

CHAPTER ONE

James Fulton is sweating like a sinner in church.

Which, of course, is exactly what he is.

All of us – the older kids my age and the mothers and the fathers and even the little toddlers whose feet don't touch the floor yet – all of us congregants of Calvary Christian Church of Clayton watch wide-eyed and silent from our metal folding chairs as James shifts his weight from one barrel-thick leg to the other, his ruddy face covered in a slick coat of perspiration. He squeezes his hands together as he sways back and forth, and a little map of sweat starts to form on the front of his yellow polyester short-sleeved shirt. Pastor Garrett stands off to the side, clutching his enormous Bible and nodding along with everything James says.

'I'm here before you with a purified heart,' James continues, looking at his feet. His white blond hair is newly shorn, making his flushed face seem even more scarlet. 'I know I need to live radically for the Lord again. And I'm asking you to help me

walk with God again because I know the punishment for sin is separation from the Lord and eternity in hell.’ Exhaling shakily, he makes the briefest of eye contact with the congregation before gazing back down at his feet.

My four-year-old sister Sarah is sitting in my lap, and she turns her little head to look at me and whispers too loudly, ‘Rachel, what’d that boy do?’

People shift in their seats around us at her question, but nobody says anything. ‘Shh, Sarah,’ I whisper back. ‘He’s talking about how much he loves Jesus.’

What James Fulton did was gratify the desires of the flesh, but I can’t say that to Sarah. And I can’t tell her that he looked at pictures of naked women on a computer, and he got caught, and I can’t tell her that he just got back from two weeks at Journey of Faith, a camp in east Texas where he spent hours in prayer and physical labor and repentance. Sarah’s too little to understand about Journey of Faith.

She won’t be too little to understand for much longer, of course. But for now, at least, it doesn’t take much to distract her.

It seems one or two of us are sent to Journey of Faith every few years. By us I mean the older kids at Calvary Christian. Some are as young as thirteen or fourteen when they’re sent away, and they always leave suddenly, spirited off by Pastor Garrett or a church elder, leaving the rest of us to consider the rumors we’ve heard of what Journey of Faith is all about. Long, forced hikes, little sleep, and endless,

backbreaking physical work, along with hours spent alone studying Scripture. Those of us who've never gone put the pieces together from testimonies like the one James is delivering now. We know that Journey of Faith is a place where life is hard, but the Lord is supposed to work on your heart and transform you.

Everyone comes back looking like James.

His cheeks are cherry red, and the shame he carries radiates off him. He hasn't come out and explicitly stated his sin, but he knows we must know about how he's strayed. He knows we know about his stumbling block. We've learned about the sins that send some of us to Journey of Faith in the same way we've learned about the camp itself. In whispers and bits of whispers. In requests for prayers during youth fellowship and at evening Bible studies.

In the Scripture used by those who've fallen upon their return to the flock.

'So in closing,' James continues, 'I want to say that the Lord is leading me to share with you this verse from Psalms, a verse that the pastor at Journey of Faith shared with me in one of our sweet fellowships.' I can tell he has practiced this part many times from the way his voice picks up speed and volume. "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto, according to thy word. With my whole heart have I sought thee. O let me not wander from thy commandments". There's a ripple of nodding heads, and at last James makes his way back to his row to join his parents.

His mother squeezes him around his broad, beefy shoulders and his father nods approvingly, and I see how James smiles at them, a quick upturned smile that disappears as quickly as it arrives.

Pastor Garrett makes a commanding motion toward the corner where Mrs. Carter sits at the upright piano, and as I hear the opening notes of 'It's Through the Blood', I lift my little sister in my arms and stand up to get ready to sing.

After the service ends, all of us spill out on to the weedy patch of grass and gravel in front of the church. I put Sarah down and watch her speed off and start racing around with some of the countless other small kids her age.

I weave through the crowd, smiling back brightly at everyone who smiles at me as I try to keep watch on my younger siblings. When I was little like them I could climb back into the family van after services with my worn-out copy of *Anne of Green Gables*, but the last time I tried that, Dad said I wasn't showing a sweet spirit. I'm seventeen now, and not only am I supposed to watch out for my little brothers and sisters, I'm supposed to be their model of proper behavior.

'Rachel! Rachel!' Someone is yelling my name from across the parking lot. I turn and spot my older sister Faith, waving me over with the one arm she isn't using to hold her infant son Caleb. It's early May in Texas and five hundred billion degrees, but somehow Faith isn't sweating, and her lavender blouse and

knee-length denim skirt don't have a spot of baby puke on them.

'Hi,' I say, joining her and some of the other young mothers of the congregation, several just a few years older than me. They stand in a loose circle holding their little ones, and their carefully groomed appearances and enthusiastic smiles make me run my fingers through my long dark curls so I don't look too disheveled. I wish, not for the first time, that my hair were straighter like Faith's, but almost immediately I hear my father's voice reminding me that a tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, and envy makes the bones rot. I imagine my bones strong and pure, constructed of nothing but molecules of good thoughts, absent of any vanity. I smile at everyone and wiggle my fingers at my little nephew Caleb, choosing to give him my full attention while the other girls chatter around me.

'I was just saying,' Faith starts, shifting Caleb from one hip to another with ease, 'that James's testimony really moved me, really moved us all, actually, and I think the Lord has laid it on our hearts to try and organize some time for fellowship, where some of us older girls get together with some of the younger girls and talk about, you know, modest dress. About helping the boys and the young men in their struggle to remain spiritually pure. Just, you know, recommitting to that idea of biblical femininity.'

Faith's voice is filled with enthusiasm, each sentence practically spilling on top of the next one. The other girls are

nodding. Faith has always been good at helping us think of others. When we were little, she taught me to flip over magazine covers in the grocery checkout line if they had immodest images of girls and women that might tempt the eyes of our brothers.

‘That sounds like it would be nice,’ I say. Faith is talking on excitedly when my eyes spot James Fulton by the side of Calvary Christian. He’s alone. The quick smile he shared with his parents at the end of the service is gone, and he leans against the church wall, staring out at a cinder block building in the lot next door. The building used to house a tractor and lawn-mower repair service, but it was abandoned a long time ago, and now it’s just a crumbling mess of a place. It’s not anything to look at, that’s for sure, but James is watching it like it’s something worth watching.

His cheeks still appear red – maybe this time from the heat outside – and he takes a big gulp of air and tips his head back against the side of the church, shifting his gaze to the blue, cloudless sky. I imagine myself stepping up in front of the entire congregation to admit my deepest sins, and I know that James feels an embarrassment so painful he can barely stand to look any of us in the eye.

We should show compassion toward sinners, and James looks so pitiful standing there all by himself that I want somebody to walk over to talk to him about the weather or where he got his yellow polyester shirt or something that doesn’t have to do with his sinful behavior or Journey of Faith

or how proud we are of how he's walking with Jesus. But nobody goes to him, least of all me.

'I mean, we would be really honoring James's testimony if we put his words into action, don't you think?' Faith continues, almost breathless in her excitement.

'Oh, definitely,' I answer, offering a quick smile.

When my father finds me a few minutes later and tells me it's time to leave, James Fulton is still standing there alone.

'Rachel, are the beans almost ready?'

'Just about done,' I answer, giving them a nudge with my fork.

My mother smiles at me and nods. 'What were you looking at out there?' she asks, motioning toward the kitchen window.

I shrug my shoulders and mumble, 'Nothing, really.' I don't want to admit I've been distracted from my work and staring at some hummingbirds darting back and forth at the shrub of yellow bells in the front yard. They love to swoop and swerve at one another to get the best flower, like little kamikaze pilots. Everyone thinks hummingbirds are these sweet little birds, but they're really hateful, actually.

'Are you feeling OK?' I ask her, pouring the beans into a serving dish. She looks paler than normal, and there's a parade of pimples marching up her normally clear complexion.

'Yes, praise God,' she answers, touching her belly. Walker baby number eleven is just a few weeks along, and the first few

months are always the worst for my mom when it comes to being pregnant. With Sarah, she spent what felt like forever trapped in the bathroom, throwing up during what should have been school time at the kitchen table.

This baby surprised us. I mean, as much as babies can be a surprise in a family with ten children. But my mom is forty-four, and it was sort of understood that two-year-old Isaac would be the last addition. Then this spring during evening Bible study, Dad read those familiar verses from Psalms that always serve as an announcement that a new Walker baby is on the way: “As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man, so are the children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them!” When Dad said it, everyone turned to look at Mom, and she nodded, smiling shyly.

I’d smiled, too, of course, but my stomach had sunk just a bit at the same time. Mom had more time for all of us now that Isaac was sleeping through the night and would soon be out of diapers. And how was I supposed to keep up with my chores and help teach the little ones with my mother preoccupied with the new baby? I’d had to reprimand myself as soon as I had those thoughts. In all things give thanks, Rachel, I’d reminded myself.

With Sunday dinner finally ready, everyone sits down to eat at one of the three tables pushed together. There are so many of us the end of the long table is practically in the hallway leading to my parents’ bedroom. I set down a platter of rolls.

‘What a lovely meal, Rachel,’ says Paul in the same loud voice that he uses to say everything. Paul is my sister Faith’s husband. They live with baby Caleb about thirty minutes away in the next town over, but that doesn’t stop them from spending almost every Sunday afternoon with us. Paul is five years older than me but he acts like it’s fifty years instead of five. His face is always pinched up like a spider, and he loves to quote Scripture like he’s a pastor even though he’s not. He gets on my nerves. No – that’s unkind. Paul’s a good Christian husband and father, and Faith is blessed to be under his protection. And yet, I wish he would lower his voice just a little.

‘Thank you, Paul,’ I respond, dishing out food for the little ones before we all sit down to pray. I let myself wonder for a moment about my future husband and what he will be like, and I try to imagine myself returning here to my parents’ house in just a few years with my own children. It’s what’s meant to be, but when I try to picture it, my head goes blank and my stomach twists.

My father sits at the head of the table, and we bow our heads as he thanks the Lord for food that will nourish our bodies so we can continue to spread His word. As Dad gets to the end of the prayer, he adds, ‘And, Father God, we ask you to keep your child James Fulton under your careful watch, and that you renew a steadfast spirit within him and create in him a clean heart. In the name of Jesus, Amen.’

Everyone responds with an amen, but Paul’s amen is the loudest.

I'm passing the butter to my younger sister Ruth when Paul brings up James again.

'It's so wonderful that you reminded us how much we need to pray for those who've strayed,' he says to Dad.

'Well, we're all capable of straying from the love of Jesus,' my father answers.

'Amen,' Paul says, nodding vigorously. Faith is seated at his side trying to eat and feed baby Caleb at the same time. Her hand slips and she drops her napkin, but Paul is too busy talking to notice. I crawl under the table to reach for it.

'I was thinking of another person who has abandoned Christ's path and who also desperately needs our prayers,' he continues as I sit up. Faith looks over at him.

'Oh, yes,' she says. 'Paul's talking about Lauren Sullivan. She's back in town.'

There's a shift in the room, and I realize I've stopped chewing.

'Really?' my older brother Andrew asks. 'She left years ago. She moved to the city, right? I mean, that's what I heard.'

'Yes, but someone saw her at the drugstore,' Faith answers, holding back on her source. 'And someone else saw her moving her things into that little apartment complex near the animal hospital. You know, the one on Rice Street? It looks like she's back for good. Or at least for a while, anyway.'

Whispers. Bits of whispers. It's how we find out everything.

'Lauren Sullivan?' Ruth asks. 'Something about that name sounds familiar. Who is she?' She tries to pry our little brother Isaac's fingers off the butter knife.

‘Lauren is someone who needs our prayers, honey,’ my mom answers, and she smiles at Paul and Faith in a way that’s clear this conversation is over. ‘Let’s hope this move brings her back home to the Lord.’

Ruth is thirteen now which means she was barely seven when Lauren left, so it makes sense she wouldn’t remember her clearly. But I do. I remember the morning she showed up to Calvary Christian with her long blonde hair dyed candy-apple red. I remember prayer requests for her soul after the stories that she’d snuck out of the house, met boys, and drank alcohol. I remember the Bible verses the pastor would use during sermons that seemed to be directed straight at her: “The eye that mocketh at his father and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it.”

I remember after that sermon how she’d stood up and calmly walked out.

She was like a grenade that had sat quietly for years and then, suddenly, exploded. But Lauren Sullivan didn’t go to Journey of Faith.

She’d disappeared before anyone could make her.