

## PROLOGUE

### Now

Ian and I are on the couch watching one of his food shows. I slide my arm around his back, my fingers hovering above his waist. He doesn't suspect a thing. I tickle him.

He jumps and somehow I'm on the floor. He's kneeling on my shoulders and leaning over me. He clamps onto my nipples, pinching and laughing like a fiend.

I try to writhe away. "Stop," I say but there's no escape. His fingers are chewing at me. "Stop," I yell.

The pinches get harder.

Fuck you. I'm boiling, frothing. I fling my leg back, kicking over my head. My toe smashes something hard.

The pinching stops. I'm free. I won.

Ian's on the floor holding his face.

Right, it was Ian. The man I love. "Where did I get you?" I ask.

He doesn't answer. He's running his tongue along his teeth.

"Are you okay?"

"No," he slurs. "You kicked me in the face. You broke my fucking tooth."

I cover my mouth. Holy shit. I'm a lunatic. I'm as cold as I was on the minus-forty day I felt my eyeball freeze.

Ian's in the bathroom checking the damage. He spits and comes back. "It's chipped," he says. "What the fuck?"

I'm still on the floor, hiding my face. My head is shaking back and forth.

"Come here," Ian says.

I can't.

He sits beside me. "I'm sorry for getting mad. I'm fine. It's nothing a dentist can't fix."

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"It's okay. It was an accident. I know you didn't mean it."

But I did. I wanted to hurt him. His face goes blurry behind the tears that are trapped in my eyes. My god, I didn't mean to mean it.

## Later

“Why did all these bad things happen to me?” I ask my therapist, Nicole, a year into our work together. “I mean why didn’t I learn? Why didn’t I stop putting myself into such risky situations?”

Nicole’s eyes remain as soft and steady as ever. “You didn’t have the capacity to deal with what happened, so your subconscious took over and tried to resolve it for you,” she says.

“I don’t understand.”

“We see a similar response in traumatized children,” she says. “They’ll often use their dolls to replay an upsetting incident over and over again until they can create a better ending.”

My body shudders. A twitch of recognition. “Is that why I was obsessed about wrestling with Ian?”

She nods but she needn’t have. I feel the answer all through me, the urgency and fire, the fury and desire.

*Faith*



## HALLELUJAH

## Now

I fly home from Belize to Regina on Easter Sunday, and it's like hallelujah, she is risen indeed. I spent two months deep in the jungle mending a broken heart, but now that I'm back on Saskatchewan soil my insides reflect the spring that's busting up through the dirt.

I try online dating and get a message from a hair-gelled engineer named Ian who is into science and nature documentaries.

"What do you like about science?" I ask when we meet for a walk.

"There are so many mysteries out there that we can understand when we look closely enough. One discovery builds on another and teaches us more about the entire world."

"So you're an atheist?"

"Ninety-nine per cent. I don't believe in God but I'm not closed to the possibility. How about you?"

"I believe in something. Maybe it's God or kindness or people being good to each other."

We go for dessert. Candlelight flickers across his hazel eyes as he tells me he's going to Africa on a volunteer trip this summer, and I get what Grandpa meant when he said he saw Grandma across the room and knew he would love her forever.

Later Ian and I go for a walk around Wascana Lake and he comes close when we get to a lookout point. Too close. My heart races and I dart away.

We keep going and climb a hill. At the top, he sweeps in and presses his lips against mine. Whoa, he likes me! My nerves quiet down and I wrap my arms around him and imagine how great it would be if I never had to let go.

Ian holds the ladder for me while I clean my eavestroughs. I throw handfuls of dirt and leaves to the ground, but some of the mess hits him in the face. I stare down at him with giant eyes. "I'm so sorry."

He spits out the clump that got into his mouth. “It’s nothing,” he says. “Keep going. There’s lots of eavestrough left to go.”

I tell Mom and my missionary sister Tenille about The Ladder Incident. “He must really like you to put up with that,” Tenille says.

“Maybe,” Mom says. “But D doesn’t like anyone who likes her back. The instant she catches someone liking her, she runs away.”

I pretend to laugh. It’s better if that’s what Mom thinks. The truth is that no one has ever wanted to stay.

I like Ian more each day. He bench-presses me and picks me up by my armpits to toss me in the air, like adults do to make kids laugh. We have water-balloon fights. He lets me give him a piggyback and jumps off my back in time to catch me when I topple over.

The only things I don’t like about him are that he’s into zombies and obscene TV shows like *The Sopranos* and has an awful photo above his couch – a woman drowning in dark waters. Her pastel skirt billows around her as she flounders, hopeless, suspended in death.

“Don’t like it?” Ian asks when he sees me frowning at her.

“Sorry. It’s super creepy.”

He laughs. “Then don’t look at it.”

We’re in my room kissing when I pull away. Shit, what if I don’t mean anything to him? What if he just wants to get me into bed?

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Do you want to be exclusive?” The words shoot straight out before I can catch them.

Ian looks startled.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make things awkward. Oh god. I just... I don’t want to fool around with someone who is dating other people.” I’m biting my lip. I wish I could take it back.

“That’s fair,” he says, leaning against the pillows. “Let’s try it.”

“Really?”

My new boyfriend nods and kisses me again.

We’re having dinner on a patio when I ask if Ian wants to get married or have a family someday. “I don’t think so,” he says. “It’s not something I need. I don’t even know if I’m capable of love.”

“Oh,” I say and push my hopes back down. I’ve been counting our

days together and then our weeks, adding them up and wondering how long he'll stay.

We go back to his place. We're kissing and his body presses against mine and his hands are all over my long green skirt. I want him to stop but it's like I'm an empty tube of toothpaste and nothing will squeeze out. I concentrate hard and finally a "no" whispers forth.

Ian stops, but I'm crying in his arms.

"I need to take things really slowly," I say. "Some bad things happened to me a long time ago."

He wipes at my tears and new ones replace them. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

I shake my head.

"Okay. No problem. That's totally fine," he says. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Can you ask 'Is this okay?' any time you touch me? And can you only date me if you really mean it?"

"Of course," Ian says. "I want to be with you."

He pulls me closer. "Oops. Is this okay?"

I nod.

Other times when I shake my head, he makes us popcorn or gets me a glass of water.

I say yes now, some of the time, and it's glorious in the warmth of his arms.

"Have you dated much?" I ask Ian one day when we meet up after work.

"Not really. I've had a bunch of first dates but nothing that's lasted more than five or six dates. Women seem to find me obnoxious," he says with a grin.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I don't hold back. One woman said it's gross to take baths, that it's like stewing in your own filth. So I said to her, 'I don't know about you, but I'm not filthy to start with.'"

"That's not very nice."

"Sure, but it was worth it," he says. "Did I tell you my friends made me promise not to play any racket sports with you?"

"Why's that?"

"They thought I'd get dumped again. I don't let anyone win. Not even my little cousins. You have to earn your victory or it doesn't mean anything."

Sure enough, when I finally convince him to play ping pong, he wins by like a hundred points. I ask him to cut me some slack but he says, "Not a chance. You knew what you were getting into."

I laugh but he means it so we stop keeping score.

Ian's holding his laptop when he opens the door to his apartment. "You have to watch this," he says. "My friends and I have been emailing about this video all day. You have to see it to know why my comment is so great."

He hits play. A woman in a bikini lies on a table in a medical office while a man draws on her skin with black marker.

"Creepy," I say.

"Yeah. Totally. It's about Satanic rituals. So now you're ready for my joke." He opens his email and reads his words back to me: "Hot. I added it to my masturbatory library."

"I don't think that's funny," I say.

Ian insists it is.

My stomach closes in on itself. I feel like I did when he said he once lived near a strip club or like I do when topless women prance across the screen during the shows we watch on his couch.

Is he a good guy or a perv? I'm so nervous I think I'll die but I have to know. "Do you watch porn?" I ask. Please say no. Please be the man I want you to be.

"Almost never," he says. "I could take it or leave it."

Okay. That's not so bad. I bet that's like once or twice a year. Maybe I can live with that.

I ask Ian why he chose to message me out of all the women online.

"I was casting a wide net," he replies. "You have better odds that way."

"Oh."

"It's nothing against you. It's simple math."

I must not look reassured because he continues: "You have nothing to worry about. I've only slept with two women."

Shit. The numbers conversation.

"You don't need to tell me about your past," he says after a silence that lasts a hundred years. "It doesn't matter to me."

Good, because I'll never tell him. It's impossible for someone to know and still like me.

## SEE JANE TRI

## Now

I'm doing a mini-triathlon called See Jane Tri in a few days, and Ian says he wants to cheer me on. "It will be boring," I say. "I won't be any good. I've barely trained."

When he won't be dissuaded, I try the real reason I don't want him there: "My parents are coming to watch."

"That's fine. I'm happy to meet them."

"Are you sure? It will be awkward. They're pretty devout Christians. I wouldn't be surprised if Dad shows up in a Rapture t-shirt."

"I'm not worried about it," Ian says. "I'll keep to myself when you start the race."

My gut clenches as I park my bike in the transition area and tuck my ponytail into my pink swim cap. I hope he doesn't hate my family. Also, I hope I don't finish last. Everyone else looks like they know what they're doing.

Ian walks over in a shirt so dark that it emphasizes his white head-phone cords. Good, at least he has something to listen to other than my parents.

Mom and Dad arrive with my thirteen-year-old sister, Holly. I have four sisters – Bethany, Tenille, Jenna and Holly – but Holly is the only one who still lives at home.

I introduce Ian and cringe as my parents shake his hand. Please don't say anything awful, I beg my parents silently.

"Good weather for a race," Dad says, and they talk about my swim cap and if they'll be able to pick me out from the others in the pool. The conversation is restrained, dull, like a new hire getting toured through an office, but I wish I could drag them apart. It's going to go badly the second one of them mentions God, science, TV, politics or practically anything else.

I get called to line up at the pool and don't see Ian or my parents again until I'm running my laps at the end. He and my parents are on

opposite sides of the crowd, waving at me. Phew, they haven't scared him away.

## Childhood

It's crowded at the Calgary Zoo, way busier than usual. Mommy says everyone is here to see the giant pandas that came from China. It's a long time before we get to see the huge teddy bears eating bamboo.

They're so cuddly. I put my hand on the glass and wish I could reach through. There's a sticker on the glass above my head. It's a black bird, a stop sign so the birds don't bonk their heads. Nobody can get close to the pandas, not even if they have wings.

"Mommy, can we go see the butterflies?"

"Be patient. This is special."

I squirm as I wait.

"Ants in your pants?" Mommy would say if she noticed.

When she's ready, she pushes Tenille and Jenna in the stroller while Bethany and I run ahead to the building with insides that look like we're still outside. There are trees and leaves and a pokey cactus that's taller than me.

The air is hot on my skin as I push through the plastic strips that hang in the doorway to the butterfly room. Mommy says the plastic helps the butterflies stay inside. Why would they leave? This is the best place in the world.

Painted wings flit everywhere. Blue, red, black, yellow, orange, white and pink. I try to catch them but the butterflies are too fast.

"Look," Bethany whispers. Her Disney-princess eyes are bigger than ever. Whoa, a butterfly is standing on her arm.

I put my arms up and try to hold still like Bethany. I want a butterfly to pick me too. The butterflies dance like fancy figure-skater ladies in their sparkly dresses but don't come close.

"Time to go," Mommy says.

I drag behind. I wish I was perfect like Bethany and good enough for a butterfly.

"Right now, D," Mommy calls from the other side of the plastic.

I lean my head through the plastic strips. They slide closed behind me, locking the butterflies in.

Mommy takes us swimming and we have the whole pool to ourselves. I'm at the edge, ready to jump. Bethany dips her toes in. "Need go potty," Tenille says.

Mommy sighs. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?" She sends Bethany and me to a bench by the bathroom door. "Sit with your backs against the wall," she says, giving me The Look. Mommy carries baby Jenna as she leads Tenille by the hand. "Don't you dare move a muscle until I come back."

I bounce my favourite little pony and try to think about anything other than the pool. Cotton Candy has pink hair. Mommy says Bethany and Tenille have blond hair. Jenna's is brown. Mine is called carrots but it just tastes like hair.

I squirm on the bench.

"Sit still," Bethany says.

I try.

I can't go in. But Cotton Candy can!

I throw my pony into the pool. She makes a big splash.

I miss her. She's too far away. What if she sinks?

I run to the water and jump in. I splash around next to Cotton Candy and grin big.

Bethany stays on the bench. She's leaning forward as far as she can while keeping her bum smooshed against the wall. "Mommy, come now! D isn't obeying!" she yells.

Mommy yanks me to the side of the pool. Her fingers are tight, ouchy around my arm. "Why couldn't you sit on the bench for one single minute? You could have drowned!"

"I'm sorry," I whisper, chin quivering. "I wanted to go in the water."

"I know," Mommy sighs, kissing the top of my head. "But you were in the deep end. I need you to obey. I need you to stay alive."

I'm making a present for Mommy at Sunday school. I take a basket the size of my hand and stuff it full of cotton balls. Then I glue two fuzzy teddies on top. I hide the basket behind my back when Mommy comes to get me. It's not good enough yet.

In the car Bethany opens a brand-new pack of gum. It's light blue and smells like toothpaste but yummy. "Please, please, can I have a piece?" I whisper.

"No."

“Please, it’s for Mommy. For this.” I hold out the basket. Bethany shakes her head.

The next day she goes to school, leaving the gum on the dresser. She said no. But Mommy would love it. But I’m not allowed. But it’s not taking if it’s giving.

I sneak over to the dresser and open the pack. There are lots of pieces. I take one. Aw, it’s wrapped like a present.

I put it in the basket next to the bears and run to find Mommy. “I have a surprise for you!” I say, bouncing up and down.

“Oh thank you,” Mommy says. “Wait, isn’t this Bethany’s gum? Did she give it to you?” She stares down at me.

“Well, no, but I took it for you.”

“You know better than that! That’s stealing. You have to tell Bethany what you did.”

When we hear Bethany’s bus drive up, Mommy tells me to stand by the door.

Bethany comes in and puts her backpack on the floor. I can’t look at her.

“D has something to tell you,” Mommy says.

“I took a piece of your gum. I’m sorry.” The words hurt coming out. They burn like throw-up.

Bethany’s voice is quiet. “I’m disappointed in you.”

I look up at her serious big-sister eyes, then down again.

“I’d even decided to give you a stick of gum tonight,” she says gently.

I’m as chewed up as the old gum she spits in the garbage.

Daddy is lying on the couch in his usual spot, catching forty winks. Is he asleep? He’s still but his breathing is quiet, not the bear snore that comes at night.

I stalk over to the flowery couch and pause by his feet. I watch his eyelids. They don’t flicker. He doesn’t know I’m here.

I crouch. Then pounce. I land in the gap between his knees and the back of the couch. His eyes stay closed.

I wedge myself in. I’m leaning against the couch, my feet against his legs. I push as hard as I can. Daddy is big like Goliath. He’s big enough to see over the fridge and strong enough to open the Cheez Whiz. But I’m going to get him.

He budes, maybe an inch or two. He grunts as I shove and kick against him. He slides over, closer to the edge. His eyes stay shut. I push again, and Daddy crashes to the floor. Legs first, head last.

“Whoa, what happened?” he asks, looking up at me.

I shake with giggles, love.

Daddy gets back on the couch and shuts his eyes.

I stare at his eyelids. Please open!

They don't.

I find Tenille and Jenna in the playroom. “Come here,” I whisper, and they huddle around me. “Help me knock Daddy off the couch!”

“Won't he get mad?” Tenille asks.

“It's a game. It's okay.”

Tenille and Jenna look at each other. They're best friends. They look back at me.

“It will be fun. I promise.”

The girls follow me. One after another we leap onto the couch, me behind Daddy's shoulders, Tenille at his back and Jenna by his legs. We push, shove, push. It's harder this time. We keep pushing. It's taking forever.

Daddy rolls close to the edge. Then thuds onto the carpet.

The girls and I laugh until my tummy hurts. “You got me,” Daddy says. Then, “That's enough.”

After that Daddy starts napping in his room but we follow him there too, pushing at him until we make him open his eyes.

## Now

I go to the airport with Ian when he leaves for Africa on his volunteer trip. He's going to spend the summer in the Sahara working on an irrigation project.

We hug, and I wave goodbye forever as Ian disappears through security. He's going to forget me.

My phone is beeping when I get home. It's a message from Ian: “I was happy that you came to the airport with me and sad to see you leave. I'm sure I'll miss you while I'm away.”

I save the message and play it over and over again, like a mantra.

The summer passes while I water Ian's plants and bring in his mail, and five weeks later he calls me from the Sahara. “I can't wait to see you,” he says.

When he comes home, he scoops me up in his arms and reads me his journal, even the part about talking to me. “D has an interview for a communications job at city hall,” he reads. “I’m sure she will get it.”

“I did,” I say, “and thanks for the vote of confidence.”

We crawl into bed and squeeze against each other, and I’m so happy that tears leak onto my pillow, the one he bought so I’d be more comfortable at his place.

Ian is looking for a new job too. He has been since we met. He moved to Regina because it was the only place he could find a decent engineering job, but he wants to get a position in Toronto near his family. “Don’t worry,” he says when I chew on my lip. “It won’t happen for a long time and we’ll figure things out.”

Ian and I go to my parents’ place while they’re away and spend a day on the trampoline and bounce until he hurts his back. I run a bath for him and give him a massage. When we tuck in for the night, he kisses my neck. “I thought you were tired, Mr. Sore Back,” I say.

“Not yet,” he says, running his fingertips over my skin. He kisses my stomach. “Is this okay?”

“Yes.”

“And this?”

“Yes.”

## BIBLE SCATTEGORIES

### Now

We're hanging out with my family and playing Bible Scattegories when Ian writes an obscene answer about the Sodomites.

Dad asks everyone for their scores. While they're counting, I grab Ian's sheet and scribble over his answer, greying it out. Ian chuckles. Mom and Tenille smile at me. They think he's having a good time. He's not. He's asked me like five times already if we could leave.

"You have to know that your family is nuts," he says when we're pulling out of the driveway.

"They're not so bad."

"Yes they are. Fucking fundamentalists. I'm impressed that you turned out normal when you grew up in that. I can't fathom what you get from being around them."

### Childhood

Mommy and I are the only ones in the kitchen. Tenille and Jenna are napping, and I don't know where Bethany is. I pull the bag of marshmallows out of the cupboard.

"Please can we?"

"Aren't they better toasted?" she teases.

"They're better in my tum!"

She smiles and gets two forks. "Come here," she says and pops me onto the counter next to the stove. I hold still while she turns on the burner.

She spears a marshmallow onto each fork and passes one to me. "Hold it carefully, back from the element like this."

Mommy's marshmallow is turning golden brown. Mine is white on top. I put it closer to the burner. Uh oh, smoke! I pull it away but it's too late. My marshmallow is black.

Black like the first page of the construction-paper book I made in

Sunday school. When we are on that page we sing, “My heart was black with sin until the Saviour came in.”

I remember a picture of Jesus I have in my room. He’s glowing like a lightning bug. He’s in a garden, knocking on a heart door.

I feel thuds inside. In my heart. Jesus?!

He knocks harder. Faster.

“Mommy, is Jesus in my heart?”

She takes my burned marshmallow and puts it down. “He will be if you invite Him in. Do you want me to pray with you? We can do that right now.”

I nod and bow my head.

“Okay, repeat the words after me,” she says. “Dear Jesus. Please forgive me for my sins. I need You. Please come into my heart and guide me all the days of my life. I love You. Amen!”

Mommy hugs me. Then she gives me her perfect marshmallow. It’s yum, all warm and gooey inside.

We don’t live anywhere any more. Mommy says it’s too hard in Calgary right now so we’re going to stay with Grandma and Grandpa.

It’s late when we get to Medicine Hat but Grandma and Grandpa, Mommy’s parents, are waiting on the front steps. Grandma is in her fuzzy housecoat. She smells like soap and cookies when she pulls me close.

Tenille and I get to sleep in the doll room so I nest into my blankets and look up at the shelves of Grandma’s favourite dolls. They’re everywhere, like stars.

Grandma rescues all the dolls she can find. She buys them from garage sales, stores and doll magazines. Sometimes she buys bags of heads at a craft store and sews bodies for them. Mommy says she saves dolls from garbage cans too.

When Grandma brings her new babies home, she washes them and makes outfits for them. She puts bows in their hair, ties their shoelaces and brushes pink stuff onto their cheeks until they look pretty, ready for church.

I hear her ask Mommy, “Doesn’t this one look like baby Lisa? And this one with the mischievous expression, does she remind you of one of your girls?”

We don’t go to real school any more because Mommy decided to be our teacher, but I do math at the table while Grandma sews.

Thirty fabric hearts hang on the wall under a giant heart that says

GOD LOVES. The pink heart with white polka dots says my name in light blue thread. There are hearts for each of my sisters and the rest of the cousins. Grandma loves us so much it doesn't fit inside her so she had to make all these extra hearts.

Mommy peels a great stack of potatoes. She is going to miracle them into doughnuts.

"Why did Jesus turn water into wine when alcohol is a sin?" I ask.

"Seems like an error in judgment," Mommy says. She is wearing a flowered apron she sewed herself. She shoos the girls and me out of the kitchen.

"But I want to help," I say. By help I mean eat.

"You can all help when I'm ready. I'll ring the bell for you."

When she finally dings the bell – the one I sometimes get to shake before dinnertime – we thunder back down the hall. The kitchen table is sprinkled with flour and covered with hundreds of white doughy rings. She hands us brown paper bags and we fill the bottoms with icing sugar.

When the oil in our green pot is hot enough, she takes a ladle and lowers the first doughnut in. A bunch more follow. We wait, giddy, hovering as close to the stove as she'll allow.

The kitchen timer beeps and she flips the doughnuts over, perfect shiny tops facing up. "Dibs on the first one," I call.

Tenille and I squabble until Mommy reaches in with the ladle, pulls one out and drops it in my bag.

"Yes, I won," I cheer, closing the bag and shaking it, making sure to cover every bit of the doughnut with icing sugar before laying it on the platter she uses for serving Christmas turkey.

I wait as long as I can, then take a huge bite. It burns my mouth. I pant to cool off my tongue.

I try again. There, that's better. It's still hot, but so sweet and soft it tastes holy.

The girls and I shake icing sugar onto hundreds of doughnuts, the white powder dusting our hands, arms, faces.

Whenever Mommy isn't looking, I pop the doughnut holes into my mouth, sometimes gobbling two or three at a time. Tenille and Jenna sneak them too. We catch each other's eyes and giggle as we make them disappear.

These doughnuts are our own family miracle. Our water into wine.

## Youth

Now that I'm in high school, I'm the captain of my Bible quizzing team and get to challenge any rulings I want. Dad, who is one of my coaches, thinks it's rude, but I get way more points when I argue for them. All the quizmaster knows is what's on his set of cards, but I know the entire Gospel.

My team is in a close match. We're crouched over our seats on these pads like Jeopardy buzzers that light up the scoreboard when we lift our butts.

A kid on the other team beats me on the jump. He stammers out all the right words. I know because I'm mouthing them along with him.

"You're incorrect," the quizmaster says.

Jesus carries me to the centre of the stage. "I'd like to make a challenge," He says in my voice. Dad grimaces like he's accidentally taken a bite of something spicy. I look back to the quizmaster. "He was right. He said everything you should have on the card."

The quizmaster checks again and adds twenty points for the other team.

"Why did you make that face?" I ask Dad after the quiz. "Were you embarrassed of me? Did you think I was trying to take points away from the other team?"

Dad's face goes red like I busted him and he won't meet my eyes. "You did the right thing," he says.