the milk. Her hands shook. She did not hurry. "Your grandpa used to do that," she said quietly, to the tablecloth. "And his dad before him." She folded the wet towel in half. "It's not the end of the world. But it's not nothing, either."

Owen pushed his chair back. "I'm gonna go outside for a sec."

Nobody stopped him. He went out the back door and sat down on the porch steps, where the yard ran down to Grandpa's old rose bed. The roses were done for the year. The wind was coming across the fields from the west, the way it always does in Sugar City, carrying the smell of dirt and cut hay.

A few minutes later the screen door creaked. Steve came out, slowly, because his right leg still ached when the weather turned, and he lowered himself onto the step beside his son.

They sat. Out past the fence, a pickup went by on the road with its windows down.

"I know where that came from," Steve said at last. "You know that, right? You got it from me. I got it from Grandpa. He got it from his dad." He rubbed his knee. "It's like a family heirloom nobody wanted."

Owen almost smiled. "So I'm stuck with it."

Steve shook his head slowly. "No," he said. "That's the thing. You're not."



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: If my family has a problem, like a temper or a sadness that runs through the generations, am I doomed to have it too?

What scripture says: "The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father" (Ezekiel 18:20). We answer for our own choices, and with Christ we are free to choose a new way.

In the story: Owen yells at his little sister and sees his father's and grandfather's temper in his own hand. Grandpa Lowell, in the spirit world, watches him choose what to do next.

Key verses: Ezekiel 18:20; Articles of Faith 1:2; 2 Nephi 2:27; 2 Kings 22:1–2; 2 Corinthians 5:17

You Are Not Your Family's Mistakes

Every family hands things down. Some of them are wonderful: a laugh, a love of music, a way of making pancakes on Saturday, a testimony. Some of them are hard: a temper, a habit of shutting down, money trouble, addiction, a sadness that sits on a family like fog.

Owen is not the only one of his friends who sees this. Hannah's mom has been sick with a deep sadness since the last baby was born, and Hannah has heard her aunts say that her grandma drank on weekends too. Families pass things down. It is true.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Bent off the Line

“Your chain’s off,” Kade Dunlavy said.

“I know my chain’s off.”

“Then why are you staring at it like it owes you money?”

It was Tuesday after school, two days after the spilled milk. Owen was crouched beside his bike at the far end of the Henry’s Fork parking lot, with grease up to his wrists and the chain hanging in a sad loop. Kade sat on the tailgate of Ridge Kesselring’s pickup ten feet away, a vape in one hand. Ridge was in the cab with the door open and the music loud and his boots up on the dashboard.

“Move,” Kade said.

He hopped down, flipped the bike upside down in one motion, pushed the back wheel forward with his thumb, hooked the chain over the bottom of the gear and gave the pedal a spin. The chain climbed on like it had been waiting for him. It took about eight seconds.

“Show-off,” Owen said.

“Eighth grade. Small engines. I carried you, Hadlock.” Kade wiped his fingers on Owen’s sleeve and grinned his huge grin.

Owen laughed. “You should come work at Ostergard. Dale would hire you in a second. You’re better than me already.”

Something moved across Kade’s face, fast, like a cloud over a field. “Nah,” he said. “My dad was a mechanic. Look how that turned out.” He climbed back onto the tailgate. “He used to say it every time something broke at our house. ‘You can’t fix a Dunlavy. We come off the line bent.’” He laughed, a short laugh with nothing in it. “That’s pretty much the last thing he said to me before he drove to Nevada.”

Everybody in the ward knew the rest of that story. Nobody had seen Kade in a white shirt since the fall his dad left.

Owen opened his mouth. I watched him stand at the edge of something true, the way a swimmer stands at the edge of cold water. Two days before, on his grandma’s back steps, he had heard his own father tell him he was not stuck with the family temper. I think he wanted to say something like that now. It was all over his face.

Then Ridge leaned on the horn, one long blast that made three freshmen jump. “Kade! Let’s go! Lusk is coming, and if he sees me driving, that’s on you.”

“Everything’s on me,” Kade said cheerfully. He walked backward toward the cab and tapped his chest with two fingers. “Bent off the line, church boy. Factory defect. No warranty.”

For a moment I saw a dull red smudge near the open door of that truck, leaning in close to Kade the way smoke leans toward a draft. Sethar loves a sentence like that one. It sounds like a joke. It works like a chain.

The truck pulled out with a spray of gravel. Owen stood there with his fixed bike and his greasy hands and the words still in his mouth. He had gone quiet again, the way he does. I saw him look at the place where the truck had been for a long time, as if he could still call something after it.

He couldn’t. Not that day. But I kept that afternoon, because I did not think it would be the last time he got the chance.



But here is the good news, and it is very good. Kade’s father was wrong. Nobody comes off the line bent beyond fixing. God does not hold you guilty for what your parents or grandparents did. Long ago, the people of Israel had started to believe they were stuck paying for their fathers’ sins. The Lord sent the prophet Ezekiel to set them straight: “The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father” (Ezekiel 18:20). *Iniquity* means sin or wrongdoing. You do not carry your father’s sins. You carry your own choices, and that is all.

We believe this as Latter-day Saints. Our second article of faith says, “We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam’s transgression” (Articles of Faith 1:2). Not Adam’s. Not your dad’s. Not your grandma’s.

That does not mean the past does not touch you. If your family fought a lot, you may have learned to fight. If your family never talked about feelings, you may have learned to bury them. You might feel the pull of an old pattern, like a car that keeps drifting toward the ditch because the alignment is off. Owen felt that pull at the dinner table. His hand came down before he even thought about it.

But a pull is not a chain. Lehi taught his sons that we are “free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men” (2 Nephi 2:27). The Mediator is Jesus Christ. He stands between us and everything that would hold us down. Through Him, the drift can be corrected. You can be the one in your family who changes the line.

A Boy King Who Changed the Line

If anyone in the Bible had a reason to say “I can’t help it, it runs in my family,” it was a boy named Josiah.

His grandfather, King Manasseh, was the worst king Judah ever had. He put idols in the Lord’s temple and filled Jerusalem with innocent blood. His father, King Amon, “did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, as his father Manasseh did” (2 Kings 21:20), until his own servants killed him.

So picture it. An eight-year-old boy is suddenly king, and everyone expects him to be just like his father and grandfather.

He was not. “He did that which was right in the sight of the LORD” (2 Kings 22:2).

As a young man, Josiah had the temple repaired. The workers found an old scroll, the book of the law, lost and forgotten. When it was read to him, Josiah saw how far his family had drifted, and he tore his clothes and wept.

Then he went to work. He cleared the idols out of the temple, tore down his grandfather’s altars and read the scriptures to the people himself. No king before him “turned to the LORD with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might” (2 Kings 23:25).

The line did not decide who he was. He did.

The People Who Buried Their Swords

The Book of Mormon tells about a whole people who changed their line.

They were Lamanites, raised for generations to hate the Nephites and to fight. Their parents and grandparents had taught them that the Nephites had robbed them, and that war was the answer. Then Ammon and his brothers came and taught them about Jesus Christ. Thousands of them believed. They were “convinced concerning the wicked traditions of their fathers” (Alma 23:3).

They knew themselves. They knew how easily their hands went to their swords. So they did something nobody could miss. They gathered together, “they took their swords, and all the weapons which were used for the shedding of man’s blood, and they did bury them up deep in the earth” (Alma 24:17).

They did not just promise to try harder. They put the old way in the ground, where it could not come back to their hands in a moment of anger. They called themselves by a new name. And they stayed faithful, so faithful that their sons later became some of the bravest and purest young men in the whole Book of Mormon.

Sometimes changing the line means deciding ahead of time. What is your family's sword? What do you need to bury before the moment comes?



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • The Leaning Wall

Long ago, in the hills of Judah, a twelve-year-old boy climbed an old stone wall at the edge of an orchard. A stone rolled under his foot, and down he went, into the dirt.

An old farmer named Ira laughed and helped him up. "That wall throws everybody," he said. "Look at it. It leans."

He pointed to the bottom. "My father laid the first row of stones in a hurry, and he laid them in a crooked line. Every row that went on top followed the row under it. So the next row was crooked, and the next, and the next. A wall leans the way its first stones were set."

"Then why not tear it down?" the boy asked.

"I left it standing to remind me." Ira's father had been a hard, greedy man, and Ira had grown up just like him. But one day Ira decided to stop. He made things right with the people his father had cheated. He started to pray. Then he built every other wall on that hill himself, and he set the first row straight.

"I was built on crooked stones," Ira said. "But I get to choose where I set the next one. So do you."

The boy never forgot it. Many years later, he would tell the story himself.

How the Line Changes

Changing a family pattern does not usually happen with one big, dramatic moment. It happens one stone at a time.

It happens when you feel the anger rise and you leave the room before your hand hits the table. It happens when you say "I'm sorry" first, even though nobody in your family ever does. It happens when you pray out loud in a house where nobody prays. It happens when you tell someone about the sadness instead of hiding it.

And it does not happen by willpower alone. That is the most important part. Paul wrote, "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus Christ is not just the One who forgives you when you mess up. He is the One who can change what is inside you, so that the old pull gets weaker and His way gets easier.

So bring your family's pattern to Him. Tell Him about it plainly. "This runs in my family. I don't want it. Please help me." Then watch, over weeks and months, as He helps you set your stones straight.

WALK WITH HIM • Bring Him the Family Pattern

Think of one hard thing that runs in your family, a temper, a silence, a habit, a sadness. This week, kneel and tell Jesus Christ about it by name, and ask Him to help you be the one who changes it. Then choose one small stone to set straight: one apology, one walk away from a fight, one kind word where there is usually a sharp one. When you do it, quietly thank Him for helping you.

Think about it: What is one good thing you want to pass down to the people who come after you?



ASHER • A WORK OF FICTION

Two Years Today

My name is Asher. I was a singer in the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, long ago, in the days of the wicked king Manasseh, Josiah's grandfather. I died in his days. Now I am a missionary in the world of spirits. I teach the gospel to those in spirit prison who never heard it, or who heard it and turned away. I have been there a very long time now, and I have learned to be patient. But I have never learned to stop being glad when a family turns a corner.

On the twenty-seventh of September, the fall Owen was fifteen, I was sitting with my friend Lowell Hadlock. He had come into the spirit world two years before, on that same day, an old mechanic from Sugar City who still pats his shirt pocket for a ten-millimeter wrench out of habit, though he has not needed one here. He laughs at himself when he does it. He laughs easily here. He did not always, he says, on earth.

We are kept informed of the Lord's work among the living, and sometimes we are permitted to see for ourselves. That evening, we were permitted to see his grandson.

Owen was in his room in Rexburg. It was late. He sat on the edge of his bed holding a necktie, a green one with small gold diamonds, a little out of fashion. Lowell made a sound beside me when he saw it, half a laugh and half something else.

"That's my Sunday tie," he said. "Forty years. Marjorie hated it."

Owen ran the tie through his fingers. On his desk, next to his cracked phone, stood a second Army photograph, one Grandma had given him: a young soldier in fatigues, squinting into a hot sun, leaning on the fender of an Army truck. Lowell looked at it a long time.

“He was there at the table Sunday,” Lowell said quietly. “I saw it. The hand. My hand. My father’s hand.” He shook his head. “I spent forty years teaching that to my boy, and less than one year unteaching it. I never did get the job done.”

“You started it,” I said.

“Not soon enough.”

I did not argue with him. I have learned that a man who is sorry does not need to be talked out of it. He needs to see what his sorrow has made possible.

So I told him about the leaning wall at Tekoa, the one I fell off as a boy, and the old man named Ira, who had been built on crooked stones and chose where to set the next one. I had told Lowell the story before. He likes it. He says it is a mechanic’s story, really: you cannot fix the frame by painting the doors.

While I was telling it, Owen got up.

He set the tie on his pillow. He went out into the hall in his socks and stood in front of his little sister’s door. There was light under it. He stood there for a while. He lifted his hand to knock and put it down again. Lowell leaned forward, the way men lean toward a game on television.

“Come on, kid,” he said under his breath. “Come on.”

Owen knocked.

“What,” said Lily, through the door, in the voice of a nine-year-old who has not yet forgiven anybody.

He opened it a crack. She was sitting up in bed with a library book. She did not look at him.

“Hey,” Owen said. “I’m sorry I yelled at you Sunday. And I’m sorry about your milk. That wasn’t okay.” He stood there, awkward and too tall in the doorway. “You didn’t do anything that bad. I was just being, like... Grandpa. The bad part of Grandpa.”

Beside me, Lowell let out a short, surprised laugh, and then put his hand over his mouth, and his shoulders began to shake. He was weeping. I let him.

Lily looked at her brother for a long moment. Then she said, “Can I see the raincoat dog now?”

Owen laughed. He came in and sat on the edge of her bed and pulled out his cracked phone and found the video, and the two of them watched a small brown dog in a yellow raincoat refuse to walk in the rain, over and over, until Lily was laughing so hard she had

to lie down. Owen laughed too. Then he told her goodnight, and on his way out the door, he stopped, and came back, and kissed the top of her head.

“Gross,” Lily said, smiling.

Lowell wiped his face with both hands. “I found my way back on my knees in the shop, under a bench, hunting for a dropped wrench,” he said. “That was the best I could do. He did it with a dog video.” He laughed again, wet and happy. “That’s better than mine.”

“It is built on yours,” I said.

He looked at me. Then he nodded, slowly.

I could not tell you what was in the boy’s heart when he walked back to his room that night. That is not given to me unless the Father wills it, and that night He did not. But I saw what Owen did next. He knelt down by his bed, and he folded his arms on the mattress, and he stayed there a long time, longer than a boy says a prayer for food.

I did not try to hear it. It was not for me. It went straight to the Father, as every prayer does, and the Father knew what it meant.

So I did what I do. I sang. Lowell does not sing well, but he hummed along, a low mechanic’s hum, and somewhere a family wall in Rexburg, Idaho, stood a little straighter than it had the day before.

When the song was done, Lowell looked a long way south, toward Idaho Falls, where his granddaughter Kate lived. “That one’s carrying something too,” he said. “Has been for years. A story she’s never told her little brother.” He was quiet a moment. “I think she’s about to.”



Time and Chance



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Drive to Idaho Falls

“Okay, but watch the ears,” Owen said, holding his cracked phone out toward the steering wheel. “Watch his *ears* when the rain hits.”

On the screen, a small brown dog in a yellow raincoat sat down in a puddle and refused to go one step farther.

“I’ve seen it,” Kate said, eyes on the road.

“You’ve seen it. But have you *studied* it?”

“Owen. Lily made me watch that video eleven times at dinner. I’ve studied it more than my anatomy notes.” She glanced over anyway, and snorted. “Okay. The ears are good.”

“Thank you.”

“Now put it away. You’re making me look.”

Kate Hadlock’s car was small and old and very clean, and she drove it with both hands on the wheel, five under the limit, watching the road like it might do something. Owen had teased her about it at the gas station in Rexburg. “Grandma drives faster than you.” “Grandma drives on the sidewalk,” Kate had said. Behind them, their dad followed in the truck with a bookshelf strapped in the bed.

Out past Rigby, the road did do something.

A mule deer came up out of the ditch on the right side of the highway, big as a pony, all legs. It crossed in front of them in two long bounds. Kate stomped the brake. The car shuddered and the seat belts grabbed, and Owen’s phone flew out of his hand and smacked the glove box and dropped into the dark by his feet. And then a second deer came up out of the same ditch and stopped, right in their lane, and looked at them.

The car stopped too. Maybe twenty feet away. Behind them the truck’s brakes squealed, and something in the truck bed went *thunk* against its straps.

For three long seconds nobody moved. The deer had huge ears, like satellite dishes, and an expression of total boredom. Then it flicked its tail and sprang away across the

field after the first one, white rump bouncing, as if two cars full of Hadlocks had been the least interesting thing to happen to it all day.

Kate's phone rang in the console. It was their dad. She hit the speaker button.

"You guys good?"

"We're good," Kate said. Her voice came out high.

"Grandma's bookshelf says hi," Steve said. "It's fine. I think it's fine. It's leaning."

Kate laughed. It was a shaky laugh, but it was real. She put the blinker on, for no one, and eased back up to speed, slower than before.

I was there. I had been sent to ride along that afternoon, and I want to be honest with you: I did nothing. Kate did it all, with her eyes on the road and both hands on the wheel, the way she always drove. Owen did not know yet why she drove like that. He was about to find out.

It was the second Sunday in October. The potato harvest was over. All along the highway from Rexburg to Idaho Falls the fields lay bare and brown, combed into long rows, and the big potato cellars sat in the dirt like sleeping animals with grass growing on their backs. The sun was low. The whole valley had turned the color of honey. Kate had come home for the weekend, and Grandma Marjorie had decided Kate needed the old bookshelf from the basement in Sugar City for her apartment. So here they were, Owen riding along to help carry it up three flights of stairs.

Owen fished his phone out from under the seat. It was buzzing. The sophomore group chat had not stopped all weekend. He turned it over to read it, and his face changed. From where I stood I could see the screen. It was the video of Jace Wendling singing in the locker room, the one that had been going around for two weeks now, with new comments piled on top of the old ones. Something dull and red moved at the edge of the chat like a smudge of smoke. I have seen Sethar crowd around a phone before. He likes a screen full of laughter at someone who cannot laugh back.

Owen looked at it for a long second. Then he turned it face down and pushed it deep into the cup holder. His mouth was tight, but he did not add to it. I was glad.

"Who's blowing you up?" Kate asked.

"Nobody. Just the group chat."

"Sounds like a lot of nobody."

They drove for a while. The radio was low. Kate's hands had stopped shaking, but she did not loosen them on the wheel. She was quiet for so long that Owen looked over at her.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” She breathed out. “Sorry. I always get weird on highways in the fall. Since Becky.”

Owen did not say anything. He had been ten when Becky died. I remember her too: a girl with a loud laugh who called him “little man” and once let him beat her at a video game on purpose.

“I never told you the whole thing,” Kate said. “You were so little.”

“I remember some.”

“What do you remember?”

He thought about it. “The phone ringing really late. And you making this sound.” He looked out his window. “And I sat on the stairs. And Dad got down on the floor with you and Mom. I’d never seen him cry before.”

Kate nodded slowly. “He’s a fixer,” she said. “And there was nothing to fix.”

She told him the rest, with both hands on the wheel and her eyes on the road. She had been seventeen. It was November, and the roads had iced over after a little snow. She had played in a volleyball game at a school an hour away, and she was supposed to ride home with Becky, who had her license and her mom’s little silver car. But the coach asked Kate to stay and help load the nets onto the bus. So she told Becky to go ahead.

“I said, ‘Go, I’ll ride the bus. Text me when you’re home.’” Kate’s voice stayed steady, but her knuckles went pale on the wheel. “That’s it. That’s the last thing I ever said to her. ‘Text me when you’re home.’”

There had been a curve, and ice, and a pickup that slid into her lane. The man driving it had not been drinking. He had not been doing anything wrong. He was just driving home, the same as Becky.

“For two years,” Kate said, “I thought it should have been me. Or I thought if I’d been in the car, she would’ve left a minute later, or taken a different road, or something. I did all this math in my head. Every night.” She swallowed. “And I was so mad at God. Becky went to seminary every single morning. She prayed. She was better than me. And she’s the one on that road? I didn’t go to church for, like, three years.”

“I remember,” Owen said quietly. So do I: their mom’s face every Sunday when Kate’s door stayed closed.

“Do you know why it happened?” he asked. “Like, did anybody ever tell you?”

Kate almost laughed. “Bishop Kenley showed me this verse once. In Ecclesiastes. It basically says sometimes stuff just happens to people. Good people and bad people. Fast people and slow people.” She shook her head. “I hated it at first. I wanted a reason. But after a while, it was kind of a relief. It meant it wasn’t a punishment. It wasn’t Becky’s fault. It wasn’t mine.” She glanced at him. “There was ice. That’s all. There was ice.”

They were coming into Idaho Falls now. The river was on their right, wide and dark and shining, with the white water spilling over the falls by the temple. Kate’s eyes were wet. She wiped them with the back of her wrist, one at a time, still holding the wheel.

“Remind me to tell you about Becky’s mom sometime,” she said. “That’s the part that brought me back.”

Owen opened his mouth and shut it again. So he did what he had done for Mia on the curb a month before. He did not say anything clever. He reached over and put his hand on his sister’s shoulder and left it there until they turned onto her street.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: If God is in charge, why do terrible things happen to good people for no reason?

What scripture says: “Time and chance happeneth to them all” (Ecclesiastes 9:11). Jesus taught that people hurt by accidents were not worse sinners than anyone else, and He weeps with those who mourn.

In the story: Kate tells Owen about the night her best friend Becky died. In the spirit world, Asher and Becky watch Kate finally tell her brother.

Key verses: Ecclesiastes 9:11; Luke 13:4; Matthew 5:45; D&C 122:7; John 11:35

The Tower That Fell

When something terrible happens for no reason, people go looking for a reason anyway. They did it in Jesus’s day, too.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • Eighteen at Siloam

A crack. Then a roar of falling stone, and a cloud of dust rolling down the street near the pool of Siloam. One minute a tower in Jerusalem was standing. The next minute it was a pile of rock. There had been no warning. Eighteen people were standing near it. All eighteen died.

The whole city talked about it. And you can guess what people said. The same thing they said about the man born blind. *They must have done something. God must have been punishing them.*

Jesus heard the talk, and He answered it. He said, "**Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem?**" (Luke 13:4).

And then He answered His own question: "**I tell you, Nay**" (Luke 13:5).

Not Worse Than Anyone Else

Nay. No. They were not worse than anybody else. They were people standing in the wrong place when old stones gave way.

Jesus went on to tell His listeners that everyone needs to repent and be ready, because none of us knows how long we have. But He was clear about the eighteen. Their deaths were not a judgment on them.

Time and Chance

A long time before Jesus, a wise teacher in Israel, called the Preacher, noticed the same thing. He watched the world for years, and he wrote down something that sounds almost too honest to be in the Bible: "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong... but time and chance happeneth to them all" (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

The fastest runner sometimes trips. The strongest team sometimes loses. Good people get sick. Careful drivers hit ice. That is part of living in a fallen world, a world where things break, wear out and slide. Jesus said our Father in Heaven "**sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust**" (Matthew 5:45). The same storm falls on everybody's roof.

That might sound scary. But think about what it means. It means that when something terrible happens to you, it is not proof that God is angry at you. It does not mean you were not praying enough or were not good enough. Sometimes there is no hidden reason to find. There was ice. There was a curve. That is all.

Heavenly Father lets us live in a real world, with real rules, where our choices matter and where hard things can happen. If He stopped every accident, the world would not be a place where we could grow. But He did not leave us alone in it. He sent His Son.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • Whose Fault Is It? Three Reasons Things Break

Bang. A hand hits a table. Milk runs across Grandma's tablecloth, and a nine-year-old's face crumples. When something breaks, the first thing we want to know is whose fault it is. Here is a simple way to sort it out. Most broken things come from one of three places, and sometimes from more than one at once.

1. My own choices. Owen's hand came down on the table at Sunday dinner. Nobody made him do it. When we choose something, we choose what comes with it. That kind of break is ours to own. The good news is that it is also ours to repent of, and repentance is a door, not a punishment.

2. Other people's choices. Mia did not decide that her parents would split up. Jace did not post the video of himself. Some breaks land on us because someone else chose them. That kind is not ours to carry as guilt, even when it feels like it.

3. Nobody's fault. Ruby's family moved because her dad got a new job. Becky's car met a patch of ice. The Preacher called it "time and chance" (Ecclesiastes 9:11). When Jesus's disciples asked whose sin made a man blind, He said, "**Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents**" (John 9:3). Sometimes there is no one to blame, and hunting for someone only makes the hurt bigger.

Here is the best part. Jesus Christ does not ask which kind of break you are carrying before He helps. He said He was sent "**to heal the brokenhearted**" (Luke 4:18). The ones who broke it themselves. The ones someone else broke. The ones that just broke. He knows "how to succor his people" (Alma 7:12). *Succor* means to run to someone's help. Bring Him all three kinds.

Not a Punishment, and Not Wasted

So if hard things are not always punishments, are they just pointless? No. Here is the other half of the truth.

The Lord once told a man who had lost almost everything, and was suffering through a long, cold winter he had not caused, that "all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good" (D&C 122:7). Paul wrote that "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28).

Look carefully at that. It does not say all things *are* good. A car crash is not good. A friend dying is not good. A tower falling is not good. It says all things can *work together* for good, in the hands of a God who wastes nothing. He does not cause every hard thing. But He can take any hard thing you bring to Him and build something out of it.

And when you are hurting too much to think about any of that, remember this: Jesus never asks you to smile through your grief. When His friend Lazarus died, Jesus went to the grave. He saw Lazarus's sister Mary crying. He saw her friends crying. And the Bible says, in the shortest verse in all of scripture, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35).

He knew He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead. He wept anyway. He wept because the people He loved were hurting. He is the same today. When you hurt, He is

not standing far off with His arms crossed, waiting for you to get over it. He is close, and He is weeping with you.

 AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • **When a Friend Dies**

"Your hat is crooked," said Kate's manager at the yogurt shop.

"It's a giant swirl of frozen yogurt," Kate said. "It's always crooked. It's *designed* crooked."

"Then make it crooked on purpose."

Kate tilted it the other way and went out to her car. It was snowing. It was also the first anniversary of the night Becky Strandquist died, and Kate sat in the grocery store parking lot next door with the engine running and typed a text to her best friend: *one year. i still can't drive past that curve*. She sent it into nowhere, the way she always did.

The phone buzzed in her hand.

It was Becky's number. Texting back.

Kate dropped the phone. It bounced off her knee and landed in a slush puddle on the floor mat, and she grabbed it out with both hands, her heart pounding so hard she could hear it.

Here is what she had never told anyone. For a whole year, almost every night before she went to sleep, she had texted Becky's phone.

can't sleep

got a job at the yogurt place. you would laugh at the hat

i should have been in the car. i'm sorry i'm sorry

She knew the messages went nowhere. Becky was gone. But she could not stop. It was the last thread she had.

What Kate did not know was that Becky's mom, Denise Strandquist, had kept paying for Becky's phone line. She could not stand the thought of calling the number and hearing it was disconnected. The phone sat in a drawer in Becky's room, plugged in. Every night, it lit up with Kate's messages. Denise read every one. For a whole year, she could not bring herself to answer. Until that night.

Kate wiped the slush off the screen and read it.

This is Becky's mom. I've read every one, honey. It was never your fault. She would have told you to ride the bus too. She loved you so much. Please come see me.

Kate put her head on the steering wheel and cried until the windows fogged up.

That Christmas, she knocked on Denise's door, and the two of them sat at the kitchen table for three hours. It was the beginning. It was not the end of the grief. A year and a half later, Kate walked back into church for the first time in nearly three years and sat on the back row. Her mom saw her and had to leave the chapel to cry in the hall.

If someone you love has died, here are a few things that help.

Let yourself grieve. Crying is not weakness and it is not a lack of faith. The Lord told His people they would "weep for the loss of them that die" (D&C 42:45). Grief is what love feels like when the person is gone.

Don't do the guilt math. "If I had been there... if I had texted back... if I had said something different." Grief loves that kind of math. But a death you did not cause is not yours to carry. Bring that guilt to the Savior and leave it with Him.

Say their name. Talk about them. Tell their funny stories. Look at their pictures. People who have

died are not a topic to avoid. They are people you love.

Let people help, and help others. When we are baptized, we promise to “mourn with those that mourn” (Mosiah 18:9). That means you are allowed to be mourned with. Let your friends sit with you. And look around: someone else may be missing the same person.

Remember the rest of the story. Before He raised Lazarus, Jesus told Lazarus’s sister Martha, **“I am the resurrection, and the life”** (John 11:25). Because of Him, death is not the end. Your friend is alive in the spirit world right now, and one day you will see them again, with a body that will never be hurt again.

Tell someone if it gets too dark. If your grief ever turns into feeling that you cannot go on, or that you do not want to live, tell a parent, a leader, a school counselor or a doctor today. In the U.S., you can call or text **988** any time, day or night. (See “If You Are Hurting” at the front of this book.)

AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • When a Friend Moves Away

The basketball hit the rim, bounced off the garage, and rolled down Sister Ybarrola's driveway straight for the street, and a pickup was coming.

Owen Hadlock, carrying a trash can to the curb next door, dropped the can and sprinted. He scooped the ball up one step before the street, and the pickup rolled past with a friendly honk.

"Bro," Owen said, breathing hard. "You owe me a trash can. It's in my yard now. Like, all of it."

Jonah Ybarrola did not laugh. He was standing under the hoop with his hands in his hoodie pocket. He had not even gone after the ball.

Jonah was a teacher, a year younger than Owen, and for as long as he could remember, his best friend had been Eli Brannock.

They had been in the same Primary class. They had passed the sacrament side by side every Sunday since they turned twelve. They had a whole system for it: Eli took the left side of the chapel, Jonah took the right, and they met in the middle at the back and did a tiny fist bump nobody was supposed to see. They rode bikes to the river all summer. They had a plan to serve missions at the same time.

Then, in July, Eli's dad got a job in Gilbert, Arizona. Three weeks later a moving truck was backed up to the Brannocks' garage, and Eli was gone.

Nobody died. Everybody kept saying that, as if it should help. "It's not like he died. You can still text him." And they did text, all the time at first. Then a little less. Eli made the basketball team at his new school. He started saying "you guys" about kids Jonah had never met. Their messages got shorter. Jonah started eating lunch by himself and telling his mom he wasn't hungry.

The first Sunday in September, Jonah passed the sacrament on the right side of the chapel, and when he got to the back, nobody was there. He stood by the door with the tray in his hands and could not move for a second.

Owen did not know all of that. But he could see enough. He passed the ball back.

"You coming to basketball on Wednesday?" Owen asked.

Jonah shrugged. "Eli and I used to go."

"Yeah. Come anyway. Brother Thorsgaard needs somebody who can actually make a free throw."

Jonah came. It was not the same. It never would be. But it was something.

The Bible has a story about two best friends who were torn apart. Jonathan was the son of King Saul. David was a shepherd boy who became a hero. They loved each other like brothers. But Saul became jealous of David and tried to kill him, and David had to flee and live far away.

On the day they said goodbye, out in a field, the two friends "wept one with another" (1 Samuel 20:41). They did not pretend it was no big deal. And before they parted, Jonathan said, "Go in peace... The LORD be between me and thee" (1 Samuel 20:42). They put the Lord in the middle of their friendship. Distance could not undo that.

If your friend moves away, here are a few things that help.

It is a real loss. It is not the same as losing a friend like Becky, but you are allowed to be sad. Grief is not only for funerals.

Stay in touch, and let it change. Video call. Send something by mail. Plan a visit. But understand that your friend has to build a new life where they are, and so do you. That is not betrayal. It is growing

up.

Make room for new people. You do not replace an old friend. But your heart has more than one room. Say yes to the invitation. Sit by someone new.

Be the friend someone else needs. Somewhere in your school or your ward, there is someone who just moved in and knows nobody. You know exactly how they feel. Go sit by them.

Remember the Friend who never moves away. Jesus Christ knew what it was like when people left. Once, after a hard sermon, many of His followers “went back, and walked no more with him” (John 6:66). He turned to His closest friends and asked, “*Will ye also go away?*” (John 6:67). He understands. And He has promised, “*I am with you alway*” (Matthew 28:20). Friends move. He does not.

WALK WITH HIM • Let Him Weep with You

This week, read John 11:32–44, the story of Lazarus, slowly. Notice that Jesus wept even though He knew how the story would end. Then think of someone you have lost, through death, a move, or a friendship that faded. Tell your Father in Heaven about that person, out loud, by name, and ask Him to help you feel His Son close to you in your sadness.

Think about it: Who do you know who might be missing someone right now, and what is one small thing you could do for them?



ASHER • A WORK OF FICTION

The First Thing She Asked

I remember the night Becky Strandquist came into the world of spirits. It was five years ago now, by the counting of the living. She came in the way the sudden ones come, stumbling, as if someone had pushed her through a door she did not see. She was seventeen, in a gray sweatshirt with her school’s name on it, holding her hands up in front of her face against headlights that were no longer there.

I had been told to be ready, and I was. I sat down beside her. That is nearly always the right thing to do.

When she understood where she was, she did not ask about herself. The first thing she asked was about her friend. “Kate was supposed to be with me,” she said. “She’s going to think it was her fault. Can somebody tell her it wasn’t? Please. Can somebody tell her?”

I could not. That is not my work. I told her the Lord saw Kate, and that she would not be left alone. It was all I had. It did not seem like very much that night.

Becky has been busy here since then, in the work of the Lord, and she is happy in it. She laughs the same loud laugh. Her grandfather is never far away. But she has never stopped watching for Kate, when she is permitted. She saw the year of nightly messages. She saw her own mother finally answer them. She saw Kate walk back into a chapel and sit on the very last row.

On that Sunday evening in October, we were permitted to see again. We saw a small, clean, careful car on the highway to Idaho Falls, with the sun going down gold over the bare potato fields, and a pickup with a bookshelf following behind. We saw Kate driving with both hands on the wheel. We saw her brother beside her, tall now, with a cracked phone face down in the cup holder.

And we heard her tell him.

Becky held very still while Kate talked. When Kate said, "Text me when you're home," Becky put her hand over her mouth. When Kate said, "It wasn't Becky's fault. It wasn't mine," Becky made a small sound and grabbed my arm, just the way she had grabbed it that first night.

"She said it," Becky whispered. "Asher, she said it out loud."

"She did."

"She never says it. She never tells anybody." Becky was crying now, and smiling, both at once. "Somebody did tell her. My mom told her. And the bishop. And she got it. She got it."

I thought about that first night. A frightened girl had asked me to tell her friend it was not her fault, and I could not. But the Lord heard what she wanted. He did not send a messenger from the spirit world to do it. He used a grieving mother with a phone in a drawer. He used a bishop with a verse from Ecclesiastes. He used five long years and a lot of tears. And now a sister was passing it on to her brother, in a car, on a Sunday, where no one but us could see.

That is often how He works. Slowly. Through people. Without wasting anything.

The Preacher was right. Time and chance happen to everyone. They happened to Becky on a black-ice curve, for no reason anyone will ever find. I will not pretend that her death was good. It was not.

But the Lord was not done when the ice was done. He never is.

We watched until the car turned onto Kate's street and the boy reached over and put his hand on his sister's shoulder. Then I sang, very softly, one of the old pilgrim songs my people sang on the road up to Jerusalem. Becky knows it now. She sang it with me, a little off the note, the way she always does: "The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore" (Psalms 121:8).

Her going out came too early. But her coming in, I was there to see. And Kate's coming back, we both saw.

There was one more thing I noticed, though it was not mine to follow. That same morning, in a little room behind a Rexburg chapel, the sacrament trays had been filled without one of the boys who should have been there. Owen had kept looking at the door. Abilene can tell you why.



PART TWO

The Seven Reminders



“Yet Have Ye Not Returned unto Me”

Past Feeling



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Empty Spot at the Sacrament Table

“Don’t,” Owen said, “touch the cup box.”

Jonah Ybarrola held up both hands. “I’m not touching it. I’m *looking* at it.”

“That’s how it starts. Last month a deacon looked at it, and we found cups under the fridge for two weeks.”

“There’s no fridge in here.”

“Exactly. That’s how bad it was.”

It was the second Sunday in October, eight-thirty in the morning, and the teachers were in the little room behind the chapel where they got the sacrament ready. The room smelled like bread and old carpet. There was a sink, a cupboard full of trays, and a box of tiny paper cups that somebody always spilled. Owen had his white shirt on and Grandpa Lowell’s green tie, the one with the small gold diamonds. Jonah had come early. Ever since Owen had chased down his basketball and talked him into Wednesday nights, Jonah had started showing up places early, like he was trying them out again.

Jonah reached past the box for a water tray. His sleeve caught the corner.

The box went over the edge of the counter in slow motion. Owen lunged for it. He got the box. He did not get the cups. Two hundred tiny paper cups bounced off the counter, off his knee, off the toe of his church shoe, and rolled away across the carpet in every direction like they had somewhere to be. One full water tray tipped against the sink, and a cold sheet of water came over the edge, and Owen yanked Grandpa’s tie up over his shoulder just before it got soaked.

They stood there, dripping a little, looking at the floor.

“Okay,” Jonah said. “I touched it.”

Owen started to laugh. He could not help it. Jonah laughed too, the first real laugh I had heard out of him since July. They got down on their knees and gathered every cup into the trash, because you do not use a cup that has been on the floor, not for this. They wiped the counter. They started the tray over, slowly this time, so nothing would slosh. Every minute or so Owen looked at the door.

Tyler did not come.

At 8:41 Owen's phone buzzed. The crack across the screen ran right through the message, but he could read it: "cant today. stomach thing. sorry bro."

Owen read it twice. Then he typed "np, feel better," and set the phone face down on the counter. He went back to the trays. That was the third Sunday in a row.

"Tyler?" Jonah asked.

"Stomach thing," Owen said. He did not look up.

I cannot hear what these kids think. I can only see their faces and hear what they say out loud. And that morning I was sent to Tyler's house.

Tyler Winsor was not sick. He was lying on his bed in his church pants, staring at the ceiling. His white shirt hung on the closet door, still on the hanger. His phone lay face down on the dresser across the room, as if he had thrown it there and did not want to look at it.

I will tell you plainly what Tyler was hiding, because it is the kind of thing a lot of good kids hide. Three years earlier, when he was twelve, someone handed him a borrowed phone with a link on it. He clicked it. He saw pornography. He did not go looking for it that first time. But he went back. And then he went back again. I will not describe one second of what was on that screen. I would not, and it does not matter. What matters is what the hiding was doing to him.

It had taught him a dozen small skills that no one his age should need. How to flip a phone over fast. How to clear a history. How to lock his door without making a sound. How to say "I'm fine" so it sounded true. Each one was small. Together they had built a wall around him, and he lived behind it.

His mother, Wendy, knocked softly. "Feeling any better, bud?"

"Kind of," Tyler said. "I'll come for sacrament meeting."

"Okay. We leave at five to nine."

Her footsteps went down the hall. Tyler sat up and rubbed his face with both hands.

He looked at the white shirt on the closet door for a long time. He got up and took it off the hanger. He held it by the shoulders, the way you hold up a shirt to see if it still fits. Then he hung it back up.

He had tried to quit. Oh, so many times. I watched him try. He would delete everything, shut the phone in a drawer and promise himself it was over. For a day, sometimes two, he held on. Then he would give in again, harder than before.

“I can’t stop,” he whispered. “I try and I try, and I can’t. It’s like I’m a slave to it.” He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. “And it’s worse than that. I sent it to other kids. Younger kids. And now they’re hooked too.”

He slid down to the floor with his back against the bed. “It’s my fault,” he said, very low. “Nobody made me. Every single time, I’m the one.”

He was quiet for a while. Then he said something that made the room feel colder. “I used to at least feel sick after. Like, really sick. Now I don’t even feel that.” He laughed once, without smiling. “That’s worse. That’s way worse.”

Then he looked up at the ceiling, the way people look up when they are talking to Someone, even when they don’t mean to be.

“Why did You make me like this?” he said. His voice cracked on the last word. “Owen just goes and fills the trays. Everybody else just... does it. Why’d You make me the broken one?”

No answer came that he could hear. I could not give him one either. That is not mine to give. But I want you to notice what he did, even angry, even lost. He asked *Him*. A boy who is truly done with God does not bother to ask God anything. Tyler was still talking to Heaven. He only talked as if Heaven had stopped talking back.

I do not know what was in his heart. I cannot see that. But I saw his face, and it was not the face of a boy with a stomachache. It was the face of a boy who did not feel like he belonged at a sacrament table anymore. He did not carry those trays. Not that bread, not that water. Not with his hands.

He came to sacrament meeting. He sat with his family, near the back. When the deacons came down the aisle with the bread, he took it. But he looked at the floor the whole time, and when the meeting ended, he was the first one out the door.

Owen waved at him from across the foyer. Tyler did not see it. Or he pretended not to.

I stood in the foyer among the strollers and the coats, and I felt the ache I have felt since before the world was made: the ache of loving someone whose choices are his own.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: What if I've done something so many times that I can't feel bad about it anymore, and God is done with me?

What scripture says: People can slowly lose the ability to feel the Spirit, but no one who wants to come back is ever too far gone. The Savior runs to meet us.

In the story: Tyler hides a habit with pornography, starts skipping the sacrament, and starts to believe he is "too far gone."

Key verses: 1 Nephi 17:45; Luke 15:20; Alma 36:18–20; Isaiah 1:18; Moroni 6:8

A Slope, Not a Cliff

The Book of Mormon has a phrase for what was happening to Tyler. Nephi's older brothers, Laman and Lemuel, had seen an angel. They had heard God's voice. And still they kept turning away. Nephi told them the Lord had spoken to them "in a still small voice, but ye were past feeling, that ye could not feel his words" (1 Nephi 17:45).

Past feeling means you stop feeling the nudges you used to feel. The guilt goes quiet. The Spirit feels far away. Things that used to bother you don't bother you much anymore. Paul used the same words for people who were "past feeling" (Ephesians 4:19), and the prophet Mormon used them for a whole nation that had gone dark (Moroni 9:20).

Here is the thing to notice. Nobody falls into "past feeling" in one day. It is not a cliff. It is a slope. You go down one small step at a time: one more hidden thing, one more excuse, one more Sunday where you don't quite show up. Each step feels small. That is why the slope is so dangerous.

But a slope has good news in it, too. **You can turn around at any point on a slope.** You don't have to climb all the way back in one jump. You only have to turn and take one step up. Then another.

And the numb feeling? It is not proof that God is gone. It is proof that something has been crowding Him out. The moment you start to feel bad again, even a little, that is not your enemy. That is the Spirit getting through. That is the first warm light coming through the crack.

"Why Did You Make Me Like This?"

Tyler asked God that question out loud, alone in his room. Maybe you have asked it too, about a habit, a temper, a pull you never wanted.

First, it is okay that you asked. Asking God a hard question is still talking to God. He would much rather hear your hardest words than your silence.

Second, here is the true answer. God did not build you to sin. James wrote, “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God” (James 1:13). Living in a mortal body means we all have weak spots, and the Lord says plainly, “I give unto men weakness that they may be humble” (Ether 12:27). But a weakness is not a sin, and it is not a sentence. In the same verse He promises, “then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27).

Third, notice the two lies hiding inside Tyler’s question. One lie says, “It’s all God’s fault, so why try?” The other says, “It’s all my fault, so I’m ruined.” Both lies end in the same place: giving up. The truth is in between. Tyler did make choices, and he needs to own them. But owning them is the first step home, not a reason to stay away.

You are not the broken one. You are a child of God with a hard problem, and He has a Son who has fixed harder ones.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Parking Lot After Basketball

On Wednesday night, the church gym smelled like floor wax and sweat. Brother Thorsgaard blew his whistle and the boys finished their last game, shirts against skins, the ball booming off the backboard. Tyler played hard. He played better than he had in weeks, as if he could run away from something on that court.

After the game, Brother Thorsgaard sat the boys down on the bottom row of the bleachers for a two-minute thought. He is a big man with a soft voice. He opened his scriptures to Isaiah and read just one line: “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18).

“Snow,” he said, and smiled. “You guys know about snow. In about three weeks, this whole town turns white overnight. Every muddy field. Every dirty parking lot. That’s what He can do. That’s all I’ve got. Grab a granola bar on your way out.”

The boys laughed and scattered. Tyler did not laugh. He stood up, grabbed his hoodie and walked out without a granola bar.

Owen caught up with him in the parking lot. The wind was coming hard off the fields, the way it does in Rexburg in October, cold enough to sting your ears. Their breath made little clouds.

“Bro,” Owen said. “You good? You’ve been kind of weird.”

“I’m fine.”

“You missed, like, three Sundays.”

“I was sick.”

Owen waited. He did not push. That is his habit: he goes quiet when he should keep going. Tyler kicked a rock across the asphalt. It skittered under a car.

Then Tyler said, very fast, not looking at him, “Do you ever think some people are just too far gone? Like God made them wrong, or He already gave up on them, and they just keep showing up to church out of habit?”

I watched Owen’s face. I do not think he understood. How could he? He thought for a second, and then he did what he always does when something feels too heavy. He made a joke.

“Like Brayden?” he said, and grinned.

Tyler laughed. It was a short laugh, the kind that closes a door. “Yeah,” he said. “Like Brayden. Forget it.”

Tyler’s mom pulled up. He climbed in and was gone.

Owen stood in the wind with his hands in his hoodie pocket. He looked at the taillights. He frowned. I think he knew he had missed something. But he did not know what, and he went home.

I stayed in that parking lot a long time. “Too far gone.” Those were the words Tyler had said out loud, and they were the words of the slope. They are the oldest lie there is. They do not sound like a lie. They sound like the truth, like being honest with yourself. The adversary loves that lie, because a boy who believes he is too far gone will stop trying to come home.



The Boy Who Came to Himself

Too far gone. Jesus once told a story about a boy who believed exactly that about himself.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • The Prodigal Son: A Great Way Off

The pigs were eating better than he was. That was the thought that hit the boy as he stood in the mud with a bucket of pig food, so hungry it was starting to look like lunch.

It had not always been this way. He was the younger of two sons, and he could not wait. He asked his father for his share of the family money, right now, while his father was still alive. That was like saying, "I wish you were already dead." The father gave it to him anyway.

The boy "took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living" (Luke 15:13). He spent every coin. He partied. He bought friends. And when the money ran out, the friends ran out too. Then a famine hit, and he got the worst job there was: feeding pigs. For a Jewish boy in that day, it was about as low as you could go.

And then comes one of the most hopeful lines in the whole Bible. Jesus said, "**when he came to himself**" (Luke 15:17). He woke up. He remembered who he was. He remembered his father's house, where even the hired workers had plenty of bread.

So he made a plan. He practiced a speech: "I'm not worthy to be your son anymore. Just let me be one of your workers." He thought he was too far gone to be a son. He started the long walk home.

Now watch the father. Jesus said, "**when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him**" (Luke 15:20).

In that culture, a grown man in a long robe did not run. It was undignified. He did it anyway. The boy started, "I am no more worthy..." and the father didn't even let him finish. He called for a robe, a ring, shoes and a feast. "**this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found**" (Luke 15:24).

He Watches the Road

The father saw him a great way off. That means he had been watching the road. Maybe every day.

Jesus told this story so you would know what God is like. You are never too far down the road for Him to see you. He is not waiting with crossed arms. He is watching the road, and when you turn around, He runs.

A Boy Who Was Worse Than He Thought

The Book of Mormon has a true story about a young man who went much farther down the slope than most of us ever will.

His name was Alma, and his father, also named Alma, was the leader of the Church. The younger Alma "became a very wicked and an idolatrous man" (Mosiah 27:8). He was smart and a good talker, and he used that gift to pull people away from God. He and his friends, the sons of King Mosiah, went around trying to tear the Church apart.

But his father never stopped praying for him.

One day, as the young men were out causing trouble, an angel came down and spoke “with a voice of thunder, which caused the earth to shake” (Mosiah 27:11). The angel told Alma why he had come: the Lord had heard the prayers of his father, who “has prayed with much faith concerning thee” (Mosiah 27:14).

Alma fell to the ground. For three days he could not speak or move. Years later he described those days. He said his soul was “racked with all my sins” (Alma 36:12). He felt the full weight of everything he had done.

And then, right in the middle of that pain, he remembered something his dad used to teach: that Jesus Christ would come “to atone for the sins of the world” (Alma 36:17). He caught hold of that one thought like a rope. In his heart he cried out, “O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me” (Alma 36:18).

That was all. One honest cry, to a real Person, by name.

And it worked. Alma said the pain was gone, and in its place came “what joy, and what marvelous light” (Alma 36:20).

Alma did not become a better person first and then call on Jesus. He called on Jesus while he was still at the bottom. That is the order. You don’t clean yourself up to come to Him. You come to Him to be cleaned. Alma became one of the greatest prophets in the Book of Mormon. If Jesus could rescue Alma, He is not done with you.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • What the Church Teaches About Pornography

Let's talk about it plainly, because silence is where this problem grows.

It is harmful. The Church teaches that pornography takes something sacred and makes it cheap. It trains your brain to want more and more of something that never satisfies. For many people it becomes a habit that is hard to break alone. Church leaders have taught that it damages the way we see other people and ourselves. The Church's guide for youth, *For the Strength of Youth: A Guide for Making Choices*, invites you to choose media that invites the Spirit and to turn away from anything that drives Him away.

Being tempted is not the same as sinning. Seeing something by accident is not a sin. Even feeling pulled toward it is not a sin. Jesus Himself "was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). What matters is what you do next.

You are not your worst habit. Shame says, "I am bad." The Savior says, "You are Mine, and you can change." Those are different messages, and only one of them comes from Him.

Do not fight it alone. Here is what helps:

- **Tell a parent.** It is scary. Most parents are much kinder about this than you fear.
 - **Talk to your bishop.** He is not there to punish you. He is there to help you feel the Savior's forgiveness and make a plan.
 - **Make it harder.** Phones stay out of bedrooms at night. Use filters. Tell a trusted friend or parent when it's a hard day.
 - **Get help if it's a habit.** The Church offers addiction recovery support, and your bishop can connect you with it, along with counselors who know how to help.
-
- **Send it away, then turn to Him.** At the very moment the temptation comes, say it in your mind or out loud: "In the name of Jesus Christ, leave." Moses did this when Satan came at him. He called on God and said, "In the name of the Only Begotten, depart hence, Satan" (Moses 1:21). Then, in that same moment, turn to Heavenly Father and ask Him to help you know His Son. You might slip back, but do not give up. Keep filling a little more of your life with Christ and His word, and leave less room for dirt and destruction. And I know it is very embarrassing, but you also need to tell your bishop, so he can help you with repentance.
 - **Keep coming back.** If you slip, don't hide. Tell someone again. The Book of Mormon promises that "as oft as they repented and sought forgiveness, with real intent, they were forgiven" (Moroni 6:8).

The Way Back

The way home is not complicated. It is just hard to start.

First, **turn toward Him.** Pray to Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ, and out loud if you can. Alma caught hold of the Savior's name, and you can too. You don't need fancy words. "Please help me. I want to come back" is a whole prayer.

Second, **tell someone**. Secrets get stronger in the dark. The scriptures say that a person who truly repents “will confess them and forsake them” (D&C 58:43). For something like this, that means talking to a parent and your bishop.

Third, **believe Him when He says it’s gone**. The Lord promised, “he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more” (D&C 58:42). Remember Brother Thorsgaard’s snow: “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18). The whole field. Overnight.

Jesus did not die and rise again so you could carry your worst moments forever. He did it so you could put them down. He knows exactly how heavy they are. He has already carried them.

WALK WITH HIM • Say His Name

This week, read Alma 36:17–20. It’s only four verses. Then find a quiet place, kneel if you can, and pray out loud to Heavenly Father in the name of His Son, as if you are talking to Someone in the room, because you are. Tell Him one true thing you have been afraid to say, and ask Him to help you come to Jesus the way Alma did. Then just stay there for a minute and notice how you feel.

Think about it: If the father in Jesus’s story was watching the road for his son, what do you think the Savior is doing while He waits for you?



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

A Light Under the Door

Two weeks before Halloween, Sister Quintanar handed out the seminary reading for the week. Each student got a slip of paper with a few chapters on it. Tyler’s slip said Alma 36.

He shoved it in his backpack and did not take it out again all week.

On Thursday night, late, the house was asleep. Tyler’s phone was charging in the kitchen, because his dad had started a new family rule that week: phones in the kitchen at ten. Tyler had grumbled about it. His dad had not explained why. I do not know if his father suspected anything. I only know the phone was in the kitchen, and Tyler was alone in his room without it.

He could not sleep. He lay there. He got up. He sat on the edge of his bed. He dug through his backpack for a charger that wasn’t there, and the seminary slip fell out onto the carpet.

He picked it up. Alma 36.

On his shelf was a blue Book of Mormon with his name stamped on the cover in gold. His parents had given it to him when he was baptized at eight. The corners were bent. He had not opened it in a long time. He took it down and turned on his desk lamp.

He started reading. I watched him. He read slowly. He read verse 12 and stopped and stared at the wall for a while. He kept going. When he got to verse 18, his lips started moving. Then he read it out loud, barely above a whisper: "O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me."

He set the book down on the desk.

He sat there with his hands in his lap. His shoulders started to shake. He was crying, the quiet kind, the kind you do when you don't want anyone in the house to hear.

Then he got off the chair and knelt on the carpet, the way he used to as a little boy, with his elbows on the bed.

"Heavenly Father," he said out loud. His voice cracked. "I don't... I don't know how to fix this. I've tried. I keep messing up. And I'm sorry I said You made me wrong. I don't think You did. I think I just... went the wrong way a lot of times." He stopped and wiped his face on his sleeve. "I need Jesus. Like Alma did. Please don't be done with me. Please." And then, very quietly, "In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen."

That was the whole prayer. He stayed on his knees.

I did not do anything. I want you to know that. I could not, and I would not have dared. What happened next did not come from me.

A warmth came into that room. It was not the lamp. It was not the heater. It was a stillness, like the moment after the last note of a hymn when the whole chapel is quiet. Tyler lifted his head. He did not look around. He just breathed, slowly, as if he had been holding his breath for three years and had finally let it go.

He did not tell anyone that night. He did not fix everything that night. The road ahead of him was long, and there would be hard days on it. He would have to tell Owen. He would have to sit in the bishop's office. His parents would have to know. All of that was still ahead.

But the slope had turned. He was facing uphill now.

He climbed back into bed and left the lamp on. From the hallway you could see a thin line of light under his door. I stood beside that light until morning.

Far down the road, the Father had seen him coming. I am sure of it. And somewhere in the dark, Someone was already running.

Before the month was out, Tyler would send Owen a text he had not sent in weeks: “can i ride with u.” It was about a Halloween party. Neither of them knew yet what they would find there.



The Still Small Voice



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Orange Lights on Brayden's Porch

"That's not a costume," Lily said from the couch. She was dressed as a strawberry. "That's just you."

Owen looked down at his work coveralls. Clean ones, at least. He had written OWEN on the name patch with a marker. "It's a mechanic costume," he said. "It's very scary. Ask anybody whose car I fixed."

"You don't fix cars. You sweep."

"Thanks, Lily."

"You're welcome." She held up her plastic pumpkin. "Daddy says I'm a hazard."

"You're a *fruit*."

"I'm a *hazard fruit*," Lily said, and rolled off the couch on purpose, because strawberries can't do anything else.

Twenty minutes later Steve's old truck pulled up in front of the Kolstads' big house on the edge of town, with Owen by the window and Tyler squeezed in the middle, his knees up by the dashboard. There were orange lights on the porch. Music thumped through the walls so hard the truck window buzzed. A fog machine was puffing on the lawn, and up on the porch, a kid in a giant inflatable hot dog costume was trying to get through the front door.

He did not fit. He turned sideways. He still did not fit. Somebody inside pulled. Somebody outside pushed. And then the hot dog popped loose backward, missed the top step, and went bouncing down all four steps and across the lawn like a beach ball, straight into the fog machine, which tipped over and blasted a cloud of white fog across the whole yard. The hot dog lay on his back in the cloud with his little arms waving.

"Is he okay?" Owen said, leaning forward.

The hot dog sat up and gave two thumbs up to the cheering porch.

“He’s okay,” said Tyler. And then Tyler laughed. Really laughed, with his head back, the way he used to before this fall. Owen looked over at him, surprised. It had been a long time.

It was Saturday, the twenty-eighth of October, cold and clear. The sun had gone down behind the potato fields west of town, and the sky over the Rexburg Temple had turned pink and then gray. Owen had spent the day at Ostergard Automotive sweeping the shop floor and handing Marco wrenches, and he had showered fast and still smelled a little like brake cleaner. Brayden Kolstad’s Halloween party had been all over soph squad for two weeks. Pumpkin emojis. Skull emojis. “Parents out of town, let’s goooo.” Half the sophomore class was going. Owen had asked his parents if he could go. His mom had looked at his dad. His dad had looked at the ceiling for a long second, and then said yes.

Tyler had texted Owen that afternoon: “can i ride with u.” Tyler had been quiet for weeks. “At least he wants to go somewhere,” Owen had told his mom.

Owen reached for the door handle.

“Hey,” Steve said.

Owen sighed. “I know, Dad.”

“I’m just saying it. X. Any time. No questions tonight.”

“I *know*.”

“Okay.” Steve looked at both boys. “Have fun. Be smart.”

I went in with them. I had been sent.

Inside, the house was hot and dim and loud. Purple light bulbs. A strobe in the living room. Forty or fifty kids, some in costumes, some in hoodies. Somebody had filled the bathtub with ice. Phones were up everywhere, filming everything.

And Sethar was there.

I knew him long ago, before the world was made. He was my friend once, bright and blue. He is a dull red now, and he is never quiet. He does not whisper. He crowds. He moved through that party like heat, pressing close to people, filling every silence with noise, pushing every laugh one notch too loud. Where he stood, people talked faster and thought less. He did not look at me. He never does, when he is busy.

In the front room, by the stairs, Kade Dunlavy and Ridge Kesselring had made themselves at home. Kade was sitting on the stair rail, swinging one foot, dressed as nothing at all except a hoodie and his huge grin. Ridge was flicking a lighter open and shut, open and shut, over a bowl of paper decorations, while a girl dressed as a witch told

him to stop. He did not stop. Sethar was closest to those two. He liked them best of all, I think. He pressed against them the way a crowd presses against a stage.

Owen and Tyler drifted to the kitchen, because that is where the food was. And that is where Owen saw it.

On the counter, next to a bowl of candy corn, there were three or four vapes lying around like pens. There was a cooler on the floor full of beer cans. Somebody's older cousin had brought it. And next to the sink there was an orange prescription bottle with a white cap. Two boys were looking at the label and laughing.

"Bro, those are my mom's," Brayden said, coming in with a grin and a plastic vampire cape. "From her back surgery. She doesn't even take them anymore." He rattled the bottle like a maraca. "Party favors."

Some kids laughed. Some looked away. Owen did neither. He just stood there.

Brayden set the bottle down by the sink and turned to yell at someone about the speaker. Kade had come in behind him. He did not look at the bottle. He did not hurry. He just picked it up, the way you'd pick up a salt shaker, shook a few pills into his palm, slid them into the front pocket of his hoodie and set the bottle back down in the very same spot. It took about three seconds. Then he took a handful of candy corn out of the bowl and ate it.

Owen saw. Kade saw him see. He winked.

I want to be plain about what I saw in that moment, because it was not a joke, though everyone in that kitchen treated it like one. A boy of sixteen had just put something in his pocket that was made to be taken by one grown woman, carefully, under a doctor's orders. I do not think he knew what it would do to him. I do not think anyone in that house did. There were forty kids, no parents, a cooler of beer, and a bottle that was a little lighter than it had been a minute before. Sethar stood right behind Kade with a kind of hunger. He was not loud for once. He was watching.

Then a crash came from the front room. Ridge had backed into the little table by the stairs, and a framed picture had gone face-first onto the tile. Brayden pushed through the crowd. He picked it up. It was a family photo, old, the Kolstads at a lake, two boys in life jackets squinting into the sun. One of them was Brayden at about seven. The other was his big brother, Tyce. The glass had cracked straight across Tyce's face.

"Bro, that's on Kade," Ridge said right away. "He bumped me. And who puts glass stuff by the stairs? That's on your mom."

"I was in the kitchen," Kade said, chewing.

Brayden did not say anything. He stood there holding the picture a lot longer than anyone noticed but me. Then he put it in a drawer, face down, and turned the music up.

I watched Owen's face change. It was not a big change. His smile stayed on, but it got stiff, and his eyes went from the bottle to the door and back. He put his hand on his stomach like it hurt. I cannot see inside a person. I could only see what showed. But I know that look. I have seen it in a thousand faces over a thousand years. It is the look of someone who has just felt a warning.

I did not give him that feeling. I cannot give anyone that feeling. It came from Someone far greater than I am. My only job, that night, was to stand in the kitchen doorway and pray that the noise would not drown it out.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: How do I know when the Holy Ghost is warning me, and what do I do when everyone else is doing it?

What scripture says: God often speaks in a quiet voice, not in noise, and He always gives a way out of temptation.

In the story: At Brayden's Halloween party, Owen watches Kade pocket pills, feels an uneasy warning, texts his dad an "X," and leaves. Tyler leaves with him.

Key verses: 1 Kings 19:11–12; D&C 8:2; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Daniel 1:8; Daniel 3:17–18

The Feeling You Can't Explain

Most of the time, the Holy Ghost does not shout. He doesn't send a text in all caps. The Lord described how He usually speaks: "I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost" (D&C 8:2).

In your mind: a clear thought, like "I should leave," or "I should text Mom," or "I should go sit by that kid."

In your heart: a feeling. Sometimes it is warm and peaceful, and you know something is right. Sometimes it is the opposite: a tight stomach, a heavy, uneasy feeling, a sense that something is off even though you can't explain why.

That uneasy feeling is a gift. The Book of Mormon says "the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil" (Moroni 7:16). You were born with a built-in warning system. The Holy Ghost makes it even stronger.

But here's the problem. A quiet voice is easy to drown out. If the music is loud and everybody's laughing and someone is calling your name, you can talk yourself out of it in about two seconds. "It's fine." "Don't be weird." "You're overthinking it."

That is why the most important thing you can do is to notice the feeling and act on it fast, before the noise wins.

Elijah in the Cave

There was a prophet in the Old Testament named Elijah. He was one of the boldest people in the whole Bible. He once stood alone on Mount Carmel in front of 450 prophets of a false god and a huge crowd, and called down fire from heaven. It worked. The people shouted, "The LORD, he is the God" (1 Kings 18:39).

You'd think Elijah would feel great after that. He didn't. The wicked queen, Jezebel, sent him a message: by this time tomorrow, you're dead. So Elijah ran. He ran a long way, into the desert, alone.

He sat down under a juniper tree, completely worn out, and said, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life" (1 Kings 19:4). He was exhausted and discouraged and done.

Then something kind happened. While he slept, "an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat" (1 Kings 19:5). There was bread baked on hot coals and a jar of water by his head. God did not lecture him. God fed him and let him sleep.

When Elijah was strong enough, he walked for forty days to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, and he crawled into a cave. And the Lord asked him a question: "What doest thou here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9).

Then the Lord told Elijah to go stand outside on the mountain. And here's what happened.

First, "a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks... but the LORD was not in the wind" (1 Kings 19:11). Then an earthquake. The Lord was not in the earthquake. Then a fire. The Lord was not in the fire.

"And after the fire a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12).

When Elijah heard that quiet voice, he wrapped his face in his cloak and walked out to the mouth of the cave. That quiet voice was where God was.

Think about that. The wind, the earthquake and the fire were huge. Loud. Impressive. They got all the attention. But God was not in any of them. He was in the quiet thing that came after.

A party is a lot like that wind and fire. Music, lights, laughing, everybody filming. All that noise is not where God is. If you want to hear Him, you have to listen for the quiet thing underneath it all.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION
Ninety Seconds in the Hallway

Brayden came around the counter holding a vape out to Owen, the way you'd hand someone a chip.

"Hadlock. Just hit it once. It's literally nothing. It's like, mango."

Owen laughed a fake laugh. "I'm good."

"Bro, nobody's gonna tell your mommy."

A couple of kids laughed. Somebody held up a phone, filming. Sethar was right there, pressed close, a heat at Owen's back. He was loud. He was always loud. The music seemed to get louder wherever he went.

Owen said, "Hold on, I gotta pee," and walked out of the kitchen.

He went down the hall and into the bathroom and locked the door. He did not use the bathroom. He leaned his back against the door and slid down until he was sitting on the cold tile floor. The music came through the wall like a heartbeat.

He pulled out his phone. The crack ran from the top left corner down to the middle of the screen. He looked at it for maybe ten seconds. Then he opened his messages, found "Dad," and typed one letter.

X.

His thumb hovered. I watched him hesitate, and I could see on his face that he was embarrassed. He was fifteen, and leaving a party early because your dad picked you up is about as uncool as it gets. And I could see something else under it. His shoulders came down a little. His jaw relaxed. He breathed out.

He pressed send.

The message said "Delivered." Then, in less than a minute: "Leaving now. 8 min. Love you."

Owen put his face in his hands for a second. Then he stood up, unlocked the door and went to find Tyler.

Tyler was on the big leather couch in the living room. Somebody had set a beer can on the cushion next to him. He was not holding it. He was just staring at it, as if it were a question he didn't know how to answer.

Owen leaned over the back of the couch. "My dad's coming. You want a ride?"

Tyler looked up at him. He looked at the can. He looked at the kitchen, where Brayden was rattling the orange bottle and kids were laughing. Then he looked at Owen again, for a long second. I could not read what he was thinking. But I saw him stand up.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, okay."

They grabbed their coats from the pile on the stairs. Kade was still sitting on the rail above the pile, his hand resting on the front pocket of his hoodie. Ridge stood below him, spinning a set of truck keys around one finger and telling a group of freshmen he could take four of them home later, easy, no problem, the cops never come out this far.

Brayden saw Owen and Tyler heading for the door. "Hadlock! Lame!" he yelled, and some kids laughed.

Kade leaned over the rail as they passed. His grin was as wide as ever, but his eyes were somewhere else. "Run home, church boy," he called after Owen, loud enough for the whole front room. More kids laughed. Ridge laughed loudest.

Owen stopped with one hand on the door. For a second I thought he would turn around and say something back. He hits back when he is hurt; I have seen it. But he did not. He looked at Kade, just for a moment, and it was not an angry look. It was the look you give somebody who is standing too close to the edge of a canal in the dark. Then he opened the door.

Behind them Brayden called, "See you Monday, bro," and it sounded almost friendly. For just a second, behind the cape and the grin, I thought Brayden looked tired. I thought he looked like a boy in a big empty house whose parents were gone again. But then someone turned the music up, and the look was gone.

Sethar had screamed at them from the moment they reached for their coats. I know how that sounds. To the kids it was only noise, only the bass and the laughing. But it was meant for those two boys, and it was meant to turn them around.

They did not turn around.

The cold air hit them like a bucket of water. The fog machine hissed on the lawn. Tyler stood on the porch and took a deep breath.

Sethar did not follow them outside. He never stays for endings. He was already back inside, pressing close to the boy on the stair rail with his hand on his pocket.

Headlights turned onto the street. The old truck. Right on time.



Daniel and His Friends

Long before Owen was born, four teenage boys faced their own party.

Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego were taken from Jerusalem to Babylon when they were young. The king wanted to train them to serve in his palace. They got the best of everything: fancy clothes, a top education, and food and wine straight from the king's table.

But some of that food broke the laws God had given Israel. So "Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself" (Daniel 1:8). Purposed means he decided ahead of time. Before he ever sat down at the table, he had already made up his mind.

He didn't make a scene. He asked politely for a test: "Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink" (Daniel 1:12). Pulse means vegetables and beans. After ten days, the four boys looked healthier than everyone else. God blessed them.

Years later, the pressure got much bigger. The king built a giant gold statue and ordered everybody to bow down to it. Anyone who refused would be thrown into a blazing furnace. Thousands of people bowed. Three young men stood up straight: Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego.

The king was furious. He gave them one more chance. Their answer is one of the bravest things ever said. They told the king their God was able to save them. "But if not," they said, "... we will not serve thy gods" (Daniel 3:18).

But if not. They didn't know how it would turn out. They chose anyway.

The king had the furnace heated seven times hotter, and the three were thrown in. Then the king jumped up in shock. He saw four men walking around in the fire, not burned at all, "and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God" (Daniel 3:25).

They came out of that furnace without even the smell of smoke on them.

Here's what that story means for you. When you make a hard choice, you are not standing in the fire alone. There is always a fourth figure. The Savior walks with the ones who choose Him.

A Way to Escape

Paul promised something every teen should know by heart. God “will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Sometimes the way to escape is a miracle. But a lot of the time, it is something very ordinary: a back door, a bathroom with a lock, a friend who will leave with you, and a text to a parent. The escape is there. You have to take it.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • The X Plan

Owen and his dad had a simple deal, and you can make one too.

How it works: If you are ever somewhere that feels wrong (a party, a car, a sleepover, anywhere), you text a parent just one letter: X. That's all. No explanation.

What the parent does: Calls you a few minutes later and says, “Something came up at home. I'm coming to get you.” You get to act annoyed. “Ugh, my dad needs me.” It's not your fault you're leaving. Then the parent comes and gets you.

The most important part: No questions that night. No lecture in the car. You can talk about it later, if you want to, when you're ready. The point is that you never have to choose between your safety and getting in trouble.

Set it up now, before you need it. Talk to your mom or dad, or another trusted adult if a parent isn't an option. Agree on the letter. Agree on the promise. Put their number in your favorites.

Why it works: In the moment, with everyone watching, it is hard to say no out loud. A single letter is easy. You can send it from a bathroom in five seconds. That one letter can be your “way to escape” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

 AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • Why the Word of Wisdom?

The Word of Wisdom is the Lord's law of health. It's in Doctrine and Covenants section 89. It asks us not to use alcohol, tobacco, or other harmful substances. Church leaders have taught that it also covers vaping and using drugs, including taking someone else's prescription pills or misusing your own.

Why does the Lord care? Here are four simple reasons.

He saw it coming. The Lord said He gave the Word of Wisdom because of “conspiring men in the last days” (D&C 89:4). There are people who make money when you get hooked. They design flavors and ads for teenagers on purpose.

He wants you free. Addiction takes away your agency, your power to choose. The Lord wants you to keep that power.

He wants you clear-headed. Bad things happen when judgment gets impaired. Most people who have been to jail or prison will tell you it never would have happened if they had been in their right mind, if they had not been drunk or high. A clear head is a protection.

He promised blessings. Those who keep it “shall run and not be weary, and shall walk and not faint” (D&C 89:20), and they “shall find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge” (D&C 89:19).

The Word of Wisdom is not a list of rules to make your life boring. It's a Father protecting His kids.

WALK WITH HIM • Make Room for Quiet

You can't hear a still small voice if your life is never still. This week, find five minutes every day when nothing is playing and no one needs you. Sit in your room, or take a walk, or lie in the grass. Pray, and then just listen. Ask Heavenly Father to help you recognize the Holy Ghost, the Comforter that Jesus promised His disciples. Write down anything you feel.

Think about it: When was the last time you felt that quiet warning, or that quiet peace, and what did you do with it?



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

No Questions Tonight

The truck smelled like dust and heater and a little bit like the shop. Owen climbed in first. Tyler climbed in after him and pulled the door shut.

Steve did not say anything. He just put the truck in gear and pulled away from the orange lights.

For a while there was only the sound of the heater and the tires on the road. The streetlights went by, one after another, sliding across the boys' faces. Owen stared out the window. Tyler stared at his knees.

At a stop sign, Steve reached over and turned the radio down, even though it was already off. It was a dad thing to do. Owen almost laughed.

They dropped Tyler off first. His porch light was on. Before he got out, Tyler said, "Thanks, Brother Hadlock."

"Anytime, Tyler. I mean that."

Tyler opened the door, then stopped. He looked at Owen. "Thanks for... yeah," he said.

"Yeah," Owen said.

That was the whole conversation. Boys can say a lot in three words. Tyler walked up to his door, and he turned around once on the step and waved before he went in.

At home, the house was dark except for the light over the stove. Erin was on a night shift at the hospital. Lily was asleep, still wearing her strawberry hat.

Steve tossed his keys on the counter. "You hungry?"

"Kind of."

"Grilled cheese?"

"Yeah."

So at 10:40 on a Saturday night, Steve Hadlock made two grilled cheese sandwiches in a cast-iron pan, and they ate them standing up at the counter. Steve kept his promise. He did not ask one single question.

Owen finished his sandwich. He wiped his hands on his coveralls. And then he said, without looking up, "There was stuff there. Like... stuff stuff."

Steve nodded slowly. "Okay."

"I just felt like I needed to leave. Like, really bad. My stomach was all weird."

Steve set his plate in the sink. He came around the counter and put one heavy hand on the back of Owen's neck, the way he used to when Owen was little.

"I'm proud of you," he said. "That's all I'm saying tonight. We can talk tomorrow if you want. Or not." He squeezed once and let go. "Go to bed, bud."

Owen went to his room. He did not turn on the light. He knelt by his bed in the dark, still in his coveralls. I heard him, because he prayed out loud, in a whisper.

“Heavenly Father. Thanks for that feeling. I think that was the Spirit. I almost didn’t listen.” He was quiet for a while. “Please help Tyler. And... I don’t know. Brayden too, I guess. And Kade. Kade took some of those pills. Please don’t let anything happen to him.” He stopped. “In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.”

He climbed into bed without changing.

I did not give Owen that warning in the kitchen. I could not. I have told you that, and I will keep telling you, because it matters. It came from the Holy Ghost, the Comforter the Savior promised would **“bring all things to your remembrance”** (John 14:26). It came because Jesus Christ keeps His promises, even to a fifteen-year-old in a mechanic costume in a loud kitchen.

The wind and the fire were back at the Kolstads’ house. Word came to me later that the music went until two in the morning. Ridge still had his keys. Kade still had his pocket. I was not sent to stop them, and I would not have forced them if I had been. I believe the same quiet warning was offered in that kitchen to every person in it. Some listened. Some laughed it off. That is what agency means, and it is the hardest thing I know. But here, in a dark bedroom on a quiet street, there was a still small voice, and a boy who had listened to it.

I stood by his window until the sky over the temple turned gray. Then I went where I was sent next.

Before the week was out, I would be sent to a kitchen on the other side of town, where the light came on every morning at a quarter past five.



Sickness and Death



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Five-Fifteen

"I'm Spider-Man," said the four-year-old.

"Spider-Man needs pants," said Hannah Prestwich. She was holding a baby on one hip and a jar of peanut butter in the other hand.

"Spider-Man doesn't wear pants. He wears *webs*."

"Spider-Man wears pants under the webs. It's in the movie."

He thought about that. Halloween had been two days ago, and he had not taken the costume off since, except for one bath under protest. A piece of candy corn was stuck to his elbow. "Which movie?"

"All of them," Hannah said, and that was when the snowplow went by.

It came down the street with its orange light spinning and its blade scraping, the most exciting thing a four-year-old had ever seen, and before Hannah could set down the peanut butter, Spider-Man was gone. The front door banged open. Cold air rushed in. Through the window she saw a small red-and-blue figure in bare feet go tearing across the snowy lawn toward the street, arms out, yelling, "TRUCK! TRUCK! TRUCK!"

Hannah put the baby in the swing in one motion, dropped the peanut butter on the counter, and ran out the door in her socks.

She caught him at the curb. The plow was already half a block away, and the driver, a big man in an orange hat, waved at the boy through his window, and the boy waved back with his whole body. Hannah scooped him up. Her socks were soaked through. The snow stung her feet like needles. She stood on the curb for a second, breathing hard, holding him so tight he squirmed.

"Did you see it?" he said. "Hannah, did you see it?"

"I saw it," she said. "Spider-Man. Shoes. Every time. Okay?"

"Okay."

She carried him back inside and shut the door and leaned against it.

It was Thursday, the second of November. The first real snow of the year had come in the night, a thin white skin over the lawns, and the wind was pushing it into little drifts against the fence. It was 6:10 in the morning, and Hannah had been up for almost an hour.

Her alarm had gone off at 5:15. She had turned it off fast so it would not wake the baby. Then she had lain there for one minute, looking at the ceiling. Just one. I have watched her do it every morning for months. It is the only minute in her day that belongs to her.

She was the oldest of six. Her mom, Allison, had had the sixth baby in the spring, and after that something in her mom went dark. The doctor called it severe depression. Most days her mom stayed in her room with the door closed. Some days she came out and tried, and her face looked like it was made of paper. Her dad, Kurt, worked in the oil fields of North Dakota, two weeks on and one week off, because that is where the money is. That left Hannah.

So at 5:20 she had been in the kitchen in her socks, making five lunches in a row on the counter like an assembly line. Peanut butter, peanut butter, turkey, peanut butter, no crusts for the one who hated crusts. At 5:40 the baby started crying, and she warmed a bottle and fed her on the couch with one arm while she signed a field-trip form with the other. At 6:00 she should have been walking out the door to early-morning seminary at the stake center. Instead she had been searching for a missing snow boot under the stairs. Now her socks were wet, too.

Her phone buzzed on the counter. It was her dad, a group text to the whole family. A photo of an oil rig in blowing snow, lit up orange. "Morning crew! Cold one up here. Be good for Hannah. Love you all."

Hannah looked at it. She typed a thumbs-up. That was all.

At 6:31 her phone buzzed again. This time it was just to her, from Sister Quintanar: "Missed you this morning, Hannah! Hope you're doing ok."

Hannah stood very still in the middle of the kitchen with the baby on her hip. She typed, "I'm fine." She looked at it. She deleted it. She typed, "sorry, busy morning," and sent that instead.

Then she changed her socks, got four kids into coats, found the boot, put shoes on Spider-Man, walked the two little ones to the bus stop through the snow, came back, knocked softly on her mom's door, and said, "Mom? Baby's fed. She's in the swing. I'm leaving for school."

A quiet voice came through the door. "Okay. Thanks, honey."

Nobody asked her how she was. Nobody had asked her in months.

At Henry's Fork High School she was a ghost. That is the only word for it. She walked down the hall, and people walked around her the way water goes around a stone. In English, the teacher called roll and said "Hailey?" and Hannah said "Here," and did not correct her. At lunch she sat at the end of a long table where nobody was talking to her, and she ate half a peanut butter sandwich, the one she had made for herself at 5:20.

I cannot see into her heart. I can only see what she does and what she says. And here is what I saw: from the moment she left the house until the moment she came home, Hannah did not say one sentence to anyone that was about her.

That night, at 11:15, after the dishes and the baths and the homework, she sat on the edge of her bed with the lamp off. She said out loud, very quietly, to the dark room, "Would anybody even notice?"

I was there. I heard it. And I wept, because I have learned what those words can mean, and because I was not sent to answer them. Someone else would be.

But the next afternoon, before anyone could, the one thing Hannah had been holding together came apart in her hands.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: What do I do when it feels like God took the person I needed most, and I'm sure it was my fault?

What scripture says: The Lord is close to people with broken hearts. He has you "graven... upon the palms" of His hands, and He sends people to help.

In the story: Hannah's mom gets worse and starts an all-day treatment program to get well. Hannah runs the house for two weeks, tells God He took her mom away, blames herself, and finally tells Sister Quintanar the truth.

Key verses: Psalm 34:18; Isaiah 49:16; 1 Samuel 1:15–18; Matthew 11:28; Alma 7:11



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Fourteen Days

"Shoes off! Backpacks on hooks! Whoever finds the remote first gets to—"

Hannah stopped in the doorway on Friday afternoon with three little kids piling up behind her like train cars. Spider-Man, in snow boots this time, crashed into the back of her knees.

Sister Kenley, the bishop's wife, was standing in the kitchen with the baby on her shoulder.

Sister Kenley had been driving Hannah's mom to her doctor appointments since summer. There had been one that afternoon. But her mom's bedroom door was shut again, and Sister Kenley was rocking the baby side to side the way people do when they have been waiting a while.

"Where's Mom?"

"Come sit with me a minute, sweetheart."

Hannah did not sit. "Where is she?"

Sister Kenley chose every word carefully. I watched her do it. "Your mom's doctor saw her today. Her sickness has gotten worse, and she needs more help than one visit a week. Starting Monday she's going to a treatment program in Idaho Falls. All day, every weekday. New medicine, too. The sisters in the ward are going to drive her."

"For how long?"

"A couple of weeks, maybe. The doctors will know more." Sister Kenley shifted the baby. "She's lying down now. It wore her out. She's going to be very tired for a while, Hannah. That's part of getting better."

Spider-Man tugged Hannah's coat. "Is Mom sick again?"

Hannah knelt and zipped his coat down so he could get his arms out. Her hands were steady. Her face was very white. "Yeah, buddy. The doctors are helping her."

At 4:15 her dad called on video from a trailer in North Dakota, with the wind slamming the walls behind him. His eyes were red.

"I've been on the phone all afternoon, Han. The doctor, my boss. I'm coming. I'm working on it."

He did not come. It was not because he did not try. The next night he told her what his crew boss had said: nobody could take his place until Christmas, and if Kurt walked off the job, he lost the job. With the job went the insurance, and the insurance was paying for her treatment. Then a storm shut the highway out of the oil fields anyway; he turned his phone to show them the snow. Every night after that he called, and every night he said, "I'm working on it," and every night his voice sounded a little more worn down.

So the ward made a schedule and taped it to the fridge. A dinner every night. And every morning a sister from the Relief Society came at seven to drive Mom to Idaho Falls, and another brought her home after dark, so gray and tired that she went straight to bed. They were kind. They brought lasagna and chicken soup and one pan of enchiladas so spicy the second-grader cried. But they went home after dinner. And it was Hannah who knew which kid hated crusts, where the pink cup was, which song made the baby stop crying, and the code for the garage door.

For the next two weeks, Hannah Prestwich ran the house.

On day three the dryer broke, and she hung wet jeans over every chair in the kitchen. On day five she helped glue a science-fair poster about volcanoes until 11:30 at night. On day six the baby had a fever, and she sat up with her in the rocking chair until two in the morning, because Mom was too worn out to wake. On day seven, at dinner, Spider-Man asked why Mom was always asleep now. Everybody at the table stopped chewing and looked at Hannah. She said, "Mom's getting help. Eat your peas." She did not cry in front of them. Not once.

On the night of day eight, after the house was asleep, she went out to the garage in her socks.

It was cold out there. It smelled like gasoline and old leaves. She stood between the minivan and the deep freezer, where no one in the house could hear her. No one but me.

"I prayed for her," she said out loud. "Every single night since April. I asked You to make her better. One thing. I asked You for one thing." Her voice got louder. "And You took her. She's right down the hall, and she's gone. You took my mom, and You left me with all of it."

Her breath came out in white puffs. She was shaking, and not only from the cold.

Then her voice dropped, and what came next was worse.

"Or it's me." She pressed her hands against her eyes. "Last week I yelled through her door. I said I was tired of doing everything. I said, 'I'm not the mom, you are.' And two days later the doctor said it had gotten worse." She slid down until she was sitting on the cold cement with her back against the freezer. "I'm the one who's here all the time. How did I not see it? If I'd been nicer. If I'd been quieter. If I'd just—"

She did not finish. She cried, hard, with her face in her knees, the way you cry when you have been holding it in for eight days.

I want to tell you two things I could not tell her. I was not sent to say them, and she would need to hear them from someone she could see.

God had not taken her mother away. A sickness had, the kind nobody chooses and nobody causes, the kind that comes because we live in a world where bodies and minds can break. No one was to blame for it. And a tired fifteen-year-old who yells through a door did not make her mother sick. Not ever.

The second thing is smaller, but I have learned to watch for it. For ten minutes in a cold garage, Hannah had been angry at God, out loud. She had told Him He took her mom. She had told Him He left her.

She was still talking to Him.



A Heart Can Get Sick Too

This chapter is called “Sickness and Death,” but the sickness here is not the kind you take to urgent care. It’s a sick heart, and a sick mind. Sometimes it belongs to you. Sometimes it belongs to someone you love, and it fills the whole house.

The book of Proverbs says, “Hope deferred maketh the heart sick” (Proverbs 13:12). Deferred means pushed off, delayed. When you hope for something again and again, and it keeps not coming, your heart can get tired. Hope for a mom who gets out of bed. Hope for one person to ask how you are. Hope for one day that is not so heavy.

Everybody feels sad sometimes. But sometimes sadness gets so heavy and stays so long that it starts to lie to you. It says no one cares. It says you are a burden. It says the people around you would be better off without you. **Those are lies.** They feel true, but they are not true. That’s what makes them so dangerous.

Feeling this way is not a sin. It is not a sign that you are weak or that you don’t have enough faith. It is not a punishment. Hearts get sick, just like bodies do. And just like a broken arm, a sick heart needs help from other people.

If you have ever felt that no one would notice if you were gone, please tell someone today. Tell a parent, a youth leader, a school counselor, a teacher, a bishop or a doctor. If you are in the United States, you can call or text **988** any time, day or night, and talk to someone who will listen. There is a help page at the front of this book. You are not too much. You are not a burden. You matter, and you are needed here.

Hannah’s Prayer

There is a woman in the Bible with the same name as our Hannah, and her heart was sick too.

Long ago, in the days before Israel had kings, a man named Elkanah had two wives. That was something people did back then. One wife, Peninnah, had children. The other, Hannah, had none. “Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children” (1 Samuel 1:2).

In those days, a woman with no children often felt like she had failed. And Peninnah made it worse. Every year, when the family traveled to the house of the Lord at Shiloh, Peninnah picked at her. She “provoked her sore, for to make her fret” (1 Samuel 1:6). That means she teased her on purpose, again and again. Year after year.

And year after year, Hannah “wept, and did not eat” (1 Samuel 1:7).

Her husband loved her. He tried. He said, “Hannah, why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not?... am not I better to thee than ten sons?” (1 Samuel 1:8). He meant well. But he did not understand. Sometimes the people who love us most still can’t see how much we hurt.

One year, after the family meal, Hannah got up and went alone to the house of the Lord. “She was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore” (1 Samuel 1:10). She prayed so hard that her lips moved but no sound came out.

An old priest named Eli was sitting by the door. He saw her lips moving and thought she was drunk! He scolded her.

And here is the brave part. Hannah did not run away. She did not say, “I’m fine.” She told him the truth: “I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit... but have poured out my soul before the LORD” (1 Samuel 1:15).

Poured out her soul. She didn’t hold anything back from God. She didn’t make her prayer pretty. She gave Him all of it.

When Eli understood, his voice changed. He blessed her: “Go in peace” (1 Samuel 1:17).

Now look at what happened next. Nothing had changed yet. She was still childless. Peninnah was still Peninnah. But “the woman went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad” (1 Samuel 1:18). Countenance means her face. Her face changed before her life did. Something had lifted, just from pouring it all out to God and telling one person the truth.

Later, Hannah had a son. She named him Samuel, and he grew up to be one of Israel’s great prophets. But the healing started before the baby. It started when she stopped hiding.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

What Sister Quintanar Saw

On Tuesday, day twelve, Hannah made it to seminary, because Sister Kenley came at a quarter to six, before the morning driver, stood at the door in her coat and said, “Go. I’ve got the bus stop.” Hannah slipped into the back row of the classroom at the stake center at 6:20, five minutes late, with her hood up and her hair still wet from a two-minute shower. Snow was melting off her boots onto the carpet.

Sister Quintanar was teaching from the Book of Mormon that morning. She is small and quick, with reading glasses pushed up on her head, and she drinks hot chocolate out of a thermos the size of a fire extinguisher. She saw Hannah come in. She did not stop the lesson. But I saw her eyes go to the back row, and stay there a moment longer than they needed to.

Hannah did not open her scriptures. She did not write anything. Halfway through, she put her head down on the desk. When she lifted it again, she wiped her face with her sleeve, fast, the way you do when you hope nobody saw.

Sister Quintanar saw.

When the closing prayer ended and the other kids stampeded out to catch rides to the high school, Sister Quintanar said, “Hannah, can you stay a sec? I’ll drive you to school. I’ve got extra hot chocolate.”

They sat in Sister Quintanar’s car in the stake center parking lot, with the engine running and the heater on high. The windshield was fogged at the corners. The temple on the hill was lit up white against the dark sky.

Sister Quintanar poured hot chocolate into the thermos lid and handed it over. She did not start a lesson. She did not give advice. She just said, “How are you, Hannah? Really.”

Hannah held the cup in both hands. She did not drink it. The quiet went on so long that the heater clicked off and back on.

Then Hannah said, “Nobody ever asks me that.”

“I’m asking.”

Hannah’s chin started to shake. She stared straight ahead through the windshield. And then the words came out all at once, like water through a broken dam. Her mom asleep behind a closed door. Her dad stuck in North Dakota. Five lunches. The baby’s

fever. The broken dryer. The teacher who called her Hailey. Being tired all the time, tired in a way that sleep did not fix.

“I told God He took her,” she said. “Out loud. In the garage.” She looked sideways at Sister Quintanar, as if she expected to be struck by lightning, or at least scolded. “And then I figured out it was probably my fault anyway. I yelled at her. Right before.”

Sister Quintanar did not scold her. “Okay,” she said. “Keep going. I’m listening.”

And then, very quietly: “Sometimes I think if I just wasn’t here, nobody would even notice. They’d notice dinner wasn’t made. That’s it.”

I watched Sister Quintanar’s face. She did not gasp. She did not panic. She set her own cup in the cup holder and turned in her seat so she was facing Hannah fully.

“Hannah,” she said gently, “I need to ask you something, and I want you to tell me the truth. Are you thinking about hurting yourself?”

Hannah shook her head hard. “No. No. I don’t... I’m not going to do anything. I don’t have, like, a plan or anything.” Her voice broke. “I just don’t want to feel like this anymore.”

“Okay,” Sister Quintanar said. “Thank you. Thank you for telling me. That was the bravest thing I’ve seen anyone do in a long time.” She reached over and took the cup out of Hannah’s hands, because they were shaking, and set it down. Then she held both of Hannah’s hands in hers.

“I want you to hear me,” she said. “I would notice. I *did* notice. I’ve been thinking about you all week. I kept seeing your empty chair.”

Hannah started crying for real then. The kind of crying that has been waiting a long time.

When Hannah could breathe again, Sister Quintanar said, “Two things. First, about the garage.” She picked her words slowly. “Hannah, so many of the Psalms are people saying hard things to God. ‘Where are You?’ ‘How long?’ He kept every one of them in the Bible. I don’t think He’d rather have a polite girl who stopped talking to Him than an angry girl who kept talking. You told Him the truth. Now tell Him the rest.”

Hannah wiped her nose on her sleeve. “What’s the second thing?”

“Your mom is sick. That is not her fault. And it is not your fault. A worn-out girl yelling through a door does not make anyone sick. Not ever. And it is not your job to fix her.”

Hannah did not answer. But she did not argue, either.

“Now here’s what’s going to happen,” Sister Quintanar said. “I’m not going to keep this a secret. I love you too much for that. We’re going to call your dad, together, right now. I’m going to talk to Bishop Kenley. And you and I are going to see the school counselor this morning. You’re not in trouble. You’re just not going to carry this alone anymore.”

They called Hannah’s dad on speaker. He picked up on the second ring, the wind roaring behind him. Hannah tried to talk and couldn’t, so Sister Quintanar explained. He had known about the treatment program, the dryer and the dinners. I could hear in his silence that he had not known about his daughter. For a while there was only the sound of the North Dakota wind on the phone. Then Kurt Prestwich said, in a voice that cracked right down the middle, “Han. Oh, Han. I’m so sorry, baby. I should have known. I’m still trying to get home. Every day. I promise you I’m trying.”

I do not know what moved Sister Quintanar to look at the back row that morning. I cannot see into her heart, any more than into Hannah’s. I was only sent to stand in that parking lot. But I know Who sees every empty chair, and I know He often answers through someone who is paying attention.



He Knows What Alone Feels Like

Here is something you might not think about. Jesus Christ knows exactly what it feels like to be alone.

On the night before He died, in the Garden of Gethsemane, He said to His closest friends, **“My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me”** (Matthew 26:38). Stay with me. And they fell asleep, again and again.

He was misunderstood by His own town. Betrayed by a friend. Left alone by almost everyone. The Book of Mormon prophet Alma taught that Jesus would suffer “pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind” (Alma 7:11), so that He would know “how to succor his people” (Alma 7:12), to run to our help.

That means when you feel invisible, you are not alone in that feeling. He has felt it. He knows the inside of it.

And He sees you. The psalm says, “The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart” (Psalm 34:18). Nigh means close. When your heart is broken, He doesn’t back away. He comes closer.

Jesus asked once whether a few little sparrows were worth anything, and then He answered: **"not one of them is forgotten before God"** (Luke 12:6). If He does not forget a sparrow, He has not forgotten you. You are not background. You are not a ghost. You are His. Through Isaiah the Lord said, "I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:16). Graven means carved. Think of the marks in His hands. He is not going to lose track of you.

And He gave an invitation that is for you, today: **"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"** (Matthew 11:28).

Heavy laden means carrying too much. That's Hannah. Maybe that's you. He doesn't say, "Get it together first." He says, "Come."

When You Blame Him, and Then Yourself

Hannah did what a lot of hurting people do. First she blamed God. Then she blamed herself. Neither one was the truth.

Some things break because of our own choices. Some break because of other people's choices. And some things break because this is a fallen world, where bodies and minds get sick and nobody chose it. Hannah's mom's illness was that third kind. God did not send it as a punishment. Hannah did not cause it.

If you are angry at God right now, you can tell Him. Use your own words. People in the scriptures did. He did not throw them away, and He will not throw you away. Anger that keeps talking to Him is still a kind of prayer. The danger is not in being mad. The danger is in going quiet and walking off alone.

And when the voice in your head says, "It's all your fault," take that to Him too. Then say it out loud to someone you trust. Lies like that shrink in the light.

 AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • When a Parent Is Sick

Sometimes the sickness in a family isn't a broken leg or the flu. Sometimes a parent struggles with depression, anxiety or another mental illness. It can change the whole house. A parent might sleep a lot, cry, get angry fast, or seem far away even when they are in the same room.

Here are some things that are true:

It is an illness, not a choice. Depression is a real sickness. Your parent is not choosing to be sad, and they are not choosing it over you. With good care, including doctors, counseling and sometimes medicine, many people get better. Sometimes a parent needs a lot of extra help for a while, like a daily treatment program, to get well. That is not giving up. It is getting help.

It is not your fault. Nothing you did caused it. You are not too loud, too much or too hard to love.

It is not your job to fix it. You can help with dishes and with younger siblings. That's good. But you are still a kid. The adults in your life, your other parent, grandparents, your bishop or a doctor, need to carry the heavy part.

Tell someone. If you are taking care of the house, or if you are scared, tell a trusted adult. Telling is not betraying your parent. It is getting help for them and for you.

Take care of you too. Sleep. Eat. Keep a friend. Go to the things you love when you can. Talk to Heavenly Father about how you feel. He loves your parent, and He loves you.

If you ever feel hopeless yourself, tell someone today. (See "If You Are Hurting" at the front of this book.)

WALK WITH HIM • Pour Out Your Soul

This week, try praying the way Hannah in the Bible did. Find a private place. Don't try to make it sound nice. Tell Heavenly Father exactly how you feel, all of it, out loud if you can, the sad parts and the angry parts and the tired parts. Ask Him to help you feel that His Son is near. Then, like Hannah told Eli, tell one trusted person the truth about how you are really doing.

Think about it: Who is one person in your life who might be carrying too much, and how could you be the one who notices?



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Porch Light

On Saturday, day sixteen, the treatment program was finished. Hannah had stayed late at a youth service project at the church, and Sister Quintanar drove her home. Her mom had asked to talk with her, just the two of them. Hannah sat in the passenger seat with her hands knotted in her lap the whole way, and at every stop sign she said, "What if

she doesn't want to talk to me?" and Sister Quintanar said, "She asked for you, Hannah," and at the next stop sign Hannah asked again.

The porch light was on. Allison Prestwich was sitting on the front step in a gray sweater, waiting. Her hair was brushed. She looked thin, and tired, and more awake than she had looked since spring.

"Han," she said.

Hannah stopped halfway up the walk. "I'm sorry I yelled," she said. "Through the door. I'm so sorry. I think that's why—"

"Oh, honey. No." Her mom stood up, slowly, came down the steps, and took Hannah's face in both hands. "You didn't make me sick. Nothing you did. Nothing you said. I'm sick, and I waited too long to tell anyone how bad it was, and that part's mine. Not yours. Do you hear me?"

Hannah nodded. Then she said the other thing, very small. "I told God He took you."

Her mom laughed, a wet, surprised laugh, and pulled her in. "I said worse than that to Him in April." She held on tight. "But He didn't take me, Han. Look. I'm right here. I'm getting better. Slow. The program's done, but there's a lot more help after this, a counselor every week and the new medicine. But I'm coming back."

They held on to each other on the cold front step for a long time. I stayed by the gate. That porch was theirs.

Inside, her mom had already put the little ones to bed herself, for the first time in weeks. Hannah sat on her own bed and, for the first time in sixteen days, turned the lamp on.

On her nightstand was a sticky note Sister Quintanar had written in the car on Tuesday, in purple pen: "1 Samuel 1. You have a namesake. Then Isaiah 49:16."

Hannah opened her scriptures. She read slowly. When she got to verse 15, she read it out loud, just above a whisper: "...have poured out my soul before the LORD." Then she turned to Isaiah and read the line about the palms of His hands, and she sat looking at it for a long time.

She knelt on the rug.

"Heavenly Father," she said out loud. "I'm sorry I said You took her." Her voice shook. "I'm still kind of mad. I don't know why she had to get this sick. But I'm still here. I'm still talking to You." She stopped. She swallowed. "I think maybe You sent Sister Quintanar. And all those ladies who drove her and brought dinner. So maybe You did see me." Another long pause. "Please help my mom keep getting better. Please help Dad get

here. And help me know Jesus is close, like it says. Like I'm on His hands. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen."

She stayed on her knees. I cannot tell you what she felt. But I can tell you what I saw. Her shoulders came down. Her hands unclenched. And her face, for the first time in months, was not tight. It was soft.

Her countenance, as the old story says, was no more sad. Nothing had been fixed yet. Her dad was still in North Dakota. Her mom was still sick. The baby would still wake up at 5:40.

But Hannah had taken one step toward Him, and it was the hardest one. She was not invisible anymore. She never really had been.

Her phone buzzed. A text from her dad, not to the group this time, only to her: "Just you, Han. I love you. Still working on getting home. Every day. Hang on, ok?"

She wrote back two words: "Ok. Love you."

She left the porch light on when she went to bed. I don't know why. Maybe so her mom would see it someday soon, coming up the street. It glowed out into the snow all night, a small warm light on a dark street, and I stood beside it until morning.

Not every house in Rexburg had a light on that month. Across town, in a small apartment, a boy who had always sung in the shower had stopped singing.



War and Terror



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Shaving Cream

“A maple bar,” Tyler Winsor said, “is not a donut.”

“It’s literally in a donut box,” said Owen.

“A cat can sit in a donut box. That doesn’t make it a donut.”

“Then what is it?”

Tyler thought hard. “A bread log. With frosting.”

“You ate two bread logs.”

“I ate two bread logs *respectfully*.”

Sister Quintanar had brought donuts to seminary that morning, a whole box, for no reason she would explain. Before anyone could touch them, she had wrapped the first maple bar in a napkin and set it aside. “That one’s for Hannah Prestwich,” she said, and did not say why. Hannah had not been to seminary in days. Tyler had eaten the next two.

It was Tuesday, the seventh of November, eleven days before Hannah’s porch light, the kind of Rexburg morning when the wind comes off the potato fields and finds every gap in your coat. The halls of Henry’s Fork High School smelled like wet boots and floor wax. Snow melted into gray puddles under the lockers.

“See you at lunch, Bread Log,” Owen said.

“Respectfully,” said Tyler, and peeled off toward his math class.

Owen stopped by the stairwell to dig his biology book out of his backpack. I was standing near the choir room, a little way down the hall, when Jace Wendling opened his locker.

The shaving cream came out like something alive. It slid over the lip of the locker and down the front of his jacket and onto his shoes. Someone had packed it in through the vents, can after can, until there was no room left. His choir folder was in there. So was his lunch, and the sweatshirt his mom had bought him for the fall musical.

For one second the hall went quiet. Then the laughing started.

It did not start loud. It started with a snort from a boy by the drinking fountain, and then a girl said something I will not repeat, and then the phones came up. Four phones. Six. I watched the little red recording lights blink on, one after another, like eyes opening in the dark.

And in the shadow at the end of the hall, where the light from the windows did not quite reach, I saw a dull red shape lean in close to the crowd. Sethar. He did not need to say anything clever. He only crowded. He pressed the laughter forward, the way wind pushes snow into a drift. He loves a hallway like that. Everyone watching. No one moving.

Jace did not cry. I want you to know that, because he would want you to know it. He stood very still. He pulled the folder out and shook the foam off it, and a little of it hit the floor with a wet sound, and someone laughed again. His ears turned red. His hands were steady, but his chin was not.

Owen Hadlock was standing by the stairwell with his backpack on one shoulder.

I watched his face. I cannot see inside a person. I can only tell you what I saw. He did not laugh. His mouth went tight, and he looked down at the floor, and then he looked back at Jace, and then at the floor again. His feet did not move.

I knew why his face looked like that, or I think I did. Back in September, a video had gone around the “soph squad” group chat, forty sophomores all talking at once. It was a video of Jace singing alone in the locker room after gym, singing because he loved to sing and thought no one was listening. Someone had filmed it through the door. The comments under it were cruel. And Owen, scrolling fast on his cracked phone at the dinner table, had sent one laughing face. Just one. Then he put the phone down, and I do not think he gave it another thought.

I do not think Jace had forgotten. You do not forget who laughed.

Then a girl stepped out of the crowd. Not toward the joke. Toward Jace.

She was new that fall, in a coat too thin for an Idaho November. Owen did not know her name. Hardly anyone did. She set her backpack down right in the foam and started wiping off the choir folder with a pack of tissues from her pocket.

“I’ve got it,” Jace said. His voice cracked. “Just go. Everybody’s watching.”

“I know,” she said. “That’s why I’m not going.”

He pulled out the musical sweatshirt. It was soaked through, ruined, and something in him gave way. He threw it on the floor and slammed the locker so hard the whole row

rang, and foam squirted out of the vents like the locker was laughing, too. “What did I even *do*?” he said, to no one. “What did I ever do to them?”

The girl turned and looked at the crowd. She did not yell. She looked at them one phone at a time. One phone came down. Then two. A boy by the fountain suddenly remembered he had class. In the shadow, the dull red shape drew back, the way it does when a crowd stops being a crowd.

“Nothing,” she told Jace. “You didn’t do anything. That’s how it works.”

A custodian came with a mop and a roll of paper towels. The girl tore off half the roll, handed it to Jace, and kept the rest. They knelt on the wet floor together. He was shaking now, which is what happens after you have held still too long.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “For yelling.”

“You yelled at a locker. Lockers can take it.” She held up the folder. Foam dripped off one corner. “Okay, but this smells exactly like my dad. Every time you open it, you’re going to smell like Gabe Varga.”

It was a small joke, and it was not at his expense. He laughed, one surprised breath through his nose. Then his eyes filled, and he wiped them fast with his wrist and pretended it was shaving cream.

“I’m Ruby,” she said. “From-Houston new. I eat lunch in the library because I don’t know where else to go.” She shrugged. “So I kind of know what it’s like when everybody’s looking at you and nobody’s seeing you.”

He studied her, as if checking whether this was another joke. It wasn’t. “Jace,” he said.

“I know. You sang at the assembly. You were good.” She held up her phone. “Somebody already posted this. And I’ve seen the one from September. Come on. We’re going to the office. You don’t have to talk. I’ll talk.”

“It’ll just make it worse.”

“Maybe. But right now nobody knows except everybody.”

They walked down the hall together, his shoes squeaking on every step. Through the office glass I saw Ruby hold her phone out to the secretary and point at the screen. I saw Jace sit down in a plastic chair, and his shoulders came down an inch.

Owen had seen all of it. He had not moved from the stairwell. A girl whose name he did not know had done the thing he should have done, and I think he knew it. I watched the red climb his neck, slowly, from the collar up. Then the bell rang, and he walked to biology with his eyes on the floor.

I did not follow Owen. I stayed by the office door, with the boy in the plastic chair and the new girl beside him.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: What do I do when someone is being bullied, and what if I already laughed?

What scripture says: Jesus was “despised and rejected,” so He knows how it feels, and what we do to “the least of these,” we do to Him.

In the story: Jace’s locker is filled with shaving cream and Ruby stands by him; two days later he is shoved into the lockers, quits the musical and asks God why He gave him a voice. Owen watches the video and remembers the one time he laughed.

Key verses: Matthew 25:40; Isaiah 53:3; Psalm 13:1, 6; Luke 6:28; 1 Samuel 18:1

Why This Chapter Is Called “War and Terror”

Some wars have armies. But a lot of teens live through a different kind of war every day. It is fought in hallways and locker rooms and group chats. The weapons are nicknames, videos, and comments. And the terror is real: the stomachache before school, the dread when your phone buzzes.

If that is you, I am sorry. It is not your fault, and you are not alone. Keep reading.

And if you have ever been one of the people who laughed, keep reading too. This chapter is for you as much as anyone.

Goliath, Saul and a Friend Named Jonathan

You know the story of David and Goliath. But most people skip the bullying in it.

Goliath was a giant, a champion soldier from the Philistine army. Every morning and every night he walked out between the two armies and shouted insults at Israel. He did it “forty days” (1 Samuel 17:16). Forty days of the same mocking voice. The soldiers of Israel “were dismayed, and greatly afraid” (1 Samuel 17:11).

Then David showed up, a teenager bringing lunch to his brothers. The first person to mock David was not Goliath. It was his own big brother, Eliab, who told him he was proud and should go back to his “few sheep” (1 Samuel 17:28). David answered, “Is there not a cause?” (1 Samuel 17:29). In other words: somebody has to stand up.

King Saul looked at David and said, “thou art but a youth” (1 Samuel 17:33). Too small. Too young. Goliath looked at him and “disdained him” (1 Samuel 17:42). He laughed at him, too.

You know what happened next. David took “five smooth stones out of the brook” (1 Samuel 17:40). He told the giant, “I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts” (1 Samuel 17:45). One stone, and the bully was on the ground.

But here is the part people forget. After David won, the women of Israel sang a song in the streets: “Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (1 Samuel 18:7). And King Saul, the grown man, the king, got jealous of a teenager. “Saul eyed David from that day and forward” (1 Samuel 18:9). Later, while David played music for him, Saul threw a spear at him. Twice (1 Samuel 18:11).

So David faced two kinds of bullies: one loud and out in the open, one jealous and pretending to be on his side.

Most bullying at school looks more like Saul than Goliath. It is not one giant. It is people who feel small, so they try to make someone else smaller.

But the story has one more person in it, and he might be the most important one for you. His name was Jonathan. He was Saul’s own son, a prince. And “the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David” (1 Samuel 18:1). When his own father wanted David dead, Jonathan warned him and helped him hide (1 Samuel 19:2). Later, when David was running for his life in the wilderness, Jonathan “went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God” (1 Samuel 23:16).

That is what a friend does. He goes out to where you are hiding and helps you hold on to God.

You may never face a giant. But you will almost certainly see someone being bullied. When that happens, you get to choose who you will be in the story. One of the crowd. Saul. Or Jonathan.

Two Days

That night I was sent to the Wendlings' apartment on the east side of town. It was small and warm and smelled like tomato soup.

Corrine Wendling, Jace's mom, was still in her scrubs from her shift at the clinic. She stood at the stove and talked about her day, and Jace sat at the table and said "yeah" and "cool" in all the right places. His choir folder was drying on the radiator. She did not ask why it was wet. He did not tell her.

His phone buzzed. He looked at it, and his face went flat, the way a window looks when the lights inside go off. He turned it face down. It buzzed again. He did not touch it.

"You've got practice for the musical tomorrow?" his mom asked.

"I might skip it."

She turned around. "You love that musical."

"I know." He shrugged. "I'm just tired."

I have heard a great many people say "I'm just tired." It almost never means tired.

After dinner he went to his room and sat on the bed. He did not sing. He used to sing in the shower, in the car, while he washed dishes. That night the apartment was quiet. He opened his phone and scrolled. I could see the light of it on his face, and I could see that what he was reading hurt, because every few seconds his jaw moved like he was biting down on something. I will not tell you what the comments said. You do not need to know, and Jace would not want you to. I will only tell you that some of them came from kids who sat near him in class, kids who had borrowed his pencils and copied his notes.

At the edge of the lamplight, near the window, the air went a dull and muddy red. Sethar had followed the comments into that small room the way smoke follows a draft. He crowded close to the bed. He did nothing you could see. He only made the room feel smaller and the night feel longer, and the phone feel heavier in the boy's hand.

Then Jace did something brave. He took screenshots, three of them, and he did not answer a single comment.

Then he set the phone on the floor and lay back and looked at the ceiling for a long time.

I could not hear what he was thinking. I could not hear if he was praying. But after a while his lips moved, just barely. And I saw his shoulders come down from up around his

ears, slowly, like a fist opening. Whatever peace came into that room did not come from me. I only stood in the corner and was glad.

Before he fell asleep, he got up and went out to the living room. His mom was folding laundry on the couch.

“Mom?” he said. “Can I show you something?”

She put down the towel she was folding. She did not say a word until he was done. Then she held him for a long time, there on the couch, with a laundry basket tipped over at their feet.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” she asked at last, into his hair.

“I didn’t want you to worry. You already work so much.” He wiped his nose. “A girl helped me. The new girl. She took me to the office.”

“Jace.” She leaned back and held his face in both hands. “You are not extra. You are not a bother. You are the whole reason I work.”

The next morning she called the school before her shift, on speaker at the kitchen counter. Mr. Lusk, the vice principal, said he already had a report on his desk, from a sophomore named Ruby Varga. He promised to look into it. And for one day, that seemed like enough.

It was not enough.

On Thursday, after rehearsal, the hall by the choir room was almost empty. It was ten past five and already dark outside. Jace was walking to the front doors with his backpack on one shoulder, humming, which he had not done in two days. Two boys came out of the stairwell behind him. I knew them. Their names were under some of the worst comments.

One of them said the nickname. I will not write it. Jace kept walking.

The bigger one shoved him with both hands, hard, into the lockers.

The sound was like a car door slamming. Jace’s head hit the metal. His glasses flew off and skidded across the floor, and the second boy stepped on them on his way past. I heard the lens crack. I do not think it was an accident. They walked out the front doors laughing, and a phone at the far end of the hall, held by someone I could not see, stopped recording.

The dull red shape in the stairwell went with them. Sethar never stays for what comes after.

Jace slid down the lockers and sat on the floor. There was a red mark on his cheekbone and a small cut by his eyebrow where the frame had caught it. Without his glasses the hall was a blur. He felt across the tile with his hands until he found them. One lens was spiderwebbed. One arm was bent sideways.

Mr. Pennock, the night custodian, came around the corner with his cart and saw him. He did not ask questions. He knelt down, gave Jace a clean rag for his eyebrow, and called the office and then Jace's mom, and he waited on the floor with him until she came.

That night Corrine taped the glasses together at the kitchen table with her hands shaking. Jace sat across from her with a bag of frozen peas on his cheek.

"I'm quitting the musical," he said.

She did not argue. "You're staying home," she said. "A week. Until that school can look me in the eye and tell me you're safe."

He went to his room and shut the door. He sent one text to the musical director: "I'm out. Sorry." Then he sat on the edge of the bed, in the dark, and he spoke out loud.

"Why'd You give me a voice?" he said. His own voice was thin and cracked. "I sang in sacrament meeting. I sang for You. Every time somebody asked." He pressed the peas harder against his face. "Why give me a voice if it just makes me a target? Did You see that? Where were You?"

He did not get an answer that night. Not one he could hear.

I could not answer him either. But I can tell you what I knew. God did not shove Jace Wendling into a locker. Two boys did. It was their choice, and someday they will answer for it to the One who sees everything, unless they turn and make it right. When people hurt us, it is not because heaven wanted it. It is because people are free, and some use that freedom to be cruel.

His mom was standing in the hall. She had heard. I watched her face, and I was afraid she would tell him not to talk to God that way. She did not. She came in and sat beside him on the bed.

“Say it to Him, baby,” she said quietly. “All of it. He can take it.” She put her arm around him. “Just don’t stop talking to Him. That’s all I ask.”

He did not answer. But he leaned against her, and he let her stay. After a while she started humming a hymn, very low, the way she used to when he was small. He did not sing along.

Not yet.



What Bullying Costs

Bullying is not “just a joke.” Ask anyone who has lived through it.

It costs sleep. It costs the things you love, like singing or a sport, because you stop wanting to go anywhere people can see you. It costs trust. It can make a person believe the worst lies of all: that they are worthless, that no one would care if they were gone.

If you ever feel that way, please do not keep it inside. Tell a parent, a leader, a school counselor or a doctor today. In the United States you can call or text 988 any time. There is a page called “If You Are Hurting” at the front of this book. You matter more than you can see right now.

It costs the people who laugh, too. Every time you laugh at someone, a little of your own kindness goes numb. You get a little better at looking away.

And it grows. A video in September. A locker full of shaving cream in November. Then two hands on someone’s back. Cruelty that nobody stops does not stay small.

When it happens to you, it is not your fault. It is not God’s either. This is one of the ways things break in this life: other people’s choices land on us. Heavenly Father gave people the freedom to choose, and some people choose to hurt. He does not stop every shove. But He sees every one, and He stands with the one who got shoved.

“How Long?”

Remember David, the shepherd boy with the five smooth stones? After Saul turned on him, David spent years running and hiding in caves. Some of his psalms were written in those years, and they are not polite.

In one he cries, “How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?” (Psalm 13:1). That is a young man asking God, “Where are You?” And God kept those words in the Bible for three thousand years.

But read to the end of that short psalm. It is only six verses. The last line says, “I will sing unto the LORD, because he hath dealt bountifully with me” (Psalm 13:6). Bountifully means generously, with more than enough.

David did not get there by pretending he wasn’t hurt. He got there by telling God the whole truth, and then not walking away. The same boy who asked “How long?” ended up singing again.

He Knows What It Feels Like

Here is something that might surprise you. Jesus Christ was bullied.

The prophet Isaiah wrote about Him hundreds of years before He was born: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). People mocked where He came from. They called Him names. They laughed at Him when He said a dead girl was only sleeping. At the end, soldiers dressed Him up in a fake robe and a crown of thorns and laughed in His face.

So when you are the one being laughed at, you are not praying to Someone who does not understand. He has stood exactly where you are standing. He was “in all points tempted like as we are” (Hebrews 4:15), and He knows every kind of hurt from the inside. You can tell Him what happened, out loud, in your own words. He will not think it is small.

And Jesus said something else that changes how we see the kid at the end of the hall. He taught that on the last day, the King will say, **“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me”** (Matthew 25:40).

That means when someone filled Jace’s locker with shaving cream, they did it to Jesus. When the crowd laughed, they were laughing at Him. And when someone hands Jace a paper towel, or sits by him at lunch, they are doing it for Jesus, too.

Samuel on the Wall

There is a story in the Book of Mormon about a man who knew what it was like to stand alone in front of a crowd.

His name was Samuel, and he was a Lamanite. He came to the great Nephite city of Zarahemla to tell the people to repent. They did not want to hear it from him. “They did cast him out” (Helaman 13:2). He was about to go home.

But the Lord told him to go back. So Samuel went back. They would not let him in the city gate, so “he went and got upon the wall thereof” (Helaman 13:4) and preached from the top of it.

Picture it. One man on a wall, a crowd below throwing stones and shooting arrows. But “the Spirit of the Lord was with him” (Helaman 16:2), and they could not hit him.

Not everyone in that crowd threw stones. Some people listened. Some believed and went to find the prophet Nephi to be baptized (Helaman 16:1). In every crowd there are people who are not throwing anything. They are just quiet. They are waiting to see if anyone else will be brave.

If you are the one on the wall, remember Samuel was not alone up there. If you are one of the quiet ones, you can be the first to put down your stone.

What You Can Do

Jesus taught, “**Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you**” (Luke 6:28). That does not mean you let people hurt you. It means you do not let their cruelty turn you into someone cruel. You protect yourself, you tell an adult, and you refuse to become like them.

And if you are watching someone else get hurt, the Book of Mormon gives you a whole list of what love looks like: “charity suffereth long, and is kind” (Moroni 7:45). Kind is not complicated. Kind is a paper towel. Ask Ruby. Kind is “Hey, you okay?” Kind is sitting down next to someone in the cafeteria when everyone else is staring.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • Bullying Online

A lot of bullying today happens on a screen. Here is what you can do when it does.

If it is happening to you:

- Do not answer the comments.
- Take screenshots, then show them to a parent or another adult you trust. Jace did that. It was the right call.
- Block and report the accounts. Every app has a way to do it.
- Tell a school counselor. Schools can act when they know.
- Tell the Lord about it, out loud if you can. He knows what it is like to be mocked.

If you are watching it happen:

- Do not share it. Do not react, not even with one laughing face. Every reaction pushes it to more people.
- Report it.
- Message the person privately: “That wasn’t okay. Are you all right?”
- Tell an adult. That is not being a snitch. That is being a Jonathan.

If you already laughed:

- You can stop today. You can take back your reaction. And later, when you are ready, you can say you are sorry. It is never too late to change sides.

WALK WITH HIM • See Who He Sees

This week, before school one morning, say a short prayer out loud: “Heavenly Father, help me see one person today the way Jesus sees them.” Then watch. Someone will be eating alone, or getting teased, or sitting at the edge of the group. Do one small, kind thing for that person, even if it is only a hello. When you do it, remember that you are doing it for Him, too (Matthew 25:40).

Think about it: In the story of David, who are you most like right now: the crowd, Saul or Jonathan? Who would you like to be?



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

One Laughing Face

Later that night, after Jace’s door closed, I was sent to Owen. He sat on his bed with Grandpa Lowell’s old Army photo propped on the shelf above him. His homework was open. He was not doing it.

The video had hit soph squad at 5:40. Eleven seconds, shot from the far end of the choir hall. A small kid walking. Two bigger kids behind him. Then the sound, that car-door slam of a body hitting lockers, and a pair of glasses spinning across the floor. Somebody had posted a laughing face under it. Then somebody else. Then somebody wrote, “bro that’s not funny he’s bleeding,” and the laughing stopped, and nobody posted anything for a while.

When I came in, Owen was watching it again. I saw him play it twice more. The second time he put his hand over his mouth.

Then he scrolled. And scrolled. It took a long time to go back to September, through weeks of memes and arguments and plans for Brayden’s party. I watched his thumb move faster and then slower, the way you walk slower when you are getting close to something you do not want to see.

Then he found it. The locker-room video. Under it, a long row of reactions. And there, among them, his own: one laughing face, with his name next to it.

He watched the video again. Jace in the empty locker room, singing a song from the musical, his voice bouncing off the tile, clear and high and good. Then the door creaking. Then the laughing behind the camera. Jace turning around, and his face when he saw the phone.

Owen had laughed at that face; I had seen him do it. Two days ago he had stood by the stairwell while a girl he did not even know knelt down in the foam. And tonight Jace was somewhere with a cut by his eye and broken glasses.

Owen had not shoved anybody. But I watched him follow the line backward with his thumb, from the glasses on the floor to the shaving cream to the video in September, and I think he saw it. A shove does not start with a shove. It starts with a crowd that thinks it is all a joke. And one laughing face is how a crowd tells a bully, keep going.

He looked at his own reaction for a long time. The crack in his screen ran from the top-left corner down toward the middle, and the light of the lamp caught it and made a thin bright line right through the picture of Jace.

Sethar was not in that room. He does not stay for moments like that. He does not like the quiet after.

Owen put the phone down on the blanket. He picked it up again. He set it down.

Then he did something I had not seen him do in a while. He got off the bed and knelt on the carpet. His prayer was out loud, but so quiet I almost missed it, and it was short.

“I laughed,” he said. “I don’t even know why I laughed. It wasn’t even funny. He just looked so—” He stopped. “And now he’s hurt. And I was part of the crowd. I’m sorry. Please help Jace. Help me know what to do.”

That was all. He did not say amen right away. He stayed there on his knees with his forehead on the edge of the bed.

I cannot tell you what he felt. I can only tell you what I saw. His breathing slowed. His hands, which had been clenched, opened on the blanket. And when he finally got up, his face did not look lighter. It looked like the face of someone who had just picked up something heavy that was his to carry, and had asked for help carrying it.

He did not fix everything that night. The hardest part was still ahead of him, and it would take him weeks to find the courage. But he took his laughing face off that video. Then he opened a new message to Jace. He typed “hey,” and he looked at it, and he deleted it, and he typed it again.

He did not send it. Not yet.

But he did not delete it, either. He left it sitting there, waiting, with the cursor blinking after it like a small, patient light.

He was not the only one in Rexburg waiting on a message that week. In the back corner of the school library, a girl from Houston checked her phone every few minutes at lunch, and every few minutes, nothing came.



Famine



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Seen 2:14 p.m.

Mrs. Doane, the librarian at Henry's Fork High School, had two rules. She had printed them on a sign and taped it to the front of her desk: QUIET VOICES. NO CRUNCHY FOOD.

"Define crunchy," said a freshman at the front table, holding up a bag of chips.

"If I can hear it," Mrs. Doane said, without looking up from her computer, "it's crunchy."

"What if I let them get soggy first?"

"Then you're a monster, Colby, and you still can't eat them in here."

His friend leaned over. "Just suck on them. Like cough drops."

"Out," said Mrs. Doane, and both boys laughed, and so did she, a little, behind her glasses.

In the back corner, at the table by the window that looks out on the faculty parking lot, Ruby Varga smiled behind her book. She liked Mrs. Doane. Mrs. Doane let students eat back there if they were quiet, and Ruby was always quiet. She had a turkey sandwich her mom had cut into triangles, the way she did when Ruby was little. Yesterday, the day of the shaving cream, Jace Wendling had eaten back there with her. Not today. Today the musical cast had a lunch rehearsal.

Then the door to the faculty lot banged open. A custodian backed through it with a cart of boxes, and the cold came in with him, and so did something small and brown and very fast.

A sparrow.

It shot over the front table. Colby ducked so hard he fell off his chair. The bird hit the top of a bookshelf, bounced off a poster about reading, and went around the room in a panicked loop while ten students screamed in quiet library voices.

"Nobody move!" said Mrs. Doane, moving.

Owen Hadlock had stepped into the doorway at that exact moment, looking around the room for someone, his phone in his hand. He swung his hoodie at the air like a man fighting a ghost. He missed by a mile.

The sparrow aimed for the brightest thing it could see, which was the window by Ruby's table. It hit the fogged glass with a soft *thump* and dropped, stunned, right beside her sandwich.

Ruby did not scream. She set down her book. She cupped her two hands over the little bird, slowly, the way you would pick up a cracked egg. "Shh," she said. "Ya, ya. Tranquilo." Then she stood up, carried it through the room in the dark of her hands, past Colby on the floor and Owen in the doorway, and opened them outside the faculty door. The sparrow sat on her fingers for one second. Then it was gone over the parked cars.

The front table clapped, softly, because it was still a library.

"Nice—uh," Owen said. "Nice catch." He did not know her name. I could see him reach for it and not find it. Then he looked around the room one more time for the person he had come to find, and did not find him either, and left. I could guess who he was looking for: Jace, the boy whose video he had laughed at. I think part of him was relieved.

Ruby went back to her table. Her phone was there. She checked it every few minutes.

Back in Houston she had a group chat with three girls from her old ward and her old school, Daniela, Marisol and Grace. They had called it "the four amigas" since seventh grade, which Grace said was bad Spanish, and Marisol said was perfect Spanish, and they had argued about it for years. In August, when Ruby moved, the chat had blown up every night. Pictures. Voice messages. Hearts on everything.

Now it was Wednesday, the eighth of November. I watched Ruby type a message slowly, erase part of it, and type it again.

a BIRD got in the library today and i caught it. also it snowed AGAIN. miss u guys so much. what are u doing this weekend?

She sent it. She ate one more triangle of sandwich. She waited.

The little word under her message changed. *Seen 2:14 p.m.*

No answer came. Not from anyone.

In August there had been forty messages a night. In September, ten. In October the gaps had grown longer, like the space between streetlights on a country road. Daniela had a new boyfriend. Grace had made the volleyball team. Marisol had posted a picture

from a birthday party, eight girls on a trampoline, all laughing. Ruby had liked it. She had looked at it a long time first.

Nobody had done anything wrong. That was the hard part. Life in Houston had just kept going without her, the way a river closes over the spot where you pulled out your hand.

She turned the phone face down. She wiped a small clear circle in the fogged glass with the side of her hand and looked through it at the gray parking lot, and the potato cellars far off past the edge of town, long low humps under white.

I have seen hunger in many places. I have seen children in a famine in Egypt, in the days of Jacob, waiting for bread that did not come. This was a different kind of hunger, but it was hunger. Ruby lived in a town full of people. She sat in a chapel full of people every Sunday. She was starving anyway.

Across the room, a girl from seminary sat with her head down on her backpack. Hannah Prestwich. She had not even looked up for the bird. Her mother had started a treatment program that week. I had been in that house; no one in this room knew it. Two lonely girls, twenty feet apart, and neither one knew about the other.

The bell rang. Ruby walked out into the noise of the hall. She had caught a wild bird with her bare hands that day, and still no one in that room had said her name.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: Why do I feel so alone when I am surrounded by people, and what do I do when I'm angry at God for taking someone I love?

What scripture says: Jesus is "the bread of life." Naomi told God He had "dealt very bitterly" with her, and He did not throw her away.

In the story: Ruby is lonely in Rexburg; then her abuela in Houston dies, the family can't afford to fly back, and she blames her parents and God. A crying boy in Primary and a few words in her abuela's handwriting begin to reach her.

Key verses: Amos 8:11; Ruth 1:20–21; Ruth 4:16; John 6:35; 3 Nephi 17:21

A Different Kind of Famine

A famine is when there is not enough food. People get thin and weak and scared. The prophet Amos talked about a strange kind of famine: "not a famine of bread, nor a thirst

for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD” (Amos 8:11). He meant that people can starve inside even when their bellies are full.

Loneliness is like that. You can eat three meals a day and still be starving for someone to know you. To ask how your day was and wait for the real answer. To save you a seat.

Ruby’s story may surprise you. She moved from a big city where there were only a few youth in her ward. She thought Rexburg would be easy. Everybody was a member! Church on every corner! The temple on the hill!

But all the kids in her new ward had grown up together. They had been in the same Primary class since they were three. They had inside jokes from girls camp four summers ago. Nobody was mean to her. They smiled. They said hi. They just did not have room. Every circle was already closed.

Sometimes it is easier to be one of a few than one of many who do not notice you.

Ruby did have one new friend by then. The day of the shaving cream, Jace ate lunch at the window table. He brought pretzels, which Mrs. Doane ruled “crunchy, but quiet crunchy.” Ruby taught him the Spanish word *calcetín*, sock, which he decided was the best word in any language. Once he hummed a song from the musical and caught himself. “Keep going,” Ruby said. “The sign doesn’t say anything about singing.” He kept going, very softly.

It was a real friendship, the plain kind, between two people who knew what it was to be the one everybody looks at. But on Thursday Jace was shoved into the lockers, and after that he was home for a week, and the window table was just Ruby again. On Wednesday nights and Sundays, and at every other lunch, the circles were still closed.

If you have ever felt that, you are not strange, and you are not broken. You are hungry. And hunger is not a sin. Hunger is a signal that you need to be fed.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Young Women on a Wednesday

On Wednesday night the Young Women met in the Relief Society room at the church. There was a craft. There were cookies. Twelve girls sat around two tables, and the talk was loud and happy.

Ruby sat at the end of the second table. She glued tiny paper stars on a card with great care, as if gluing stars was very important work.

“Remember when Kenzie fell in the lake at camp?” one girl said, and the whole table laughed. “And her shoe floated away—”

“It’s still out there,” said Kenzie. “Somewhere in the reservoir. Living its best life.”

They laughed harder. Ruby smiled along. She had not been at camp. She did not know the lake or the shoe. She laughed one second late, the way you do when you are trying to catch up with a joke.

A leader, Sister Dahlquist, came by and touched her shoulder. “Ruby, you’re doing great. So glad you’re here.” Then she moved on to help someone else.

It was kind. It was true. It was not enough. I could see that in the way Ruby’s smile stayed on her face a little too long after the leader walked away, like a light someone forgot to turn off.

Near the end, while they cleaned up, a girl named Addie turned to her. “Ruby, you’re from Texas, right? Is it true everybody there has, like, a pool?”

“Not everybody,” Ruby said. “We had a sprinkler.”

Addie laughed, a real laugh, and for a second the door of the circle seemed to swing open. Ruby leaned toward it. But then someone called Addie from the other table about rides for Saturday, and she turned away, and the door swung quietly shut again. No one meant anything by it. I want to be fair to them. They were good girls, and kind, and busy, and they did not see.

When the activity ended, the other girls stood around the parking lot in their coats, talking and laughing in little groups, their breath white in the cold. Ruby stood by the door and waited for her dad. Gabe Varga pulled up in his old Honda still wearing his badge from the hospital, where he worked as a respiratory therapist. She got in.

“How was it, mija?”

“Good,” she said.

He looked at her. He did not push. He turned up the heater for her and drove home through the snow. But at a red light he reached over and squeezed her hand once, and she squeezed back, and neither of them said anything.

They were still three blocks from home when Gabe’s phone rang through the car speakers. The screen on the dashboard said *Tía Rosa*. It was almost ten at night in Houston.

Gabe answered. “Rosa? ¿Qué pasó?”

I will not write down everything Ruby's aunt said. She was crying too hard for most of it to be words. But a few words came through clearly, in Spanish, and Ruby understood every one of them. Abuela had lain down for a nap that afternoon, after her morning of chores and her phone call to her sister, and she had not woken up. Her heart had simply stopped. She was seventy-four. Nobody had seen it coming. Nobody could have.

Gabe pulled the car over in front of a stranger's house and put it in park, and for a long time the only sound was the windshield wipers.

At the kitchen table that night, Gabe and Lucia sat with the laptop open, looking at flights. The funeral would be Monday morning. I watched the numbers on the screen. Three tickets on four days' notice cost more than two months of rent, and the move in August had already taken all the money they had saved. Gabe ran the numbers three times. Lucia held his hand. Then he closed the laptop slowly, as if it were very heavy.

"We can't, *mija*," he said. "Not all of us. Not this time. I'm so sorry."

Ruby stood in the kitchen doorway in her coat. She had not taken it off.

"If we'd never moved," she said, "I'd have been there. I'd have been at her house on Sunday like always. I'd have—" Her voice went up. "You moved us here for a job! You took me away from her for a *job*!"

Lucia started to cry. Gabe did not raise his voice. "The hospital closed my unit, Ruby. You know that. There was no job to stay for."

"I don't care!"

She went to her room and shut the door. She did not slam it. That was somehow worse.

Then she took out her scriptures, the paper ones her abuela had given her when she was baptized, with her name pressed in gold on the cover. She did not open them. She held them against her chest and sat on the floor beside her bed.

She prayed out loud, the way she had learned as a little girl at her abuela's knee. But it was not like any prayer I had heard from her before.

"I asked You for one friend," she said. Her voice was low and shaking. "One. Every night since August. And You took my abuela." She pressed the book harder against her chest. "You moved us here. You let them close Papi's unit. You let her die by herself while I was gluing paper stars. Where were You? ¿Dónde estabas?"

She did not say amen. She cried until she fell asleep on the floor, still holding the book.

I could not answer her. I am not allowed to, and I would not have known how. But I will tell you what I knew. Her father had not done this. A hospital closing a unit was nobody's cruelty. An old heart stopping on a quiet afternoon was nobody's fault, and it was not God's punishment on a fifteen-year-old girl. It was the kind of loss that comes to everyone in a world where people grow old and die. That did not make it hurt less. It only meant she was aiming her anger at the wrong people.

Her mother came in after midnight, put a blanket over her, and lay down on the floor beside her. I stayed in the doorway until morning.



Ruth, the Girl Who Did Not Fit

There is a whole book in the Bible about a young woman who did not fit in. Her name was Ruth.

Ruth was from a country called Moab. She married into a family from Israel, and then her husband died. Her husband's mother, Naomi, had lost her husband and both of her sons. Naomi decided to go home to Bethlehem, and she told her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab with their own families.

One of them did. But "Ruth clave unto her" (Ruth 1:14). That means Ruth held on and would not let go. She said some of the most beautiful words in the Bible: "whither thou goest, I will go... thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

Think about what that meant. Ruth left everything she knew. Her country. Her language. Her friends. She walked to a town where she was the only Moabite, where people would look at her and know right away that she was not from there.

When they got to Bethlehem, the women of the town came out to see. "Is this Naomi?" they asked (Ruth 1:19). Her name meant *pleasant*. And Naomi said the most honest thing in the whole book: "Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me" (Ruth 1:20). Mara means *bitter*. "I went out full," she said, "and the LORD hath brought me home again empty" (Ruth 1:21).

That is a woman blaming God, out loud, in the middle of town. She had buried a husband and two sons. She was angry, and she said so.

And here is what God did not do. He did not strike her down. He did not take Ruth away from her. He did not leave her in her bitterness. He let her be angry, and He kept working.

They were poor. So Ruth went out to the barley fields to glean. Gleaning was the way poor people got food back then: they walked behind the harvesters and picked up the leftover grain that fell on the ground. It was hard, hot, humble work. And Ruth did it alone, a foreigner in a field full of strangers.

The man who owned that field was named Boaz. He noticed her. He asked who she was. And then he did something kind. He told her to stay in his field, close to his workers, where she would be safe (Ruth 2:8). He let her drink from their water. He told the young men to leave extra grain on the ground for her on purpose.

Ruth was amazed. She bowed down and said, “Why have I found grace in thine eyes, that thou shouldest take knowledge of me, seeing I am a stranger?” (Ruth 2:10).

That is the question every lonely person asks. Why would anyone notice me? I am new. I am different. I do not belong.

Boaz answered that he had heard how she had cared for Naomi. He said, “The LORD recompense thy work” (Ruth 2:12). In other words: you have been faithful, and God has seen it.

Here is the end of the story. Ruth married Boaz. They had a son named Obed. And the woman who had called herself Bitter “took the child, and laid it in her bosom” (Ruth 4:16). The neighbors told her he would be “a restorer of thy life” (Ruth 4:15). The Lord had not brought Naomi home empty after all. He had brought her home to a grandson. And Obed became “the father of Jesse, the father of David” (Ruth 4:17). The girl who did not fit in became the great-grandmother of King David. And from David’s family, many years later, came Jesus Christ Himself.

The outsider was never outside of God’s plan. Not for one day. And neither was the bitter old woman who said God had dealt hard with her.

If someone you love is gone and you are angry at God, you are in good company. Naomi said so out loud, in the middle of town. He did not throw her away. Keep telling Him the truth. Keep showing up. Let Him bring you home, even if it takes a whole harvest.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Sunbeam Who Would Not Stop Crying

Ruby almost did not go to church that Sunday. She went because her mother asked her to, in a voice so tired that Ruby could not say no to it. She sat on the side, near the

back, with her arms crossed, and she did not sing the sacrament hymn. After sacrament meeting she walked down the hall toward her Young Women class.

She did not get there.

Outside the Primary room, a little boy was crying. Not loud crying. The tired, hopeless kind, with his face pressed against the door frame. He was maybe four. His clothes were a little too big. A Primary teacher knelt beside him, trying everything, and he would not look at her.

His family had moved to Rexburg from Guatemala nine days before. He spoke almost no English. The room full of bright posters and singing children was a room full of words he did not understand.

The Primary president, Sister Hollingsed, came hurrying down the hall with a box of crayons. “Mateo, sweetie,” she said, “it’s okay, come on in.” He cried harder.

Ruby stopped. I think she knew that crying. I had seen it on her face since August, and harder since Wednesday.

She knelt down on the carpet next to him. “Hola, Mateo,” she said softly. “¿Tienes miedo?”

He stopped crying. Just like that. He turned his wet face and looked at her as if she had come out of the sky.

They talked in Spanish for a minute. She told him her name. She told him she was new, too, and from far away, too. Then she held out her hand, and after a long moment he took it.

“Do you want me to stay with him?” Ruby asked.

Sister Hollingsed looked at her like she was an answer to a prayer, which, for all I know, she was. “Would you? Could you come every week? We have two more kids from Spanish-speaking families coming next month and I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

Ruby looked down at Mateo. He was holding her hand with both of his.

“Yeah,” she said. “I think I could.”

She sat on a tiny chair with her knees up high, and Mateo sat on her lap. When the children sang “I Am a Child of God,” she whispered the words to him in Spanish, the way her abuela had sung them to her. Halfway through the second verse her voice broke, and she had to stop. Mateo patted her cheek with a sticky hand, very seriously, the way you would pat a dog that was sad. Then he sang the next line himself, very off-key, with his whole heart.

Something in Ruby's face that had been clenched since Wednesday let go a little. Not all the way. A little. She was not a stranger in that room. She was the one person in it who was needed exactly the way she was: her language, her newness, her own memory of being afraid in a strange place.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket on the way out. It was the four amigas. Marisol: *ruby we heard about ur abuela. we're going tomorrow. we'll sit with ur tía. we love u so much.* Daniela and Grace had both put hearts on it.

Ruby read it in the hallway and pressed the phone against her mouth and did not move for a long time. Then Mateo's mother came down the hall to thank her, in Spanish, with her hands full of baby and diaper bag and gratitude, and Ruby had to put the phone away and smile, and she did.

The famine was not over. One good Sunday does not end a famine, and one small boy does not fill the place an abuela leaves. But the first rain had come.



The Bread That Fills You

When Jesus was on the earth, He fed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. The next day the crowd came looking for more bread. And He told them something they did not expect: **"I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger"** (John 6:35).

He did not mean you would never be hungry for lunch again. He meant that the deepest hunger, the hunger to be known and loved and wanted, He can fill. Friends matter. Belonging matters. But even the best friends can move away, or stop texting, or forget. Jesus does not. He said, **"him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out"** (John 6:37). No matter how new you are. No matter how different.

One by One

There is a moment in the Book of Mormon that I think every lonely teen should know by heart.

After Jesus rose from the dead, He came to the people in the Americas, at a place called Bountiful. There were about twenty-five hundred people there. A huge crowd. And He did something that crowds usually do not allow. He saw each person.

First He invited the people to come and touch the marks in His hands and feet, and they went forward “one by one until they had all gone forth” (3 Nephi 11:15). Not in a rush. Not as a group. One by one.

Later, when He said He had to go, the people were in tears and looked at Him “as if they would ask him to tarry a little longer” (3 Nephi 17:5). So He stayed. He healed every sick person they brought to Him. Then He asked for their little children.

The parents brought them. They set them down on the ground around Him. And Jesus knelt and prayed for them. Then “he wept, and the multitude bare record of it, and he took their little children, one by one, and blessed them” (3 Nephi 17:21).

One by one. Not a group blessing. Not a wave from the stage. He picked up each child and blessed that child by name.

Then He told the parents, “Behold your little ones” (3 Nephi 17:23). And when they looked, they saw angels coming down from heaven “as it were in the midst of fire,” and the angels “encircled those little ones about” (3 Nephi 17:24).

I want you to picture that. Every child in that crowd was seen. Every one was held. Every one was surrounded by light.

That is how He sees you. Not as one face in a crowd of members. Not as “the new girl” or “that kid from somewhere else.” He knows your name. He would take you up, one by one, and bless you.

And He calls the people in His Church to see each other that way. Paul wrote to new members who felt like outsiders: “ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19). In His household there are no outsiders. Only family who have not met yet.

 AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • Lonely in a Crowd

Being lonely in a crowd can be the hardest kind of lonely. Here are a few things that help.

Remember it is not a sign that something is wrong with you. Moving, changing schools, or growing apart from friends happens to almost everyone. It is a season, not a sentence.

Stop waiting for the perfect group. Look for one person. Just one. Often it is someone else sitting alone. Lonely people are easiest to find when you are lonely yourself, because you know what it looks like.

Look up. Loneliness makes you shrink and stare at the floor. Lift your eyes. Say hi to the person next to you, and ask one real question.

Serve. This is the surprise. When you help someone, you stop being the guest and become part of the family. Ask your bishop or a leader how you can help. Ruby found this out on a tiny Primary chair.

Tell someone. A parent, a leader, a friend. “I’m lonely” is not a weak thing to say. It is a brave thing to say. If loneliness turns into feeling hopeless, tell an adult today, or call or text 988.

Talk to Him. Jesus was lonely, too. In the garden His friends fell asleep. You can pray to Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ as to Someone sitting right beside you. Tell Him you feel alone. He will not get tired of hearing it.

WALK WITH HIM • One by One

Read 3 Nephi 17 this week, a few verses each night. When you get to verse 21, stop. Picture yourself as one of those children. Picture Him picking you up and blessing you by name. Then pray and thank Heavenly Father that His Son knows you one by one. Ask Him to show you one person you can see that way, too.

Think about it: Who in your ward, school or class might feel like Ruth in the barley field right now?



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Uno por Uno

“Can I have a library pass?”

Mrs. Venable looked up from the biology quiz she was handing out. “Ruby, it’s a quiz.”

“I know.” She was already standing, backpack on. “I’ll make it up. I promise. Please.”

She looked at Ruby’s face. Whatever she saw there, she signed the pass without another word.

It was Monday, the thirteenth of November, 9:58 in the morning. In Houston it was 10:58, and in two minutes, in the chapel where Ruby had been baptized, her abuela's funeral would begin.

I had been in the kitchen doorway that morning. Her mother had begged her to stay home and watch it together on the laptop. Ruby had said no. She had said it meanly. She had said she was not going to sit in Idaho and watch her own grandmother's funeral on a screen like it was a movie. So she had gone to school. And now, at 9:58, it was plain on her face that she could not sit in a biology classroom while it happened either.

She went to the table in the back corner by the window. Jace's chair was empty; he was home that week, with his glasses taped together. Mrs. Doane was at the front desk. No one else was there. Ruby put in her earbuds, propped her phone against her water bottle, and pressed the link her tía had sent.

I stood by the window. I could see the little screen over her shoulder.

The camera was set up in the back of the chapel, crooked, so the picture leaned a little to the left. Ruby knew every inch of that room: the blue carpet, the organ, the bench where she used to sit with her abuela and draw on the program. There were flowers on the casket, white and yellow. Her tía Rosa sat on the front row. And in the third row, in their Sunday dresses, sat Daniela, Marisol and Grace, the four amigas minus one, holding hands.

Ruby put her hand over her mouth.

The bishop in Houston spoke. A cousin read a poem. Then the Primary children of that ward, eleven of them, came up and stood in front of the casket, and they sang "Soy un hijo de Dios," "I Am a Child of God," the same song Ruby had whispered to Mateo the day before. A little girl in the front was missing a tooth. A little boy kept waving at someone in the audience.

That was when Ruby started to cry. Quietly, because it was a library. Her shoulders shook. She did not wipe her face. She just let it come.

She was fifteen and fifteen hundred miles away, alone at a table in the corner of a library in Idaho, and the person who had loved her first and longest, after her parents, was in that box under the flowers. I have seen a great deal of grief. I have never seen it look small. It did not look small that morning.

Mrs. Doane looked up from her desk. She did not come over. She seemed to understand that this was not a thing to interrupt. But after a while she walked back, set a box of tissues on the corner of the table, touched Ruby's shoulder once, and went back to her desk.

When the closing prayer ended and the screen went dark, Ruby sat without moving. Then she unzipped her backpack and took out the paper scriptures with her name in gold on the cover. She had carried them every day since Wednesday. She opened the front cover.

She had read the inscription there a hundred times. It was in her abuela's slanted handwriting, in blue pen, from the day she was baptized. She read it again now, moving her lips:

Rubí: Él te conoce por tu nombre. Uno por uno. 3 Nefi 17:21. Con todo mi amor, Abuela.

He knows you by your name. One by one.

Ruby turned to the verse. She read it in English, very softly, out loud: "...he took their little children, one by one, and blessed them."

She closed the book and held it with both hands on the table.

"I'm still mad at You," she said, so quietly that only someone standing by the window could have heard. "I'm still really mad. But she believed You knew my name." Her voice broke. "So please. Know hers. Hold her. And... don't let go of me either."

It was not a long prayer. It was not a calm one. But I noticed she had not stopped praying when she got angry. She had prayed right through it.

Then she took out her phone and texted her mother. *im sorry. i was so mean. can u come get me? i want to be with u.*

The answer came in less than a minute. *Ya voy, mi amor.* I'm coming.

At 12:05 Lucia Varga's car pulled away from the front of Henry's Fork High School with her daughter in the passenger seat, and the two of them were crying together before they reached the corner.

Two minutes later, inside the cafeteria, every phone in the room began to buzz.



Pestilence



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Monday, 12:07 p.m.

“Tot tax,” Owen said, and stole one off Tyler’s tray.

“That’s theft,” said Tyler. “That’s a crime. I could call somebody.”

“Who? The tot police?”

“The lunch lady. She’d take my side. She loves me. She gave me extra tots because I said her hairnet looked nice.”

“You lied to a lunch lady?”

“It *did* look nice.” Tyler pulled his tray closer and curled an arm around it like a dragon guarding gold. “Get your own.”

It was Monday, the thirteenth of November, lunch at Henry’s Fork High School. Sleet was streaking the cafeteria windows. The room was loud with trays and chairs and three hundred conversations.

“Did you hear a bird got into the library last week?” Owen said.

“Jace said it was a hawk.”

“It was a sparrow. I was there. Some girl caught it with her bare hands, like a Disney princess. The new girl. From Texas, I think.” Owen frowned. “I should know her name.”

“You should know a lot of things,” Tyler said, but he said it lightly, and he slid one tot back across the table as a peace offering. For a second it felt like summer again, like the two of them on the top row of the bleachers, before everything got weird.

Owen ate the tot. “How’s the headache?”

“Fine,” Tyler said. He looked at his tray. “Gone.”

Across the cafeteria, Brayden Kolstad was sitting on top of a table with his friends around him, laughing. Ridge Kesselring was beside him, telling the whole table, loudly, that he was failing English because Mrs. Ostrom “had it out for him.” Kade Dunlavy sat at the far end with his hood up and his head down on his arms, asleep at noon. He had slept through most of biology last week, too. When somebody bumped the table and he

lifted his head, his eyes were slow and far away, like a boy looking up from the bottom of a pool. Then he put his head back down.

Brayden glanced at him, just once, and something crossed his face that was not a laugh. Then he held up his phone. The boys near him leaned in. "Watch this," he said.

It was 12:07 p.m.

Owen's phone buzzed on the table. Then a phone buzzed at the next table. Then two more behind him. A girl gasped and grabbed her friend's arm. Someone laughed, high and sharp. Someone said Owen's name loud enough to carry. And then phones were lighting up all over the room, table after table, in a wave, the way wind goes across a wheat field.

Owen looked down. I saw the color leave his face all at once, like water draining out of a sink.

It was a screenshot. A screenshot of a private message he had sent the night before, and Brayden had just posted it into soph squad, the group chat with forty sophomores in it.

Here is what had happened. On Sunday night Owen had been tired and grumpy and a little lonely. Tyler had skipped preparing the sacrament again that morning, the third time in a month, and when Owen asked him why, Tyler said he had a headache, and Owen's face had said plainly that he did not believe him. So that night, lying in bed, Owen opened a private chat with Brayden and two other guys from open gym, and he vented. He and Brayden had been sort of friends since seventh grade, the kind of friends who trade jokes and never anything real. That night it seemed real.

I was there. I watched him type it. It was not a cruel message. It was a careless one. He wrote that Tyler was acting weird and lying to everybody. And then, because it was late and the chat felt safe and the guys were joking about girls, he wrote that he liked Mia. He added a face with its hand over its mouth. Then he went to sleep.

A private message feels like a whisper in a closed room. It is not. It is more like a letter left open on a table in the middle of the cafeteria.

Now it moved through that cafeteria like a sickness moves through a crowded room. Within an hour, I learned later, it had been screenshotted again and sent to kids at other schools, and to kids who were not in the chat at all.

Sethar was there. He was everywhere in that room at once, it seemed, a dull red smear at the edges of the light, crowding the tables, pushing the laughter higher. He did not need to start it. Brayden had done that. He only had to fan it.

Tyler's phone buzzed, too.

Tyler read it. He did not say anything. He did not look at Owen. He set his phone down very carefully on the table, as if it might break, and he picked up his tray, and he walked away. He did not dump it. He just left it on the counter, half full of tots, and went out the door into the hall.

Owen half stood up. "Tyler—"

Tyler did not turn around.

Across the room, at the table by the windows, Mia Castellaw was looking at her phone. Her friend was saying something to her. Mia did not answer. Her face went pink, and then pale. She looked up, and for one second her eyes found Owen across the cafeteria. Then she looked away, grabbed her backpack, and left, too.

Owen sat down. He stared at his phone. The crack in his screen ran right through the screenshot of his own words, splitting them in two.

All around him, people were laughing.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: What do I do when someone I trusted spreads my private words, and what if I hit back?

What scripture says: Jesus was betrayed by a friend with a kiss; Joseph was sold by his own brothers; both met betrayal with mercy.

In the story: Owen's private message is screenshotted into the group chat; he loses two friends in one lunch and then strikes back.

Key verses: Luke 22:48; Psalm 41:9; Proverbs 26:20; Genesis 50:20; D&C 64:10

Why "Pestilence"?

A pestilence is a plague, a sickness that spreads fast from person to person. In old times a plague could move through a city in days.

Gossip and screenshots work the same way. One person shares. Then two. Then forty. It jumps from phone to phone. It spreads to people who have never even met you. And like a sickness, it hurts everyone it touches: the person it is about, the people it is about secondhand, and even the people passing it along, who get a little colder each time.

Proverbs puts it simply: “Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth” (Proverbs 26:20). A talebearer is someone who carries stories. If nobody carries the story, the fire dies. If everybody carries it, the whole forest burns.

The Kiss in the Garden

There is one betrayal story that is hard to read.

Jesus chose twelve apostles. He walked with them, ate with them, taught them, and loved them. One of them was named Judas. He had heard every sermon. He had seen the miracles. And he sold Jesus to His enemies for thirty pieces of silver.

At the Last Supper, Jesus knew. He was “troubled in spirit” and said, “**one of you shall betray me**” (John 13:21). Then He dipped a piece of bread and handed it to Judas. Even then, He was offering him bread.

That night, in the Garden of Gethsemane, after Jesus had suffered more than anyone has ever suffered, Judas came with a crowd carrying swords and clubs. He had told the soldiers, “Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he” (Matthew 26:48).

A kiss on the cheek was how friends greeted each other. Judas walked up and “said, Hail, master; and kissed him” (Matthew 26:49).

And here is what Jesus said back. Not a curse. Not a scream. “**Friend, wherefore art thou come?**” (Matthew 26:50). He called him friend. Then, quietly, “**Judas, betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?**” (Luke 22:48).

The psalm had said it long before: “mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me” (Psalm 41:9).

Then, in the middle of that chaos, one of His disciples swung a sword and cut off a servant’s ear. And Jesus, while He was being arrested, reached out. He “touched his ear, and healed him” (Luke 22:51).

Think about that. Betrayed by a friend. Surrounded by enemies. And His hands were still healing.

So if someone you trusted ever spreads your secrets, or turns on you in front of everyone, you can take that pain to Jesus. He is not going to say, “Well, you should have known better.” He knows what it is to be kissed and betrayed in the same moment. He understands, and He can heal the part of you that the betrayal broke.

The Post

Owen got through the rest of the day. I do not know how. He did not raise his hand in any class. In the hall, people he barely knew grinned at him and made kissing noises and said “Miaaa” in sing-song voices. He kept his head down.

He texted Tyler: *bro I’m sorry I didn’t mean it like that*. No answer.

He texted Mia. He typed and deleted four different messages. In the end he sent nothing.

When he got home, the house was empty. His mom was on shift at the hospital and his dad was still at the shop. Lily was at a friend’s. Owen went to his room and shut the door hard enough to rattle Grandpa Lowell’s photo on the shelf.

Then he opened soph squad and read every comment. All of them. I watched his face get harder with each one. I watched his jaw clench and his eyes narrow. His hurt was turning into something else. It happens fast in a person. Hurt is a hot coal, and if you hold it long enough you want to throw it at someone.

And then the dull red was in the room.

Sethar did not come in through the door. He was just there, in the corner, crowding the air, making the room feel small and hot. He leaned close to Owen’s shoulder. I could not hear his words. I could only see what came after. Owen’s thumbs began to move.

He knew something about Brayden. Everybody half knew. Brayden’s older brother, Tyce, was in a treatment program in Utah. Brayden never talked about it. Owen had overheard two adults whispering about it after a game. It was the kind of thing a family keeps close.

Owen started typing a post about it in soph squad.

I will not tell you what he wrote. It was meant to hurt, and it was about a brother who was already hurting, and a family that was already falling apart. It was the cruelest thing I had ever seen him type.

I stood close. I am not allowed to reach in and stop a hand. I never compel. But I prayed, there in that room, for the boy with the phone.

And something came. Not from me. I saw it land on him. His thumbs paused over the screen. His face changed, just for a second, the way a face changes when you hear your

name called from far away. He looked uneasy. He looked like a boy standing at the top of a staircase in the dark, unsure of the next step.

He sat with that feeling for maybe five seconds.

Then he pushed it away, and he hit send.

Sethar laughed. I heard that. It was not a happy sound.

The reactions started coming in. Laughing faces. Shocked faces. “OOOOOH.” “Dang Owen.” “Not him bringing up Tyce.” Owen watched them come in, one after another. He had wanted to feel better. I watched him wait for it.

It did not come. His face did not loosen. It got heavier. He put the phone down and then picked it up again and read the post he had written, and I saw him wince, actually wince, like a person who has touched a hot stove.

But he did not delete it.

He did not have to wait long for an answer. At 4:52, Brayden posted again. I will not tell you what that one said either. It was about Owen’s dad and the winter he could not walk, and about “church boy” Hadlock, who talks about his friends behind their backs. Brayden knew where to aim, too.

Owen answered. Brayden answered back. Then Owen again.

For the next hour soph squad burned like dry grass. Kids picked sides. Ridge posted that the whole thing was Owen’s fault anyway, which was what Ridge said about most things. Kade, awake now, put a skull under every one of Owen’s messages, and then wrote just three words: *run home church boy*. Somebody posted a video of two rams smashing their heads together. Somebody else made a poll: *who won*. By six o’clock there were two hundred and twelve new messages, and kids from Madison High had joined the chat just to watch. Sethar did not have to push anything now. He only stood in the middle of it and grew.

At 6:10 Owen threw the phone on the bed so hard it bounced off and hit the floor, screen down. He did not check whether it had cracked again. He went downstairs and ate half a box of cereal standing up at the counter, without tasting it.



Joseph and His Brothers

Owen had hit back. Here is one of the oldest betrayal stories in the world, about a man who could have hit back and didn’t.

Joseph was seventeen. He was his father Jacob's favorite son, and everyone knew it. His father gave him a special coat, "a coat of many colours" (Genesis 37:3). He also dreamed that his family would one day bow to him, and, not very wisely, he told his brothers.

His ten older brothers were jealous. "They hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him" (Genesis 37:4).

One day Joseph's father sent him out to check on his brothers, who were far away taking care of the sheep. They saw him coming across the fields in that bright coat. "Behold, this dreamer cometh," they said to each other (Genesis 37:19). And they made a plan.

They grabbed him. They tore off his coat. They threw him into a dry pit with "no water in it" (Genesis 37:24). And then, while he was still down there, they sat down to eat lunch.

Later, they saw a line of traders passing by on the way to Egypt. So they pulled Joseph out of the pit and sold their own brother "for twenty pieces of silver" (Genesis 37:28). They dipped his coat in goat's blood and showed it to their father, and let him believe a wild animal had killed his son. Jacob tore his clothes and mourned "many days" (Genesis 37:34).

Betrayed by family. Sold. Lied about. Carried off to a foreign country as a slave.

In Egypt, Joseph was falsely accused and thrown in prison. But "the LORD was with Joseph" (Genesis 39:2). Bit by bit he rose until he was second only to Pharaoh, and when a great famine came, he had saved grain for the whole land.

His brothers came to Egypt hungry, begging for food. They did not recognize him. But he recognized them.

He could have punished them. He could have thrown them in a pit of his own. Instead he sent everyone else out of the room, and he wept so loud the Egyptians heard it. Then he said, "I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt" (Genesis 45:4). His brothers were terrified. But Joseph told them not to be angry with themselves, "for God did send me before you to preserve life" (Genesis 45:5). He "kissed all his brethren, and wept upon them" (Genesis 45:15).

Years later he told them, "ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good" (Genesis 50:20).

That does not mean betrayal is good. What his brothers did was wrong, and it hurt him for years. It means God can take even the worst thing someone does to you and bring

something good out of it, if you let Him. Joseph did not let the pit make him bitter. He let the Lord make him strong.

When You Are Betrayed

If someone has spread your private words, here is the truth: what they did was wrong. You are allowed to be hurt. You are allowed to be angry. Being betrayed by someone you trusted is one of the most painful things a person can go through.

But here is what Owen learned the hard way: hitting back does not heal the hurt. It just makes a second wound, in someone else, and often a third, in you. The Bible says, “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). Revenge feels like strength for about five seconds. Then it feels like poison.

The Lord asks something very hard of us: “of you it is required to forgive all men” (D&C 64:10). That does not mean you have to pretend nothing happened. It does not mean you have to trust that person again right away. It means you let go of the right to get even, and you give the hurt to Jesus instead of throwing it back. Joseph did that. Jesus did that. With His help, you can do it, too, a little at a time.

When You Are the One Who Started It

Owen was betrayed. That is true. But there is another true thing, and it is uncomfortable.

The first leak was Owen’s. Before Brayden ever took a screenshot, Owen had talked about Tyler behind his back, and called him a liar to three other guys. Proverbs says, “he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends” (Proverbs 17:9). Owen did not mean to hurt Tyler. But he did.

Almost every betrayal story has more than one person who did something wrong. Joseph bragged about his dreams. Owen vented about a friend. That does not make what was done to them okay. It just means that when we are hurt, it is worth asking: is there any part of this that is mine? Not to blame yourself for everything. Just to own your part, so Jesus can heal that part, too.

 AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • Screenshots Are Forever

Here is a hard fact about phones: nothing is private. Any message you send can be screenshotted, saved, forwarded and posted, by anyone who sees it, forever.

Before you send something, ask:

- Would I say this to the person's face?
- Would I be okay if my parents, my bishop, or the person I am talking about saw it?
- Am I sending this because I am angry, tired or lonely? (If yes, wait until morning.)

If someone sends you a screenshot of someone else's private message:

- Do not forward it. Do not react. Do not post it. Remember Proverbs 26:20: no wood, no fire.
- You can say, "That's not cool," and leave the chat if you need to.

If your private words get spread:

- Do not hit back. That is the hardest one, and it matters most.
- Tell a parent or another adult you trust.
- Reach out to anyone you hurt, privately and in person if you can.
- Take the hurt to the Lord in prayer, out loud if you can. He was betrayed by a friend. He understands.

And if you are the one who posted something mean, you can still take it down. You can still say you are sorry. It is never too late to stop the spread.

WALK WITH HIM • Give Him the Hot Coal

The next time someone hurts you and you feel the urge to hit back, wait. Before you type anything, find a quiet place and pray out loud: "Heavenly Father, I'm so angry. Please take this. Help me be like Jesus." Then read Luke 22:47–51, about the kiss and the healed ear. Notice what Jesus did with His hands when He was betrayed.

Think about it: Is there someone you need to forgive, or someone you need to ask to forgive you?



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

A Light in the Window

At 9:40 that night, Erin Hadlock came home from her shift. She hung her coat on the hook and set her keys in the bowl and stood for a second in the kitchen, looking at the open cereal box on the counter and the spoon in the sink.

She went upstairs. Owen's door was shut. She knocked once.

"Yeah."

She opened the door. He was lying on his bed in the dark, with only the glow of his phone on his face. She did not turn on the light.

“Long day?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

She sat on the edge of the bed. I watched her watch him. She is a nurse; she reads faces the way other people read signs. “You want to talk about it?”

“No.”

She waited.

“Maybe tomorrow,” he said.

“Okay.” She put her hand on his foot, through the blanket, and squeezed it once, the way she used to when he was little and sick. Then she stood up. At the door she said, “I love you, bud. Whatever it is.”

When she was gone, he lay still for a long time. Then he reached over to his nightstand and picked up the paper scriptures that had been sitting there under a pile of homework since summer. He opened them to the Bible. He did not know where to go. He turned pages for a while. Finally he landed in Luke, near the end, and I watched him read about the Last Supper, and the garden, and the kiss.

He read the verse about the ear twice. I saw his lips move on the second time through.

Then he closed the book on his finger and lay with it on his chest.

I could not see what he was thinking. But I saw him reach for his phone, open soph squad, and scroll down to his post about Tyce. He looked at it for a long time. His thumb hovered.

He did not delete it. Not yet. That would come later, and it would cost him more than a tap on a cracked screen. Some things you have to be ready to do with your whole heart, or they do not mean much.

But he did something else. He set the phone face down on the nightstand and did not pick it back up. He turned onto his side, holding the scriptures, and he prayed out loud in the dark. It was very short.

“I messed up,” he said. “Again. And they messed up. And I don’t know how to fix any of it.” He stopped. “Jesus was betrayed, too. So You know.” Another long pause. “Please help Tyler. And Mia. And—” He stopped again. His voice got smaller. “And Brayden. I guess. Help Brayden’s brother.”

That was all.

The room was quiet. No dull red in the corner. Sethar had left long before, as he always does when the noise runs out. The only light was the streetlight through the window, falling across the bed and the book and the boy.

I do not know if Owen felt anything. I know only what I saw. His face, which had been tight and hard since lunch, softened. His breathing slowed. He fell asleep holding the book, and he did not let go of it all night.

Earlier that night, on the other side of town, Brayden Kolstad had sat in a dark bedroom, reading Owen's post for the tenth time, with his parents shouting at each other downstairs. I knew that because after I left Owen's room at suppertime, I was sent there before I came back to him.

While I was there, his phone lit up. A text from Kade: *lol u destroyed him. party at ridges sat?*

Brayden stared at it. Downstairs, above the shouting, I heard his mother say it again: she had counted the pills left in a small orange bottle in the bathroom, and they were short. She had asked Brayden twice since the party. Twice he had said, "Nothing, Mom."

"Was that you, Kade?" he said out loud, to the dark. He didn't type it. He didn't answer the party text either. He just turned the phone face down. Kade would see that Brayden had read it, and that he hadn't answered. It was the first time I ever saw Brayden ignore Kade. It would not be the last.

That night there were two hurt boys in Rexburg, and one Savior who knew them both by name.

Neither of them knew that yet. But the Lord was not finished with either one.

The war would get worse before it got better. On Tuesday morning the two of them would pass at the sophomore lockers, and Brayden would say something low about a ladder, and Owen would give him a long, hard look and keep walking. Nobody touched anybody. What came at the end of that week was worse than a punch.

And on Friday, the list would go up on the gym door.



The Elements



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The List on the Gym Door

“I did the math,” said Jonah Ybarrola.

“You did not do the math,” said Owen.

“I did the math. Twenty-two guys tried out. There are twelve spots. You’re top twelve, easy. Probably top eleven.”

“What happened to the twelfth guy?”

Jonah thought about it. “Ankle,” he said sadly. “Tragic.”

It was 3:08 on a Friday, the seventeenth of November, and the hall outside the gym was packed with sophomores pretending they were not waiting for anything. Jonah was a freshman. He had not tried out for anything. He had come anyway, because ever since the night Owen passed him a basketball in his grandma’s driveway, Jonah had decided he was Owen’s hype man, whether Owen wanted one or not.

Then the gym door swung open, and Coach Bramhall came out with a single sheet of paper. He taped it to the door with two strips of blue tape and walked away fast, the way coaches do when they know what a piece of paper is about to do to people.

The hall rushed the door. A big kid in front whooped and slapped it so hard it swung open again. The side doors at the end of the hall were propped open for the buses, and the wind came straight down the hall off the potato fields. One strip of tape let go. Then the other.

The list took off.

It skated across the floor like a paper airplane with no plan. Fifteen boys chased it like a loose ball in the last second of a game. It slid under a bench, flipped over twice, and came to rest against the toe of Owen’s shoe.

He stepped on it. The whole hall groaned and then laughed.

“Read it!” somebody yelled. “Hadlock, read it!”

I was standing by the trophy case. No one can see me unless I am sent to be seen, and that afternoon I was not. I was only there to watch, and to stay.

Owen picked up the paper. He read it from the top. I watched his eyes go down the names once. Then he read it again, slower, the way you check a phone number you are sure you typed right. Then he touched the paper with one finger, at the place where his name should have been.

It was not there.

Jonah read it over his shoulder. He did not say anything about math.

Brayden Kolstad read it over Jonah's other shoulder. His own name was on it, seventh line. He did not whoop. He looked at Owen and smirked, slowly.

Owen knew why, and so did I. I had been with him at 6:40 that morning, when his dad called from the shop. "Don't come by today, bud," Steve had said, in a strange, flat voice. Owen went anyway, on the way to school. On the long cinder-block side of Ostergard Automotive, in black spray paint taller than a man, someone had written FALL OFF ANY LADDERS LATELY? and drawn a stick figure tumbling. Dale Ostergard stood in front of it holding a cup of coffee he was not drinking. Steve stood beside him with his hands in his pockets, looking older than Owen had ever seen him. "Go to school," Steve said quietly, and turned away, I think so Owen would not see his face.

Nobody had to tell Owen who did it. On Tuesday Brayden had passed him at the lockers and said something low about a ladder. Owen had only given him a long, hard look and kept walking.

Owen handed the list to the nearest boy and smiled at somebody. It was a good smile, the kind he uses when he does not want anyone to ask. Then he walked out the side doors without a word.



At 11:40 that night, Owen eased his bedroom window open and climbed down off the garage roof.

I have watched him all his life, and I had never seen his face like that. It was not hot, the way it gets when he is hurt. It was cold and very still. That is the face of a person who has decided something in the dark. Sethar walked beside him the whole way, a dull red shape at his shoulder, matching his steps.

It was nine blocks to the Kolstads'. Owen had his dad's old pocketknife. The family pickup sat in the driveway under a streetlight.

I was not sent to stop him. Twice I saw him slow down. At the corner by the canal he stopped all the way, and I saw the uneasy feeling come over him, the same warning he had felt at the Halloween party. He stood there maybe ten seconds.

Then he kept walking.

Four tires. It took less than a minute. The truck sank onto its rims, one corner at a time. Owen never noticed the little blue light glowing beside the Kolstads' front door.

He climbed back in his window and lay down in his clothes. He did not look better. He looked like a boy who had swallowed a stone.

At 1:15 a.m. the doorbell rang. Officer Dunmire, the school resource officer, stood on the porch with the Kolstads' doorbell video on her phone. She had already picked up Brayden; the shop's camera had caught him at 10:52 Thursday night with a spray can. The charge for both boys was malicious injury to property.

Steve did not yell. He watched the video. He looked at his son. Then he sat down on the bottom stair as if his legs had quit holding him up. I will not forget that. Erin went and got Owen's coat.



Court was closed for the weekend. So Owen spent it at the county juvenile detention center.

Intake took two hours: a photo, fingerprints, and his shoelaces, belt and cracked phone in a plastic bag with his name on masking tape. He traded his clothes for a navy jumpsuit. His room was pale green cinder block, with a steel bed, a window in the door the size of a book, a slot for trays, and a light that never went all the way off.

Brayden was already there, in the room next door.

Saturday was the longest day of Owen's life. Cold eggs came through the slot at 6:30. In the afternoon there was an hour in the dayroom, at one long table. Brayden sat at the far end. Neither of them looked up.

At visitation, Owen's parents sat across a table from him while a staff member watched. I have seen Steve Hadlock's face in an emergency room. This was worse. Erin had been crying in the car; you could tell. She told him the report card had come. Biology: D. She said it so he would not find out alone. Steve said almost nothing. When the twenty minutes were up, he put his hand flat on the table, as close to Owen's as the rules allowed. "We'll be there Monday," he said.

That night Owen lay on the steel bed and stared at the light. Through the cinder-block wall came a sound. At first it sounded like coughing. Then it did not.

Owen lay still a long time. Then he knocked twice on the wall, softly.

Silence. Then, from the other side, two knocks back.

That was all. It was not friendship. It was not even a truce. But a boy in a pale green room had found out he was not the only one awake.



On Monday morning they stood side by side in front of Judge Wilhelmina Strand, the magistrate, with their parents behind them. She read the report and looked at them over her glasses.

“Neither of you has ever been in trouble before,” she said. “So I am offering you a diversion agreement. Owen, you will pay for four new tires. Brayden, you will pay for the paint and help put that wall back. You will post nothing about each other, anywhere. And you will each do thirty hours of community service.” She set down her pen. “Together.”

“Together?” both boys said at once, and then glared at each other for it.

“You two tore at each other’s families,” Judge Strand said. “Now you can build something together. Your vice principal, Mr. Lusk, has offered to find the work. Finish by the end of February, and this case goes away.”

At 10:15 Owen walked out into a cold, bright morning, carrying his shoelaces in a plastic bag.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: What if I can’t be everything everybody expects me to be?

What scripture says: The Lord does not ask us to run faster than we have strength. He asks us to come to Him, and He makes us whole over time.

In the story: Owen is cut from JV, slashes the Kolstads’ tires after Brayden paints the shop, and spends a weekend in detention; in the garage he shouts at God, then sees his own fingerprints on the wreckage; Tyler lies to his mom; a storm brings a talk with his dad by the woodstove.

Key verses: Mosiah 4:27; John 11:21; Matthew 27:46; Matthew 11:28–30; Moroni 10:32

When the Weather Turns

This chapter is about the elements: wind, snow, storms, the things nobody controls. Today a storm takes the power out and makes you sit in the dark with your family.

But there is another kind of weather, and every teen knows it. It is the weather of *expectations*. Your parents hope you will do well. Your coach wants you to work harder.

Your teachers want the homework. Your bishop says you'll be a great missionary. Your friends expect you to be funny.

None of these people are bad. Most of them love you. But when all those hopes pile up at once, they can feel like a blizzard. And when you fall short in one place, a cut list, a report card, a mistake everyone saw, it can feel like you have failed at *everything*.

Here is something the Lord said through King Benjamin, a prophet-king in the Book of Mormon:

"It is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength" (Mosiah 4:27).

"Requisite" means *required*. God does not require you to run faster than you can run. He says the same thing again in modern scripture: "Do not run faster or labor more than you have strength" (D&C 10:4). Both verses also say to be "diligent": keep going steadily, at the speed of a real person.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Nobody in the Garage

That same Monday night, Owen took the trash out and did not come back in.

I followed him into the garage. It was cold enough to see his breath. Steve's workbench ran along the back wall, with a pegboard of tools above it, each tool hanging inside its own outline drawn in black marker. One outline was empty now, a small one in the shape of a pocketknife. Officer Dunmire had kept the knife.

On the bench lay a sheet of paper from Ostergard Automotive. Four tires, mounted and balanced, for the Kolstads' pickup. At the bottom was a number with a comma in it. Under the number, in Steve's square handwriting: *Owen. Saturdays. We'll work it out.*

Owen read it. Then he grabbed a basketball out of the bin by the door and threw it at the wall as hard as he could. It boomed off the drywall, bounced off the lawnmower, and rolled under the car.

"I did everything right!" he shouted.

He was not shouting at the ball. He was looking up, past the bare bulb and the rafters. I have watched a great many people talk to God. Most of them do it quietly. This was not quiet.

"I go to seminary at six in the morning! I get the sacrament ready every Sunday! I went to every open gym since August! I left that party when I felt like I should, and I

texted my dad, and I did it *right*!” His voice cracked, and he didn’t care. “And You let them cut me. You let Brayden paint that on the shop where my dad has to look at it every day. Where were You? Where were You when my dad fell off the ladder? I was twelve! I prayed every night that winter! Every single night!”

He was crying now, the hard kind that comes out like coughing.

“I did everything right,” he said again, smaller.

Then he stopped.

I could not see inside him. I never can. I could only see where his eyes went. They went to the paper on the bench. Four tires. They went to the empty outline on the pegboard, the shape of his dad’s knife.

He stood there a long time. When he spoke again, it was not a shout. It was the voice of a boy reading a list he did not want to read.

“Okay. Not everything.”

He wiped his face on his sleeve and held up one finger, the way his dad counts parts. “Brayden painted the wall. That’s on him.” Two fingers. “He screenshotted my message. That’s on him too.”

Then a long breath. “But I wrote the message. Nobody made me.” Three. “I laughed at Jace. I knew it was wrong while I was doing it.” Four. “I wrote that thing about Tyce.” He could not lift the next finger right away. “And I walked nine blocks with Dad’s knife. At the canal I felt like I should stop. I felt it. And I kept walking.”

His hand dropped.

In the corner, on two hooks, hung the aluminum extension ladder. It was the same ladder. Steve had never gotten rid of it. “A ladder’s a ladder,” he always said.

Owen looked at it for a long time.

“And Dad,” he said. “Nobody did that. It was frost. It was just frost on the patio.” He shook his head slowly. “Nobody did that one.”

That is the thing about a winter like Owen’s. Some of it falls on you because of other people’s choices. Some of it falls because the world is a cold place where patios freeze. And some of it you carry yourself, nine blocks, in the dark. From far away it all looks like one big storm. Up close, if you are brave enough to look, it comes apart into pieces, and some of the pieces have your own fingerprints on them.

Owen sat down on the cold step that led into the house and looked at his hands.

“I’m still mad at You,” he said to the rafters. It was not a shout now. “I’m just still mad. But I’m not done talking to You. Okay? I’m not leaving. I just don’t know what to say.”

I did not go to him. I was not sent to. The kitchen door opened a crack, and light fell across the cement, and Erin stood there, still in her scrubs. She had heard every word; the whole street probably had. She did not say one thing about the shouting. She came down the step, sat beside her son and put her arm around him, and they sat there in the cold with the basketball still under the car.

After a while she said, “He can take it, you know.” She tipped her head up at the rafters, the same way Owen had. “He’s heard worse from me.”

Owen laughed once, a wet, surprised laugh. Then they went inside. The ball stayed under the car until spring.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Family Laptop

On the Wednesday after Thanksgiving, the twenty-ninth of November, the Winsors’ family laptop sat open on the kitchen counter next to a bowl of leftover rolls.

Wendy Winsor had only wanted to print a recipe. I watched her face change as she scrolled. It did not get angry. It got very quiet, the way a face does when the floor seems to tilt.

“Rob,” she said. Not loud.

Tyler came in from the garage at that moment, stamping snow off his shoes. He saw the screen, and he stopped.

“Tyler,” his mother said. “What is this?”

I will not tell you what was on that screen. You do not need to know, and I would not say it if you did. I will tell you only that it showed what someone in that house had been looking at, late at night, for weeks.

Tyler’s face went white and then red. I watched him grab the first thing within reach, the way a person grabs a branch when he slips.

“That’s not mine,” he said. “It’s a pop-up thing. Somebody sent a link in the group chat and it just opens stuff. Everybody’s getting them.”

His father looked at him for a long moment. His mother closed the laptop very gently, the way you close a door on a sleeping baby. “Okay,” she said. Her voice did not believe it, and neither did her eyes.

Dinner was leftover turkey soup. Nobody talked. Rob asked for the salt and Wendy passed it, and that was the whole conversation. Tyler ate four bites. Once his mother looked up at him, and he looked down so fast I thought he would hit the table.

A lie does not end a conversation. It only moves it inside you, where you have to have it alone.

At 11:20 that night Tyler sat on his bedroom floor with his back against the bed and his phone in his hand. His door was locked. He and Owen had barely spoken since the screenshot. He typed, deleted, typed again. Then he sent it.

dont save me a seat sunday. or ever. im done with church

The answer came in under a minute.

what?? why

doesnt matter. im already lost. its fine

its not fine. what happened

Tyler did not answer. He set the phone face down on the carpet. Then he did something I had never seen him do. He tipped his head back against the mattress and spoke out loud to the ceiling, in a cracked whisper.

“Why did You make me like this?”

He waited, as if an answer might come down through the ceiling.

“I asked You to take it away. Like a hundred times. Every time I said I’d never do it again, and I meant it. And then I do it again. So either You’re not listening, or You made me broken on purpose.” His voice gave out, then came back. “I lied to my mom tonight. To her face. I’m not even a good person anymore. I’m just a liar who goes to church.”

He pulled his knees up and pressed his face against them.

I knew something, standing in that dark room, that Tyler did not believe. He was not made broken on purpose. He was a twelve-year-old who clicked a link on a borrowed phone, and then he hid it, and the hiding made it grow, the way things grow in the dark. He had a real problem that needed real help. But he had just said out loud that the problem was *him*. That is one of the oldest lies there is: that your worst habit is your truest name.

I could not tell him. I had not been sent to tell him anything, and I never whisper. So I stood there, and I waited, and I wept.

His phone buzzed on the carpet. Then again. Then again. He did not turn it over. But in the morning, before school, he did. Three messages from Owen, sent at 11:31, 11:44 and 12:10.

ok you dont have to tell me

but youre not lost

im not going anywhere. even if you do

Tyler read them three times. He did not answer. But he did not delete them, either.



When You're Mad at God

Maybe you've done what Owen did in the garage. Maybe you've asked what Tyler asked on his bedroom floor. Maybe you've never said it out loud, but you've thought it: *Where were You? I prayed every night. Why did You make me like this?*

Here is something that might surprise you. Being mad at God is still talking to God. People who truly give up don't yell. They walk away. Owen didn't walk away. He shouted at the rafters, and then he said, "I'm not done talking to You."

The scriptures are full of people who said hard things to God and were not thrown away.

When Lazarus died, his sister Martha went out to meet Jesus on the road and said what everyone was thinking: "Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died" (John 11:21). That is blame, said right to His face. He didn't scold her. He stayed and talked with her, and then He went with her to the grave.

And Jesus Himself knows that feeling from the inside. On the cross, in the darkest hour anyone has ever lived through, He cried, "**My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?**" (Matthew 27:46). The Savior of the world asked "Why?" So when you ask it, you are not standing somewhere He has never been. That's part of why He can sit with you in it.

So if you're mad at God:

- **Tell Him.** Out loud if you need to. "Pour out your heart before him" (Psalms 62:8). He can take it.

- **Sort the pieces with Him.** Which part was my choice? Which part was someone else's? Which part was just a fallen world? Bring all three to Him. He heals every kind.
- **Don't stop.** Keep praying, even if your prayers are short and angry. Anger that keeps talking turns, little by little, into trust.

Owen was still mad when he went to bed that night. That's okay. He was still talking.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • Peter on the Water

They screamed. A boatful of grown men, most of them fishermen who had spent their whole lives on this lake, screamed like kids at a haunted house, because something was walking toward them. On top of the waves.

It was before dawn on the Sea of Galilee, a big lake ringed by hills. Jesus had sent His disciples across while He went up a mountain alone to pray. Then the wind came down off the hills. The boat was “tossed with waves” (Matthew 14:24), and the men had rowed for hours and gotten nowhere. Now this. They thought it was a ghost.

Then they heard His voice: “**Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid**” (Matthew 14:27).

Peter, who always spoke first, called back: “Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water” (Matthew 14:28).

And Jesus said one word: “**Come**” (Matthew 14:29).

Picture it. Peter swings one leg over the side of the boat. Then the other. His feet touch the water, and the water holds. He takes a step. Another. He is *walking on the sea*. Every eye in that boat is on him.

Then he looks around. He feels the wind. He sees how big the waves are. “When he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me” (Matthew 14:30).

And “immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him” (Matthew 14:31).

Not after a lecture. Not after Peter sank all the way and learned his lesson. *Immediately*. Then they climbed back into the boat together, and the wind stopped (Matthew 14:32).

Eyes on the Hand

Peter didn't sink because he was weak. He sank because he started looking at the storm instead of at the Lord. That is what expectations do to us. We stop looking at Jesus, and we start counting waves: the cut list, the grade, the comments, the things people say we should be. The waves are real. But they aren't the point. The hand is the point.

And notice: Peter walked on water. Nobody else in that boat did. The guy who sank is also the only one who ever tried. Jesus didn't throw him away for sinking. He caught him.

 AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • Perfect in Him, Not in You

A lot of teens carry a secret belief: “If I were really good, I’d be good at everything.” That isn’t the gospel. That is a treadmill with no off switch.

Here is what Moroni actually wrote at the very end of the Book of Mormon: “Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him” (Moroni 10:32). *In him*. Not in your report card or your stats.

Moroni says that if you come to Christ, “then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ” (Moroni 10:32). Grace is His help and power, given because He loves you, not because you earned it. It’s like a phone that charges even when your own battery is at one percent.

So try this:

- **Do the next right thing, not every right thing.** Today, that might be one biology assignment and one prayer. That’s enough for today.
- **Separate who you are from what you scored.** A D is a grade. It’s not your name.
- **Talk to Jesus about the pressure itself.** “I feel like I’m letting everyone down” is a real prayer. He wants to hear it.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Storm at Grandma’s House

The snow started during sacrament meeting on Sunday, the third of December. By the time the Hadlocks drove out to Sugar City for dinner at Grandma Marjorie’s, the wind was throwing it sideways across the road. Steve drove with both hands on the wheel and did not turn on the radio.

Owen sat in the back next to Lily, who was singing a Primary song about snowflakes and getting half the words wrong on purpose to make him laugh. He did not laugh. He was picking at a blister on his palm. It came from a gum scraper.

The service had started the Monday after Thanksgiving, at Ostergard Automotive, with gray primer and two rollers. Dale stood by with his arms folded. Steve stayed inside in the bay and did not come out once. Brayden would not look at the shop door.

For forty minutes, neither boy said a word.

“So,” Brayden said finally. “Miss your jumpsuit?”

“Heard your dad’s driving on a spare,” Owen said.

That was the end of talking. A minute later they both reached for the same paint tray. They pulled. Brayden shoved. Owen shoved back. The tray flipped, and Brayden stepped in it and left a trail of gray footprints across Dale’s clean parking lot.

Dale looked at the footprints. He looked at the boys. "Gentlemen," he said. "Twenty-six hours to go."

After the wall came the gym bleachers: forty years of gum and the burned crust from the smoke bomb in August. On the first day of school Tyler had called that gum an ecosystem. Tyler had not answered one text since the night he said he was done with church. Owen still checked his phone for one every hour.

Now, in the back of the car, Owen was looking at his phone. Soph squad was quiet for once; everybody was snowed in. But there was a text from Coach Bramhall saying "Keep your head up, try again next year," a notice about a makeup biology lab, and an email from Mr. Lusk: *Thursday, 3:15. Upper Valley Food Pantry. Wear old clothes.*

Every message was kind. I watched each one land on him like another shovel of snow.

Grandma's house smelled like roast and rolls. Her hands shook as she set the butter dish down, the way they do now. She hugged Owen hard and said, "There's my missionary." She has said that since he was eight. It is the most loving thing she knows how to say. I watched him take it the way you take a heavy box from someone, with a little bend in the knees.

They were halfway through dinner when the lights went out.

Lily screamed and then laughed. The furnace fan wound down to nothing. In the sudden quiet you could hear the wind pressing on the windows, steady and huge, like something leaning on the house.

"Well," Grandma said in the dark, "Lowell would be thrilled. He always said this house was built for a night like this."

In the corner of the family room stood Grandpa Lowell's woodstove, black iron, with a little glass door. Nobody had used it since he died. Steve went out to the shed with a flashlight and came back with snow in his hair and an armload of split pine. Owen went with him the second time, leaning into the wind. When they came back in, Erin had found candles, and Lily had built a fort out of couch cushions and was announcing that she lived there now.

Steve knelt in front of the stove and built the fire the way Grandpa had taught him: paper, then kindling in a little cabin shape, then the bigger pieces. He struck the match. The flame caught and climbed. Orange light filled the little glass window and spread across the carpet.

Everyone came close. You do, in a storm. Owen sat on the hearth with his knees up, holding his phone, which had eleven percent battery and no signal.

Steve rubbed his right leg. It aches in the cold, ever since the ladder. He winced, and Owen saw it. Then Steve said, “Come help me bring in one more load before it gets worse.”

They didn’t go out right away. They stood in the dark mudroom pulling on boots, and Steve said, not looking at him, “Coach texted me too.”

Owen didn’t say anything.

“And I saw the report card.”

“I know,” Owen said. “I know. I’m sorry. I’m gonna fix it. I’ll do the makeup lab and I’ll—” His voice cracked like his screen. “Everybody keeps saying I’m gonna be this great missionary and this great guy, and I can’t even make JV. I can’t even pass biology. I can’t even keep my friends. I snuck out, Dad. I *planned* it. Mom had to see me in that jumpsuit. And now I’m scraping gum with Brayden Kolstad till February. I’m wrecking everything.”

Steve stopped with one boot half on.



A Yoke Made to Fit

Jesus once said something that sounds strange at first: “**Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me**” (Matthew 11:29).

A yoke is a wooden beam that fits across the necks of two oxen so they can pull a load together. A badly made yoke rubs and cuts. A good one is carved to fit the animal so it can pull without being hurt.

Jesus said, “**My yoke is easy, and my burden is light**” (Matthew 11:30). That doesn’t mean following Him is easy. It means His yoke *fits*. And you never pull it alone, because the other side of the yoke is Him.

Many expectations are yokes other people built, or that we built ourselves. Some of them cut. When everything feels too heavy, ask, “Which of these did Jesus ask me to carry today?” Usually His list is shorter than ours. It sounds like this: “**Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest**” (Matthew 11:28).

WALK WITH HIM • Hand Him the Heavy Things

Tonight, make a list of everything you feel you are supposed to be, big and small. Then kneel, or sit on the edge of your bed, and read the list out loud to Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ, one line at a time. After each one, ask, “Is this mine to carry right now?” Then read Matthew 11:28–30 slowly, and picture Jesus on the other side of the yoke.

Think about it: Which expectation in your life feels most like a storm, and what would it look like to keep your eyes on Jesus instead of on that wave?



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

By the Woodstove

Steve finished pulling on his boot. Then he sat down on the mudroom bench, which put his face lower than Owen’s, and he looked up at his son in the dim light coming from the woodstove.

“Do you remember the winter I fell?” he asked.

Owen nodded. He had been twelve: the wheelchair, the ramp the elders quorum built, the bills on the fridge.

“I couldn’t walk to the bathroom by myself,” Steve said. “I couldn’t work. I couldn’t pay for anything. I was supposed to be the dad who takes care of everybody, and I was sitting in a wheelchair while my twelve-year-old learned to change brake pads because I couldn’t stand up.” He laughed a little, but it was not a funny laugh. “You know what I thought? I thought I was failing everybody. Every single person in that house.”

Owen didn’t move.

Then Steve said, “When I watched that video, I had to sit down on the stairs. I taught you to change a tire, Owen. In our garage.” He was quiet a moment. “But all weekend, you know what I wanted? Not to yell. I wanted to drive over there and carry you out.”

“And you know what your grandpa told me, that winter?” Steve tipped his head toward the family room, toward the stove that had been Lowell’s. “He said, ‘The Lord didn’t ask you to carry the family. He asked you to come to Him and let Him carry you for a while.’ I was so mad at him for saying it. Because he was right.”

Outside, the wind made the whole house creak. Through the doorway I could see the fire throwing gold on the ceiling, and Lily half asleep in her cushion fort.

Steve stood up and put his hand on the back of Owen's neck, the way he used to when Owen was small.

"Listen to me," he said. "I care about biology. I care about you making the team someday. Your mom and I want good things for you. But nobody's asking you to be perfect by Tuesday."

Owen made a sound that was half a laugh and half something else.

"Nobody," Steve said again. "Not me. Not your mom. Not Grandma, even if she calls you her missionary every five minutes. And not the Lord. He's not standing at the end of the hall with a clipboard. He's—" Steve stopped. He is not a man with a lot of words for these things. "He's more like the guy who comes out to the shed in the snow and helps you carry the wood."

They went out together into the storm one more time. Steve carried the big pieces. Owen carried the kindling. The wind pushed at them both, and they leaned into it side by side.

When they came back in, Owen did something I had not seen him do in weeks. He sat on the hearth, put his phone face down beside him, and closed his eyes. His lips moved. I could not hear the words. That prayer was not mine to hear; it went straight to his Father, where it belonged. But I saw his shoulders come down an inch. I saw his hands open on his knees.

And I felt it in the room, the way I have felt it in a thousand rooms: a warmth that was not from the stove. The Holy Ghost does not shout. He came the way the fire had come, small at first, and then filling the whole window with light.

The power came back on at 9:52. Lily groaned, because her fort was no longer an emergency.

Owen picked up his phone. Eleven percent had become six. Through the crack in the corner of the screen, the lock-screen light still came through, the way it always did.

He looked at it for a moment. Then he put it in his pocket and went to help Grandma with the dishes.

The storm was still blowing outside. It would blow all night. But a boy who had been looking at the waves had started, just a little, to look up.

And the post about Tyce was still sitting in the group chat. He had not deleted it. Not yet.



Compelled to Be Humble



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Delete

“This,” Lily announced, “is Mount Saint Lily.”

“That’s not how volcanoes get named,” Owen said.

“Who names them, then?”

“Scientists.”

“I’m a scientist. I’m in third grade.” She patted the lump of brown clay in the middle of the kitchen table. It had a plastic cup buried in the top and a little paper flag that said DANGER in purple marker. “It’s for science night. It’s going to erupt.”

“Not on my biology, it isn’t.”

It was Monday night, the fourth of December, the day after the storm. Owen had his biology worksheets spread across the other end of the table. He was finally catching up. He had Grandma Marjorie’s leftover fudge on a plate, which she had sent home with them “for emergencies,” and he had decided that biology counted. His phone lay face up beside the plate.

“You have to see it,” Lily said. “It’s the best part.”

“I’ll see it from here.”

“You’ll see it better from *here*.” She had a baking-soda box in one hand and the big jug of vinegar from under the sink in the other. Red food coloring had already gone in. So had dish soap. So had, I noticed, a lot more of everything than the instructions said.

“Lily,” Owen said. “How much vinegar are you—”

She poured.

Mount Saint Lily did not erupt. It *exploded*. A great pink-red foam came boiling up out of the cup, over the DANGER flag, down the sides of the clay, and across the table in a fizzing wave, straight for Owen’s biology.

He grabbed the worksheets. He grabbed the fudge. He grabbed his phone, which was the last thing the foam reached, and lifted it out of the flood with one corner dripping pink.

“What was THAT?” Erin called from the laundry room.

“SCIENCE!” Lily yelled back, delighted.

Owen wiped his phone on his shirt. The screen woke up under his thumb. It was still open to soph squad, where he had left it. And there, under a smear of pink foam, was the post.

He stopped laughing.

He went upstairs, shut his door and sat on his bed with the phone in both hands.

The post was still there, the one he had written the day Brayden spread his private message: the one about Brayden’s older brother, Tyce, away in a treatment program in Utah. It was short. It was mean. It had sixty-one likes.

I will not repeat it. Words like that do not need more places to live.

His thumb hovered over the little three dots.

That was when Sethar came.

He does not knock. He seeps in. That night he was a dull red smear in the corner where the lamp did not reach, and the air went gray around him. He crowded up close to Owen’s shoulder, loud, the way he always is.

I could not hear his words. I never can. I only saw what they did. Owen’s face got tighter and more hurried, the way it does when a room gets crowded, and he muttered to himself, “Brayden started it. Everybody already saw it anyway. What’s the point?”

I did not shout back. I cannot out-shout him, and it is not my work to try. My work is to stand still and keep a little space open, so that something quieter can be heard.

Owen set the phone down on the blanket. He rubbed his eyes. On his desk, beside the biology worksheets with one pink corner, sat his grandpa’s old Army photo, a young man in a uniform squinting into the sun. Owen looked at it for a while.

Then he picked up the phone again. His face did not get angry or proud. It got sad, and then it got steady. I believe the Holy Ghost was in that room, because the gray air began to thin, and Sethar began to pace, and that is what he does when he is losing.

Owen pressed the three dots. “Delete post?” the screen asked.

He pressed “Delete.”

Sixty-one likes vanished. The post was gone. Sethar hissed and was gone too. He never stays for endings.

Owen did not cheer. He lay back, and after a long time he said out loud, to nobody I could see, “That’s one.”

The next day at lunch, I watched him do the second one. Jace Wendling sat at the end of a long table by the windows, with his choir folder and a bag of pretzels and nobody on either side of him. On the days Ruby was not in the library, that was where he sat.

Owen walked across the cafeteria with his tray, a long walk when everyone can see you, and sat down across from Jace. Jace looked up and went very still, the way a person does who expects to be hurt.

“Hey,” Owen said. He had typed that word to Jace weeks ago and never sent it. “I laughed at that video. In the chat. Back in September.” He swallowed. “It wasn’t funny. It was really messed up. I’m sorry, man.”

Jace didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then he pushed the pretzel bag an inch toward Owen.

Owen took one. They ate without talking. It was not a movie moment. It was better. It was real.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: Why does it take something bad happening before I’m willing to change?

What scripture says: God blesses those who are humble without being forced, and He also lifts those who are humbled by hard things and turn to Him.

In the story: Owen deletes a cruel post and apologizes to Jace, Mia, Brayden and Tyler; a pallet of beans breaks the ice with Brayden; on Christmas Eve Mia walks out into the snow, done asking God; Kade turns down a ride to the church gym; Brayden’s brother nearly dies; Owen walks with Tyler to the bishop’s office.

Key verses: Alma 32:16; Ether 12:27; James 5:16; Helaman 14:30; John 21:15–17

Two Ways to Get Humble

Alma, a Book of Mormon prophet, once taught a group of poor people who had been thrown out of their own churches. They were humble because life had forced them to be. Alma told them that was a blessing. But then he said there’s an even better way:

“Blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble” (Alma 32:16).

“Compelled” means *forced*. Some people get humble because they choose it. Some get humble because something knocks them flat: a cut list, a weekend behind a locked door, a friend who won’t talk to them.

Owen got humble the second way. Most of us do. That’s okay. The Lord doesn’t refuse to help us just because we came to Him after we crashed. But Alma’s words are an invitation: you don’t have to wait for the crash. You can choose to be teachable now.

Being humble doesn’t mean thinking you’re worthless. It means being willing to say three hard sentences: “I was wrong.” “I’m sorry.” “I need help.” Those sentences are like doors. When you say them, Jesus can walk in.

 AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • **Three Times by the Fire**

The servant girl squinted at him across the fire. Then she pointed. "This man was also with him" (Luke 22:56).

Every face in the courtyard turned toward Peter.

Only a few hours earlier, Peter had made Jesus a promise: "Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death" (Luke 22:33). He meant it. He was brave and loud and loyal. Jesus had looked at him and said, "**The cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me**" (Luke 22:34).

Then soldiers arrested Jesus and took Him to the high priest's house. Peter followed at a distance and sat by the fire with the servants, trying to blend in.

Now the girl was pointing. Peter said, "Woman, I know him not" (Luke 22:57).

A little later, someone else said, "Thou art also of them."

Peter said, "Man, I am not" (Luke 22:58).

About an hour later, a third man insisted that Peter had been with Jesus. You could hear it in his accent, the man said: "He is a Galilæan" (Luke 22:59).

Peter said, "Man, I know not what thou sayest" (Luke 22:60).

And while the words were still in his mouth, a rooster crowed.

Then comes one of the saddest lines in the whole Bible: "The Lord turned, and looked upon Peter" (Luke 22:61). Their eyes met across the courtyard.

"And Peter went out, and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62).

If the story ended there, it would be a story about failure. But it doesn't end there.

Jesus was crucified, and on the third day He rose. When the angel at the tomb told the women the news, he said, "go your way, tell his disciples *and Peter*" (Mark 16:7). Peter was named. As if the Lord wanted to make sure the one who felt the worst got the message too.

Some time later, Peter went back to the only thing he knew how to do. "I go a fishing," he said (John 21:3). Others went with him. They fished all night and caught nothing.

At sunrise, a man stood on the shore and called out, "**Children, have ye any meat?**" (John 21:5). In other words, had they caught anything?

"No."

"Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find" (John 21:6).

They did, and the net filled so full they couldn't pull it in. John looked at Peter and said, "It is the Lord" (John 21:7).

Peter didn't wait for the boat. He jumped into the sea and swam for shore.

On the beach there was already a fire going, "and fish laid thereon, and bread" (John 21:9). The risen Son of God, who had conquered death, was cooking breakfast for the friends who had run away from Him.

He said, "**Come and dine**" (John 21:12).

After they ate, Jesus turned to Peter and asked him a question. Not “Why did you do it?” Not “How could you?” He asked, “**Lovest thou me?**” (John 21:17).

He asked three times. Three denials by a fire; three questions by a fire. Each time Peter said yes, and each time Jesus gave him something to do: “**Feed my sheep**” (John 21:17).

What He Does with Our Failures

That’s what Jesus does with our failures. He doesn’t pretend they didn’t happen. But He builds a fire on the beach, and He asks, “**Lovest thou me?**” And He gives us work to do.

Before any of this happened, Jesus had already told Peter, “**When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren**” (Luke 22:32). Peter’s failure would become the thing that helped him help others.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Truth on the Way Home

Owen texted Mia that Wednesday. He typed it four times and deleted it three. The one he sent said: “I shouldn’t have said that stuff in a message to other people. You deserved better than finding out like that. I’m sorry. You don’t have to answer.”

She didn’t answer for two days. On Friday she walked past him in the biology room, slowed down, and said, “Thanks for the text.” Then she sat down in her old seat, the one next to his. That was all. Owen’s ears turned bright red, and he kept his eyes on his worksheet for the whole period. I will tell you more about Mia later in this book. For now, a seat was enough.



Brayden was the hardest, and Owen knew it. What he had done to Mia and Jace had been careless. What he had posted about Brayden’s brother, Tyce, he had written on purpose, to hurt.

On Thursday at 3:15 the two of them stood in the back of the Upper Valley Food Pantry, an old tire store on the edge of town that still smelled a little like rubber. The manager, a small, fast woman named Darlene Quarnberg, pointed at a pallet stacked taller than either of them and wrapped in plastic. “Canned beans,” she said. “Six hundred cans. Shelves A through D. Old ones to the front.” Then she went to answer the phone.

It was their first shift there. They had already done four, at the shop wall and the gym bleachers, and they had a system: Owen worked one end, Brayden worked the other, and nobody talked.

“I’ll cut the wrap,” Brayden said.

“You’ll cut it wrong.”

“How do you cut plastic wrong?”

“You don’t start at the top. You have to start at the—”

Brayden started at the top. The stack had been leaning a little, the way a tired person leans, and the plastic was the only thing holding it up. The blade went down one side. The stack sighed. Then six hundred cans of beans came down like a rockslide.

In three seconds both boys were knee-deep in pinto beans and refried beans, and cans were rolling in every direction. One rolled out the open loading door, bumped down the ramp, and took off across the icy parking lot toward the street.

They both went after it. They both hit the ice at the bottom of the ramp. They both went down flat on their backs, side by side, in the slush.

The can rolled gently into the curb and stopped.

For a second they lay there, looking up at a gray sky with snow just starting. Then Brayden laughed. It was not his loud group-chat laugh. It was smaller, and it seemed to surprise him. Then Owen was laughing too, the kind that hurts your stomach and won’t stop, two enemies lying in a parking lot because of beans.

“I *told* you,” Owen said, when he could breathe. “The bottom.”

“You did not say the bottom.”

They sat up on the cold curb. Brayden picked up the runaway can and read the label like it was interesting. Then he said, without looking up, “Tyce used to volunteer here. When he was our age.”

Owen opened his mouth and closed it again. I was proud of him for that.

“He hurt his shoulder playing football,” Brayden said. “They gave him pills for it. And then he couldn’t stop. It took everybody a year to figure it out. My parents fight about it every night. Whose fault it was. Like it’s a game somebody can win.” He turned the can over and over. “Some nights I sit in my car in the driveway so I don’t have to hear them.”

The snow came down harder. Owen looked at the boy he had spent three weeks hating, the same boy who had knocked back through a cinder-block wall.

"I'm sorry," Owen said. "About the post. About Tyce. About your truck. It's the worst thing I ever wrote. I deleted it Monday. I know that doesn't fix it."

Brayden was quiet a long time. "My mom saw it," he said. "She cried in the kitchen."

Owen closed his eyes.

Brayden did not say *it's okay*. It was not okay, and neither of them pretended it was. He did not say sorry back, either. Not yet. But he stood up and held out a hand, and Owen took it, and Brayden pulled him up off the curb.

"Don't make it weird," Brayden said.

"I wasn't going to make it weird."

"You were about to make it weird." He tossed Owen the can. "Come on. Darlene's gonna kill us."

They picked up six hundred cans together. It took an hour and a half. They talked the whole time about nothing: the Jazz, which beans were the worst beans. When Darlene came back, she looked at the shelves and said, "Well. That's the fastest anybody's ever done that."

Brayden looked at Owen. Neither of them told her why.



Tyler was hard in a different way. Owen had told other people that Tyler was "acting weird and lying to everybody," and Tyler had read it in front of forty kids.

Since the night of the *im done with church* text, Owen had sent Tyler the same message every single day: *its just basketball. no church. ill pass you the ball*. That week Tyler finally came. After the game, Owen waited by the doors while Tyler put on his coat.

"Walk home?" Owen said.

Tyler shrugged. They walked. The snow squeaked under their shoes, the dry squeak you only get well below freezing.

At the corner by the canal, Owen stopped. "I'm sorry," he said. "For what I wrote about you. It was your business, not mine. I was a bad friend."

Tyler kept walking a few steps. Then he stopped too. He stood with his back to Owen and his hands jammed in his pockets, looking at the dark field across the street.

I was close enough to see his jaw working. I could not see inside him; I never can. But I have watched people stand at the edge of telling the truth for a very long time, and it always looks like this: a person bracing against a wind no one else can feel.

"You weren't wrong," Tyler said finally.

Owen didn't understand. "What?"

"You said I was lying to everybody. I am." Tyler turned around. His face was wet, and not from the snow. "There's stuff I look at on my phone. Stuff I shouldn't. Since I was twelve. I keep stopping and then I do it again, and I keep thinking I'll fix it myself, and I don't. That's why I quit preparing the sacrament. I couldn't—" His voice broke. "I can't touch the trays, man. And my mom found it on the laptop, and I told her it was a pop-up. I lied right to her face. I feel like I'm too far gone."

The cold seemed to stop. The whole street seemed to hold still.

Owen's mouth opened. Nothing came out. I watched him, and I want you to know what he did not do. He did not step back. He did not laugh. He did not look disgusted. He did not say, "Dude, that's gross," or "How could you?"

He stepped forward and put his gloved hand on Tyler's shoulder.

"You're not too far gone," Owen said. His voice was shaking. "I don't know a lot, but I know that. You're not."

Tyler cried then, really cried, the way a person does who has been holding something by himself for three years. Owen just stood there with his hand on his friend's shoulder in the snow.

After a while, Tyler wiped his face on his sleeve. "I don't know what to do."

Owen thought about it. "Bishop Kenley," he said. "He's really nice. He eats sunflower seeds during youth interviews. My dad says he's the least scary guy in Idaho."

Tyler laughed, a wet, surprised laugh.

"I'll walk you there," Owen said. "If you want. I'll wait outside. I won't ask you anything."

Tyler looked at him for a long moment. Then he nodded.

There was a warmth on that street that had nothing to do with the temperature. The Holy Ghost was there. I could not tell you what each boy felt inside. But I could see that Tyler was standing straighter than when they had left the church.



Weak Things Made Strong

In the Book of Mormon, the Lord tells the prophet Moroni something surprising: “I give unto men weakness that they may be humble” (Ether 12:27).

That doesn’t mean God *wants* you to sin. It means He made us as real people in a real world, with real limits, so that we would need Him. And then comes the promise: “If they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27).

Not “make weak things disappear.” *Make them strong.* Owen’s cruel post became the reason he knew how to sit on a cold curb and listen to a boy he had hurt.

James, a leader in the early Church, wrote: “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed” (James 5:16). Secrets grow in the dark. When you say them out loud to the right person, they lose a lot of their power.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION
Christmas Eve in the Snow

The sign went up the week after the storm. It stood in the snowbank in front of the Castellaws’ house: FOR SALE, and under it a photo of a real-estate agent with very white teeth, smiling at the house as if this were good news.

On Christmas Eve, which fell on a Sunday that year, the ward held its Christmas program in sacrament meeting. The chapel was packed. The Primary children sang in bathrobes and dish-towel headdresses. One small shepherd’s towel slid down over his eyes, and he kept singing with it on, which made the whole chapel laugh.

Owen laughed too. Then he looked across the aisle and saw that Mia was not laughing.

She sat between her mother and Theo. Her father was not there; he was in Idaho Falls. In front of them sat a young family, and the dad had his arm across the back of the bench, around the mom, the way dads do without thinking. Mia was staring at that arm.

The Primary began the next song, a soft one about families. Mia stood up in the middle of the second line, stepped past Theo’s knees, and walked out the side door without looking back.

Shauna half rose to follow. Erin Hadlock caught her eye from across the aisle and nodded toward Owen, and Owen was already sliding out of the bench.

The snow outside was falling straight down, big and slow, the kind that makes no sound at all. Mia stood at the edge of the parking lot in her church dress and a thin coat, with her arms wrapped around herself.

“Mia?”

“Don’t,” she said. “Please don’t say anything nice.”

So he didn’t. He just stood next to her. After a minute he pulled off his gloves and held them out. She looked at them, then took them.

“Did you see the sign?” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Tomorrow we’re doing Christmas twice. Morning at our house, then Mom drives us to a gas station halfway to Idaho Falls, and Dad picks us up there. That’s the plan. A gas station. Theo asked if Santa knows the address of Dad’s apartment.” She laughed, and it came out wrong. “Next Christmas it won’t even be our house.”

The snow kept falling. Inside, very faintly, you could hear the children singing.

“I prayed every single night they’d stay together,” Mia said. Her voice was low and flat. “Every night all summer. On my knees, Owen. I never skipped once. Not even when I was sick.” She turned and looked at him, and her eyes were full. “He didn’t do it.”

Owen opened his mouth to say something, the kind of thing people say at church, and then he stopped. I think he remembered the garage.

“I yelled at Him,” he said instead. “Last month. In our garage. Like, really yelled.”

She stared at him. “What happened?”

“My mom came out. She said He can take it.” He shrugged. “I’m still kind of mad.”

Mia almost smiled. Almost. “I’m not yelling,” she said. “I’m just done asking. Either He doesn’t listen to me, or He doesn’t care, or I did it wrong.”

“I don’t think you did it wrong,” Owen said slowly. “Your parents’ stuff isn’t yours. I don’t think it’s His, either. I think they just... chose it.” He looked down at the snow collecting on his shoes. “I don’t know why He didn’t stop it. I don’t.”

He didn’t try to fix it. That was the best thing he did all year, and he did not even know it.

The side door opened. Theo stuck his head out, in his white shirt and crooked clip-on tie. “Mom says come back in,” he said. “They’re doing the part with the baby sheep.”

Mia did not go back in. She sat in her mother's car with the heater on, and Theo climbed in with her. Owen stood outside the window in the falling snow until the closing prayer.

I cannot tell you what was in Mia's heart that night. I only saw her face through the foggy glass. It was not peaceful. It was tired, and very young, and still angry at Someone. Her story was not finished. It would take a long time, and a piano, and a spring that was still far away.



When Someone Else's Choice Lands on You

Mia did everything right. She prayed every night. And her parents still divorced. That doesn't mean her prayers bounced off the ceiling.

God gives every person agency, the power to choose. Samuel the Lamanite said it plainly: "ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves" (Helaman 14:30). That freedom belongs to your parents too, and to the people who hurt you. God will not force anyone's heart, not even to answer a good prayer.

So when someone else's choice lands on you, remember: it is not your fault, and God did not cause it or leave you. The scriptures say that when God saw His children choose hate, "he wept" (Moses 7:28). He grieves with you. He is still there in the snow, even when you're done asking.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Two Doors in January

"You realize I'm basically your Uber now," Brayden said.

"You offered."

"I offered *once*. You keep getting in."

It was the second Tuesday of January, after a pantry shift, and Brayden's car smelled like cardboard and pinto beans. He pulled into the gas station on Main Street for drinks. Under the pumps, leaning on the hood of an old gray sedan, were Kade Dunlavy and Ridge Kesselring.

Kade saw them first. He grinned his big half-of-his-face grin, but it did not reach his eyes. He looked thinner than he had in August. “Well, look at this,” he called. “You and church boy holding hands now, Kolstad?”

Ridge laughed loud enough to make a lady at pump four turn around.

Brayden’s jaw went tight. Before he could answer, Owen got out of the car and walked over.

“Hey, Kade.”

“Hey, church boy.”

“Wednesday basketball,” Owen said. “At the church on Third. Seven o’clock. Brother Thorsgaard runs it. Nobody cares if you can shoot.” He nodded back at the car. “We’ll pick you up. He drives. Apparently he’s my Uber.”

Kade’s grin slipped. For a second he looked about twelve years old, the boy who used to sit on the tool chest at Ostergard and ask what every part was for. He looked down the street, toward the temple on the hill.

“What time?” he said.

“Seven. We’d be there at quarter till.”

Kade picked at a hangnail. I saw him almost say it. I saw the word start.

Then Ridge snorted. “Bro. Are you serious right now?”

And Kade’s face closed like a door.

“Nah,” he said. “God never did one thing for me. Why would I go to His gym?”

Ridge laughed again and slapped the hood. Something dull and red leaned there beside them, in the shadow of the pumps, crowding close to Kade’s shoulder. It was pleased.

Owen did not argue. He did not preach. He said, “Offer’s good every Wednesday,” and walked back to the car.

As they pulled out, Kade called after them, “Run home, church boy!” But he said it without much in it, and I saw him watch the car all the way to the corner.

Owen sat with his drink in his lap and did not open it. There was no anger in his face. It was sorrow, the kind you feel watching a friend walk out onto ice you know is thin.

“He used to pass the sacrament with me,” Owen said. “He dropped a whole tray once and caught every piece.”

Brayden didn't say anything. But that night Owen texted Kade: *every wednesday 7. offer stands*. Later that night I was sent to Kade. I saw him read it, alone on a couch in a dark front room, with the TV on and nobody watching. He read it twice. He did not answer.

I will tell you what else I had seen that fall, because no one else in this story knew it yet. The orange bottle from Brayden's kitchen lasted Kade about two weeks. Then he started asking to use the bathroom at other people's houses: a grandmother's bottle after her hip surgery, an uncle's from a bad back. When the medicine cabinets ran thin, he bought from an older guy behind the tire shop, with money that was not his. That first bottle had only been the door. Now the thing on the other side of it had hold of him, and every week it wanted more.



The next Monday, the fifteenth, Brayden didn't show up at the pantry.

He didn't answer his phone, either. After the shift, Owen's dad dropped him off at the Kolstads' house, and there was Brayden's car in the driveway with the engine running and Brayden inside it, staring at the garage door.

Owen knocked on the passenger window. Brayden unlocked it without looking over. Owen got in.

The heater ticked. Neither of them said anything for a long time.

"Tyce left his program," Brayden finally said. "Before Christmas. Saturday night he overdosed in some apartment in Salt Lake." His voice was flat, like he was reading a cereal box. "Somebody called 911. They got there in time. He's in the ICU, on a breathing machine." He swallowed. "He's gonna live. They said he's gonna live."

Owen sat very still.

"My parents drove down at three in the morning. They told me to stay here and go to school. Like that's a thing." Brayden laughed, but it was not a laugh. "They didn't even fight in the car. That's how I knew it was bad."

"I'm sorry," Owen said. "I'll pray for—"

"Don't." Brayden turned on him so fast Owen flinched. "Don't tell me God's got a plan. Everybody from church keeps texting my mom that. 'Heavenly Father has a plan.' What plan has my brother almost dying on some floor? My mom prayed for him every night for two years. Every night. Where's that? Huh? Where was He Saturday?"

Owen did not argue. I watched him want to. Then something in his face changed, and I think he was remembering a garage, and his own voice shouting the same question.

“I wasn’t gonna say that,” he said quietly.

“Good.”

“Can I just sit here?”

Brayden looked at him for a long time. Then he turned back to the garage door. “Whatever.”

So Owen sat there. The windows fogged. The heater ticked. After a while Brayden said, without turning his head, “He called me on Christmas. He sounded good. He asked about Dad’s truck tires.” Then his shoulders started to shake, and he put his forehead down on the steering wheel, and Owen put one hand on his back and left it there.

I will say this plainly, because Brayden could not hear it yet. What happened to Tyce was not God’s doing. It was Tyce’s own choices, and the choices of people who sold him poison, and it landed on everyone who loved him. I do not blame Brayden for being angry. Anger looks for somewhere to land. But I stood in the Father’s presence before the world was, and I know His love. It is not a love that shrugs. On nights like that one, it weeps.

Brayden’s aunt pulled up at 8:30 to stay with him. Owen walked home in the cold, and I walked with him. At the corner by the canal, the same corner where he had once stopped and then kept walking, he stopped again, and this time he bowed his head.



AUTHOR’S SPOTLIGHT • What Happens When You Talk to the Bishop

For a lot of teens, the idea of talking to the bishop about a serious mistake is the scariest thing in the world. Here’s what usually happens, so it’s less of a mystery.

Getting there. Ask the bishop after church, text him, or ask a parent or leader to help you set up a time. You can bring a parent or another trusted adult if you want.

In the room. Just tell him. You don’t need perfect words, and you never need to describe details. “I’ve been looking at pornography and I can’t stop” or “I did something I need help with” is enough. Bishops have heard hard things before. He won’t be shocked, and he won’t think less of you.

What he does. He listens. He keeps it private. He helps you make a plan: maybe meeting again, maybe talking with your parents together. These steps aren’t punishments. They’re like a cast on a broken arm: they help you heal right.

What you feel. Most people say the same thing afterward: “I feel lighter.” That’s because the bishop is a helper, not the healer. He points you to Jesus Christ, and Jesus is the one who heals.

The Lord’s promise is clear: “As oft as they repented and sought forgiveness, with real intent, they were forgiven” (Moroni 6:8). And: “I, the Lord, remember them no more” (D&C 58:42).

WALK WITH HIM • Say the Three Hard Sentences

This week, think of one person you owe an apology to. Pray first, in the name of His Son, and ask Heavenly Father to help you be humble. Then say it plainly: “I was wrong. I’m sorry.” If there’s something heavier you’re carrying alone, tell a parent or the bishop. Read John 21:1–17, and picture the Savior’s fire on the beach waiting for you.

Think about it: Which is harder for you to say: “I was wrong,” “I’m sorry,” or “I need help”? Why?



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Bench Outside the Bishop’s Office

It took Tyler five weeks to keep that nod. Twice he made an appointment and canceled it. Then came Christmas, and he told Owen he wanted to try quitting on his own first, the way he had told himself a hundred times. In January he texted Owen one word: *tuesday*?

It was a Tuesday night in the middle of January, and the church building was mostly dark. A light was on in the bishop’s office at the end of the hall.

Owen and Tyler sat on the padded bench outside the bishop’s office. Tyler’s knee was bouncing so hard the whole bench shook. Owen didn’t tell him to stop. He just sat there, close enough that their shoulders almost touched.

At 7:30 exactly, the door opened. Bishop Kenley leaned out. He had a bag of sunflower seeds in one hand and a kind, tired face.

“Tyler,” he said. “Come on in. I’m glad you’re here.” Then he looked at Owen. “You must be the friend.”

“Yeah,” Owen said.

“Good,” the bishop said. “Everybody needs one.”

Tyler stood up. He looked at Owen. For a moment I saw the boy at the canal again, the one who thought he was too far gone. Then he walked into the office, and the door closed.

Owen sat alone on the bench.

He took out his phone, the cracked one, and opened his scripture app. I watched him scroll to John 21. He read it slowly. His lips moved now and then. When he got to the part where Peter swims for shore, he stopped and stared at the hallway carpet for a while.

Then he put the phone away, folded his arms, and bowed his head right there on the bench. He prayed under his breath, so low that I caught only a few words. I heard Tyler's name, twice. Then another name, one I had last heard in a cold car in a driveway, from a boy who did not want anyone to pray. The rest was his, and it went to his Father.

I stood by that door the whole time. I was not sent inside; that room belonged to a boy, his bishop, and his Savior. But I was allowed to be there in the hall, and I was glad.

The meeting took forty minutes. When the door opened, Tyler came out first. His eyes were red. He was holding a little card the bishop had given him, and he was standing straighter than I had seen him stand since summer.

Bishop Kenley put a hand on his shoulder. "Same time next week," he said. "And this week, tell your mom and dad the truth about the laptop. Call me if you want me to be there. You're going to be okay, Tyler. You're not the first, and the Savior's not tired of you."

Tyler nodded.

The two boys walked out into the parking lot. The sky had cleared. The stars over Rexburg were sharp and cold, and the temple on the hill was glowing white.

"How was it?" Owen asked, and then quickly, "You don't have to tell me."

Tyler took a big breath of cold air and let it out in a cloud.

"Lighter," he said.

That was all. It was enough.

They walked home the long way. I followed a little behind. Somewhere ahead, I knew, there was a long road for Tyler, with hard days and good days. But I had seen something tonight I have seen many times since Galilee: a friend on a beach, a fire already burning, and the Lord asking a broken person, "**Lovest thou me?**"

The answer is always the beginning.

Tyler was not the only one in Rexburg that winter learning to say a hard thing out loud. Across town, a girl who felt invisible had already said hers, and someone had heard.



PART THREE

Miracles and Redemption



Beauty for Ashes

Before They Call, I Will Answer



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Far Table

“Okay,” Tyler Winsor whispered. “Next card. What is the powerhouse of the cell?”

“The mitochondria,” Owen whispered back. “Everybody knows that. It’s not even on the test.”

“It’s on every test. It’s on the test of *life*.” Tyler flipped to the next card. He had made the flash cards himself, in the hall before lunch, and his handwriting got worse as he went. He squinted at this one. “Okay. This one just says ‘FROG?’”

“What about the frog?”

“I don’t know. I was in a hurry. Something happens to a frog.”

“Lots of things happen to frogs.”

From the front desk, without looking up, Mrs. Doane cleared her throat.

This was back in December, a few weeks before that bench outside the bishop’s office. The Henry’s Fork library has eight round tables, a poster of a cat reading a book, and a librarian named Mrs. Doane who pretends not to see you eat lunch there, as long as you don’t spill. She also pretends not to hear you, up to a point. The boys had reached the point. Owen had a D in biology to dig out of before the semester ended, and Tyler had come along to “help.” After school Owen had another service shift with Brayden Kolstad, which Tyler called “the world’s worst buddy program.” Since that walk by the canal, Tyler had started laughing again, a little at a time, like someone testing the ice on a pond. I was there for the frog card. I wish you could have seen his face.

At the table by the window, Ruby Varga was trying very hard not to laugh. She had a fist pressed against her mouth.

“Miss Varga,” said Mrs. Doane, still not looking up. “Is that a tamale?”

Ruby froze with the foil halfway open. “It’s... a very warm bookmark.”

“Mm-hm.” Mrs. Doane turned a page. “Don’t get bookmark on the books.”

Tyler snorted so hard he had to put his forehead down on the table.

Then the door banged open.

Hannah Prestwich came in fast, hood up, head down, the way you walk when you don't want anyone to look at you. She cut the corner by the returns cart too close, and her backpack caught the top shelf. The cart rolled, wobbled on one wheel, and tipped. A whole tower of returned books went sliding off in an avalanche: atlases, a cookbook, a dictionary as thick as a cinder block, and about thirty paperbacks that hit the floor like a round of applause.

Ruby was already moving. She dove and caught the dictionary an inch above the carpet. Owen jumped up and grabbed the cart before it could roll into the computer row.

Then, for one second, it was very quiet.

"I'm sorry," Hannah said. Her face had gone white, then red. "I'm so sorry. I didn't—"

"It's okay," Ruby said, on her knees with an armful of atlases. "Seriously, they had it coming. They've been stacked like that since October."

Mrs. Doane came around the desk and looked at the pile, and then at the four of them. "Is anybody hurt?" Nobody was. "Then it's just paper," she said. "Paper forgives."

They restacked the cart together. Then the boys headed for the gym, Tyler still arguing that the frog would be on the test. And Hannah, without a word, went to the table farthest from everyone, behind the biography shelves. She sat down and put her head on her arms.

Hannah didn't usually come to the library at lunch. She had no lunch with her. Just a water bottle with a crack in the lid, held together with tape.

Ruby went back to the window table, where she had eaten lunch since August. At first it was because she didn't know where else to go. By December it was partly habit and partly something new. On Sundays now she helped in Primary, the children's class at church, where tiny kids hugged her knees and called her "Sister Ruby." In the front pocket of her binder she kept a drawing one of them had made: a purple stick figure with enormous hair and the words RUBY IS MY FRIEND.

Ruby watched Hannah. I watched Ruby watch her.

I have seen a lot of people decide whether to cross a room. It happens in a few seconds, and almost no one knows how much depends on it. Ruby looked down at her own lunch: two of her mother's tamales wrapped in foil, an orange, a bag of crackers. She looked at Hannah. She looked at her lunch again.

Then she stood up, picked up everything, and walked across the library.

"Hey," she said. "Can I sit here?"

Hannah lifted her head. Her eyes were red around the edges and very tired. "You don't have to," she said. "I'm fine."

"I know I don't have to," Ruby said, and sat down anyway. "I've sat in here since August. Technically you're in my library."

Hannah almost smiled. Almost.

Ruby unwrapped the foil, broke a tamale in half, and set one half on a napkin in front of Hannah. "My mom makes like forty at a time," she said. "We can't eat them all. You'd be doing me a favor."

For a moment Hannah didn't move. Then she picked it up and ate it in about four bites, the way a person eats who has been feeding everyone else and forgetting herself.

They didn't talk much. Ruby peeled the orange and split it. Hannah told her, in pieces, that she had been up since five, that the baby had an ear infection, that she had made five lunches for her little brothers and sisters that morning and then remembered at the bus stop that she hadn't made one for herself. She said her dad was in North Dakota until the twenty-second. She said her mom was "still having a hard time."

Then Ruby asked the question.

"How are *you*, though?"

Hannah stared at her. "Nobody asks me that," she said quietly.

"Well," Ruby said, "I'm asking."

Hannah looked down at the orange peel on the table for a long time. When she answered, her voice was very small. "Not great," she said. "Better than last month. I told Sister Quintanar some stuff. She's been checking on me. But home's still... the same."

Ruby didn't try to fix it. She didn't give a talk. She just nodded and said, "Okay. Then I'll sit here tomorrow too."

The bell rang. Mrs. Doane looked up from her desk and pretended not to see two girls walking out together, one of them laughing at something the other said for the first time all week.

I stayed by the far table for a moment after they left. There was a warmth in that corner, behind the biographies, that had not been there at the start of lunch. I know where that warmth comes from. It was not from me.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: Does God hear me when I feel invisible?

What scripture says: God knows us so completely that He starts sending help before we even ask, and He often sends it through other people.

In the story: Ruby starts sitting with Hannah; both girls begin talking to the Savior as a real Friend; Hannah's dad comes home early; her mom begins to get help; Ruby finds she belongs when she serves; locked out in the snow, Owen tells Brayden about his dad's hard winter.

Key verses: Isaiah 65:24; 1 Samuel 1:15–18; Enos 1:4–5; Mosiah 2:17; Matthew 10:30

Help Already on the Way

Here is a promise from Isaiah that sounds almost too good to be true:

“Before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear” (Isaiah 65:24).

God knows what you need before you know how to say it. Sometimes, by the time you finally kneel down and pray, the answer is already on its way. It might be a person walking across a room. It might be a phone call someone already made. It might be a plan the Lord set in motion weeks ago.

Jesus said that God knows you so well that “the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matthew 10:30). Nobody counts the hairs on your head. Not your mom, not your best friend, not you. But your Heavenly Father knows. If He knows that, He knows when you've been crying in your room. He knows when you feel like no one would notice if you disappeared.

He notices. He always has.

Hannah at the Temple

Remember the Hannah of the Old Testament, back in Chapter 8? When she poured out her soul at Shiloh, “only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard” (1 Samuel 1:13). Nobody in that room could hear her. God did. Years later she held her baby son and said, “For this child I prayed; and the LORD hath given me my petition” (1 Samuel 1:27).

Two things stand out. First, God heard a prayer nobody else could hear. Eli couldn't hear it. But God did. Second, God used a person, Eli, to help Hannah feel heard. Prayer and people. Usually He uses both.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Truck in the Driveway

It was a Tuesday, the twelfth of December, a little after five o'clock. The sky over Rexburg was already dark, and the snow along the Prestwich driveway had gone gray at the edges.

Inside, the kitchen was loud. Two of Hannah's little brothers were arguing over a tablet. A sister was crying because her spelling words were "too long." The baby was on Hannah's hip, warm and heavy and finally out of pain from the ear infection. Hannah was stirring a pot of boxed macaroni with her free hand and checking a math worksheet with her eyes. The bedroom door at the end of the hall was closed. It had been closed most of the day. Behind it, her mother was lying down again.

I had been in that kitchen many evenings that fall. I knew the shape of it by now: a fifteen-year-old girl holding up a house with her two thin arms.

Then headlights swept across the front window.

A truck pulled into the driveway. A big, dusty white pickup with North Dakota mud dried along the doors.

Hannah stopped stirring. "That's not—" she said. "He's not supposed to be home till the twenty-second."

The front door opened, and the cold came in, and a tall man in a work coat came in with it. Kurt Prestwich set down a duffel bag and looked at his kitchen: the arguing boys, the crying girl, the macaroni, and his oldest daughter standing in the middle of it all with a baby on her hip.

The kids screamed "Dad!" and ran at him. He caught as many as he could. But he was looking over their heads at Hannah.

She didn't run. She stood there holding the spoon. Her face did something complicated. Then it crumpled.

Kurt crossed the kitchen in three steps, took the baby gently and set her in her high chair, and wrapped both arms around his daughter. Hannah cried into his coat the way she had not let herself cry in front of anyone at home since summer.

"I'm sorry," he kept saying. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I'm here. I'm here."

Later, after the macaroni and after the little ones were in bed, Kurt sat at the kitchen table with Hannah. I heard him tell her what had happened.

"You know Sister Quintanar called me, back in November," he said. "You were right there. And then Bishop Kenley called. And I want you to know something." He turned his coffee mug in his big hands. "I'd already asked to come home. The week your mom got worse. Before either of them called. I kept waking up at night out there with this feeling that I needed to be here. I couldn't shake it. I asked my supervisor for the rest of the month off, and I started looking for work closer to home. I didn't tell anybody in case it fell through." He shook his head slowly. "It came through yesterday."

Hannah stared at him. "Before she called? Back then?"

"Back then."

That was before Ruby crossed the library. It was even before Hannah had said the hardest things out loud to Sister Quintanar. Before anyone had called anyone. Help had already started on its way home, long before a dusty white truck came across Montana.

Kurt got up and walked down the hall to the closed bedroom door. He knocked softly and went in. The door stayed open a crack. I did not go in; that room was not mine to enter. I heard low voices, and crying, and his voice saying, "We're going to keep getting you help, Allie. For as long as it takes. You're not doing this by yourself anymore."

When he came back to the kitchen, Hannah asked him, very quietly, "Is she going to be okay?"

Kurt thought before he answered. "Her doctor's going to help her get well. That's real medicine, and she needs it, the same as a broken arm needs a cast." He reached over and squeezed Hannah's hand. "And the Savior's going to help all of us. Her, me, you. We're going to need both, sweetheart. We don't have to pick."

The next morning, I saw Allison Prestwich walk out to the truck in her winter coat, holding her husband's arm. She looked thin and pale and frightened. But she was walking. They were going to see her doctor.

Hannah stood at the front window and watched them go. Her lips moved. I could not hear the words. But I saw her put her hand flat against the cold glass, and I saw her shoulders let go of something.



Hannah was not the only one that month to find help already on its way. The next Monday, the eighteenth, it snowed eleven inches, and I was sent across town to the Sagecrest Senior Apartments, where Mr. Lusk had sent two boys with court-ordered hours and shovels.

Owen and Brayden were up to fourteen hours by then. Since the beans they could laugh together, but they had not yet talked about anything that mattered.

They shoveled the long walk to the front doors. They cleared a path for a woman with a walker, who knocked on her window and gave them a thumbs-up, then knocked again and pointed at a spot they had missed. They salted the steps. Then Brayden propped the side door open with a shovel so they could put the tools away. The wind slammed the door. The shovel fell flat. The lock clicked.

Their coats and phones were inside the maintenance closet. The office had closed at four. It was 4:20 and already getting dark.

“You propped it with a *shovel*,” Owen said.

“It was a good shovel.”

They knocked. They pounded. Nobody came; the TVs inside were turned up loud. So they sat on the bench by the door in their hoodies, hands pulled up into their sleeves, and waited for somebody, anybody, to want to go outside.

This time Owen talked first. Brayden asked, half joking, if Owen’s dad was going to kill him for being late. Owen said no, his dad didn’t really do that anymore. And then, maybe because it was cold and dark and nobody else could hear, he told Brayden about the ladder.

He told him about the frosty patio when he was twelve, the ambulance, the rod in his dad’s leg, the wheelchair all winter. The bills on the fridge. How he learned to change brake pads because his dad couldn’t stand up.

“I said stuff about that,” Brayden said quietly. “In the chat. On your dad’s wall.” He looked at his shoes. “I didn’t know any of that part.”

“You want to know the weird part?” Owen said. “Guys from church showed up with lumber and built a ramp before my dad even got home from the hospital. Somebody paid our power bill. Stuff just kept showing up. Like somebody knew what we needed before we did.”

Brayden thought about that for a long time. “That doesn’t happen at my house,” he said.

Owen didn’t argue. He just bumped Brayden’s shoulder with his own, the way you bump a teammate on the bench.

At 4:51 the woman with the walker opened the side door, looked at two shivering boys, and said, “Well, for heaven’s sake. Get in here. I have cocoa.”

Her name was Mrs. Thurgood. She made them sit at her little kitchen table while she told them about her husband, who had driven a potato truck for forty years, and Brayden ate five of her cookies. When they finally walked out to the parking lot, it was Brayden who said, “Same time Wednesday?”

“Same time Wednesday,” Owen said.



Enos: A Hungry Soul in the Forest

The Book of Mormon has a story about a young man who prayed for a very long time.

His name was Enos. One day he went hunting in the forest, and while he was out there alone, he started thinking about things his father, Jacob, used to say about God and eternal life. Those words “sunk deep into my heart,” Enos said (Enos 1:3).

Then he said something every lonely or hurting person can understand: “My soul hungered” (Enos 1:4).

So he knelt down. And he prayed. Not a quick prayer. “All the day long did I cry unto him; yea, and when the night came I did still raise my voice high that it reached the heavens” (Enos 1:4).

All day. Into the night. Out in the trees, alone.

And God answered: “Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be blessed” (Enos 1:5).

But here’s what happened next, and it’s the part that connects to Ruby and Hannah. As soon as Enos felt God’s love for himself, he started thinking about other people. “I began to feel a desire for the welfare of my brethren,” he said (Enos 1:9). He prayed for his own people. Then he prayed for the Lamanites, the people who were his enemies.

That’s the pattern. When Jesus fills our hunger, we start to notice who else is hungry.

Ruby had been starving for belonging since August. Then she started serving: helping in Primary, and now sitting with Hannah. And something surprising happened. The hunger began to fill. Not because she found the perfect group of friends, but because she started *being* the friend someone else needed.

King Benjamin said it this way: “When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17). When Ruby crossed the library with half a tamale, she wasn’t only serving Hannah. She was serving Jesus Christ. And she was walking right beside Him.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • Prayers Answered Through People

Sometimes God answers prayers with a feeling, a thought, or a verse that jumps off the page. But very often He answers through people.

A dad who can't shake the feeling he should come home. A seminary teacher who notices a quiet girl in the back row. A new girl who decides to cross a room. A bishop who makes a phone call. An Eli who finally looks again and says, "Go in peace."

This means two things for you.

First, watch for the answers that come wearing a person's face. If you've been praying for help, and someone sits down next to you, or texts you out of nowhere, or asks how you're *really* doing, that may be God answering. Let them in.

Second, you might be someone else's answer. You will probably never know whose prayer you're answering. Ruby didn't know Hannah had been praying. She just felt she should cross the room. When you get that quiet nudge to reach out, follow it. It costs you a few seconds. It might change someone's life.

And if you're the one feeling invisible: please tell someone today. A parent, a leader, a teacher, a school counselor, a doctor. If you ever feel like no one would notice if you were gone, or you're thinking about hurting yourself, tell an adult right away. In the U.S., you can call or text **988** any time, day or night. The help page at the front of this book has more. Hannah told Sister Quintanar, and that was one of the bravest things she ever did. You can be that brave too.

Seen by Name

When you feel invisible, it's easy to believe God sees you the way some people do: as a background character. One of six kids. The new girl. The quiet one.

But that's not how He sees you. The Psalms say, "The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart" (Psalms 34:18). Nigh means *near*. Not far away. Right next to you.

Jesus Christ knows what it's like to be unseen. People walked past Him. His own town turned Him away. He knows loneliness from the inside (Alma 7:11–12). That's why He can sit with you in it. And that's why He so often sends someone to sit with you too.

But the people He sends are not the whole answer. They point to Him. Sister Quintanar listened to Hannah, and then she said, "Tell Him, too." That's the real healing: not just being noticed by people, but getting to know Jesus Christ as a real Friend. Talk to Him out loud, the way you'd talk to someone sitting next to you. Read one verse of His words and keep it where you'll see it. During the sacrament, think about Him by name. He said, "**Behold, I stand at the door, and knock**" (Revelation 3:20). All you have to do is open it.

WALK WITH HIM • Pour Out Your Soul

This week, find a quiet place, maybe your room, your car, or a walk outside, and pray the way Hannah and Enos did. Don't hurry. Tell Heavenly Father everything that's on your heart, in the name of His Son, even the hard things. Then sit still and listen for a few minutes. Afterward, ask Him one more question: "Who needs me this week?" Watch for the answer, and when it comes, cross the room.

Think about it: Has someone ever been an answer to your prayer without knowing it? Who might you be an answer for?



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Forty Tamales

The Saturday before Christmas, a small blue car pulled up in front of the Prestwich house. Ruby got out of the passenger side holding a big foil pan. Her mother, Lucia, got out of the driver's side holding another.

"You said forty," Lucia said in Spanish, laughing, "but I think this is closer to sixty."

The door opened before they knocked. Hannah stood there in a sweatshirt with a little sister clinging to each leg.

"You actually came," Hannah said.

"I told you we would," Ruby said. "My mom doesn't make tamales for people she doesn't like."

Inside, the house was still noisy. It will probably be noisy for a long time; there are six children in it. But it was a different kind of noise now. Kurt was at the counter teaching one of the boys to make hot chocolate on the stove. There was a calendar on the fridge with doctor appointments written in neat blue pen. There was a casserole dish from the Relief Society drying on the rack, with a name written on masking tape on the bottom so it could go home.

And at the kitchen table, in a soft gray sweater, sat Hannah's mother.

Allison Prestwich still looked tired. Getting better from depression is not like flipping a light switch. It is slow, and some days are better than others, and her doctor had told her so. But she was sitting at the table. She was dressed. She looked up when Ruby came in, and she smiled, and the smile reached her eyes.

"You must be Ruby," she said. "Hannah talks about you."

Ruby turned pink. "She does?"

"Every day," Allison said.

Ruby sat down with the little ones and helped them with a puzzle of a snowy barn. She was good at it. She was patient. She knew how to talk to small children now, from all those Sundays in Primary. The youngest boy climbed into her lap without asking, the way small children do with people they've decided are safe.

Lucia sat with Allison and the two mothers talked quietly, half in English and half with their hands. At one point Lucia reached over and squeezed Allison's arm, and Allison had to wipe her eyes.

Later, Ruby and Hannah stood out on the cold front porch while the sun went down behind the potato fields, orange and then pink and then gone. Their breath made clouds. Somewhere a dog was barking.

"Can I tell you something weird?" Hannah said.

"Sure."

"Last month I prayed that somebody would notice me. Just one person. I didn't even know who." She pulled her sleeves over her hands. "And then you walked over with half a tamale."

Ruby was quiet for a moment.

"Can I tell you something weird back?" she said. "Since August, I've been praying that I'd find a place here. That I'd belong somewhere. And I kept waiting for some group to invite me in." She laughed softly. "But I think the place was at your table. I just had to walk over."

Hannah pulled her sleeves down farther. "Can I tell you one more weird thing?"

"You're on a roll."

"When I told Sister Quintanar everything, back in November, she listened for like an hour. And then at the end she said, 'Tell Him, too. Not just me.'" Hannah let out a breath that made a cloud. "I thought I already did. But I'd been praying like I was filling out a form. So now I talk to Him out loud. In the laundry room, after everybody's asleep. Like He's just sitting on the dryer." She laughed a little, embarrassed. "I tell Him about the macaroni and the ear infections and how mad I was at Him. I wrote one verse on a sticky note on my mirror. Psalm 34, verse 18. 'The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart.' And last Sunday, during the sacrament, I held the little cup and I thought, He knows about the laundry room. He knows all of it." She shook her head. "Nothing at my house is fixed. But I'm not by myself in it anymore. Does that make sense?"

“Yeah,” Ruby said. Her eyes were shining. “It does. In Primary, a little boy asked me, ‘Sister Ruby, does Jesus know you?’ And I said yes without even thinking. Then I went home and I asked Him, out loud in my room, ‘Do You?’ Because in Houston I knew He did, and up here I wasn’t sure.” She was quiet for a moment. “I think that’s what I’ve been finding out. It’s not a group. It’s Him. He’s at whatever table I’m at.”

They stood there a while longer. Neither of them said anything else. They didn’t need to.

I stood at the edge of the porch, in the cold that cannot touch me, and I wept. I do that often. Sometimes it is from sorrow. That night it was not.

Two girls had each thought they were invisible. Each one had prayed, and I did not hear those prayers; they went where they belonged, to the Father who knows the number of every hair. And He had answered each of them with the other.

Before they called, He was answering. While they were yet speaking, He heard.

Through the window behind them, I could see the kitchen: Kurt laughing at the stove, Lucia passing a plate, Allison holding the baby on her lap, the little ones fighting over the last piece of the snowy barn. It was not a perfect house. It was a house where the light was coming back on.

And it was coming in, the way light always does, through the cracks.

Word came to me later of one more small thing that night. Across town, Owen’s phone buzzed. It was a text from a number he had saved back in November under a name I will not repeat. He had changed it since. Now it just said *Brayden*. The text said: *pantry tues? darlene says bring the bean guy.*

And in the Castellaws’ front room, an old brown piano with one sticky key was waiting for spring. It had a hard part in the middle, and so did the girl who played it.



Beauty for Ashes



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Hard Part in the Middle

“That,” Theo said from the kitchen table, “sounded like a goose falling down the stairs.”

Mia did not turn around. “Thank you, Theo.”

“A nice goose. A goose with a lot of feelings.”

“I heard you the first time.”

Theo was ten. He was supposed to be doing a math worksheet. Instead he was drawing a dragon in the margin and eating a cold tamale out of the foil with his fingers. Ruby Varga’s mother had sent a dozen home with Mia after a youth activity, and Theo had decided it was his job to make sure none of them went to waste.

“Do the goose part again,” he said. “I’m putting it in my drawing.”

Mia played it again: the quick run of notes in the middle of the piece, climbing up and tumbling down. Her right hand tightened. Her shoulders came up toward her ears. One note went wrong, a sour little honk.

“Honk,” Theo said, very softly.

Mia spun around on the bench. “If you say honk one more time, I am eating the rest of those tamales in front of you.”

Theo opened his mouth.

That was when the roof let go.

First came a long, low groan over their heads. Then came a roar. All winter the snow had piled up on the steep roof over the front room, and now, on a gray Tuesday in early March, with water dripping off the eaves in long strings, the whole slab slid at once. It thundered down past the big front window in a solid white wall, so close and so fast that the glass shattered in its frame and the picture frames on top of the piano jumped. Mia screamed. Theo went over sideways, chair and all. Outside, the snow hit the porch railing with a crack like a baseball bat.

Their mother came running from the kitchen with a dish towel over her shoulder. "What was that? Is everybody okay?"

Theo lay flat on his back on the floor, one arm straight up in the air. In his hand was the tamale. "I saved it," he said.

Mia started to laugh. She laughed until she had to lean forward and put her forehead down on the keys, and the piano made a low, sour cluster of notes like a groan, and that made Theo laugh too. For about one minute, the house sounded the way it used to. It was the first time anyone in that house had laughed since Saturday night.

Then it got quiet again. Theo sat up on the floor, still holding the tamale, and looked at the window where the snow had come down.

"Mia," he said. "Is that big kid going to lose his leg? The one in the canal?"

Mia's laugh was gone. "I don't know, Theo."

"Everybody at school says he is."

"Everybody at school doesn't know either."

The music was still on the stand, and the hard part was still in the middle of it.

The piano in the Castellaws' front room was older than Mia. It was a brown upright with a chipped corner and one key near the top that stuck in cold weather. Her mother had kept it when the house was divided up in the fall. Her father had not argued. He had only said, "That's Mia's," and carried his own boxes out to the truck.

I had counted how many times Mia played those same eight measures that afternoon. The goose was number eleven. I count things like that. It is part of watching.

The piece was a nocturne by Chopin, a slow, singing song for the night. Mia had chosen it back in September for the spring recital, which was set for Saturday the seventeenth at the stake center. Most of it she could play beautifully now. But the hard part in the middle would not come right.

She turned back around and played it again. Wrong again.

Theo picked up his chair and sat back down at the table. He had grown quieter that winter, and he watched his sister the way younger brothers watch the weather.

"You're doing the shoulder thing," he said.

Mia let her shoulders drop. "It's not working, Theo. That part is never going to work."

Their mother, Shauna, was still standing in the doorway with the dish towel. She looked tired. She had gone back to full-time work at a dental office in January, and she

came home every night with her hair still pinned up and her feet sore. But she did not look away from Mia.

“Did your dad text back?” Mia asked, staring at the music.

“I sent him the date and the time,” Shauna said carefully. “He said he would try.”

“Try.” Mia sat up. “He said he’d try for Theo’s science fair, too.”

“He came to that,” Theo said.

“He came late.”

“He still came.”

Shauna folded the towel in half, then in half again. I watched her hands, because hands tell me what words leave out. Hers were still. She was choosing not to say something. “Your dad loves you,” she said at last. “Whatever else is true, that’s true.”

Mia did not answer. She looked at the music on the stand. In the top corner, in pencil, her teacher had written a note back in September: *Breathe before the run*. Below that, in Mia’s own handwriting, from the same week, was a single word: *quit*? It had been erased. You could still see it.

I remembered that week. It was the week after her parents told her and Theo. Mia had decided that her piano lessons were the reason. She had heard her parents argue so many times about who would drive her to lessons and to soccer that she had carried those arguments around inside her like a stone in her shoe. If she quit, she told Mrs. Penhallow that week, maybe it would help. It would not have helped. The trouble in that house was older and deeper than any piano. But she was fifteen, and hurting, and pain makes us look for something to blame, and we usually pick ourselves.

Her teacher, Mrs. Penhallow, an old woman with a voice like gravel, had said no. “You do not get to quit the one thing that is holding you together,” she had said. “Practice. Come next week.”

So Mia had practiced. All fall and all winter, while her father moved to Idaho Falls and the house got quieter, she practiced.

Now Theo slid off his chair and came to the piano bench. He sat down next to her without asking. “Play the part I like,” he said. “The beginning.”

She played the beginning. The melody rose up slow and sweet, like someone singing in another room. Theo leaned his head on her shoulder. Shauna stood in the doorway with her towel and did not move.

When Mia reached the hard part, she stopped before it this time. She took her hands off the keys. She closed her eyes. And then, out loud, very quietly, so that I heard it only because I was standing close, she prayed.

“Please let him come,” she said. “And if he doesn’t, please help me not be mad at him. Please help me play it anyway. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.”

Theo said “amen” too, like it was a normal thing to say in the middle of a piano piece.

She took a breath. She played the run.

It was not perfect. One note still slipped. But her shoulders stayed down, and she did not stop. She played straight through to the end, and the last chord hung in that worn little room for a long time.

I do not know what she felt. I cannot see into a heart. But I saw her face, and it had changed. And I felt the room change too, the way a room changes when the Holy Ghost is near: a warmth, a stillness, like the moment after the last note when nobody wants to move.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: Can something good really come out of something that broke?

What scripture says: The Savior came to give “beauty for ashes” (Isaiah 61:3). He does not erase what happened. He makes something new out of it.

In the story: A crash on an icy road shakes the whole school, and everyone looks for someone to blame. Two weeks later, Mia plays her spring recital, and both of her parents come.

Key verses: Isaiah 61:3; Mosiah 18:9; Revelation 21:5; John 20:15–16; Psalm 30:5



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Eleven-Fifty on the Canal Road

I have to take you back three nights before Theo’s goose, to Saturday, the third of March. I would rather not. But you need to see it, because everyone in this story saw what came after it.

At a quarter past eleven that night, Adiel sent me to a county road north of Sugar City. He did not tell me why. He only said, "Go and stand by the canal bridge." So I went, and I stood there in the dark, between two flat white fields, where the road bends once before it crosses the canal.

It had been warm that afternoon, and melting snow had run across the road in thin sheets. After sundown every sheet froze into glass. You could not see it. The road just looked wet and black and ordinary.

At eleven forty-nine, headlights came over the rise.

It was Tanya Dunlavy's old silver sedan, and Kade was driving it. He was sixteen, with only a learner's permit, and there was no grown-up in that car.

Ridge Kesselring sat in the passenger seat with the seat leaned back and his boots up on the dashboard. He was not wearing his seatbelt. He never did. "Seatbelts are for old ladies," he liked to say. The music was so loud I could feel it in the air before the car reached me.

What I could not see that night was made known to me later. His mother was at work at the truck stop, thinking he was asleep. Earlier that night Kade had taken pills, the kind that do not belong to you. They were not from the bottle at Brayden's party; that one had been empty since early November. These he had bought behind the tire shop, the way he got most of them now. I will tell you only this: they made him slow, and they made him sure he was fast.

And in the back seat, leaning forward between the two boys with his face close to theirs, was a dull red shape I knew. Sethar. He was laughing. He was always laughing in that car.

"Faster," Ridge said. "You drive like my grandma."

"Your grandma's dead," Kade said.

"Exactly."

Kade laughed and pushed the gas.

The car hit the curve before the bridge, and the tires found the ice.

I have watched a great many things fall. This was very quiet at first. The back end of the car simply slid out to the side, smooth and slow, the way a sled turns on a hill. Kade yanked the wheel. That made it worse. The car spun all the way around once in the middle of the road, its headlights sweeping across the white field and back, and then it went sideways into the guardrail at the edge of the bridge.

The guardrail did not hold. It bent with a long scream of metal, and the car went through it and over the edge and down into the canal.

The canal was nearly empty. The farmers had not turned the water in yet for spring. If it had been full, I think both boys would have died that night. Instead the car dropped about ten feet onto frozen mud and rolled onto its side, and stopped.

The music was still playing. Then it cut off.

For a moment there was no sound at all except one wheel spinning slowly in the air.

Kade climbed out through the driver's window, which was now on top. His left arm hung wrong, and his face was cut, and he was crying out for his friend before his feet even touched the ground. "Ridge! Ridge!"

Ridge had not been buckled in. When the car stopped, he was not in his seat anymore. He was lying on the frozen mud beside the car, on his back, looking up at the stars. His left leg was under the edge of the car, pinned below the knee.

"Kade," he said. His voice was very calm, and that was the worst part. "Kade. I can't feel my foot. Why can't I feel my foot?"

Kade dropped to his knees beside him. He grabbed Ridge's jacket with his good hand. He did not know what to do. Nobody does.

Then he lifted his face to the sky and screamed. It was not a curse. It was a question. "Where are You? Where were You? Where were You?"

He screamed it until his voice broke.

I looked for Sethar. He was gone. He never stays. He is very good at the part where a boy pushes the gas. He has nothing at all to give to the part where a boy lies on frozen mud and cannot feel his foot.

I knelt in the mud on the other side of Ridge. I could not lift him or touch him. I was not sent to heal him. I was sent to stand there, and so I stood there, and I wept.

At eleven fifty-four, a pickup came along the road from the other direction. It was a farmer's son coming home late from the calving barn, in a canvas coat with straw still stuck to it. He saw the broken guardrail in his headlights and one red taillight down in the canal. He stopped so hard his truck slid too, and then he was out and running and calling 911 at the same time.

He climbed down the bank with a blanket from his truck. "Don't move him," he told Kade. "Don't move him. They're coming. Hey. Look at me. They're coming."

He put the blanket over Ridge. He sat on the frozen mud beside two boys he had never met and talked to them about nothing, about cows and the weather and the Jazz game, until the sirens came up the road from Sugar City and the red and blue lights filled the whole canal.

Nobody ever wrote about that young man or asked his name. But he was the first one there with a blanket. Some nights, that is what God sends.

Nobody else was hurt. No other car was on that road.

Ridge was flown to a hospital in Salt Lake City before the sun came up. Kade rode in an ambulance to Rexburg with his arm in a splint and a police officer in the front seat. By Sunday afternoon, everybody knew.



On Monday morning, Henry's Fork High School did not sound like itself.

The commons was full before first bell, but it was quiet in a strange, buzzing way, like a hive with something wrong inside it. Kids stood in clumps, looking at their phones. Somebody had taped a sheet of poster paper to the wall by the office that said *PRAY FOR RIDGE*, and a long line of kids were signing it with a marker that kept running out.

Mr. Lusk announced a serious accident and said counselors were in the library all day. He did not say any names. He did not need to.

Owen stood by his locker with Tyler and read soph squad. The chat had been going all night. Mia read it over his shoulder with her arms folded tight, the way she sat at the piano before the hard part.

kade was high. everybody knows it.

they had to take ridge's leg. my mom works at the hospital.

thats not even true, he's in salt lake

kade should go to jail forever

where'd he even get the pills tho. ask whose party it was in october

why does God let stuff like this happen to kids. seriously.

Then a voice cut through the commons, loud and cracked. It was Ridge's cousin Colter, a junior, standing in the middle of the floor with red eyes.

"Kade did this!" he yelled at nobody and everybody. "Kade put him in that car. Kade's done. He's done!"

A girl by the vending machines started crying. "It's that whole party crowd," she said. "Everybody knows, and nobody ever does anything."

"It was ice," a boy said. "It was just ice. It could've been anybody."

"It was *pills*," somebody said back.

"Then why didn't God stop it?" the crying girl said. Her voice went high. "Ridge is sixteen. If God's real, why didn't He just make the car stop?"

I watched the faces in that commons. Every one of them was looking for a place to put the blame down, the way you look for a place to set down something too hot to hold.

Then I saw Brayden.

He was standing at the end of the hall with his backpack hanging off one shoulder. He must have read the same chat. *Ask whose party it was in October*. His face had gone white. He turned around and walked out the side door into the parking lot without a word.

Owen went after him. Mia and Tyler went after Owen.

They found him sitting in his mother's white SUV with the engine off and both hands on the steering wheel.

Owen opened the passenger door and got in. Mia and Tyler got in the back. Nobody said anything.

"The first ones he ever took came off our kitchen counter," Brayden said finally, staring through the windshield. "At my party. In October. My mom's pills. I'm the one who set the bottle out by the sink, like it was a joke. My mom said the whole bottle was gone, after. I said I didn't know anything. I knew." He shook his head. "Everybody knows he's been getting more since. But the first bottle was ours." He swallowed. "I didn't put him in the car. But I knew."

"That's not the same as doing it," Owen said.

"I didn't say it was the same." Brayden's jaw was tight. "I said I knew."

In the back seat, Mia spoke up. Her voice was quiet.

"Everybody wants it to be one person," she said. "Kade, or the party, or God, or the ice. Because if it's one person, then it's simple." She looked out the window at the poster on the wall. "When my parents split up, I decided it was me. My piano. Because then at least it made sense." She shook her head. "It wasn't me. And it isn't just one thing. Some of it's Kade. Some of it's Ridge. Some of it's... just ice."

Brayden did not answer. But he let go of the steering wheel.

Owen took out his phone. He scrolled down to a name he had not texted since January. He typed: *Kade. It's Owen. I'm really sorry. I'm here if you want anything. Anything.* He sent it.

It said *Delivered*. It never said *Read*.

The first bell rang across the parking lot. None of them moved. Then Tyler, in the back seat, said quietly, “Should we pray? For Ridge? Like, right now?”

Nobody laughed at him.

So they did, four kids in a cold SUV in the school parking lot, with their heads bowed. Tyler said it. It was short and clumsy, and it was the first prayer I had ever heard Brayden Kolstad sit still for.



When Everybody Wants Someone to Blame

When something terrible happens, the first thing most of us do is look for someone to blame. That is normal. Blame feels like control. If we can find the one cause, maybe it will make sense.

But most real breaks are tangled. Think back to the three reasons things break from Chapter 5. The crash on the canal road had all three. Kade’s choices: the pills, the car, the gas pedal. Ridge’s choices: getting in, no seatbelt. Other people’s choices that added up. And something nobody chose: water that froze into glass after dark.

God did not push that car. He also did not take away the choices of two sixteen-year-old boys, because that is the agency He gives every one of us. That is hard to hear on a Monday morning. It is still true.

So what do you do when something like this hits your school? You do not have to solve it. When people join the Savior’s Church, they promise to “mourn with those that mourn” (Mosiah 18:9). That means you sit with the hurting. You pray for them by name. You do not post rumors. You do not decide who is “done.”

And you remember who is still reaching for every person in this story, including Kade and Ridge. The Lord says, “mine arm is lengthened out all the day long” (2 Nephi 28:32). All the day long. Even after a road like that.

Beauty for Ashes

In Bible times, when people were grieving, they sometimes sat in ashes or put ashes on their heads. Ashes meant: *Something burned down. Something is gone, and it is not coming back.*

The prophet Isaiah said the Messiah would come “to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning” (Isaiah 61:3). Hundreds of years later, Jesus stood up in the little synagogue in Nazareth, His hometown, and read from that same part of Isaiah. He read that He was sent **“to heal the brokenhearted”** (Luke 4:18). Then He sat down, and with every eye on Him, He said, **“This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears”** (Luke 4:21).

In other words: *This is Me. I am the One who does this.*

Notice what He trades. He does not trade ashes for the same house that burned. He trades ashes for *beauty*. Something new. Something you could not have had any other way.

That is important if your family has broken apart, or your plans have, or you have. Jesus does not always put things back the way they were. Sometimes He makes them into something else. It might be smaller, or a different shape, or still a little sore. But it is beautiful, because He made it, and He is in it.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • Mary in the Garden

The stone was gone.

Mary Magdalene stopped dead on the path. It was still dark (John 20:1), but she could see enough. The great stone that had been rolled across the door of the tomb was rolled away. The tomb was empty.

She had been through the worst three days of her life. She had watched Jesus, the One who had healed her and changed everything for her, be beaten and nailed to a cross. She had watched Him die. She had seen His body laid in a tomb cut into the rock. Now it was the first day of the week, and she had come early, maybe because she could not sleep, maybe because she just needed to be near Him, even if all that was left was a grave.

To Mary, an empty tomb was not good news. It was one more loss on top of all the others. Somebody had taken Him. She could not even have His body to grieve over. So she stood outside the tomb, and she cried (John 20:11).

Two angels sat inside, where His body had been. They asked her, “Woman, why weepest thou?” (John 20:13). She told them: “they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.”

Then she turned around, and there was a man standing in the garden. Her eyes were full of tears. She thought he was the gardener.

He asked her the same question: **“Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou?”** (John 20:15).

And she begged him, if he had moved the body, to tell her where. She would go get Him herself.

Then the man said one word. He said her name.

“Mary” (John 20:16).

That was all. Just her name, said the way only He had ever said it. And she knew. She turned and cried out, “Rabboni,” which means *Master*.

The Worst Place, and Her Name

Think about where that happened. Not in the temple. Not on a mountaintop. It happened at a grave, in the dark, to a woman who had been crying so hard she could not see straight. The worst place in her life became the place where she met the risen Lord. That is beauty for ashes.

And notice how He found her. He did not give a speech. He called her by name. He does the same with you. He knows your name. He knows the exact thing that broke. When you are standing in the worst place, crying so hard you cannot see Him, He is already there, and He already knows what to call you.

 AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • **Kintsugi: Gold in the Cracks**

In Japan there is an old art called *kintsugi*. The word means “golden joinery,” joining with gold.

When a bowl or cup breaks, most of us sweep up the pieces and throw them away. A kintsugi artist does something different. They gather every piece. They glue the pieces back together with a special lacquer, a kind of tree-sap varnish, and before it dries they dust it with powdered gold. When they are finished, the bowl holds water again. But the cracks are not hidden. Every crack is now a line of gold, running across the bowl like a river on a map.

People love kintsugi because it says something true: a broken thing can come back *more* beautiful than before, not in spite of where it broke, but right there, at the break.

Some even say the mended bowl is worth more than it was before it broke. It has a history now. Every gold line tells a story.

That is what the Savior does with us. He does not throw us away when we crack. He does not pretend the cracks never happened. He gathers every piece, even the ones we thought were lost, and He fills the breaks with something more precious than gold: His love, His grace, His healing. The Lord promised that when we come to Him humbly, then **“will I make weak things become strong unto them”** (Ether 12:27).

Your cracks might be your parents’ divorce, a sin you regret, a friend who hurt you, or a loss that just happened. In His hands, they can become the gold lines in your story, the places where people can see that Someone loved you enough to put you back together.

A Family in a New Shape

When parents divorce, it is not anybody’s fault in the way kids often think. It is never the child’s fault. Not the piano lessons, not the grades, not the fights you had with your brother. Mia had to learn that slowly, and so might you.

It also does not mean the love is gone. Mia’s mom and dad were not going to be married again. That was real, and it hurt. But they both still loved her and Theo. They were still her parents. The family did not end. It changed shape.

In the last book of the Bible, the Lord says, **“Behold, I make all things new”** (Revelation 21:5). New does not mean the old never happened. It means He keeps working. He keeps building. He is not finished with your family, and He is not finished with you.

That can take a long time. The psalm says, “weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30:5). Some nights are long. Some last a whole winter. But the morning comes.

WALK WITH HIM • Hand Him the Pieces

This week, find a quiet place and tell Jesus Christ, out loud, what broke. Name it plainly, the way you would tell a close friend. Then read John 20:11–18, slowly, and picture yourself standing in that garden as He says your name. Before you finish, ask Him to show you one small piece of beauty He is already making out of it, and watch for it all week.

Think about it: If the Savior called you by name today, the way He called Mary, what would you want to tell Him first?



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Two Rows Behind

The recital was on Saturday, the seventeenth of March, at two in the afternoon, in the chapel of the stake center. Someone had pushed the sacrament table aside and rolled the grand piano out into the middle. The chapel was half full of parents holding phones, grandparents holding programs, and little brothers and sisters holding very still because they had been told to.

Owen came. He sat on the left side with his mother and Lily. He was wearing a collared shirt Erin had made him change into, and he kept tugging at the neck. Jace Wendling sat on his other side. Jace had said he wanted to hear the Chopin, because, he said, “it’s basically a song with no words, and I’m into that.” I think he also came because Owen asked him to.

Lily had a single yellow tulip wrapped in a paper towel. “It’s for Mia,” she announced, loudly enough for three rows to hear. Owen slid down in his seat.

Shauna sat on the third row, right side, with Theo. Theo kept turning around to look at the doors.

Mia sat in the front row with the other students. Her back was very straight. I could see her hands in her lap, pressing together, letting go, pressing together again.

At five minutes to two, the doors at the back opened, and Dan Castellaw came in.

He had driven up from Idaho Falls. He was wearing his work jacket over a white shirt, as if he had not been sure how dressed up to be. He stood at the back for a moment and looked at the rows. I watched his face. He looked like a man walking into a place where he was not sure he was welcome.

Theo saw him. Theo's whole body turned around, and he waved, a big, two-handed wave that had no idea there was anything complicated about it.

Shauna turned to see what Theo was waving at. She and Dan looked at each other across the chapel. It lasted about a second. Then Shauna gave a small nod, and moved her purse off the seat beside Theo. It was not an invitation to sit by her. It was an invitation to sit by his son.

Dan did not take that seat. Maybe it was too much, too soon. Instead he came down the aisle and sat two rows behind them, on the end. But Theo climbed over the back of the pew, something he would have been scolded for on any other day, and sat beside his dad. Nobody scolded him.

And Mia, in the front row, turned around and saw them. Her mother on the third row. Her father two rows behind. Her brother between them, climbing back and forth like a thread being pulled through cloth.

Her face crumpled for a moment. Then she turned back around, pressed her hands together one more time, and let them go.

She was the ninth student. When her name was called, she walked to the piano and sat down and adjusted the bench, just a little, the way she always did. She looked at the keys. She did not look at the audience.

Then she played.

The beginning rose up slow and sweet, like someone singing in another room. The chapel went quiet in a different way than before. Even the little brothers stopped kicking the pews. Jace closed his eyes. Lily held her tulip with both hands.

When Mia came to the hard part in the middle, I saw her stop for the smallest moment, the length of one breath. *Breathe before the run.* Then she played it.

One note slipped. I heard it. I think Mrs. Penhallow heard it, from her seat by the organ, because she smiled. Mia did not stop. She did not put her head down. She kept going, and the next note was right, and the one after that, and the melody came back around, and the slipped note was gone behind her like a stone in a river.

The last chord rang out and faded into the high ceiling. For a second nobody moved. Then the chapel filled with applause.

Afterward, in the cultural hall, there were cookies on paper plates and lemonade in plastic cups. Shauna hugged Mia first. Then Dan came over, slowly, and stood beside them. He said, "You were beautiful, Mimi." Mia said, "You came," and he said, "I told you I'd try," and she laughed and cried at the same time, and he hugged her.

Then Theo said the thing that only a little brother would say. He held up his mom's phone and said, "Can we get one picture? All of us?"

There was a pause. I watched the two parents look at each other again, and I watched them decide. They stood on either side of Mia. Theo pushed in front. Mrs. Penhallow took the picture. They did not stand close, and nobody pretended anything had changed. But they were all in the same frame, smiling for the same girl.

Lily marched up with her tulip. "This is for you," she said. "Owen picked the color."

"I did not," Owen said, and then, because Mia was looking at him, "I mean, yellow's fine. It was really good. Your song. The middle part was really good."

"I messed up a note in the middle."

"I didn't hear it."

"Yes, you did."

"Okay, I did," Owen admitted. "It was still really good."

Mia smiled at him. His ears went red. Jace looked at the ceiling and grinned.

I stood near the wall of that cultural hall, beside the basketball hoop folded up against the ceiling, and I looked at that family. Not the family it had been. A different one. A new shape, with cracks in it you could see if you looked. But there was light in those cracks.

Later that evening, at home, Mia sat at the old brown piano again, alone. She did not practice. She just sat. Then she folded her hands on the music stand, right on top of the faded word *quit?*, and she said out loud, "Thank you. Thank you for letting him come. Thank you for the middle part."

I do not know everything she meant. But I know who she was talking to. And I know He had been there in that chapel all afternoon, nearer than any of us, turning ashes into something beautiful, one note at a time.

She was not the only one that spring with a hard part in the middle. There was a boy across town whose road had one too, and I have not told you about it yet.



Breaking the Line



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Toast at Six in the Morning

“I’m telling you,” Rob Winsor said, “they do it on TV all the time.”

“They also have a crew to clean up,” Wendy called down the stairs. “Just use the spatula, Rob.”

“Spatulas are for quitters.”

It was ten minutes to six on the second Friday in March, six days after the crash on the canal road. Outside, the street was dark, and the snowbanks along the curb had gone gray and crusty, the way they do in Rexburg in March, when winter is tired but not finished. Inside, the Winsors’ kitchen light was on. Rob stood at the stove in his work clothes with an egg sizzling in the pan, two slices of bread in the toaster, and a look of great confidence on his face. Seminary started at six-fifteen, and Tyler never ate unless somebody put food in his hand. So this morning, Rob had decided, breakfast was going to be impressive.

He gave the pan a sharp flick of the wrist.

The egg went up. It went up a lot higher than he meant it to. It turned over once in the air, beautifully, like a gymnast, and then it kept going, sailed right past the pan, and dropped toward the floor.

Biscuit, the Winsors’ old yellow Lab, had been asleep under the table. He was not asleep anymore. He launched himself across the kitchen, caught the egg in midair with a wet snap, and skidded across the floor straight into the trash can. The trash can went over. The lid went spinning across the kitchen like a dropped cymbal. At the same moment the toaster popped, loud as a starting pistol, and Rob jumped so hard he dropped the pan in the sink.

Then it was quiet.

“Well,” Rob told the dog. “At least somebody’s eating.”

He turned around, holding the spatula he had sworn not to use, and saw Tyler standing in the doorway.

On another morning, Tyler would have been bent over laughing. He would have filmed the whole thing and given the video a name. But he was not laughing now. His hair was flat on one side. His face was pale, and his eyes were red around the edges.

It had been a hard week for everyone at Henry's Fork. For Tyler, hard weeks were the dangerous ones. I will not tell you about the night before, the Thursday night when Tyler slipped back into the old habit. I was not sent into that room, and even if I had been, it is not a thing to describe. It was a bad night. That is enough to say.

Rob set the spatula down. He buttered the toast and held a piece out to his son. Tyler did not take it.

"Hey," Rob said. "You okay?"

Tyler did not move from the doorway. I watched him. His hands were in the front pocket of his hoodie, and I could see them clenching and unclenching under the fabric. I had watched this boy hide for three years. I knew what hiding looked like on him: the quick smile, the shrug, the "I'm fine, just tired." I waited for it.

It did not come.

"Dad," Tyler said. "I messed up again. Last night."

The kitchen went very quiet. The refrigerator hummed.

Rob set the butter knife down on the counter. He did it slowly, like he was afraid a fast move might scare something away. Then he pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and sat down in it, and pulled out the chair next to him.

Tyler sat.

"Okay," Rob said. "Thank you for telling me."

"It's been six weeks," Tyler said. His voice cracked. "Six weeks, Dad. I thought I was done. And then I just... I'm never going to get out of this. Maybe I'm just too far gone."

In the corner of that kitchen, where the light from the window did not reach, there was a dull red shape I knew. He had the look of something that had spent the night there. He was there still, crowding close to Tyler's shoulder, loud the way he is always loud. He did not need to say anything new. He only needed Tyler to keep believing the old lie: *too far gone, too far gone*.

Rob did not see him. Rob only saw his son. He was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Tyler. How long did you hide this, the first time?"

"Three years."

"And how long did you hide it this time?"

Tyler looked at him. “I don’t know. Like... eight hours?”

“Eight hours.” Rob put his hand on the back of Tyler’s neck, the way he used to when Tyler was little and had fallen off his bike. “Bud, that’s not somebody who’s too far gone. That’s somebody who’s coming home. You fell. But you didn’t hide. That’s a whole different road than the one you were on.”

Tyler put his face in his hands and cried. Not loud. Just his shoulders shaking. His dad kept his hand where it was.

Wendy came down the stairs in her robe, saw them, and did not ask anything. She just came and stood behind Tyler’s chair and put both hands on his shoulders.

Then Rob said, “Let’s pray,” and the three of them bowed their heads at the kitchen table, with the toast going cold on the counter. Rob prayed out loud. He thanked Heavenly Father for his son. He thanked Him for a son who told the truth. He asked for help, for strength, for the Savior’s grace “to keep reaching this kid, because we know You haven’t let go of him.” He prayed in the name of Jesus Christ.

When they lifted their heads, the corner of the kitchen was empty. Sethar does not stay for endings. He cannot stand to watch someone choose the light.

Tyler texted Bishop Kenley before he left for seminary. *Can I come see you Sunday? I slipped.* The answer came back in less than a minute. *Yes. 9:00. Proud of you for telling.*

Tyler read it twice. Then he picked up the toast and ate it in the car.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: If I keep messing up, will God get tired of forgiving me?

What scripture says: “As oft as they repented and sought forgiveness, with real intent, they were forgiven” (Moroni 6:8). And He asks us to forgive others the same way.

In the story: Tyler keeps walking his long road home; Brayden apologizes and Owen forgives him; Ridge turns them away from his hospital room; and Owen is ordained a priest.

Key verses: Isaiah 1:18; Moroni 6:8; D&C 58:42; Matthew 18:21–22; Luke 15:28–32

The Long Road Home

Tyler’s road home did not end in one meeting with the bishop. It almost never does. Changing a habit that has grown for years is more like learning to walk again after an injury than flipping a switch.

What matters most is not that you never fall. It is which way you are facing when you get up.

The Lord made a promise about this through Isaiah: “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18). Scarlet was a deep red dye. It did not wash out. It was the stain you could not get rid of. And God says He can.

Moroni wrote about the early Church in his day, and how they treated people who kept trying: “as oft as they repented and sought forgiveness, with real intent, they were forgiven” (Moroni 6:8). *As oft as*. As many times as. The Savior is not counting your falls and waiting for the number that is one too many. He is watching which way you turn.

And when the forgiving is done, He says, **”I, the Lord, remember them no more”** (D&C 58:42). You might remember. He chooses not to hold it against you.

If you are on a road like Tyler’s, here is what helped him: he told a parent. He kept meeting with his bishop. He prayed out loud, every day, as if Someone were really listening, because Someone was. He read a few verses about Jesus each morning, even on the mornings he felt like a fraud. And when he slipped, he told the truth fast. Every one of those things is a way of holding on to the Savior’s hand.

Alma’s Joy

Remember Alma the Younger, back in Chapter 6? He was about as far from God as anyone could get, and in the middle of his worst pain he cried out, “O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me” (Alma 36:18). One honest cry, to the right Person. And then, he wrote, “what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold” (Alma 36:20). The young man who had tried to destroy the Church spent the rest of his life helping other people find that same joy.

Nobody is too far gone for that. Not Alma. Not Tyler. Not you.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Hour Thirty-One

Owen and Brayden logged their thirtieth hour on the last Wednesday in February, in Darlene Quarnberg’s tiny office at the pantry. Mr. Lusk signed the sheet. Judge Strand’s clerk stamped it. The case went away, the way the judge had promised.

On the second Tuesday in March, at 3:15, Erin dropped Owen at the pantry. Tyler climbed out of the back seat with him. Tyler said the bishop had told him on Sunday to keep his hands busy this week, and Owen had said, “I know a place.”

Brayden’s mother’s white SUV was already in the lot, its back bumper pushed in from a pole at the gas station. Brayden was leaning on it.

“Hours are done,” Owen said.

“I know.”

“So why are you here?”

“Why are *you* here?”

Neither of them answered. Tyler looked from one to the other. “Wait. Are you guys, like, friends now?”

“No,” they both said, at the same time. Then they glared at each other for saying it at the same time.

Inside, Darlene was in trouble. The old walk-in freezer had died in the night. Twelve cases of frozen chicken, donated by a grocery store, were sweating on the concrete. The stake center across town had an empty freezer, if somebody could get the chicken there before it thawed.

Brayden held up his keys.

It went wrong in the first block. Since the pole, the hatch did not latch right. At the stop sign on Main Street it swung up, and two cases slid out the back and burst open in the intersection. Frozen chicken thighs went skating across the ice in every direction like hockey pucks. A man in a pickup honked. Tyler jumped out and stood in the middle of the street with a chicken thigh in each hand, waving traffic around like a crossing guard.

That should have been funny. It was not funny to Brayden. His phone had been ringing since the pantry. His mother. Four calls. Five. He let them ring.

“We need rope for the hatch,” Owen said. “My dad keeps—”

“I don’t care what your dad keeps.”

“I’m just saying—”

“Stop *saying*.”

On the second trip Owen rode in the back, crouched among the boxes, holding the hatch down with both hands. On the third trip the phone rang again, and Brayden hit the wrong button, and his mother’s voice filled the car on speaker, loud and fast, about his

father, about the money for the family weekend in Utah, about whose fault it all was. Brayden stabbed it off. Nobody breathed.

I saw a dull red smudge then, low by the passenger seat, crowding close to that phone. Sethar loves a car full of anger with nowhere to go.

At the stake center, the last case split open on the steps. Brayden kicked it. Then he slammed the hatch with his left hand, said a word I will not write down, and sat on the cold steps with his hand jammed under his arm.

Owen picked up the chicken. All of it. Tyler carried it inside. Then Owen came back out and sat on the step beside Brayden, and he did not say anything. He had learned that much since November.

When the phone went quiet on the seat, the red smudge drifted off. It never stays for this part.

“She wants me to tell my dad not to come to family weekend,” Brayden said finally. “Like I’m the referee.” He stared at the parking lot. “Everything at my house has been blowing up since Tyce. And in November I just wanted somebody else’s stuff to blow up too. That’s why I screenshotted your message. That’s the whole reason. It’s so stupid.”

Owen waited.

“And what I painted on the wall. About your dad. The ladder.” Brayden’s voice went rough. “I’m sorry, man. For real. I’ve been trying to say it since the beans. Every Tuesday I think, today. And then I just stack cans.”

I had waited months to hear those words. I think Owen had too.

I watched his face, and I saw a fight there. I had seen it on his father’s face years before, and on his grandfather’s: the old Hadlock temper, the urge to say *Yeah, it was stupid*, and make the other person feel it. I had seen that urge win more times than I could count.

Owen took a breath. “I’m done being mad about it,” he said.

Brayden looked at him. “Like, done done?”

“Done done. You already repainted a whole wall.”

Brayden laughed. It came out wet.

Tyler had come back out. He sat a step above them with his hood up, and his face was gray. He had looked that way all afternoon. Brayden twisted around. “What’s with you? You’ve been weird all day.”

Owen said nothing. It was not his to tell.

Tyler shrugged. Then he said, “I’ve got a thing. A habit. I keep thinking I beat it, and then I don’t. I’m working on it with the bishop.”

He did not say what it was. Brayden did not ask. I want you to notice that. He did not ask.

“You can actually get out of it,” Brayden said. He said it plainly, like a fact about cars. “My brother’s doing it. It’s not over.”

Tyler looked at him a long time. “Even if you mess up again?”

“Tyce messed up like four times before Utah. He called last week. He sounded like himself.” Brayden shrugged. “It’s not over till you quit. And you’re sitting on church steps holding frozen chicken, so.”

Tyler laughed, the first real laugh I had heard from him in days.

“We play basketball here on Wednesdays,” Owen said. “Seven o’clock. Brother Thorsgaard runs it. Nobody cares if you’re good. I got cut from JV, so. Low bar.”

“I’m not, like, a church guy.”

“You’re literally sitting on the church.”

The next Wednesday, at five minutes after seven, the side door of the gym opened, and Brayden Kolstad walked in with his hood up and his hands in his pockets. Brother Thorsgaard threw him a ball without a word. Owen grinned and put him on his team. At the end, everyone sat on the floor for the closing prayer. Brayden sat at the edge of the circle with his hood still up. But he bowed his head.

And the Tuesday after that, the three of them were back at the pantry. Nobody had to sign anything.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Go Pray About It

In early April, Brayden asked Owen the question he had been working up to since the canal road: would he come to Salt Lake to see Ridge?

“Rule one,” Steve Hadlock said, pulling out of the gas station in Tremonton with a bag of beef jerky in his lap. “Nobody touches the radio but the driver.”

“That’s not a rule,” Owen said. “That’s a dictatorship.”

“Rule two. Nobody says *dictatorship* before nine in the morning.”

From the back seat, Brayden snorted. It was the first sound he had made since Idaho Falls.

It was Saturday, the seventh of April, five days after Owen turned sixteen. They had left Rexburg in the dark and driven south past Pocatello, down into Utah. When Owen asked, Steve had not asked why. He had only said, "I'll take the day off. Bring a coat."

In the back seat, between Brayden's knees, was a long roll of poster paper with a rubber band around it. It was the sign from the wall by the school office, *PRAY FOR RIDGE*, with more than four hundred names on it in marker. Mr. Lusk had taken it down and given it to Brayden. On top of it sat a bag of sour gummy worms, the green and orange kind Ridge used to eat in biology when the teacher was not looking.

Ridge had been in Salt Lake for five weeks now. First the hospital, where the surgeons had tried for two days to save his left leg and could not, and had taken it below the knee. Now a rehabilitation floor in the same big building, where they were teaching him how to stand on one leg, and how to move from a bed to a wheelchair, and, later, how to walk on a leg that was not his own.

Kade was not in Salt Lake. Ten days after the crash, he had stood in front of a judge in Rexburg with his arm in a cast. He had been held all that time in the same county detention center where Owen and Brayden had spent a weekend in November, maybe in the same cinder-block room. In April he would be sent to a state juvenile facility for about a year.

The rehab floor smelled like soap and floor wax. Ridge's mother, Deb Kesselring, met them in the hall. She was a tall woman with tired eyes and a cardigan buttoned wrong. She hugged Brayden, who had eaten a hundred dinners at her house when they were in fifth grade.

"He's having a hard day," she said. "They're all hard days." Then her face changed. "You know who did this to him. Kade Dunlavy did this to my boy. I want you to know that. Kade did this."

Nobody answered her. Steve put his hand on her shoulder for a second. Then he said he would wait in the lounge.

Ridge was sitting up in a wheelchair by the window, the left leg of his sweatpants folded up and pinned below the knee. He looked smaller. That was the first thing I noticed. He had been the biggest kid in the sophomore class, and now he looked like somebody had let some of the air out of him. His hands were on the wheels, and his knuckles were scraped from learning to push.

"Hey, man," Brayden said.

Ridge looked at them. He did not smile. "What are you guys doing here?"

"We brought you something." Brayden held out the gummy worms. Ridge did not take them. So Brayden set them on the tray table, and then he unrolled the poster on the bed so Ridge could see all the names.

Ridge looked at it for a long time. I watched his face. For a moment, just a moment, something in it cracked open.

Then it closed.

"Four hundred people," he said. "Cool. Did any of them drive that car? No. Kade drove that car." He started to talk faster, louder, the way he had walking across the football field on the first day of school. "Kade was driving. The county never sands that road, everybody knows that. The ambulance took forever. My mom let me go out. The cops were on us all year, they were just waiting for something—"

"Ridge," Owen said quietly. "We've been praying for you. Our whole ward has."

Ridge turned and looked straight at him.

"Praying," he said. "Great. How's that working out? Is it growing back?" He hit the arm of the wheelchair with his fist, right above the pinned-up sweatpants. "Is my leg growing *back*, church boy?"

Owen had no answer for that. Nobody would have.

Brayden tried. "Ridge. The first pills Kade ever had came from my house. I'm sorry. I should've said something back in October."

"Yeah," Ridge said. "You should've." He turned the chair, hard, toward the window. "Get out. Both of you. Go pray about it."

They stood there for a second. Then they went.

In the hall, Deb was crying. She walked them to the elevator. "He won't let anybody in," she said. "Not his grandma. Not the counselor. Not the man from the church down the street who comes on Thursdays. He just sits there and decides whose fault it is." She pressed the elevator button for them. "Thank you for coming. I mean it. Come back if you can stand it."

On the long drive home, nobody touched the radio. Brayden held the bag of gummy worms Ridge had not taken. Somewhere around Pocatello he said, "I'm going back. In two weeks."

"He told us to get out," Owen said.

“He told me to get out in sixth grade, too, when I broke his bike. I came back the next day. He let me in.” Brayden looked out at the dark fields. “Somebody’s got to keep showing up.”

Steve watched him in the rearview mirror. “Some people,” he said slowly, “you can’t reach for a long time. You just keep the door where they can see it.”

That night, at home, Owen did exactly what Ridge had told him to do. He knelt by his bed, and he prayed about it, out loud.

“I don’t know what to ask for,” he said. “I can’t make him walk. I can’t make Kade sorry. Please don’t let them be alone in this. Please keep the door open. And help me keep showing up, even when they yell at me. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.”

I heard every word, because he said them out loud. I could not carry one of them. They did not need carrying. They went straight to the Father, where they belonged.



AUTHOR’S SPOTLIGHT • Music at the Wrong House

The older brother was walking in from the field when he heard it: music. Dancing. Up at his house, in the middle of a workday. Somebody was having a very good time, and nobody had told him.

He called one of the servants over and asked what was going on (Luke 15:26). The answer: his little brother was home. The same little brother who had taken his share of their father’s money, left home and wasted every cent of it. When he had nothing left, he had come home, hoping to be hired as a servant. But their father had seen him **“when he was yet a great way off”** and ran to him and hugged him (Luke 15:20). Now the father was throwing a party.

In the story Jesus told, the older brother’s answer is short: **“he was angry, and would not go in”** (Luke 15:28).

He had a point, sort of. He had stayed home and worked hard the whole time. He had been the good one. Nobody had thrown *him* a party.

So the father did something beautiful. He did not wait for his older son to come inside. He went outside to find him, the same way he had run out to meet the younger one. He said, **“Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine”** (Luke 15:31). And then he said, **“this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found”** (Luke 15:32).

Which Brother Are You?

Here is the hard question: when somebody who hurt you, or somebody who messed up big, starts coming back, which brother are you? Are you inside at the party, or standing outside with your arms crossed?

Owen could have stood outside. He had good reasons. But he sat down on the cold steps instead.

Ridge, for now, was the brother standing outside with his arms crossed. But remember: the father went out to that brother too. The Lord keeps coming out. The door is not locked from His side.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • **Laman and Lemuel: They Saw an Angel and Still Said No**

Crack. The rod came down across Nephi's back, and then across his brother Sam's.

Laman and Lemuel were furious. Their plan to get the brass plates from a powerful man named Laban had failed, and they had lost all their family's gold and silver trying. So they took it out on their little brothers. They "did smite us even with a rod," Nephi wrote (1 Nephi 3:28).

Then, right in the middle of the beating, an angel of the Lord appeared and stood in front of them (1 Nephi 3:29).

You would think that would settle it forever. It did not. As soon as the angel left, Laman and Lemuel "again began to murmur" (1 Nephi 3:31).

To *murmur* means to complain under your breath, over and over. Nephi says his older brothers "did murmur" because "they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them" (1 Nephi 2:12). Every hard thing was always someone else's fault. Their father "hath led us away" (1 Nephi 17:22). Their younger brother "thinks to rule over us" (2 Nephi 5:3). The Lord was too hard. The desert was too long. They had seen an angel. They had heard the Lord's voice. And still, Nephi told them, they were "past feeling" (1 Nephi 17:45).

Here is the saddest part. Their blaming did not stay with them. Hundreds of years later, their descendants still believed "that they were wronged in the wilderness by their brethren" (Mosiah 10:12), and "taught their children" to hate (Mosiah 10:17). One family's habit of blame rolled down through generations.

But here is the hopeful part. The door never closed. Many of those same descendants later heard the truth and had "a change of heart" (Helaman 15:7). Some became the most faithful people in the whole Book of Mormon.

Blame is a road you can get off of. The sooner, the shorter the way back.

Seventy Times Seven

Peter once asked Jesus how many times he had to forgive someone. Peter thought he was being generous. "Till seven times?" he asked (Matthew 18:21).

Jesus answered, "Until seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22).

That is 490. But the point is not to keep a list and stop at 491. The point is that real forgiveness does not keep a list at all.

You do not have to do it alone. When you cannot find the strength to let go, ask the Savior for His. He forgave the soldiers who crucified Him while He was still on the cross: **"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do"** (Luke 23:34). He knows how. He can teach you.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • Forgiving Isn't Saying It Was Okay

A lot of teens think forgiving someone means saying, "It's fine. It didn't matter." That is not what forgiveness is.

Forgiving is not pretending. What Brayden did to Owen was wrong. It hurt Owen, Mia and Tyler. Forgiving him did not mean deciding it was okay. It meant deciding not to carry it anymore.

Forgiving is not trusting right away. You can forgive someone and still be careful. Trust is rebuilt slowly, by how someone acts over time. Owen forgave Brayden, but he was a lot more careful about what he typed in private messages after that.

Forgiving is not staying in danger. If someone is hurting you, or keeps hurting you, forgiving them does not mean you have to stay where they can do it again. Tell a parent or a leader. Get safe first. Forgiveness can come later.

Forgiving is setting down a heavy backpack. When you hold a grudge, you are the one who carries it everywhere, to school, to bed, to church. The Lord said, **"of you it is required to forgive all men"** (D&C 64:10). That is not because the other person deserves it. It is because He wants you free.

WALK WITH HIM • Ask Him to Help You Let Go

Think of one person you are still holding a grudge against. This week, pray out loud about that person. Do not pretend what they did was okay; tell the Savior exactly how it hurt. Then ask Him to help you set it down, even a little. Ask Him to help you see that person the way He sees them.

Think about it: Is there someone in your life who is "a great way off," trying to come back, and how could you be the one who runs out to meet them?



ASHER • A WORK OF FICTION

Hands on His Head

I was permitted to see it, and Lowell Hadlock was permitted to see it with me. We stood together on our side of the veil, which is so much nearer to yours than you think, and we looked through it the way I used to look into the still pools below Jerusalem when I was a boy: you can see every stone on the bottom, but you cannot reach in.

It was a Sunday that spring. Sacrament meeting had ended. In a small office at the end of the hall, the bishop's office, a chair had been set in the middle of the room.

Owen sat in it. He was sixteen now. Earlier, in sacrament meeting, the ward had raised their hands to sustain him to be ordained a priest. Now Bishop Kenley stood beside his chair, along with Brother Thorsgaard, who had thrown a ball to a boy in a hoodie on a Wednesday night. That boy, Brayden Kolstad, was sitting out in the foyer, because Owen had asked him to come. And Steve Hadlock, Owen's father, stood behind the chair and rubbed his hands together, because they were cold, and because they were nervous.

Lowell made a sound beside me. Not a word. Just a breath.

"I ordained him," Lowell said. "Steve. When he was sixteen. In that same building, if you can believe it. Down the hall."

"I believe it," I said.

"My hands were shaking." Lowell laughed a little. "I had yelled at him that morning about the car. I don't even remember what about. Then I put my hands on his head and gave him the priesthood. I felt like a hypocrite the whole time."

I said nothing. I have learned when a man needs you to be quiet.

"My dad had a temper," Lowell said. "I got it from him. I tried not to give it to Steve. I didn't try hard enough." He looked through the veil at his son. "Steve's better than I was. That winter he broke his leg changed him. He prays now. Really prays. On his knees in the kitchen."

Behind the chair, Steve placed his hands on Owen's head. Bishop Kenley and Brother Thorsgaard stepped in and laid their right hands lightly on Owen's head too. Steve spoke Owen's full name. He said that by the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood he ordained him to the office of priest in the Aaronic Priesthood. His voice was steady for that part, because he had practiced it.

Then came the blessing, and his voice was not steady anymore.

He blessed Owen to be a peacemaker. He blessed him to have courage to speak up when it mattered and gentleness to stay quiet when that mattered more. And then, after a long pause, he said, "And I bless you that what has been hard in our family will stop with you. That you'll be quicker to forgive than I was. And than your grandpa was. And that your kids will know a dad who prays."

Lowell put his hand over his mouth.

I thought of my own brother, Zerah, and of the long, sad line that ran down from his angry choices, generation after generation. I thought of how many centuries it took before someone in that line turned around. And I thought: *here, in this little office, a line is turning*. Not because the Hadlocks were perfect. Because a grandfather had tried, and a father had been humbled, and a boy had sat down on a cold step beside the boy whose family's truck tires he had once slashed and said, *I'm done being mad*.

That is how a line breaks. Not all at once. One person at a time decides that the old pain will not get the last word, and then he takes it to the Savior and leaves it there.

When it was over, Owen stood and shook the bishop's hand and Brother Thorsgaard's. Then he turned and hugged his father, a hard, long hug. Steve held on to him.

In the hallway, waiting, was Tyler Winsor. He and Bishop Kenley had agreed he would wait a while to be ordained, while he kept walking his road. He had come anyway, in a white shirt, to stand outside the door. When Owen came out, Tyler said, "Congrats, bro," and Owen said, "You're next," and Tyler said, "Yeah. I'm getting there." He sounded like he believed it.

Then Marjorie came down the hall, slowly, with something folded in her hand. It was a necktie, narrow and blue with small gold diamonds on it. Owen already had one of his grandfather's ties. This was the other one, the one Lowell had saved for the temple and for special Sundays.

"He'd want you to have this one too," Marjorie said, and her hands shook as she gave it to him.

Beside me, Lowell was weeping. "That's my tie," he said. "That's my good tie."

By the window of that small office there was a light I had come to know, soft gold, like early morning. I knew him. It was Abilene, the minister who had walked beside that boy all year. He saw us too, I think. He did not speak. He only bowed his head to Lowell, the way one servant greets another across a crowded room.

"He'll be better than me," Lowell said, when he could talk again.

"He will be himself," I told him. "And he will be the Lord's. That is better."

Then, because my heart was too full to say more, I did what I always do. I sang, softly, a psalm from my boyhood on the temple steps: “O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good” (Psalm 136:1). Lowell did not know the old tune. But he hummed along anyway, a little off-key, until the two of us were singing together on our side of the veil, while on the other side, a boy in his grandfather’s tie walked out into the spring sunshine with his father’s arm around his shoulders.

And all around us, on our side, there were others who had waited a long time for someone on earth to speak their names in the water. For some of them, that day was coming soon.



As in the Days of Noah, Again



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Names on a Card

“Write it down,” Brother Thorsgaard said. He looked at his watch, then at his clipboard, then at Owen Hadlock standing alone by the church van. “Saturday, May nineteenth. Six-fifteen a.m. Owen Hadlock, here first.”

“Nobody’s going to believe it,” said Bishop Kenley, and cracked a sunflower seed.

“I’ve been practicing,” Owen said. “The words for the baptisms. In the shower. All week.”

“And how’s that going?”

“Lily says I sound very official.”

The bishop nodded seriously. “Lily’s a tough critic. That’s high praise.”

Owen had his white shirt on and his scriptures under his arm, and his hair was still wet. Around his neck was the narrow blue tie with the small gold diamonds, the one Grandma Marjorie had given him that spring. He had tied it three times in the mirror, and it was still a little crooked. This was his first temple trip as a priest. Today, for the first time, he would be the one standing in the water, saying the words and baptizing.

Tyler came next, walking fast across the parking lot with his hands jammed in his jacket pockets. He stopped in front of Owen and pulled something out. It was his temple recommend, a little slip of paper. Bishop Kenley had signed it two weeks before.

“Look at that,” Owen said.

“I know.” Tyler looked at it like it might disappear. “I keep checking that it’s real.”

“Want me to hold it for you?”

“Absolutely not.”

Then Ruby’s family’s car pulled in, and Ruby got out holding a white envelope with both hands, like it was made of glass. Hannah climbed out of the back seat with her.

“Nobody breathe on this,” Ruby said. “I mean it. My tía mailed these from Houston, and if anything happens to them, she will fly up here personally.”

She lifted the flap to show them.

That was when the wind came down off the hill.

Rexburg wind does not knock first. It came all at once, a gust hard enough to slam the van's open door and send the pages on Brother Thorsgaard's clipboard flapping like a startled bird. It tore the envelope right out of Ruby's hands. Two small white cards spun out of it and went in two different directions.

"No!" Ruby yelled.

Everybody ran. One card skated flat across the asphalt toward the storm drain at the edge of the lot. Tyler got there first. He dove, full length, in his white shirt, and slapped his hand down on the card about an inch from the grate. The other card went high, over the roof of the van, tumbling end over end toward the lawn. Owen sprinted after it, lost it against the bright sky, found it again, and trapped it against his chest with both hands just before it sailed into the lilac bushes. Bishop Kenley stepped on the empty envelope as it blew past him and did not even drop his sunflower seeds.

Tyler stood up. There was a long gray smear down the front of his white shirt. He held the card over his head like a trophy.

"Got him," he said. He squinted at the name. "Anselmo... Ledesma?"

"Got her," Owen panted, holding up the other one. "Refugio."

Ruby had both hands over her mouth. She looked like she might laugh or cry, and she ended up doing a little of both. Brother Thorsgaard looked at Tyler's shirt, sighed, and went to dig in the back of the van. "There's always a spare shirt," he said. "Every trip. Somebody always needs the spare shirt."

The wind dropped as fast as it had come. The sun was just coming up over the Teton foothills to the east. The air was cold enough to see your breath, and it smelled like wet dirt and cut grass. Up on the hill above town, the temple was already lit, white and quiet, like it had been waiting up for them.

When the cards were safe in the envelope again, Ruby explained. "My abuela did family history for, like, twenty years. These are her grandparents. From Saltillo, in Mexico." She touched the names. "Anselmo Ledesma. And Refugio, his wife. They never got to hear about the gospel." Her voice wobbled. "After she died, my tía found this envelope in her Bible. It already had my name on it, in her handwriting. *Para Ruby. En tu templo nuevo*. For Ruby. In your new temple." She swallowed. "I was so mad at God when I couldn't go to her funeral. And then this came in the mail. It's like she was still taking care of me. Like He was."

Your new temple. Ruby said it like it was simply true now. I saw Hannah notice it, and smile. Hannah's dad worked close to home now, not in North Dakota anymore, and Hannah's mom was doing better. For the first time in more than a year, Hannah had a Saturday morning that was hers.

I had watched Tyler's face for almost a year by then. I had seen it gray and closed and hiding. That morning, with a smear of parking lot down his shirt, it was open. He was not finished with his road. He would tell you that himself. But he was on it, and he was facing the right way.

Ruby looked at Owen, and then at Tyler. "I can do Refugio. But Anselmo needs a guy. Would one of you...?"

"Tyler should be his proxy," Owen said right away. "He already saved him once. I'll baptize."

Tyler looked up. "Me?"

"Bro. You've got the recommend in your pocket. Use it."

Ruby nodded. "Okay. Tyler for Anselmo. And Owen, you can baptize me for Refugio." She tucked the cards deep into the envelope and held it flat against her coat with both hands. Her hands were shaking a little. So was her smile.

Mia came last, jogging across the lot with her hair in a messy bun. She climbed into the van next to Hannah and Ruby, and the three of them leaned their heads together over the envelope.

Before they pulled out, Brother Thorsgaard held up a plastic laundry basket. "Phones," he said. "The temple has enough to do without your notifications."

One by one, the phones went in. Owen's went in last. Just before he dropped it, the screen lit up. The crack still ran from the top-left corner to the middle. It was a message in soph squad, which had more than forty people in it now. Somebody was planning an end-of-school bonfire out at the gravel pit that night. *bring whatever*, the message said, with a winking face.

Owen looked at it for a moment. Then he put the phone in the basket, face down, and climbed into the van.

The van pulled out and turned up the hill toward the temple. Behind the last row of seats, the laundry basket buzzed and buzzed in the dark under the back seat. Nobody listened to it.



THE CHAPTER IN BRIEF

The question: If the world is getting louder and darker, how do I stay ready?

What scripture says: The last days will be like Noah's days: people busy, distracted, not watching (Matthew 24:37–39). The Lord asks His followers to “stand ye in holy places, and be not moved” (D&C 87:8).

In the story: Kade answers Owen's letter with three bitter lines; the friends go to the temple together, and then choose together.

Key verses: Matthew 24:37–39, 42; Matthew 25:1–13; D&C 45:57; D&C 87:8; Joshua 24:15

As It Was in the Days of Noah

Now, at the end of the year, Jesus' words about Noah come back around.

He said, “as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be” (Matthew 24:37). (Noe is the Greek way of saying Noah.) And then He described what those days were like: “they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage” (Matthew 24:38).

None of those things are bad. Eating is fine. Weddings are great. The problem was not what they were doing. The problem was that they were so busy, they “knew not until the flood came” (Matthew 24:39). They were not watching. They did not see what was coming.

Picture Noah's neighbors. Every day they walked past a giant boat being built on dry land, miles from any sea. Some laughed. Some ignored it. Noah kept teaching them; he “called upon the children of men that they should repent; but they hearkened not” (Moses 8:20). They were not wicked every single minute. They were just busy with everything else.

Meanwhile, Noah kept building. Board after board. Year after year. The Bible sums up his whole life in one short line: “Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he” (Genesis 6:22). He was not flashy. He was faithful. He did what the Lord asked, one board at a time, even when the whole world thought he was weird.

And when the rain finally came, “the LORD shut him in” (Genesis 7:16). The Lord Himself closed the door. Noah was safe because he had been getting ready all along.

The Lord has promised He will never again flood the whole earth (Genesis 9:11). The days of Noah that Jesus talked about are not about water. They are about attention. In a world that never stops buzzing, are you still watching for Him?



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • The Midnight Shout

"Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him" (Matthew 25:6).

The shout came at midnight, and ten sleeping young women jolted awake, the way you do when the fire alarm goes off at a sleepover. They grabbed their lamps. And five of those lamps were sputtering out.

In a story Jesus told, these ten were the kind of friends who would be bridesmaids today. They were waiting at night for a wedding party to arrive, holding lamps to light the way (Matthew 25:1). Five of them were wise and brought extra oil. Five were foolish and brought none (Matthew 25:3-4). The bridegroom was late, and they all fell asleep.

Now the foolish ones turned to the wise ones and said, **"Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out"** (Matthew 25:8).

And the wise ones said no. Not because they were mean, but because they could not. **"Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you"** (Matthew 25:9).

While the five ran to buy oil, **"the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut"** (Matthew 25:10).

Oil, Drop by Drop

That sounds harsh until you understand what the oil is. The oil is the stuff you cannot hand to someone else: your own prayers, your own time in the scriptures, your own trust in Jesus Christ, built up over time. Owen could take Tyler to the bishop's office. He could not repent for him. Ruby's abuela could save names for twenty years. She could not make Ruby feel the Spirit in the temple. Everyone fills their own lamp.

The good news is, oil is added drop by drop. One prayer. One verse. One Sunday where you actually think about Jesus during the sacrament. Nobody fills their lamp in one night. And nobody has to.

The Lord promised that the wise, the ones who "have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide," will "abide the day" (D&C 45:57). That means they will be ready when He comes, and they will be okay.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Three Lines

Five days before the wind took Ruby's cards, on the Monday of that week, the mail came.

"Mail call!" Lily shouted, and threw the whole stack at Owen's head.

Owen ducked. A pizza coupon hit the fridge. A bill for his dad slid under the stove. And one plain white envelope landed flat on the kitchen table, right side up, with his name printed on it in pencil, in square capital letters that leaned a little to the left.

The return address was a state juvenile facility, two hours away.

Lily saw his face and stopped bouncing. "Is that from a jail?"

"Kind of," Owen said. "Go find Mom, okay?"

She went. Owen sat down and held the envelope a while without opening it.

He had written to Kade in April, the week Kade was sent there. He had written it at this same table. It had taken him three nights and both sides of a page. He wrote about small-engines class, and the lawnmower Kade put back together with no leftover pieces. He wrote about the Sunday they were twelve, when Kade dropped a whole tray of sacrament bread and caught every piece before it hit the floor. He wrote that Ridge's mom said Ridge was learning to push his own chair. He wrote, *When you get out, there's basketball at the church on Wednesdays. I'll pick you up. You don't have to talk to anybody.* And at the end he wrote, *I'm praying for you. Not in a weird way. Just every night.*

Now he opened the answer.

It was one piece of lined paper, folded twice. Three lines, in pencil.

Got your letter. My arm healed crooked.

Tell God thanks for nothing. Where was He when my dad left, and where was He on that road.

Don't write me about church.

No name. Just a K.

Owen read it three times. Then he put it face down on the table and put both hands over his eyes.

I stood by the window and watched him. I want to be careful here, because Kade's story is not finished. I will only tell you what I saw. On that road, Kade's hands were on the wheel. Nobody else's. And still, two months later, from a narrow room with a locked door, he was pointing at the sky. I do not say that to judge him. I say it because I have watched a great many people do it, and I have never once seen it make the road shorter.

Erin came in from the hall with Lily behind her. She read the three lines over Owen's shoulder. She did not say anything wise. She just pulled out the chair beside him and sat.

After a while Owen turned the paper over and read it again.

“He didn’t say don’t write,” he said.

Erin waited.

“He said don’t write about *church*.” Owen wiped his face with the back of his hand. “So I’ll write about engines.”

He did. That night he wrote a full page about a 1970s pickup Dale had towed in, and the carburetor nobody could fix, and how Marco finally did it with a coffee filter and a paper clip. He did not mention God once.

At the bottom he wrote: *Still praying. You don’t have to read that part.*

Then he licked the envelope, and he knelt by his bed, and he did what he had promised.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

In the Water

Back at the temple that Saturday morning, I followed them down. The baptistry is below the main floor. It is quiet down there, and bright, and everything is white. The font sits on the backs of twelve oxen carved in stone, standing in a circle and facing outward, the way the twelve tribes of Israel camped around the tabernacle long ago.

Owen stood in the water in white clothes, up to his waist. It was warmer than he expected. He kept looking at the little screen on the wall where the names would show up, and swallowing.

On the side of the font, two witnesses stood ready, and a recorder sat at a small desk. Brother Thorsgaard was one of the witnesses. He gave Owen a thumbs-up so small that only Owen could see it.

Tyler came down the steps into the water. He was pale. He took Owen’s left wrist, the way they had been taught, and Owen raised his right arm to the square.

The name appeared on the screen. Owen read it out slowly and carefully, the way Ruby had said it in the parking lot, rolling the *r* as well as he could. “Anselmo Ledesma.”

He said the words of the ordinance. He said that he was commissioned of Jesus Christ. He said he was baptizing Tyler on behalf of Anselmo Ledesma, who was dead. He said it in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Then he put Tyler under the water, all the way, and lifted him back up.

Tyler came up with water streaming off his face. He wiped his eyes. I do not think it was only water.

Ruby was sitting on the bench along the wall with Hannah and Mia, in their white dresses, waiting their turn. Ruby had both hands over her mouth.

I do not live in the spirit world. I serve here, among the living. I could not see, that morning, the place where Anselmo Ledesma waited, or whether he had been taught, or whether he would accept what had been done for him. That belongs to others, and to the Lord. But I saw a boy from Rexburg baptize another boy from Rexburg in the name of a man from Saltillo who had died before either of them was born. And I saw a girl from Houston who had spent a whole fall eating lunch in the library, sitting on a white bench, crying with her two friends holding her hands.

Then it was Ruby's turn. She came down into the water, and Owen read the name, "Refugio," and his voice did not shake at all this time. He baptized her. When she came up, she was laughing and crying at the same time, and she whispered "thank you" to him so fast that he barely heard it.

They kept going, name after name, for almost an hour. Hannah did names from a ward list. So did Mia. Tyler did eight more. Owen's arm was tired by the end, and his white clothes were soaked to the shoulders.

When they finally climbed out and changed back into their Sunday clothes, Owen sat for a minute on the bench in the dressing room, alone, with his tie in his hand. It was the narrow blue one with the small gold diamonds, the one Grandma Marjorie had given him. He did not put it on right away. He just sat there.

Then he bowed his head, and he whispered something out loud. It was short. I heard only, "Thank You. Thank You for letting me do that." Then he tied his tie, crooked, and went out to find the others.



Choose You This Day

When Joshua was an old man, near the end of his life, he gathered all the tribes of Israel together one last time. He reminded them of everything the Lord had done for them: the escape from Egypt, the walk through the sea, the years in the wilderness, the promised land. Then he made them choose.

“Choose you this day whom ye will serve,” he said. And then he told them his own answer, right out loud, in front of everyone: “but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15).

Notice that Joshua did not wait to see what everyone else would choose. He went first.

That is what standing in holy places means. The Lord told His people to “stand ye in holy places, and be not moved” (D&C 87:8). A holy place is the temple, and it is also your home when you pray there, and the chapel on Sunday, and even a school hallway when you decide to stand with someone who is alone. It is anywhere you invite the Savior to be with you. And “be not moved” means that when the noise of the world pushes on you, you do not get pushed off.

Jesus said it in one word: **“Watch”** (Matthew 24:42). Stay awake. Pay attention. Keep your lamp full. Keep your eyes on Him.



AUTHOR'S SPOTLIGHT • Signs of the Times, for Teens

People sometimes talk about the “signs of the times,” things the scriptures say will happen before Jesus Christ comes again. Some of them sound scary: wars, earthquakes, storms. Jesus also said that **“the love of many shall wax cold”** (Matthew 24:12), which means a lot of people will stop caring about each other.

If you have ever scrolled through the news and felt your stomach drop, you are not alone. Here are a few things to remember.

The signs are not only bad news. Jesus also said **“this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world”** (Matthew 24:14). Temples on hills in towns like Rexburg are a sign of the times too. So are teenagers doing baptisms on a Saturday morning.

The point is not fear. The point is being ready. The Lord told His people, “if ye are prepared ye shall not fear” (D&C 38:30). You do not prepare by worrying more. You prepare by knowing Him better.

Nobody knows the date. Jesus said nobody knows **“the day nor the hour”** (Matthew 25:13). So you do not need to chase rumors or predictions online. You only need to be ready today.

Love not growing cold starts with you. If the love of many grows cold, you can be one whose love stays warm. Sit by someone. Text someone who is struggling. Forgive someone. Every warm act is a lamp lit in a dark room.

Stay close to Him. The safest place in the last days is not a bunker or a secret plan. It is close to Jesus Christ. Pray to Him daily. Read His words. Take the sacrament and think about Him. Those who walk with Him are not afraid of the dark, because they know who is holding the light.

WALK WITH HIM • Fill Your Lamp a Drop at a Time

This week, pick one small thing you will do every day to add a drop of oil to your lamp: a short prayer out loud in the morning, five verses about Jesus at night, or one kind act for someone who looks alone. Keep it small enough that you will really do it. At the end of the week, kneel and tell Him how it went. Notice whether you feel even a little closer to Him.

Think about it: If the bridegroom came tonight, what is one drop of oil you wish you had added this week?



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

Standing on the Hill

When they came out of the temple, the sun was all the way up. The wind had died down. The grass on the temple grounds was wet and bright green, and the sprinklers were ticking along the edges of the walk. From the top of the hill you could see the whole of Rexburg: the school, the church steeples, the potato fields running out flat and brown toward the mountains, the snow still white on the peaks far away.

Two people were waiting for them on the steps by the fountain.

One was Jace Wendling. Owen had texted him the night before: *We're doing breakfast after the temple. Come.* Jace had come. He had walked all the way up the hill in a sweater that was too warm for the morning, and he stood a little apart, not sure if he belonged.

The other was Brayden Kolstad.

He had his hood up. He was sitting on the low wall, bouncing one knee. Brother Thorsgaard had invited him too, at Wednesday basketball. He did not have a recommend, and he had not come inside. But he had come up the hill and sat on the wall outside the temple for an hour, waiting for his friends. Twice, between names, I had come up to look in on him. He had not looked at his phone once. He had just sat there, looking up at the white walls and the gold figure on the top, with a face I could not read.

"Hey," Owen said.

"Hey." Brayden stood up. "How was it?"

Owen thought about it. "Really good," he said. "I baptized Tyler for Ruby's great-great-grandpa."

“That’s kind of crazy,” Brayden said. But he did not say it in a mean way. He looked down at his shoes. “I prayed up here. While you guys were inside. Like, out loud, kind of. For Ridge. And for Tyce.” He shrugged. “First time I ever did it by myself. It was weird. It was a good weird.”

Owen did not make a big deal of it. He just bumped Brayden’s shoulder with his own.

Brother Thorsgaard brought the laundry basket up from the van and handed the phones back. They buzzed to life one by one. Soph squad had exploded. Forty-one new messages, all about the gravel pit bonfire that night. *who’s bringing what. my cousin can get some. last one there is lame.*

Owen read it. Tyler read his. Mia read hers. I saw something cross their faces, the old pull of the noise, the fear of being left out of whatever everyone would be talking about on Monday. I also saw, at the bottom of the hill, in the shade by the parking lot, a dull red shape I knew. Sethar did not come up the hill. He never does, here. He stayed down where the noise was.

Brayden was the one who spoke first. “I’m not going to that,” he said. “Tyce comes home in three weeks. I’m not gonna be the guy who...” He stopped. He did not finish.

Owen looked at his phone. He looked at his friends standing on the temple steps: Tyler with his hair still wet, Ruby holding her empty envelope, Hannah with her face turned up to the sun, Mia with her hands in her sweater sleeves, Jace a little apart, and Brayden with his hood up. Then he typed something into his own family’s group chat, not soph squad. He typed: *Can I have like 6 people over tonight? We could do burgers.*

His dad answered in less than a minute. *Yes. I’ll grill. Tell them to bring appetites.* And then, a second later: *Proud of you.*

Owen looked up. “My dad’s grilling tonight,” he said. “You guys should come. All of you.”

Tyler said yes before he finished the sentence. Mia said yes. Ruby looked at Hannah, and Hannah said, “I’ll have to bring my brothers,” and Owen said, “Bring them,” and she laughed. Jace said, “Seriously?” and Owen said, “Seriously.” Brayden pulled his hood down.

“Yeah,” Brayden said. “Okay.”

Then Bishop Kenley, who had been standing behind them the whole time eating sunflower seeds, held out his own phone and said, “Picture. All of you. Get on the steps.”

They got on the steps. Seven friends who had cracked and broken and been broken in a hundred ways that year, standing in a ragged line in front of the house of the Lord,

squinting into the sun. Bishop Kenley took the picture. It was not a perfect picture. Jace blinked. Brayden's hood was half up again. Owen's tie was crooked.

That night, after the burgers, after Hannah's little brothers had played tag in the Hadlocks' backyard until dark, they begged Jace to sing something, anything. He stood on the back step under the porch light and sang "I Need Thee Every Hour," every verse, with no music at all. The backyard went quiet. Even the brothers stopped.

Afterward, Owen walked him to the curb. "Back in November," Jace said, "I asked God why He'd give me a voice if it just made me a target." He looked back at the porch. "I think I know now. It's for Him. It was always for Him."

Mia was waiting for her mom's car by the mailbox. "I prayed every night that my parents would stay together," she said, half to herself and half to Owen. "He didn't do that. But He never left. I didn't know that was an answer too."

Hannah, holding her littlest brother, sleepy on her shoulder, said, "I read one verse about Him every morning before they wake up. Just one. It's the only quiet I get." She smiled. "It's enough."

After everyone had gone home, Owen sat on his bed and looked at that picture on his cracked screen. The crack ran right across the steps, right across all seven of them. The light from the screen came up through it and lay across the ceiling in a thin, broken line.

He did not leave the group chat. He just muted it. And then he knelt beside his bed, and he did not say "thanks for the food." He talked for a long time.

I could not hear all of it. Some of it was too quiet, and the rest was not mine to tell. But near the end, he said one thing out loud that I will always remember. He said, "As for me, I want to serve You. Help me keep choosing it."

It was not a speech. It was not Joshua at Shechem. It was a sixteen-year-old boy on a Saturday night in May, in a world as loud as the days of Noah.

But it was the same choice. And he made it.

He kept that cracked phone a long time after that. Longer than he ever expected to.



EPILOGUE

Always Remember Him



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION

The Phone in the Drawer

“Owen!” Lily pounded on the laundry room door. “Are you done in there? My tights are in the dryer!”

“I’m ironing.”

“You’ve been ironing for twenty minutes!”

“Ironing is an art, Lily.”

“It’s a *shirt*!”

At a quarter past six on a Sunday morning, Owen Hadlock stood in the laundry room in his socks with an iron in his hand, losing an argument to an eleven-year-old. He was not good at ironing. He had pressed a new wrinkle into one sleeve.

“Just let me grab them,” Lily said. “I’ll be so fast. I’ll be like a ninja.”

“Ninjas don’t yell through doors.”

“Good ninjas do!”

He turned toward the door to answer her. He left the iron sitting flat on the sleeve while he did it, just for a second. It was a longer second than it should have been.

A thin gray curl of smoke rose off the ironing board.

“Is that *smoke*?” Lily yelled. She must have smelled it under the door. “MOM! OWEN’S ON FIRE!”

“I’m not on fire!” Owen snatched up the iron. There was a brown triangle on the sleeve, the exact shape of the bottom of the iron, still smoking a little. He flapped at it with his hand.

Feet thundered down the hall. The door flew open, and there stood his father in a T-shirt and church pants, holding the red fire extinguisher from under the kitchen sink, ready to use it.

Owen held up the shirt. “Dad. It’s a sleeve.”

Steve looked at the sleeve. He looked at the extinguisher. Slowly, he lowered it. "You can't be too careful," he said, with great dignity. "I've heard what happens under bleachers."

Behind him, Lily was laughing so hard she had to hold on to the doorframe.

Owen laughed too. He couldn't help it. He told Lily later what had flashed through his head: for a second he was fifteen again, on the top row of a hot gym on the first day of school, watching smoke pour up through the seats and his phone fly out of his hand. That was more than two years ago. It felt like a lot longer, and also like last week.

"Suit coat," he said, holding up the sleeve. "Nobody will ever know."

A year and a half had gone by since the temple trip. It went fast, the way years go when you are sixteen and seventeen. I will tell you about this one Sunday morning, the last Sunday in October, the fall Owen was seventeen, because that is where this story ends, and where it began.

He was seventeen now, a senior, taller than his father. He still worked Saturdays at Ostergard Automotive, but now Dale let him do brake jobs, and Travis had started calling him "the kid who actually listens."

When the shirt was as good as it was going to get, he went back to his room to find his tie. He opened the top drawer of his desk, and there, in the back, under a tangle of chargers and an old seminary bookmark, was his old phone.

He had gotten a new one the summer after the temple trip, when the old one finally stopped holding a charge. He had never thrown the old one away. If you had asked him why, I do not think he could have told you. He just kept it in the drawer.

He picked it up. The crack was still there, of course. It started in the top-left corner and ran down to the middle and split into three thin lines, like a river reaching the sea. He ran his thumb along it. It felt rough, but it did not cut.

On a whim, he plugged it in. It took a minute. Then the screen lit up.

The lock screen was still Lily at Island Park, years younger, holding up a fish almost as long as her arm, screaming with joy. The crack still ran right across her face. Her grin still came through.

Owen swiped up and opened the photos. He scrolled back to a picture of seven teenagers squinting on the steps of the temple, one of them blinking, one with his hood half up, one with his tie on crooked. He looked at it for a long time.

Then he did a thing I did not expect. He held the old phone in both hands, and he bowed his head over it, and he said out loud, quietly, “Thank You for that year. Even the bad parts. Thank You for not throwing me away.”

He put it back in the drawer, gently. He did not fix it, and he did not throw it out. It was part of his story now. Then he found his grandfather’s narrow blue tie, the one with the small gold diamonds, and tied it, and it came out almost straight.

At church, Jonah Ybarrola was waiting by the sacrament table, looking nervous. Jonah was sixteen now, and new at being a priest, and Owen had shown him that morning, in the empty chapel, how to fold back the white cloth without knocking anything over. They sat together at the table while the chapel filled up.

I looked out over the rows. I always do.

The Hadlocks were in their usual pew on the left. Steve had a little gray at his temples. Erin sat beside him. Lily sat between her mother and her grandmother, reading the hymn numbers off the board in a loud whisper. Grandma Marjorie had a cane now, hooked over the end of the pew. Her hands still shook.

And Kate was there. She had driven up the night before from Idaho Falls, where she was in nursing school. Owen had told her on the phone that she didn’t have to come. “It’s just the sacrament,” he had said. “I do it a lot.” And Kate had said, “I know. I want to.”

Mia sat at the piano, because she was the ward pianist now, with her music open and her back very straight. Her mom and Theo sat on the third row. On the end of a row near the back sat her dad. He came to her ward once a month, on the Sundays she played.

Tyler Winsor sat with his parents. He was a priest now. He had been ordained the summer after the temple trip, by his father, and he had blessed the sacrament himself the week before. He sat very still with his arms folded, the way a person sits when he does not take something for granted anymore.

Ruby and Hannah sat together on the right, with two of Hannah’s little brothers squirming between them. Jace sat with his mom, Corrine, who still came in her scrubs some weeks, straight from a night shift.

And in the very back row, in a gray hoodie pulled on over a white shirt, sat Brayden Kolstad. He worked Saturdays at Ostergard now too; Owen had asked Dale to give him a try, and Dale had. The two of them still went to the pantry on Tuesdays. Darlene had finally given them their own key. Next to Brayden sat a young man with the same jaw and the same eyes, a little older, a little thinner. It was Tyce. He had come home that June, three weeks after the temple trip, and he was still walking his road. They did not come every week. But they had come.

Kade was not there, and Ridge was not there. Before the hymn, Owen looked once at the bench halfway up the right side where the Dunlavys used to sit. Then he looked back down at the bread.

The sacrament hymn began. Mia played. The people stood and sang, and Owen and Jonah broke the bread into the trays. Owen worked carefully, one piece at a time, the way his grandfather had once taught him to stack wood: square, and no hurry.

When the hymn was over, the chapel went still. Owen knelt.

I cannot see into a heart. I have said that all through this book, and I will say it once more, because it is true: only the Father knows what was in Owen Hadlock's heart that morning. But I could see his hands, and they were steady. And I could hear his voice.

He read the prayer slowly, as if every word weighed something. When he came to the words "always remember him" (Moroni 4:3), his voice caught, just a little, and then went on.

"Amen," said the chapel.

And in the back row, I watched Brayden Kolstad say it too.

After the meeting, in the crowded foyer, Brayden found Owen by the drinking fountain and bumped his shoulder, the way you bump a teammate on the bench. "Nice job not setting anything on fire," he said.

Owen stared at him. "Lily texted you?"

"Lily texts me everything."

I have watched friendships for longer than this world has had a name, and I know the ones that last. Very often they are the ones that started in the worst places: a spray-painted wall, a cinder-block room, a pile of beans on a cold curb. I would not be surprised if these two stood by each other for the rest of their lives. I would be surprised if they didn't.



Always Remember Him

On the night before He died, Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to His friends. He said, "**this do in remembrance of me**" (Luke 22:19).

That is what the sacrament is: a weekly chance to remember Him on purpose. Not only when life cracks. Every week. In the good weeks too.

This book has been about a lot of cracks. A phone on a gym floor. A family that changed shape. A secret that hurt. A video that should never have been posted. A message that should never have been shared. A girl who felt invisible and a girl who felt like a stranger. A boy who got cut from the team. A car through a guardrail on a frozen road. In every one of them, the same Person was reaching in, even for the ones who have not reached back yet.

He knows your name, the way He knew Mary's in the garden. He has not forgotten you, and He never will. The Lord said, "I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:16). Your name is written where the nails went.

And He offers you something the world cannot. He said, "**Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you**" (John 14:27).

The world gives you noise. He gives you peace. The world counts your cracks. He fills them with gold.



ASHER • A WORK OF FICTION

The Breath Before the Song

I was permitted to see it, and I was not alone. Lowell Hadlock stood beside me. With him stood a young woman named Becky Strandquist, who had come to us one icy November night years before. She was not of the Hadlock family. But she had asked to come, because of Kate.

We watched the boy kneel at the table in Lowell's blue tie.

"Every word," Lowell said when it was over. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "He said every word."

"He did," I said.

Becky was watching Kate in the pew, the way you watch a sister. "She came home for it," Becky said softly. "Of course she did."

Then I saw him: a soft gold light by the tall window of that chapel, standing very still, like tall grass at the end of a long summer day. It was Abilene. He had been beside these young people every day of that hard year. I had watched with him once before, in a bishop's office that spring. He saw us now, across the thin place between his work and mine. He came and stood near us.

"You walked with him all year," I said.

"I watched," Abilene said. "I could not carry a single one of his prayers. I could not whisper a single word to him. I could only watch, and wait, and pray for him myself."

"So could I," I said. "So could Lowell. None of us saved him. We are not the ones who save."

Abilene looked toward the table, where Owen sat with his hands folded and his ears red. "No," he said. "We are not. Only One does that."

When I was a boy in the temple choir in Jerusalem, my father taught me that the most important moment in any song is the breath before the first note. The whole choir breathes in together, and turns toward the one who leads them, and waits.

The sacrament is that breath. Once a week, the Lord's people go quiet and turn toward Him, together, before the song of the week begins.

That morning, I watched seven young people take that breath. Not because they had been stirred by some new disaster. Because it was Sunday, and they remembered.

Lowell began to hum. I knew the tune he was trying to find; it was the hymn they had sung in the chapel. He could not carry it well. He never could. Becky joined him, and then I did, and Abilene, who once sang in the great choirs before the world was, sang with us too. On the other side of the veil, the boy at the table did not hear us. That is as it should be.

He was not remembering us. He was remembering Him.



ABILENE • A WORK OF FICTION
Light Through the Cracks

That afternoon, after Sunday dinner at Grandma Marjorie's, after the roast and the potatoes and Lily feeding the dog under the table, Owen went home and sat on his bed with a sheet of notebook paper in his lap.

At seven o'clock there was a youth fireside at the stake center. Bishop Kenley had asked seven of them to speak. "Just tell them what happened," he had said, cracking a sunflower seed. "The year everything cracked. In your own words. Five minutes each." Owen had written his talk four times. He had crossed out most of it four times.

He opened the drawer one more time. He took out the old phone and turned it on. In the dim room, the screen glowed, and the light came up through the crack and threw a thin, broken line across the ceiling, the same line it had thrown on the first night of his sophomore year.

He lay back and looked at it.

I looked up at it with him, and I thought: it does not look like a crack in the sky anymore. It looks like a path.

I have watched a great many people. I have watched them break things, and be broken, and break each other. I have watched the Lord reach into every one of those breaks, gently, and patiently, and without ever forcing His way in. He waits to be asked. And when He is asked, He comes.

That is the whole secret. It is not a program. It is not a rule. It is a Person. He knows your name. He knows exactly where you cracked. And He is not finished with you, or with anyone, not even the ones who are still standing outside with their arms crossed.

Owen turned off the old phone and put it back in the drawer, gently, where it belonged. Then he knelt beside his bed and said, out loud, "Help me always remember You. And help me say it right tonight. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen."

He folded his notebook paper into his suit pocket and went out to the car.

By the time he pulled into the stake center lot, the first snow of the year had begun, falling soft and white over Rexburg, over the potato fields and the high school and the temple on the hill. The others were already there. Tyler was in the foyer, mouthing his notes to himself. Ruby and Hannah came in shaking snow out of their hair. Jace stood by the drinking fountain, humming to warm up. Mia was at the piano, playing the beginning of the nocturne very softly, just for her hands. Brayden came in last, with his hood up. In the doorway of the chapel, he pulled it down.

Seven folding chairs waited on the stand, in a row. The chapel filled with kids in hoodies and kids in white shirts, kids Owen knew and kids he had never seen, more than he expected. Some of them were looking at their phones. Some of them looked like they had not wanted to come at all. One or two looked like they were carrying something heavy and had not told anybody yet.

Brother Thorsgaard stood up at the pulpit and waited for the room to quiet down.

“Tonight,” he said, “we asked some of your friends to tell you about a hard year. Not a sermon. Just what happened, and Who they found in the middle of it. In their own words.”

He sat down.

Owen looked out at all those faces. Then he looked down the row at his six friends, and every one of them was looking back at him.

He stood up first. His tie was almost straight.

And this is what they said.



In Their Own Words



Owen Hadlock

So the bishop asked me to go first, probably because I'm the one who set the most stuff on fire this year. Just my shirt. This morning. Ask Lily.

Okay. For real now.

When I was twelve, my dad fell off a ladder on our patio. Frost on the concrete. Nobody pushed him. Nobody did anything wrong. It just happened. I learned that year that some things break and it's nobody's fault.

Then I turned fifteen, and I learned the other two kinds.

Some things break because of what other people do. Somebody screenshots your private message and forty kids read it. Somebody spray-paints a line about your dad's ladder on the wall of the shop where your dad works. I stood in that parking lot with my dad and Dale and read it, and I felt my whole face go hot.

And some things break because of what you do. That's the kind I didn't want to talk about. That same night I slashed four tires on a pickup. I spent a weekend in juvenile detention. I sat in a cinder-block room and knocked twice on the wall, and somebody on the other side knocked back, and I found out later it was the guy I hated most in the world.

The worst night, though, wasn't in there. It was a few nights after, in our garage.

I'd been cut from JV. I had a D in biology. Everybody at church kept saying, "You'll be such a great missionary," and I felt like the worst person in Rexburg. I went out to the garage so nobody would hear me, and I stood by my dad's workbench, and I yelled at God. Out loud. I said, "I did everything right!" I said it like three times. The wrenches on the pegboard rattled.

Then it got really quiet. And I stood there looking at the pegboard, and I started counting. The tires. The post about Brayden's brother. The laughing face I sent under a video of Jace. The times I stood by a stairwell and didn't move.

I hadn't done everything right. Most of the wreckage that winter had my fingerprints on it.

I want to be careful here, because I don't think God made me stand in that garage to feel like garbage. I think He let me get quiet enough to see the truth. Those are different things. One crushes you. The other one lets you start over.

So here's what I started doing. I prayed like my grandpa. Grandpa Lowell used to pray out loud, kind of slow, like he was talking to somebody sitting across the kitchen table from him. I'd always thought that was an old-guy thing. Turns out it works. I started doing it in my dad's truck before school, with the heater running. Nothing fancy. "Hey. It's me again. I messed up yesterday. Help me with Jace. Help me with my mouth."

And I started thinking about Peter. Peter said he'd go to prison for Jesus, and then he said "I don't know Him" three times by a fire. And after the Resurrection, Jesus made him breakfast, and asked him, "**Lovest thou me?**" (John 21:17). Not "Why did you do it?" Not "How could you?" Just that. And then He gave Peter a job.

That's what He did with me. He didn't pretend the tires didn't happen. I paid for every one of them out of my shop money. But He gave me jobs. Apologize to Jace. Delete the post. Sit on a curb with Brayden after six hundred cans of beans fall on us. Walk Tyler to the bishop's office.

This morning I knelt at the sacrament table and read the prayer, and when I got to "always remember him," my voice cracked a little. Some of you heard it. That wasn't nerves. That was me remembering where He found me. In a garage, yelling at Him. And He came anyway.

I know He's real, and I know He doesn't throw people away. He didn't throw me away.

Mia Castellaw

I'm going to try to get through this without crying, so if I stop, just wait. Jace said he'd hum something if I freeze.

My parents told me and my little brother Theo they were getting divorced on a Sunday afternoon in September, in the front room, by the piano. I remember the clock. It was 4:14. I don't know why that's the thing I remember.

I decided right away it was my fault. They'd fought for years about who would drive me to piano and soccer, and I thought, if I just quit, maybe they'd stop. I wrote "quit?" in pencil on my music. You can still see it. I erased it, but you can still see it.

That was the first thing I blamed: me.

The second thing I blamed was God.

Every night that summer I prayed they'd stay together. Every single night. On my knees, not in bed. I made deals. I said I'd read every chapter, I'd never miss seminary, I'd be nicer to Theo. The night they told us, I stopped kneeling. And in December our house went up for sale. There was a sign in our yard with a stranger's face on it, smiling.

Christmas Eve was the first one split in half. The ward had the Christmas program, and the Primary kids sang a soft song about families, and I just stood up in the middle of it and walked out the side door into the snow. All I had on was my church dress and a thin coat. Owen followed me out. He didn't say anything smart. He just stood there. And I told him, "I prayed every single night they'd stay together. He didn't do it."

I meant God. I said it like God had dropped something I handed Him.

The third thing I blamed was my dad. That one lasted the longest.

Here's what I learned, slowly, and I'm still learning it. It wasn't my piano. It wasn't me. And it wasn't God, either. My mom and dad are grown-ups, and they made their own choices, and it hurt. Heavenly Father let them choose, the same way He lets me. Even while I was on my knees begging Him not to.

But He didn't leave. That's the part I couldn't see on Christmas Eve.

In January my dad picked me up for his weekend, and we sat in his truck in the driveway for a really long time with the engine running. And he said, "Mimi, none of it was you. It was ours. Your mom's and mine. You didn't cause one second of it." And then he said he was sorry for the way he'd talked when he was mad. My dad doesn't say sorry. He said it twice.

And then in March he came to my recital. He sat two rows behind my mom. Theo climbed back and forth over the pew between them all afternoon. And when I got to the hard part in the middle of the Chopin, I did what my teacher wrote on the music: breathe before the run. Except by then, that breath was a prayer. Every time. "Help me play it anyway."

I missed a note. I kept going.

There's a verse I wrote on a sticky note and put on the piano. It says the Savior came "to give unto them beauty for ashes" (Isaiah 61:3). For a long time I thought that meant He'd give me back the house and the family the way it was. It doesn't. He gave me something else. A different shape. A dad who says sorry. A mom who moved her purse so he could sit by Theo. A little brother who waves with both hands. And me, at a piano, talking to Jesus out loud before every hard part.

It still hurts some Sundays. My dad comes once a month when I play here, and he sits in the back, and I can see him from the bench.

I know Jesus Christ didn't cause my family to break. And I know He never once walked out.

Tyler Winsor

Okay. Most of you know my dad as the guy who fed an egg to our dog by accident. That's fair. That's a true story.

This one's harder.

When I was twelve, somebody sent me a link on a phone I'd borrowed, and I saw something I shouldn't have. Then I went looking for it again. And I hid it for three years. That's what I struggled with, pornography. I'm not going to tell you more than that, and you don't need more than that. What you need to know is what it did to me. It made me a liar. It made me tired. It made me stop preparing the sacrament because I didn't feel like I could touch the trays.

And here's the part I want you to hear: this one was my choice. Someone else sent the first link, yeah. But every time after that, it was me. I'm not going to stand up here and blame somebody else, because blaming somebody else kept me stuck for a long time.

And there's one more thing I have to say, and it's the part I'm most ashamed of. I didn't just look. When I was thirteen and fourteen, I passed it on. A link to a kid at a sleepover. A video to two guys at the back of the bus, who laughed and said it was no big deal. I think I wanted to feel like I wasn't the only one. Somebody did that to me, and then I turned around and did it to them.

Some of those kids are fighting the same thing I fought. A couple of them are addicted to it right now. One of them told me so last spring, and I went home and cried in my truck. I can't take those links back. I've apologized to every one of them I could find, and I pray for them by name. If anybody ever sends you something like that, don't send it on. Be the place where it stops.

In November my mom found my history on our family laptop. She asked me about it in the kitchen, and I lied. I said it was a pop-up. She knew I was lying. I knew she knew. And that night we ate dinner, the three of us, and nobody said one word. You could hear the spoons on our soup bowls. I'll remember the sound of those spoons my whole life.

That night I decided I was already lost. I thought, okay, that's who I am. I texted Owen I was done with church. And I said something to God I'd never said before. I said, "Why did You make me like this?"

I was blaming myself so hard I couldn't breathe, and then I was blaming Him. Either way, I was hiding from Him.

In December, Owen apologized to me at the canal for something he'd written, and I just told him. I don't even know why that night. It came out. And he didn't step back. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "You're not too far gone." I'd been waiting three years for somebody to say that, and it was a fifteen-year-old in a beanie.

In January he sat on the bench outside Bishop Kenley's office while I went in. Bishop Kenley eats sunflower seeds. I don't know why that helped, but it helped. He didn't look shocked. He gave me a card. On the card was a verse: "as oft as they repented and sought forgiveness, with real intent, they were forgiven" (Moroni 6:8).

As oft as. I read that card about a thousand times.

Because I slipped. In March. After six weeks. And I almost went right back to hiding. But I walked into the kitchen the next morning and told my dad, and he asked me how long I'd hidden it the first time, and I said three years, and he asked how long this time, and I said like eight hours. And he said, "That's not somebody who's too far gone. That's somebody who's coming home."

What helped me? Telling. My parents and my bishop. Telling fast when I fell. Praying out loud every morning, even the mornings I felt like a fake, because I wasn't praying to prove I was good. I was praying because I needed Him. Reading a few verses about Jesus, mostly the ones where He's with people who messed up. And keeping my hands busy. Frozen chicken counts.

My dad ordained me a priest the summer after the temple trip. Last week I blessed the sacrament. I knelt at that table where I couldn't even touch the trays, and I said the words, and my hands were steady.

If you're where I was, please talk to a parent and your bishop. It's the scariest thing, and then it's the lightest you've felt in years.

I know the Savior isn't counting my falls. He's watching which way I turn, and He turns with me.

Jace Wendling

I'm a singer, so I'm going to be bad at talking. Bear with me.

Sophomore year somebody filmed me singing alone in the locker room and posted it. Then somebody filled my locker with shaving cream. Then there were comments. I'm not going to say what they said. They don't get a microphone.

And then it got physical. Two days after the shaving cream, two guys came up behind me in the hall by the choir room, and one of them shoved me into the lockers, hard, and my glasses hit the floor. The other one stepped on them. When I found them, one lens

was spiderwebbed and one arm was bent sideways. I remember sitting there on the floor holding them. I couldn't see anybody's face. I could just hear them laughing, walking away. That night my mom taped them back together at the kitchen table.

I quit the musical that week. My mom kept me home for a whole week. I lay in my room and didn't sing. Not in the shower, not in the car, nowhere. If you know me, that's like saying I didn't breathe.

I didn't do anything to get it. Ruby told me that the day of the shaving cream: "You didn't do anything. That's how it works." I needed to hear that about fifty more times before I believed it.

At first I blamed the guys. That's fair. Then I blamed the school. Then, lying in my room with my glasses taped together, I blamed God. I said, "Why would You give me a voice if it just makes me a target?" I said it out loud. My mom heard me through the wall. She came in and sat on the end of my bed in her scrubs and didn't say anything for a long time. Then she said, "You are not extra. You are the whole reason I work." She'd said it before. That time it went in.

I didn't get better all at once. I got better in pieces.

A piece was Ruby, who walked me to the office and ate lunch with me in the library and made fun of how the shaving cream smelled like her dad.

A piece was Owen sitting down across from me in the cafeteria and saying sorry for a laughing face. I gave him a pretzel. I don't know why. It's what I had.

And the big piece was something Sister Quintanar showed me in seminary. It's a verse in Zephaniah, which I didn't even know was a book. It says the Lord "will joy over thee with singing" (Zephaniah 3:17).

He sings. Over us. Over me.

I read that and I just sat there. Because I'd been thinking my voice was the reason I got hurt. And here's God, and the thing He does over His children is sing.

So I started singing again, but different. I started singing hymns in the car as prayers. Like, I'd pick one and mean it, line by line, to Him. "Where Can I Turn for Peace?" I sang that one probably four hundred times. Some days I couldn't pray in words, but I could sing it, and I'd feel Him close, warm, like somebody was in the passenger seat.

And I read in Isaiah that He was "despised and rejected of men" (Isaiah 53:3). He knows what a hallway feels like. He knows what it's like when people laugh and walk away. Every time I felt alone, I'd remember that, and it made me feel less alone, because somebody who was rejected like that was walking with me.

I went back to the musical junior year. I had a solo. My mom cried so loud during it that a man in front of her turned around, and she said, “That’s my son,” and he said, “Oh. Okay then.”

Forgiving those guys has taken a long time. Forgiving doesn’t mean it was okay. It means I’m not carrying it to bed anymore. I’m still working on one of them. I’m letting the Savior help me with that.

I know Jesus Christ loves my voice. He gave it to me. And He’s never once laughed at it.

Ruby Varga

Hi. Most of you know me as Sister Ruby from Primary, so if your little brother or sister comes home talking about Sister Ruby, that’s me.

I moved here from Houston at the start of sophomore year because my dad got a job at the hospital. In Houston I was one of like four youth in my ward. I thought, Rexburg, everybody’s a member, I’ll have a hundred friends. And I was lonelier here than I’d ever been in my life. Everybody had grown up together. Everybody already had a table.

So I ate lunch in the library. For months.

Nobody did anything wrong. That was the hard part. My dad needed the job. My old friends in Houston just got busy. And when there’s nobody to be mad at, you get mad at everybody. I blamed my parents for moving. I blamed my friends for not texting back. And then I blamed God.

In November my abuela died in Houston. My grandma. She taught me to pray. She prayed in Spanish, really fast, with her eyes squeezed shut, like she was afraid God would hang up if she slowed down. And we couldn’t afford to fly back for the funeral. Three tickets, last minute, right before Thanksgiving. My parents tried. It just wasn’t there.

So my tía sent me a link, and I watched my abuela’s funeral on my phone, at a table in the back corner of the school library, with my earbuds in. Nobody else was there but Mrs. Doane. The camera was crooked. I could see my tía on the front row, and my three best friends from Houston in the third row, holding hands, and I couldn’t hug any of them. When the Primary kids sang “Soy un hijo de Dios,” I lost it. I watched the whole thing, all the way to the closing prayer, and then the screen went dark and I was just a girl in Idaho at a library table.

The night she died, I’d yelled at God on my bedroom floor. “¿Dónde estabas?” Where were You? In the library I was still mad, and I told Him so, out loud, really quietly. But I

also asked Him to know her name and hold her, and not to let go of me. I didn't stop praying because I was mad. I prayed right through it.

Here's the thing. He had already answered, the day before. Not in a voice. In a little kid.

That Sunday a four-year-old named Mateo, brand new from Guatemala, was crying outside the Primary room, and nobody could understand him. And I could. I knelt down and said, "¿Tienes miedo?" and he stopped crying and looked at me like I'd come out of the sky. And I thought, oh. I know exactly how you feel. That's my whole job right now. Knowing how you feel.

Then in December I saw Hannah sitting alone behind the biography shelves, and I walked over with half a tamale. That was it. Half a tamale. And I found out the place I'd been praying for since August was right there. I just had to walk over.

There's a verse I love because it was written to people who felt like outsiders. It says, "ye are no more strangers and foreigners" (Ephesians 2:19). In His house, nobody's the new kid. Not forever.

And here's my favorite part. When we went to the temple that May, I brought two cards with names on them. My great-great-grandparents, from my abuela's side. She'd saved their names for years, and after the funeral my tía found them in an envelope in her Bible, with my name on it in her handwriting, and mailed it to me. Owen baptized Tyler for my great-great-grandpa, and then he baptized me for my great-great-grandma. I sat there holding the empty envelope and cried, because I couldn't be at her funeral, but I could be there for her grandparents. That felt like Jesus saying, I didn't forget your family. I didn't forget her.

What do I do now? I pray in Spanish, fast, with my eyes squeezed shut, like her. Except now I slow down at the end, because I know He's not going to hang up. I serve somebody every week. When I'm lonely, I go find the loneliest person in the room. It works every time. It worked on me.

I know Jesus Christ sees the stranger. He saw me in a library, and He sent me a crying four-year-old so I'd stop being one.

Hannah Prestwich

Before I say anything, my dad's here, and he's already crying, so if you see a big guy in the back blowing his nose, that's him. Hi, Dad.

I'm the oldest of six. After my mom had the baby, she got sick. Depression. Bad. Most days she stayed in her room with the door closed, and my dad worked in North Dakota

two weeks at a time, and that left me. Lunches at five-twenty. The baby at five-forty. Spelling words. Macaroni. Every night.

And at school I was a ghost. A teacher called me Hailey for two months and I never corrected her.

That fall my mom's illness got worse, and she had to go to a treatment program every day for a couple of weeks. I'm not going to say more than that, because it's her story, and she's doing so much better, and she's sitting right there. For two weeks it was just me running the house. I'd stand in the kitchen at night after everybody was asleep and look at her bedroom door, shut again, and wonder if she was ever really coming back out.

I told God He took my mom. I said it out loud in the garage, by the freezer, so nobody would hear me. "You took her. You took my mom and You left me with everything."

Nobody did this to us. Not my mom; being sick isn't a choice. Not my dad. Not me, even though I tried really hard to make it my fault. Then I blamed God, and then I blamed myself again, and somewhere in there I started feeling like nobody would even notice if I was gone.

I want to be really careful here, because some of you might feel that way right now. I never made a plan. I never tried anything. But that feeling was real, and it was heavy, and here's what I know now: that feeling lies. It told me nobody would notice. It was wrong. Somebody did.

Sister Quintanar noticed. She kept me after seminary in her car with a thermos of hot chocolate and asked how I was, really. Nobody had asked me that in a year. And I told her. Everything. She didn't panic. She asked me straight out if I was thinking about hurting myself, and I said no, and she said, "Thank you for telling me," and then she said she wasn't keeping it a secret, because she loved me too much. She called my dad. She took me to the counselor.

So please hear me. If you feel the way I felt, tell someone today. Not next week. Today. A parent, a leader, a counselor, a doctor. In the U.S. you can call or text 988, any time. Telling is not weak. Telling is how I'm standing here.

My dad came home early. He'd asked to come home the week my mom got worse, before anybody even called him. He just kept waking up in North Dakota feeling like he needed to be here. My mom finished her treatment and started getting better, slowly. Some days are still hard. But she's at the table now.

And Ruby walked over with half a tamale.

The thing that changed me inside, though, was the Hannah in the Bible. She was so sad she couldn't eat, and she went to the temple and prayed so hard the priest thought

she was drunk. And she told him, “I... have poured out my soul before the LORD” (1 Samuel 1:15). Poured out. Not a nice prayer. All of it.

So that’s how I pray now. I don’t fix it up first. I tell Jesus Christ the tired parts and the angry parts and the parts I’m ashamed of. I picture Him sitting on the old freezer in our garage, listening. And I feel warm. Not fixed. Warm. Like somebody finally picked up some of the stuff I was carrying.

I know He sees me. I was never invisible to Him, not for one day.

Brayden Kolstad

I’m not a church guy. I mean, I’m here. Back row, hood down tonight because the bishop asked. Baby steps.

Most of you know what I did sophomore year, so I’ll just say it. I threw the party. I screenshotted Owen’s private message and put it in front of forty people. And I spray-painted something about his dad’s ladder on the wall of the shop where his dad works. That was me. Nobody made me. I spent a weekend in a cinder-block room for it, and I’d do every hour of it again before I’d do that wall again.

So part of my mess was my own choices. A big part.

The other part was my family. My older brother Tyce hurt his shoulder playing football and got pills for it, and then he couldn’t stop. My parents fought about it every night. Whose fault. Like it was a game somebody could win. I used to sit in my car in our driveway with the engine off so I wouldn’t have to hear it.

I blamed Tyce. I blamed my parents. I blamed Owen, because he wrote something about Tyce that made my mom cry in the kitchen. And I blamed God, but mostly I just figured He wasn’t there.

Then in January, the middle of the night, the phone rang. Tyce had relapsed in Utah. He’d overdosed. The paramedics got there in time. I’m going to say that again, because I say it to myself almost every day: they got there in time.

My parents drove down to Salt Lake at three in the morning. They told me to stay and go to school, and my aunt came to stay with me. My mom sent me one picture from the ICU, my brother with a tube in him. I looked at it in my car in the driveway and thought, this is it. This is what it all comes to.

Owen found me out there that Monday, staring at the garage door with the engine running. He got in. And I said to him, before he could even finish his sentence, “Don’t tell me God’s got a plan.” I was ready to fight him.

He didn't argue. He said, "I wasn't gonna say that." Then he just sat there till the windows fogged.

A few days later Brother Thorsgaard came by. He runs Wednesday basketball. He sat on our couch, and he said, "I'm not going to tell you God's got a plan. I'm going to tell you the shortest verse in the Bible." And he said it. "Jesus wept" (John 11:35).

He told me Jesus knew He was about to bring His friend Lazarus back, and He still stood there and cried with Lazarus's sisters first. He didn't give them a speech. He cried with them.

I don't know why that got me. But it got me. I'd thought God was either fake or up there with a clipboard. I'd never thought of Him crying in a hallway.

After that it was a lot of small stuff. Thirty hours of community service with the guy whose dad I mocked. Six hundred cans of beans falling on us. Owen saying "I'm done being mad" on the steps of the stake center when I didn't deserve it. Wednesday basketball, where at the end we all sit on the floor for a prayer. At first I just bowed my head so I wouldn't look weird. Then one week I actually said something inside. Then out loud, in my car, in the driveway. Same driveway where I used to hide. Now I talk to Him there. "Hey. It's Brayden. Help Tyce today. Help my mom. Help me not be a jerk at work."

Tyce came home that June. He's still walking his road. He sat next to me this morning.

I still drive to see Ridge every other Sunday. Most of the time he doesn't let me in. I go anyway. Somebody kept showing up for me.

I'm not where Owen is. I'm in the back row. But I'm in the row.

I know Jesus is real, because I've watched Him come and get my brother, and then come back for me.

Where the Road Went, as Told by Abilene

Two seats in that chapel were empty that night, and I want to tell you where the two boys who might have sat in them were. I tell it with sorrow. I have no other way to tell it.

Kade Dunlavy was eighteen. Most of what I know of his year was given to me from above. He had come out of the state facility in the spring, a year after the crash on the canal bridge, and he had not gone back to school. He had a record from his case now, and it went with him into every interview. He was good with engines. He could still take one apart and put it back together with nothing left over. But no shop in the valley would hire him yet, not with that record. He slept on couches in Idaho Falls, a different one every

few weeks, and he was still using. His mother, Tanya, still worked nights at the truck stop. She had stopped expecting him home. His little sister Paisley, ten now, kept his old bike in the garage with both tires flat, and when anyone asked if she wanted it gone, she said no.

Owen still texted him every few months. Nothing long. “Hey, man. Thinking about you.” Or a picture of an engine at the shop with the words “you’d know what’s wrong with this.” Some of those messages Kade never opened. Some he did. I have seen the little word under them change to “Read,” and nothing come after it.

Ridge Kesselring was eighteen too. He had lost his left leg below the knee. He had spent weeks in a hospital in Salt Lake and months learning to walk on a leg made of carbon and steel, and the pain had come with him from the hospital, even the strange pain in a foot that was no longer there, and so had the pills that followed it. He was angry, and he had blocked nearly everyone. His mother, Deb, had quit her job to take care of him. She drove him to every fitting and every therapy appointment, and she slept light, listening.

Brayden still drove to the Kesselrings’ house every other Sunday. Most Sundays the door stayed shut. Once, in September, it opened, and Ridge let him in, and the two of them sat in the dim front room and watched a football game without saying a word for three hours. When Brayden left, Ridge said, “Whatever,” which from Ridge was almost a thank-you.

I had stood near both of those boys many times that year. I stood in the parking lot when Kade said God never did one thing for him. I stood on the dark county road the night the car went through the guardrail, in the cold and the red lights, and I wept, because I could not stop it. I was not sent to stop it. The choices that put those boys on that road were theirs, made one at a time over a long time, and the Lord does not take a person’s agency away, even when He weeps to watch it used that way.

I want you to hear this plainly. Neither of them is beyond reach. The door they kept walking past is still open. The Lord says of the people who turn from Him, “mine arm is lengthened out all the day long” (2 Nephi 28:32). All the day long. That arm was held out to Kade at fourteen, when his father drove away. It was held out at sixteen, in a church gym he would not walk into. It is held out now, on a couch in Idaho Falls.

But I will not pretend the road is short. It is so much longer now than it would have been. Repentance can heal a soul all the way through. It does not always undo what happened to a body, or erase a record, or give back the years. Ridge will not get his leg back in this life. Kade’s case will follow him for a long time. Those are the hard, quiet facts of the road they chose, and no one who loves them pretends otherwise.

That night, after the fireside, after the snow began, I stood a while outside a dark house on the edge of Sugar City where a light was on in one front window. Inside, a mother was folding laundry for a son who would not speak to her. I could do nothing there but watch, and wait, and pray for him myself.

I am not finished hoping. Neither is He.

Two Years After, as Told by Abilene

I was sent back to that house on the edge of Sugar City in March, the spring Ridge was eighteen. It was two years, almost to the night, since the car went through the guardrail.

Ridge was eighteen. For two years he had felt nothing. That is the word he would use later: numb. Not sad, not angry anymore, just nothing. He slept until noon. He played the same video game until two in the morning. He took what he took for the pain and some more for everything else. His prosthetic leaned against the wall by the door most days, because there was nowhere he wanted to walk to. His mother still knocked every morning. He still didn't answer.

On that night the house was dark except for the glow of his screen. Deb was asleep. A March wind was pushing at the windows the same way it had pushed on the night of the crash, and somewhere a loose gutter was banging.

The game froze. Just froze, the way they do, the picture stuck in the middle of a jump. Ridge hit the controller against his knee, and then he set it down, and the room went very quiet.

I watched his face. I cannot hear what the Holy Ghost says to anyone. That is not mine to hear. But I have stood near a great many people at the moment He speaks, and I know what it looks like from the outside. Ridge went still the way a deer goes still. He turned his head a little, as if someone had said his name from the hallway. His eyes filled. He did not wipe them.

He sat that way a long time. Then he said, out loud, to the ceiling, in a voice that cracked like a fourteen-year-old's, "Are You there?"

Nothing in the room changed that I could see. No light. No sound. Only the gutter banging and the wind. But something in Ridge's face changed. It was as if a window that had been painted shut for two years had been pried up an inch, and air came in.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do," he said.

He sat there. Then he reached for his phone. His thumb hovered over Brayden's name for almost a minute. I counted. Then he typed five words and sent them before he could take them back:

come by sunday. ill open

He did not finish the sentence. He did not need to.

I want you to know that I did nothing that night. I did not whisper. I did not push. That is not my work, and it never will be. I stood in the corner of a dark bedroom in Sugar City and watched a boy who had been numb for two years begin to hear God. And when he lay back on his bed, still with his face wet, I stood there and prayed for him myself, because that is what I am allowed to do.

It was the smallest thing. Five words in a text. A door opened an inch.

That Sunday, Brayden knocked, and Ridge Kesselring opened the door.

A Word from the Author

This is a work of fiction. The characters are invented, and their names are not meant to point to any real person. But every one of them stands for something real: situations I have lived through myself, or watched unfold in the lives of people around me. And I have lived long enough to see where those roads lead, and what the long-term consequences look like years down the line.

So here is my plea to you: get it right while you are young. Learn in your youth, so that you are spared the heavy consequences some people carry for the rest of their lives. God is always the answer. He is always your support. Life is hard enough. Don't try to walk the path alone.

As an author, I like to imagine what it would be like to gather all of these people together, and that is what the fireside in these pages is: seven of them at a pulpit, one at a time, telling how they had grown that year, and how they had been healed. What would *you* say?

What Ridge would tell you — Thirty Years Later



Brayden asked me to write this down. He said some kid who's sixteen might read it. So this is for you, whoever you are.

It's been thirty years since the crash. I'm forty-six. My left leg ends below the knee. I walk on a prosthetic, the sixth one they've fit me for, and I'll walk on one for the rest of my life. I want to say that first, so you don't think this story ends with me getting my leg back. It doesn't.

When I was sixteen, nothing was ever my fault. Bramhall had it out for me. Lusk had it out for me. Cops were always on us. The smoke bomb was Kade's idea. The car was Kade's idea. I said that so many times I believed it.

That night in March, I knew Kade had been taking pills all afternoon. I knew he only had a learner's permit. I knew the county road was ice. I got in anyway. I didn't put my seatbelt on. I never did. Those were my choices. Nobody made them for me.

After, in the hospital, I blamed Kade. Then my mom. Then the farmer's kid who didn't call 911 faster, which makes no sense, I know. Then God. When Owen and Brayden came to see me in Salt Lake, I told them, "Get out. Go pray about it." I thought that was the meanest thing I could say.

Then I went numb. That's the only word for it. For two years I didn't feel anything. I didn't go back to school. I slept till noon and played games till two in the morning, and I took the pills they gave me for the pain, and then I took more for everything else. My leg leaned against the wall by my door most days, because there was nowhere I wanted to go.

My mom quit her job to take care of me. Her name was Deb. She drove me to every fitting and every appointment and every pharmacy. She knocked on my door every single morning, and most mornings I didn't answer. I yelled at her more than I thanked her.

Brayden kept coming. Every other Sunday. Most of those Sundays I didn't let him in. He'd sit in his truck in our driveway for half an hour anyway and then drive home.

And then one night in March, two years after the crash, my game froze. Dumb, right? And the room got quiet, and in that quiet I heard something I hadn't heard in two years. Not a voice out loud. More like when somebody you love says your name from the next

room, and you know who it is before you turn around. It was warm. It was the first thing I'd felt in two years, and the only way I can describe it is that Someone was still there. Like He had never left the room.

I said out loud, "Are You there?" I was crying like a little kid. I didn't know what else to do, so I texted Brayden. *come by sunday. ill open*. I couldn't even finish the sentence.

That Sunday he knocked, and I opened the door. He looked at me like I'd grown another head. I said, "Will you pray with me?" He'd never prayed out loud in front of me. He got down on his knees on my bedroom carpet anyway and prayed for me by name. He said, "Please. He's been on my list for two years."

I'd never been on anybody's list.

There's a line Jesus tells about the prodigal son, the one who wasted everything. It says that one day, out in the pigpen, "**he came to himself**" (Luke 15:17). That's what happened to me. I came to myself. I quit blaming Kade, and my mom, and the cops, and God. I said it out loud: "I got in the car. I didn't buckle. I took the pills after. That was me." It was the hardest thing I've ever said, and it was the first time in two years I could breathe.

It wasn't fast. Getting off the pills was the hardest thing I've ever done, harder than learning to walk again. My bishop got me into the Church's addiction recovery group on Thursday nights. I sat in a circle of folding chairs with a retired trucker, a nurse, and a kid my age, and we told the truth to each other once a week. I went back to school and finished. I started going to church with Brayden. I started reading a few verses every night, even when I didn't feel like it, especially when I didn't feel like it.

Then I enrolled at BYU-Idaho, right there in Rexburg, a few blocks from Henry's Fork. I was the guy who limped to class. I didn't care. I studied hard for the first time in my life. In a physics lab my second year, I met a girl named Sue who laughed at my jokes even when they were bad. I told her about my leg on our first date and about the pills on our third. She stayed anyway. We were married in the Rexburg temple. Brayden was there. So was Owen. So was my mom, in the front row, crying harder than anybody.

I graduated with a degree in exercise science, and today I help fit people for prosthetics: kids born without a hand, soldiers, farmers who got caught in a combine. I tell every one of them the same thing: "You're going to walk out of here."

And when I was thirty, I ran a marathon. All 26.2 miles, on a carbon spring blade, St. George, Utah. It took me five hours and eleven minutes. Brayden ran the last mile next to me, and Sue and our two kids were at the finish line holding a sign that said *GO DAD GO*. I crossed it and fell down on the grass and laughed and cried at the same time. There's a

verse I wrote on the inside of my running shoe: “they shall run, and not be weary” (Isaiah 40:31). I was plenty weary. But I ran.

Here’s the part I’ve never told anybody until now.

When I was fourteen, my grandma Kesselring talked me into getting my patriarchal blessing. She was the only one in my family who still went to church, and she drove me there most Sundays that year, mostly by bribing me with breakfast. The patriarch was an old man named Brother Pendergrass, with big farmer’s hands. He put them on my head, and I sat there waiting for something big.

It never came. Not the way I wanted. The main thing he said, the best I can remember it, was that if I would just do the small things, the things I already knew I should be doing, then many of the pitfalls and obstacles of this life would be of no concern to me. There wasn’t much else. A few lines about my family. That was about it.

I remember walking out to Grandma’s car thinking, that’s it? Later, kids at church would tell each other what their blessings said. They got the magnificent stuff. Missions. Great callings. Big promises. And I was jealous. I’m not proud of it, but I was. Mine sounded like the instructions on a cereal box. I folded my copy and stuck it in a drawer, and I quit going to church that next year.

My mom died the winter I was thirty-three. Her heart. Cleaning out her things, I found a copy of my blessing in her nightstand. She’d kept it there all those years. I read it at her kitchen table, and I sat there and cried, because I finally understood it.

It was the truest thing anyone ever said to me.

The small things. Saying my prayers. Going to church. Reading a few verses. Choosing my friends. Not taking the first vape. Not getting in the car. Buckling the seatbelt. Those were the things I knew I should be doing, all along. The pitfalls weren’t some mystery. I fell into every single one of them, because I skipped the small things that would have walked me right past them. And when I finally climbed out, it wasn’t anything big that got me out. It was the small things, one day at a time. Alma said it a long time ago: “by small and simple things are great things brought to pass” (Alma 37:6). I used to think that was something you stitch on a pillow. Now I think it’s the whole map.

And I can’t stop putting my life next to Kade’s.

We came from the same place. The same streets. The same Primary class, where neither of us sat still. The same small-engines bench in eighth grade. The same parking lot, the same party, the same smoke bomb. His dad drove off to Nevada. Mine was never around to drive off. We both decided God didn’t care about kids like us. Same start, same excuses, same road. I was in the same car.

It wasn't that one of us was good and one of us was bad. It was that, two years after the crash, when the quiet came, I finally said yes. Kade never did, not on this earth.

The spring I was thirty-one, Paisley called to tell me he was dead. A highway in Nevada. A curve. A bar. Four kids coming home from their prom in the other car. They all lived, thank God. But the boy driving, Dawson Teague, seventeen years old, will never walk again. The other three were hurt. Kade caused it.

When she told me, I felt that old pull to blame somebody, and the only name left was his. I didn't. I thought about those four kids in their dance clothes, and I thought about the blessing in my mom's nightstand, and I sat on the edge of my bed and shook. Every night since, I've said Kade's name when I pray. And Dawson's. And his family's. "Please, wherever they are. Please."

I'm not going to tell you everything got fixed. I'll walk on a fake leg till the day I die. My mom spent two of her years knocking on the door of a son who wouldn't answer, and I can't give her those back. I wasted two years being numb in a back bedroom. I can't get those back either.

But I got the rest. Jesus didn't give me my leg back. He gave me back myself.

One more thing, and then I'll quit.

High school is hard. Friends come and go. Some of them turn on you. Some of them you turn on. You make a friend in October and lose him by March. A few of them turn out to be lifelong, like Brayden, who I treated like dirt and who kept knocking anyway. A lot of them are short and temporary, and you never see them again after graduation, and it turns out that's okay.

When you're standing in that hallway at sixteen, it feels like forever. Every bad week drags. Every rumor feels like it will follow you the rest of your life. You think, this is it, this is who I am, this is how it's always going to be. I thought that. I thought the parking lot at Henry's Fork was the whole world.

It isn't. I'm forty-six now, and I can tell you those years are so short. Four years. Then they're over, and you walk out into the rest of your life, and most of what felt huge in that hallway you won't even remember. I mean, think back to fifth or sixth grade. Did it last that long? Was it hard? Easy? Well, it's sort of like that.

If I could reach back and grab one kid by the shoulders, I'd tell him to look down the road, even five years. Just five. Hold on. Do the small things. Don't make one bad night into a whole life. It gets better, and it gets better sooner than you think.

If you're fourteen and your patriarchal blessing doesn't sound like much, read it again. If it tells you to do the small things, do them. They are not small.

If you're sixteen and you're blaming everybody, I was you. The door I kept walking past was open the whole time. I wish I'd gone through it at sixteen, before the car. I came through it at eighteen, limping, but I came through.

Paisley called again last week. She's been doing her family history. She found Kade on the tree, and she wants to take his name to the temple, and she asked if I would come. I told her I'll be there if I have to run every mile of it.

The door's still open. I checked. It's open for Kade. It's open for you.

AS TOLD BY ASHER

Kade — The Long Road and the Gray Place



ASHER • A WORK OF FICTION

Prom Night Outside Winnemucca

“If you play that song one more time,” Brynn said from the back seat, “I am walking home. In these shoes. Forty miles.”

“It’s our song,” Mason said.

“It is not our song. You picked it in the parking lot ten minutes ago.”

“Which makes it our song,” Mason said. “That’s how songs work.”

In the front seat, Lacey laughed so hard she had to hold on to her corsage, a little bunch of white roses on an elastic band around her wrist. Dawson Teague kept both hands on the wheel. He was seventeen, and he had promised his dad, standing in the driveway five hours earlier, that he would drive like a grandma. He was driving like a grandma. He was also grinning.

It was a Saturday night in May. The prom was over. The four of them had danced until the lights came up in the gym, and then they had stood in the parking lot for half an hour taking pictures under the one good streetlight, and now they were driving home the long way, south of Winnemucca on a two-lane highway, with the windows cracked and the desert smelling of sage after a little rain. Lacey was scrolling through the photos on her phone and holding it up so the back seat could see. There was one of Dawson trying to pin a flower on Mason and stabbing himself in the thumb. There was one where all four of them were laughing so hard nobody’s eyes were open.

“That one,” Lacey said. “That one’s going on my wall.”

Ahead of them, the road bent around a low brown hill.

Headlights came around the curve, and they were in the wrong lane.

Dawson saw them first. He said, “Hold on,” very calmly, the way his dad had taught him, and he pulled hard to the right.

I will come back to that curve. But if I tell you only the end of a song, you will think it was always sad.

My name is Asher. If you have read this far, you have met me before. I was a singer in the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem long ago, in the days of a wicked king named Manasseh, and I died on the temple steps. Now I live among the dead, on the other side of the veil, and I am one of the messengers sent to teach the spirits who wait in the spirit prison. I go only where I am sent, under the Lord's own commission (D&C 138:30). I know what is in a heart only when the Father wills it.

The man driving the other car was thirty-one years old. His name was Kade Dunlavy. You knew him at sixteen; Abilene told you that part. I was given the rest later, when I was given Kade's name. So let me tell you the rest of it, as far as it has gone, and then a little farther.

Some of what follows I was permitted to see for myself. Some of it I was taught by those who preside over the work, who keep us informed. I will tell you only what was said and done, and I will tell you when I am guessing.



ASHER • A WORK OF FICTION

The Speech He Always Had Ready

Kade came out of the state facility in the spring, a year after the crash on the canal bridge. He was seventeen. His arm had healed crooked, just as he wrote to Owen. When he was cold, it ached, and he rubbed it without knowing he did.

He did not go back to school. He slept on couches in Idaho Falls, a different one every few weeks. He applied at four shops. At every one, a man behind a counter looked at the box Kade had checked on the form, then looked at him, and said, "We'll call you." None of them called.

By nineteen, he had found another way to use his hands. He knew engines better than almost anyone in the valley. He knew which part under a car was worth the most. He took them off cars in apartment lots and church parking lots, and sold them to a man who did not ask questions. Most of the money went to pills. Everything he was good at, he was good at in the wrong direction.

He was caught on a cold night behind a grocery store, on his back on the frozen pavement, with a police officer's flashlight in his eyes. He was twenty. He went to prison for the first time.

He came out. He found work at a tire shop and lasted five weeks, until he fought a customer in the parking lot over something nobody could remember the next day. He drank more. He used again, buying pills from anyone who would sell them and paying

with whatever he had stolen that week. He was arrested for stealing tools out of a contractor's truck, and then for a fight, and then for driving without a license. Every line on his record was a door some employer would close before he ever knocked.

And every time Kade stood in front of a judge, or a parole officer, or a new cellmate, he had the same speech ready. I have sung the psalms of kings, but I have never heard anything practiced as often as that speech.

"The judge was crooked. My lawyer didn't care. The cops had it in for me since I was sixteen. My old man ruined me. And God, if He's even up there, never did one thing for me."

He said it the way some people say a prayer they learned as children, without hearing the words anymore.

Through all of it, people kept knocking.

His sister Paisley wrote to him in every prison he was sent to. She was eight when he went to the state facility, and she wrote him in purple marker with drawings of their dog in the margins. She was a grown woman in a nursing uniform when he went in the last time, and her letters still came, every month, on lined paper, always ending the same way: *I still have your bike. Love, Pais.*

Owen Hadlock sent a text on Kade's birthday every year, to whatever number Kade had that year. Some years it bounced back. *Happy birthday, man. Thinking about you.* From his mission in Brazil, he sent it through Paisley, and she printed it and mailed it.

Bishop Kenley was released when Kade was twenty. He kept mailing a Christmas card every December, wherever Kade was, in his own slow handwriting. Most of them said only, *We have not forgotten you. You are welcome home.*

Kade kept some of those letters and cards. When he was moved from one cell to another, he carried them in a paper sack. He answered almost none.

His mother, Tanya, drove eight hours once to visit him in a prison in Nevada. She sat across a metal table from him for the whole visiting hour, in her truck-stop jacket, with her hands folded. He spent the hour talking about his lawyer. When the guard called time, she stood and said, "I pray for you every night, Kade. Every single night." He looked at the wall.

When she walked out to her car, I am told she sat in the parking lot a long time before she could turn the key.

I do not want you to read this as a story about a bad man. It is not. It is a story about a boy who was hurt, and who decided early that because he was hurt, nothing that came after was his fault. That decision did more damage than the hurt ever did.

There was a morning he almost set it down.



ASHER • A WORK OF FICTION
Six Fifty-Two on a Monday

Seven springs later, Kade came out of prison for the third time. He was twenty-four. He rode a bus back to Idaho Falls with his paper sack of letters and forty dollars.

Owen found out. I think Paisley told him. I was permitted to hear the call he made. Owen called the number she gave him, and for the first time in years, Kade picked up.

Owen was twenty-four too. He was married now, with a little boy, and he ran the service bays at Ostergard Automotive. Brayden Kolstad worked the bay next to his.

“I talked to Dale,” Owen said. “He knows about your record. All of it. He said if you show up, you’re hired. Monday. Seven a.m. You’d be on my crew. Nobody cares about anything except can you fix a car, and you can fix a car better than any of us.”

“Why would you do that?” Kade said finally.

“Because you carried me in small engines,” Owen said. “Remember? I’m just paying you back.”

Kade did not say yes. He did not say no. He hung up.

On Monday morning, at six-fifty-two, a borrowed car pulled into the edge of the Ostergard parking lot and stopped by the fence with the engine running. I was permitted to see that Monday morning too. I stood in the cold with the frost still on the weeds, and I watched.

Kade sat behind the wheel in a clean shirt. He had shaved. His hands were shaking a little on the wheel, and he held on tighter to make them stop.

At six-fifty-five, the big bay door went up with a rattle. Owen stood inside in gray coveralls, a coffee cup in one hand. He did not see the car by the fence. Brayden came up beside him and said something, and Owen laughed. Behind them, against the back wall, stood the same red rolling tool chest Kade used to sit on when he was five years old, swinging his feet and asking Steve Hadlock what every single part was for. Kade looked at it for a long time.

I could not see into his heart. But I could see his face. It looked like a boy at the edge of a swimming pool on the first warm day of summer, wanting to jump, afraid of how cold the water will be.

He reached for the door handle. His fingers touched it.

Then his jaw set, the way it used to set when he was sixteen. He took his hand off the door. He put the car in reverse.

At seven-ten, Owen walked out to the edge of the lot and looked up and down the street. Then he went back inside and told Dale, "Maybe next week."

Kade did not come next week. That same week he caught a ride south, to Nevada, to find his father.

He found Rick Dunlavy in a trailer outside Winnemucca, a thin, tired man with a cough. Rick looked at his son a long time and said, "Well. Look what the wind blew in." He did not say he was sorry. I am told that later that night, in a bar, near midnight, Rick laughed and slapped the table and said the old line, the one he used to say every time something broke at their house: "You can't fix a Dunlavy. We come off the line bent."

And Kade laughed too. From that night on, he lived as if he believed it.

He stayed in Winnemucca. He fought in a bar there over nothing, and went back in. He came out and drank with his father some more. Rick died the winter Kade was thirty, in that same trailer, alone. Kade found him. He added his father's death to his speech.

So now I will take you back to the curve, as I promised.

Dawson pulled hard to the right. He almost made it. Two seconds either way, and the two cars would have passed in the dark.

I will not tell you what it sounded like. I will tell you that afterward the desert was very quiet, except for the song, still playing from somewhere, the one Mason said was theirs. Lacey's phone lay face up on the floor of the car, the screen still lit with a picture of four kids laughing so hard nobody's eyes were open. The white roses had come off her wrist.

A trucker came over the hill a few minutes later. He called for help. He went from one kid to the next, talking to them the whole time, the way the farmer's son once talked to Ridge on the canal bank: "They're coming. Hey. Look at me. They're coming."

They came. Lacey lived, with a leg broken in two places. Mason and Brynn lived, and spent much of that summer in a hospital in Reno, and walked out of it slowly, holding each other up.

Dawson Teague lived. His back was broken, and he would never walk again.

Kade did not live.

In Winnemucca, at twenty minutes past one, phones began to ring in dark houses. Dawson's mother answered hers on the first ring, because she had been waiting up. Her lock screen was a picture she had taken that same evening in the front yard: her son and Lacey on the porch steps, Lacey holding up her wrist to show off the white roses, Dawson looking at Lacey instead of the camera. I was permitted to see her answer the phone. Then she drove all night to Reno. I will not tell you more than that. Some things belong only to a mother and to God.

I want to be plain about one thing, because Kade could never be plain about it. He caused it. Not the judge, not the cops, not his father, not the bartender who had offered twice to drive him home, and not four kids driving home from a dance. The car was on the wrong side of the line because Kade had put it there, with his own hands on the wheel. There is no one else to hand this one to.

I do not say it to be cruel. A person cannot be forgiven for something he will not admit he did. That is the door. It is the only door. And the handle is on the inside.

Tanya drove to Nevada one more time and brought her son home. I was permitted to be there when they buried him in Sugar City on a windy afternoon. Bishop Kenley, white-haired now, spoke at the grave. Owen and Brayden stood at the back in their work shirts. Paisley held her mother's hand and did not cry until the very end, and then she could not stop. The night before, she had called Ridge Kesselring, whom she had not spoken to in years, and told him. What Ridge did with that news, you have already read in his own words.



ASHER • A WORK OF FICTION

The List

I was sent to meet him.

The spirit prison is not fire. It is gray. It is dim, like a valley an hour after sunset, all shapes and no colors. It is crowded and restless, with a hurry in the air, a pressure to argue and pace and never be still. Spirits who did not know God, or who knew Him and turned away, wait there and are taught, and they still choose. Agency does not end at the grave. Neither does mercy.

Kade was standing in the gray with his fists clenched, rubbing his left arm, though in that place it was not crooked anymore. He did not seem to notice.

"Who are you?" he said.

"My name is Asher. I was sent to you."

"Sent." He laughed, the short laugh with nothing in it. "By who?"

"By the Lord."

"Oh, *now* He sends somebody." Other spirits turned to look. "Where was He? Where was He when my dad drove off and left me standing in the driveway? Where was He on that bridge? Where was He when I couldn't get one single job? Where was He tonight?"

Then he began the list. His father. His mother, who worked nights. The teachers at Henry's Fork. The vice principal. The cops. The judge in Rexburg. The shops that never called. Ridge, who should have buckled his seatbelt and who told everyone in the valley it was Kade's fault. The bartender, who should have taken his keys. The county, for the curve. And God. God for every single item.

I did not interrupt. A man has to empty his hands before he can hold anything new, and Kade's hands were very full.

When he finally ran out of breath, I said, "I asked it too, you know. 'Where was He?'"

He squinted at me.

"They killed me on the steps of His own house," I said. "I would not sing for the king's false altars, so the king's men came for me one morning. And the last thing I thought was, *Where are You?*"

"So what's the answer?"

"I learned it after," I said. "He was there the whole time. He does not always stop what men choose to do. But He never once left."

"That's a church answer."

"It is the only one I have."

Then I told him what I had been permitted to tell him that day. "The other car," I said. "Four kids, coming home from a dance. All four of them lived."

Kade went very still. His mouth opened. His hands came unclenched. I held my breath the way I used to before the first note of a psalm, and I thought, *Now*.

"But," he said. He could hear it in my voice.

"The boy who was driving. His name was Dawson. He was seventeen. He will never walk again."

For one moment his whole face broke. Then it closed like a door, the way it had closed at a gas station in Rexburg when he was sixteen.

“What were four kids doing out on that road at one in the morning?” he said. “Where were their parents? Why didn’t he get out of the way?” His voice climbed. “So now I’m the monster. Everybody’s going to say I’m the monster.”

He turned and walked away from me, fast, into the crowd, rubbing his arm.



ASHER • A WORK OF FICTION
The Song He Stopped For

I went back. Whatever else you remember from this chapter, remember that. The messengers go back.

I went back for months, and then for years. Kade would see me coming and start walking. Many there do, back and forth, like a dog along a fence, as if walking fast enough could get them somewhere. “I didn’t ask for any of this,” he said, so often that the spirits near him stopped listening. He would not forgive his father, or the judge, or Ridge, or God. And he would not say Dawson’s name.

So I stopped arguing, and I sang. A song carries farther than an argument in that place. I learned that long ago, singing across the great gulf to my own brother, who would not listen to me either.

Most often I sang a psalm from the cave of David, the prayer of a trapped man: “Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name” (Psalm 142:7). I sang it to the old tune my father taught me on the temple steps when I was ten. I always stopped there, after the first line.

Kade pretended not to hear. But one day, in the middle of it, he stopped walking. He stood with his back to me, hands in his pockets. When I finished, he started walking again. The next time I sang, he stopped again.

That was the first crack. A hairline crack, like the first thin line across a phone screen, top-left corner to the middle. But light can come through a crack that small.

Once, Lowell Hadlock came with me. He stood beside me in the gray, in a white shirt, looking very much like a grandpa. “Kade,” he said. “You won’t remember me. Lowell Hadlock. Owen’s grandpa. I was visiting my son’s ward one Sunday when you were twelve, sitting on the second row. You tripped on the edge of the carpet and dropped a whole tray of bread, and before it hit the floor you caught every single piece. Half the chapel almost clapped.”

“I dropped it,” Kade said flatly.

"You caught it," Lowell said. "Every piece. That's what I remember."

Kade walked away. But Lowell told me later, with tears on his face, that he had seen Kade's hand move at his side, as if it remembered the tray.

Then, nearly two years after he came, Kade walked up to me on his own. He looked at the ground.

"Paisley," he said. "Is she okay?"

I was permitted to tell him. "She is a nurse in Idaho Falls, on the children's floor. She is married. She has a little boy named Micah, and he is learning to ride a bike. Your bike. She had new tires put on it."

Kade's throat moved. He said nothing for a long time.

Then I told him one more thing I had been permitted to see. I do not carry prayers. Prayers go to the Father, and to no one else. But I had been allowed to see a man in a quiet house in Rexburg, sitting on the edge of his bed at the end of the day, his prosthetic leg leaning against the wall, saying out loud, to the ceiling, a name.

"Ridge prays for you," I said. "Out loud. Every night."

Kade's head came up. "Ridge doesn't pray."

"He does now."

His mouth worked. Then he said, very quietly, "What's the rest of it? The song. You always stop."

"I will sing you the rest," I said, "when you are ready for it."

He walked away. But he walked slowly this time.



ASHER • A WORK OF FICTION

The Firsts

He ran out of names on an ordinary day, if any day in that place is ordinary.

I found him sitting, which I had never seen. He was sitting on the gray ground with his arms around his knees, the way a boy sits on a curb. He did not get up when I came. He did not start the list. I sat down beside him and waited.

"I've been going back," he said at last. "Back and back. Like taking an engine apart. You keep pulling pieces till you find the one that failed first."

I said nothing. I have learned when a song should wait.

“Everybody thinks it started with the pills,” he said. “Or my dad. It didn’t. I keep going back, and it starts sophomore year. The parking lot at Henry’s Fork. Ridge handed me a vape in his truck, and I took it. That’s the first one.” He held up one finger. “It wasn’t a big deal. That’s what I thought. It was nothing.”

He held up a second finger. “Then Brayden’s Halloween party. His mom’s pills, in the kitchen, by the sink. I just picked them up. Like a salt shaker. Owen saw me. I winked at him.” His voice cracked on the word. “I winked. That bottle lasted two weeks. Then I went looking for more. Bathrooms at friends’ houses. Somebody’s grandma’s medicine cabinet. A guy behind the tire shop. My own mom’s purse, once, after she had a tooth pulled. That first bottle was the door.”

A third finger. “And that same night, a can out of the cooler. My first drink. Everybody had one. I didn’t even like it.”

He looked at his three fingers for a long time.

“You know what I figured out?” he said. “All three of those were the same year. The year I stopped talking to Him at all. I didn’t even quit Him loud. I’d already stopped going to church at fourteen. Then I just stopped talking to Him. Not even ‘thanks for the food.’ Not even that.” He shook his head. “I took God out, and I let those three in, all in one year. Like I had a hole and I filled it with the first junk I found.”

“And they did not stay small,” I said.

“No.” He laughed, but there was no meanness in it now, only tiredness. “That’s the thing nobody tells you. The first time, it is you deciding. After that, they don’t ask. The second one doesn’t beg you. It tells you. *More*. And you give it more, and it says *more*. And with each one, the addiction strengthens. And then you’re twenty and you’re on your back on the frozen pavement behind a grocery store, and it’s still saying *more*. And you’re thirty-one and the bartender’s holding out his hand for your keys, and it’s saying *more*.” He pressed both fists against his eyes. “I thought I was the one driving. I hadn’t been driving since I was sixteen.”

He was quiet a long time.

“It wasn’t my dad,” he said. “My dad left. That was bad. That was real. But he didn’t hand me the vape. He didn’t put the pills in my pocket. He didn’t pour anything. He didn’t put my car on the wrong side of the line.” He swallowed. “It was me. Every first one was me. And every one after that was me too.”

Then he said the name. He had never said it before.

“Dawson.”

He said it the way a man lifts something heavy he has refused to look at for a long time. He did not set it down. He held it. He began to shake.

"He was seventeen," Kade said. "He was just going home. He didn't do anything wrong. He was just going home, and now he can't walk." His voice broke all the way. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

He could not stop saying it. I have seen this before. Men who never once said "I'm sorry" to a living soul find, when they finally see, that they cannot stop saying it.

I did not tell him it was all right, because it was not all right. A boy would never walk again. I only stayed. When he was too tired to say it anymore, I sang the first line of the psalm again, very softly, and he did not walk away.



ASHER • A WORK OF FICTION

Dawson

You might think that was the end of his struggle. It was the beginning of a harder one.

Blaming everyone else is easy. Forgiving yourself is the steepest climb there is. For a long time after that day, Kade could not believe that anyone would ever forgive him: not Dawson's mother, not Lacey, not God. He believed it so hard that he would not let anyone try. "Don't," he would say, when I began to speak of the Savior. "You don't get it. He shouldn't. Nobody should."

And then he learned what Dawson had done with his life.

Dawson Teague had been a faithful boy. He went to seminary before school in Winnemucca. He had his mission papers half filled out on his desk. He spent that whole summer in a hospital in Reno, and then most of a year learning to live in a wheelchair: how to get in and out of a car, how to get up a curb, how to be patient with people who did not know where to look. Some days he was angry. Some days he cried. But he kept praying, and he kept going.

He finished his mission papers in that chair. He served a service mission close to home. He became a teacher. He married a girl from his ward, and they had children, and on Sundays he sat at the end of a pew where his chair would fit.

And one fast Sunday, years after the crash, Dawson stayed in his chair at the front of a little chapel in Winnemucca and said into the microphone that he had forgiven the man who hit him. "I don't know where he is," he said. "But I hope he knows. I don't want him carrying this. The Savior already carried it."

I was permitted to tell Kade that, because he asked. He could hardly bear it. “He shouldn’t,” he said. “He can’t mean it.”

“He meant it,” I said.

Kade studied the Savior’s words in that place the way he used to study an engine, one part at a time. He learned that the Lord says, “mine arm is lengthened out all the day long” (2 Nephi 28:32), and that the day does not end at the grave.

But he still could not take hold of that arm. Something stood in the way, and it was Kade himself.

The first step was the hardest one. He had to stop hating himself.

For years he had carried that night on the curve like a stone in his chest. He thought carrying it was the least he owed. “If I put it down,” he told me once, “it’s like it didn’t matter.”

I told him it mattered more than he knew. That was why Someone else had already carried it. The Savior suffered for that night in Gethsemane, every second of it, long before Kade ever got behind the wheel. Holding on to the stone did not give Dawson back his legs. It only told the Savior that what He had suffered was not enough.

Kade sat with that for a long time. Then one day he said, very quietly, “If Dawson can forgive me, and He already paid for it... maybe I’m allowed to stop.” It was not a feeling. It was a choice. He forgave himself. He did not forget; he would always remember that curve. But he stopped beating himself with it, and for the first time there was room in him for something else.

Then he did what he had never once done in his whole life on earth. He fell to his knees.

I heard every word, because he said them out loud. He made no excuses. He did not blame his father, or Ridge, or the pills, or the road. He named it all, one thing after another: the first vape, the first pill and every bottle after it, the first drink, the stealing, the fights, the lies to his mother, the job he walked away from at 6:52 in the morning, the night on the curve, the boy in the other car. After each one he said, “I did that.” When he had nothing left to name, he cried out the words a young man named Alma once cried in his own dark place: “O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me” (Alma 36:18).

That is what repentance is. Kade had felt sorry for years. Feeling sorry is not the same as turning around. The Lord gave the pattern plainly: “he will confess them and forsake them” (D&C 58:43). Kade confessed. Then he forsook them, every day, again and again, until the wanting faded and did not come back.

The answer did not come in a flash. It came the way snow melts off the hills in spring, a little more every day. The gray around him thinned. He began to sing with me, the first line at least. And the Lord kept His promise, the one He makes to every soul who turns: **"he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more"** (D&C 58:42).

One day Kade walked up out of the gray to the near shore, the edge of the light, where those who have accepted the gospel wait. Scripture says the dead who repent "will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God" (D&C 138:58).

Kade had been baptized when he was eight. He had passed the sacrament as a deacon. That covenant still stood. But he had never been ordained an elder, and he had never gone to the house of the Lord to receive his endowment. Those ordinances belong to the earth, just like baptism. They need a body, and Kade did not have one. Someone on earth would have to stand in for him.

He waited a long time. Waiting was new to him, and he got good at it. And while he waited, he learned one more hard thing: how to accept a gift. For a man who had spent his life taking, that was not easy. He could not earn what was coming. When the day came, he could only say yes.



ASHER • A WORK OF FICTION

One Word in the Temple

It was a Saturday morning sixteen years after the night in Nevada, in the Rexburg Idaho Temple.

I was permitted to see it, and I was not alone. Lowell Hadlock stood beside me. A little behind us stood Kade.

Paisley sat in white along the wall of a small, quiet room. She was forty now, with a few gray hairs of her own. She had found her brother's name on the family tree herself, and carried the name to the temple. Beside her sat her son, Micah, nineteen now and waiting on his mission call; he had stood in for his uncle that day. Next to them sat Tanya, past seventy, her hands folded the way they had been folded across a metal table in a prison long ago.

Beside them sat Ridge Kesselring, his wife Sue next to him, his left leg stretched out in front of him. He had asked to come. There was gray in his beard, and he did not take his eyes off the front of the room.

Brayden Kolstad stood near the door in white, with Owen Hadlock beside him, gray at the temples now. Brayden kept clearing his throat.

And just inside the door, where there was room for his chair, sat a man of thirty-three in white: Dawson Teague. Paisley had written to him. He had driven up from Nevada.

After the proxy ordinance in the temple was finished, Kade said one word out loud, so that Lowell and I heard it.

“Yes.”

That was his choice, and he made it freely. No ordinance is forced on anyone, living or dead. He took it.

I have watched light come into a great many faces. I have never seen it come into one that had been dark so long. It did not come all at once. It came the way the sun comes up behind the hills east of Rexburg, gold on the top of the ridge first, and then down, and down, until the whole valley is full. His hands, which had once held a car on the wrong side of a line, were open.

Lowell was weeping. So was I. I am not ashamed of it. And by the door, Dawson Teague bowed his head and wept too.

When it was over, they gathered in the celestial room, a quiet white room full of light. Nobody said much. Paisley held her son’s hand and cried without making a sound. Brayden whispered, “That was good,” and had to clear his throat twice to get it out. Owen put one hand on Micah’s shoulder and did not say anything at all.

And Ridge bowed his head and said, very quietly, “Thank you.” I did not hear to whom. I think I know.

The ordinance did not do Kade’s repenting for him. He had done that himself, on his knees in the gray, years before. The ordinance was the Lord’s answer to it. The Prophet Joseph Smith wrote that “they without us cannot be made perfect” (D&C 128:15), and neither can we without them. Kade could not be there in the flesh. Micah could. Paisley could carry the name. The living reach back, the dead reach forward, and in the house of the Lord the Savior’s own work is done.

Kade looked at me then. His face was wet and shining.

“Asher,” he said. “The rest of the song.”

So I sang it. I sang the whole verse, the way my father taught me on the temple steps when I was ten, and this time I did not stop after the first line:

“Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name: the righteous shall compass me about; for thou shalt deal bountifully with me” (Psalm 142:7).

The righteous did compass him about. Lowell on one side. Me on the other, singing. And on the far side of the veil, a sister in white, a nephew in white, a mother with her hands folded, an old friend who once ran a marathon on a leg of carbon and steel, another old friend clearing his throat, a man in a wheelchair who had forgiven him long ago, and a gray-haired mechanic who had once been told, *Run home, church boy*, and who had come back for him anyway.

Kade Dunlavy came home.

It took thirty-one years on the earth and sixteen more in the gray. It took a sister who never let go of a bike, and a friend who never stopped texting, and a singer who kept singing the same line. It took the Savior, whose arm was out the whole time.

It is out for you too. You do not have to take the long way.



