

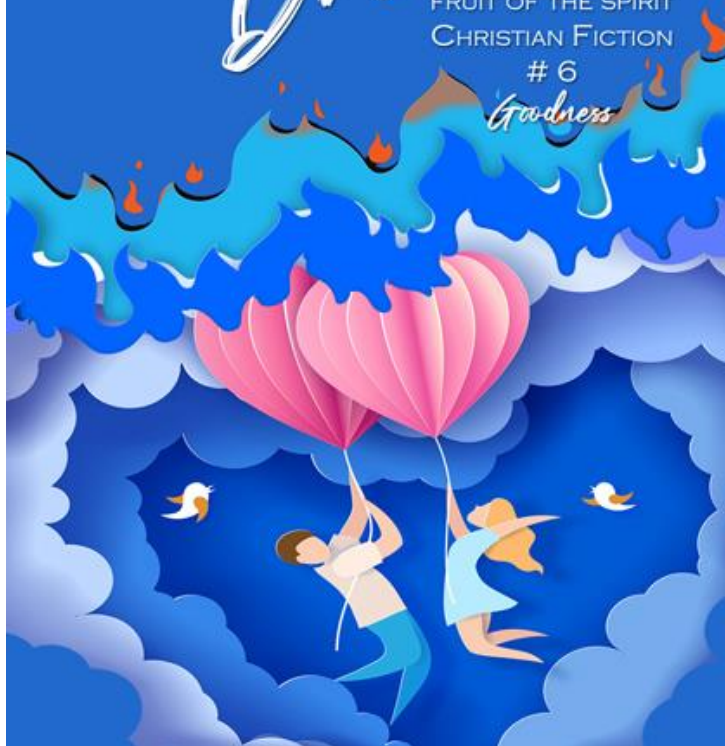
TRACY WAINWRIGHT

Scorched Dreams

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT
CHRISTIAN FICTION

6

Godness



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Tracy Wainwright

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1

Katie Mitchell opened her front door and embraced her cousin. "Maria, it's so good to see you."

"You, too." Maria squeezed her tight.

"And you." Katie let go of Maria and scooped up Maria's son, Aaron, in a hug.

"Oh, you're squeezing me to death," the nine-year-old complained.

Katie laughed and hugged him tighter. "Can you still breathe?"

"No." He grunted.

She laughed harder and set him down.

"Hey, bud. Good escape." Katie's son, James, strolled into the room, trying not to walk with the altered gate that a jet ski accident he'd had months ago had given him.

Katie cut her gaze to James and winked at him.

"Um, how was the drive?" James asked.

"Slept most of the way," Aaron answered and then yawned.

James ruffled his head. "Want to see the new game I got?"

"Sure." The younger boy pumped his fist.

Katie shut the front door behind them, and the boys disappeared into James' room.

"Where's Alex?" Maria asked.

"Asleep. You'd think things would slow down after Christmas, but he worked a double yesterday." She didn't mention he was still taking all the overtime he could get to pay off James' medical bills. Not that they could make much of a dent in them even with his extra hours. She shook off the thought. No time to dwell on their problems. Maria and Aaron had come to celebrate Christmas, if a bit late, and had enough trials of their own.

"I imagine there are a ton of returns from unwanted Christmas presents," Maria said.

"And after Christmas sales shopping," Katie added. "Want some coffee? Or water?"

"Coffee would be great. Thanks."

Katie led the way to the kitchen and pulled a mug out of the cabinet. "How are you?" She poured the rest of the coffee into the cup and handed it to Maria.

Maria took a sip before answering. "Not sure. It's been like a bad dream. Aaron wakes up almost every night screaming."

"Poor kid." The call from Maria the day someone had tried to kidnap Aaron weeks before still felt fresh. She could only imagine how much it was so for Maria.

"Yeah." Tears filled Maria's eyes. "I feel so helpless to do anything for him. He doesn't want to talk about it, won't say a word."

"That's so unlike him." Katie offered a soft smile, hoping to lighten the mood. "He's always been so chatty. About everything."

Maria waved her hand in front of her face. "Oh,

he'll talk about anything else. His favorite movie. Next season. The cool new tennis shoes his best friend wore to school before they got out on break. Just not the incident."

"Maybe it's just too much for his little mind to handle."

"I guess." Maria sighed. "I feel like it's too much for my brain to cope with, yet I can't stop thinking about it." Maria, holding her cup of coffee in both hands, took a sip as if to distract herself from her own words.

"You're not still blaming yourself, are you?" Katie asked.

"I guess not. I can tell you I won't let him out of my sight for quite a while." Maria shook her head, shivered, and took another sip of coffee.

Katie glanced toward James' room. "Within reason."

"Not when he's with someone I trust. I can't let him go anywhere alone. Not even to the mailbox."

Katie's heart ached for her cousin and friend. "How's he dealing with that?"

"Complains every day. Refuses to get the mail with me. We're at an impasse, but I can't," Maria said, her voice thickening.

"Understandable." Katie knew a bit about the struggle between letting go and holding one's child tight, but what Maria faced was different than anything she'd had to deal with. Leaving your child's life in the hands of capable, caring doctors was a whole world away from a nefarious stranger trying to snatch

your child. "Hey, why don't we go chill in the living room?"

"Sure."

Katie led the way and took up a seat on her recliner.

Maria sat on the sofa, still holding her mug of coffee.

Katie curled her legs under her. "Tell me about Christmas."

"The day was great. Simon got Aaron a remote-control car and a set of camping gear."

"He's into camping now?" Aaron's father had barely been in the picture his whole life and had never provided for Maria and Aaron. His interests seem to change with the seasons and weather.

Maria rolled her eyes. "Oh, yes. It's his latest obsession. Goes every weekend. Well, not right now, but anytime it's above freezing. It's been colder than normal this winter, so I think he's missed two or three weekends."

"How's he handling all this?"

Maria shrugged. "He was furious at first. Think he chopped wood for a few hours after I called him. His mom said Simon had some choice words for the creep when she first told him."

Katie nodded. "That's to be expected."

"I guess. Such a shame it took something like this for him to act like a dad. He's asked about a regular visitation schedule for the first time ever. Aaron spent a couple days with him last week. Now I'm supposed to figure out a new routine."

"That's good, though," Katie replied. "I know you've wanted him more involved for a long time."

"True." Maria drained her cup. "Guess this is one of those cases of being careful about what you wish for."

Katie didn't answer. Instead, she sent up the millionth prayer for Maria and Aaron. This time she added Simon.

James and Aaron whooped at something they'd accomplished on the game they played.

"James seems to be doing great." Maria switched topics. "I was surprised to see him without crutches."

"He's worked hard for that. Of course, he'll have to go back to them for a few days after his surgery."

Maria smacked her forehead. "Right, that's tomorrow. Sorry. I forgot."

Katie waved her hand to dismiss Maria's apology. "No worries. You have enough on your mind."

"He nervous at all?"

"No way. That's my job." Katie chuckled. "I've gotten better but not looking forward to him going under anesthesia and the knife again. He's excited about getting some metal removed, especially the one affecting his growth plate."

"Has the doctor given you a better prognosis?" Maria asked.

"Cautiously optimistic, I'd say. James has surprised him the whole way. All of us, really." Katie toyed with her earring. "I haven't told him we can't continue the personal trainer."

"No?"

Katie updated Maria on the compounding medical bills.

“Wow. I knew hospital stays could get expensive, but I assumed insurance covered most of emergencies.”

“That’s with insurance covering a huge portion,” Katie replied. “I can’t imagine what people without insurance do.”

“Me, either. I mean, mine’s not great. I just paid off Aaron’s delivery a few years ago.”

“Maria, I had no idea.” Why hadn’t she shared that struggle with Katie?

“Wasn’t something that needed to be talked about.” She shrugged again. “It was what it was. Still, though, that was nothing compared to what y’all have on you. Is that why Alex is working overtime?”

“Yeah. It’ll still take us like fifteen years to pay off everything. And that’s before tomorrow’s surgery.”

Maria fingered the emerald necklace she’d worn as long as Katie could remember. “Guess we all carry some kind of burden.”

“What’s that saying?” Katie said. “You’re either in a trial, coming out of one, or heading into one?”

“When’s the break?”

“I suppose there’s an in between. I sure would like to get there.” Katie forced a grin.

“You and me both,” Maria said.

“I’m glad your mom loaned y’all out for the afternoon. Aunt Kimberly can be stingy about her time with y’all.” Understandable, since Maria and Aaron only came up once or twice a year.

Maria laughed. "Yeah, well, she made plans with some friends. You know she doesn't stay home much."

"I'm grateful for that. She's been a huge help with Mom."

"She's glad to do it." Maria set her long-empty cup on the end table. "Not sure I could."

"You don't have a sister to worry about," Katie said. *Or a mother with the same issues.*

"No, just a wacky cousin." Maria smiled.

"Sometimes I'm so scatterbrained, I consider taking some of those memory medications they advertise on TV." She'd had that thought more than once, especially since her mom's Alzheimer's diagnosis.

"No. You've always been flighty and can't remember anything."

Katie grinned. "Funny."

Maria laughed. "And true."

"What's true?"

Katie twisted in her seat to look up at Alex. "Hey. Good nap?"

He yawned. "Yeah. Not quite awake yet. You're avoiding my question."

"That Katie has the memory of a ninety-year-old," Maria piped up.

"Oh, that," Alex replied. "Yep. Very true."

"Hey," Katie protested.

Alex leaned down and kissed her forehead. "Don't worry, hon. It's part of what we love about you. Makes sense with all those creative juices flowing up there all the time."

“Oh.” Katie jumped up. “We can do presents now.” She couldn’t wait for Aaron to open his gift from them. She’d finished the painting of Moses standing in front of the parted Red Sea a couple days before Christmas. They’d also gotten Maria and Aaron matching pajamas. She’d almost changed back into hers after church, but James had protested. The impact wouldn’t be as effective without everyone in them, so she had thrown on leggings and an old sweater instead.

Katie knocked on James’ doorframe. “Present time.”

“Yay,” Aaron exclaimed.

“Need a couple minutes to finish our game,” James called.

“OK, but not longer than that.”

She retrieved the canvas from her workroom. The other gifts still sat in the living room under the tree. She hadn’t dared risk messing up the paint by wrapping the picture. Even days later, paint could smudge when layered on a canvas. She brushed her fingers over the picture and said a silent prayer of gratitude to the Lord for giving her the vision and skill to pull it off.

2

The next day, Katie rose from the uncomfortable seat in the waiting room and walked to the window. Flurries flittered through the air, not something they saw on a regular basis. At least the temp hadn't dropped too low, and the forecast hadn't been for more than a dusting. Otherwise, they'd have cancelled James' surgery. Not that she loved waiting for him while he was under, but at least they'd be past one more hurdle.

"You worrying again?" Maria asked from behind her.

Katie spun and forced a grin. "Who, me?"

"Yes, you."

"It's been two hours. The doctor said an hour and a half." She checked her watch again.

"That's not too much extra time," Maria said. "I'm sure they'll be here any minute."

Katie turned back to the window. Maria was right, but her words didn't allay Katie's fears. So many things could go wrong in surgery. Just like all her reassurances to her dear cousin that Aaron would be fine were appreciated but hadn't changed Maria's mindset or lessened her anxiety.

"Aaron jumped out of bed when I told him it was snowing," Maria broke into her thoughts.

"Bet he expected something more than this." She waved a hand at the window without turning around again.

"Yeah, but he ran out and played in it anyway. We've only had one snow since he was born, and he was too young to remember it."

Western Georgia got even less snow than they did, she supposed.

"Mrs. Mitchell."

Katie spun at her name being called. "Yes?"

A nurse stood in the doorway. "James is out of surgery and in the recovery room. Everything went well. The doctor will call you back when James wakes up more."

"Thank you." Joy and gratitude bubbled up and replaced the worry.

"See, I told you." Maria grinned.

"Oh, I know. But waiting is the worst." She strode over to where Maria sat.

"No kidding. I can tell it's bad when you can't even draw."

Katie glanced at her discarded drawing pad and pencils. "Yeah. Anxiety muddles the creative juices, for sure. I should have brought a color by number for this."

Maria laughed. "You'd be bored to death with one of those."

"They have some complex ones," Katie countered.

"OK," Maria sounded skeptical. "Now what do

we do while we wait for the doctor to call you back?"

"Good question." Her heart felt more settled, but nothing would calm it like laying eyes on her son. "Lunch?"

"Now she wants to eat."

"Yes, well, can you run to the cafeteria?" Katie asked. "I don't want to be down there if the doctor comes back soon."

Maria stood. "Sure. What 'cha want?"

"A sandwich and some chips are fine."

After Maria headed off, Katie pulled her phone out of her pocket. She texted Alex, her dad, and the Bible study ladies. The pinging replies began right away.

The doctor hadn't been sure if James would be admitted and stay for observation overnight or be sent home once he woke up. From what the nurse had said, Katie hoped they'd go home in a couple hours. They'd spent enough time in hospitals the last few months to last her a decade or so.

She responded to her text messages and then updated the online church group. She debated making a post, but everyone who needed to know would get the update via one of the notifications she'd sent out or word of mouth. If someone didn't get the update and cared, they'd contact her.

"Here we go," Maria sang. She held up a white paper bag in each hand. "Reubens and chips."

Katie accepted a bag. "Thanks."

"Oh, I didn't think about drinks."

"I have a water bottle." Katie sat down and

opened her lunch. She pulled back the paper and took a bite. Her eyes widened. "This is good."

"Not typical hospital food, huh?"

"No. The hospital in Richmond had different restaurants, so I expected the food to be better than normal, but they just have a cafeteria here."

Maria took a bite. "Mmm. That is good."

They chatted as they ate their sandwiches. Maria kept Katie's mind occupied, so she didn't check her watch every two minutes.

The surgeon pushed through the doors. "Mrs. Mitchell?"

Katie set her lunch items aside and stood. "Yes?"

"James is ready to see you now."

Katie turned toward Maria. "I'll be back in a few."

"Take your time."

She followed the doctor through the door and down a hallway. "How'd he do?"

"Great. Everything came out fine. He woke up right away, although he's been groggy. That's to be expected."

"Seemed like the surgery took longer than planned," she said.

"Nothing to worry about. We had a little cleaning up to do in addition to taking the rod out."

Katie's eyebrows raised. "Cleaning up?"

"Every surgery leaves a bit of scar tissue. Sometimes we can clean that up if we go back in. But his body did a great job of forming calcium to support the breaks as the rod and pins held everything together. We left a few screws in, as we discussed

previously, but that's also typical for this extensive of an injury." The doctor paused. "Here we are."

Katie followed him into the room with multiple beds and several nurses. She had thought James would be in his own room. Maybe that he was still in the general recovery room was a good sign.

"How are you feeling now?" the doctor asked as they approached James' bed.

"Good." James pushed to a sitting position, placed a hand on the bed at each side, and closed his eyes.

"A little woozy still?"

"Some," James mumbled.

"Well, don't move any further," the doctor ordered. "Hospital protocol says you leave here in a wheelchair."

"But I can walk," James protested.

"Once you're home with crutches for three days. Then try it out on your own and see how it goes."

"Just three days?" Katie asked.

"Yeah, he's built up a lot of muscle and this incision is minor compared to his previous ones," Dr. Babcock said. "He'll be up and running, well, walking, in no time."

"Great," James declared. "I can get out of here, then?"

The doctor chuckled. "As soon as the nurse checks you out one more time and your mom signs all the right paperwork."

"Let's do it," James said.

"I'll send your nurse right over. And don't take this the wrong way, but I hope not to see you again."

The doctor shook James' hand and then Katie's.

"Same," James responded.

"Thanks," Katie said. "For everything." She hoped this would be James' last major hurdle on his healing journey. All uphill from there.

The doctor nodded, motioned to one of the nurses, and left the area.

Katie turned to James, who attempted to sit up again. "Why don't you relax until the nurse gets your checkout stuff completed?"

"I've been resting all day."

"True." She guessed he couldn't fall from sitting on the bed. Especially with the head of the bed raised. She pressed the correct button to lift his head. "Dr. Babcock said the surgery went great."

"Yeah, heard that."

"Right. Well, Maria's waiting in the lobby. Guess I can tell her we'll be a few minutes."

"Aaron with her?" James asked, shifting his weight a bit.

"No, Aunt Kimberly took him to the go-cart place."

"Cool. Can I go meet them there?" James asked.

Katie shook her head. "No way. Oh, I didn't ask about driving." She narrowed her eyes. "Definitely not today, though. Not even a go-cart. The drugs they used to knock you out are serious."

James cocked his head and grinned. "I know. Just joshing with you."

Of course, he was. She smirked and punched him lightly on the shoulder.

He pretended to fall over and caught himself.

She reveled in seeing him get back more and more to his old self.

A nurse in kitten scrubs and spiky blonde hair approached them. "All right, here we go."

Katie listened to the after-care instructions and signed all the papers. Twenty minutes later Katie followed the nurse pushing James in the wheelchair out the doors to the lobby.

"Yay," Maria squealed. "You're breaking out of this place."

"Darn right," James said.

Katie glanced at the spot they'd been sitting earlier. "You picked up my things. Thank you."

Maria handed Katie the bag full of her art supplies, magazines, and water bottle. "What's a best cousin for?"

"To pick up after me, apparently." Katie hadn't thought twice about the mess she'd left behind for Maria to clean up. Not that day. Not when James had made it through surgery with a glowing report and was heading home.

"Want to pull your car around, ma'am?" the nurse asked.

"Sure."

"I'll go get it," Maria offered.

"You have your own car. We'll walk together." Katie paused and turned. "I'll be right back."

Flurries swirled as she headed to the parking lot and her car. She texted everyone again to update them. She couldn't have asked for a better day.

3

Katie sipped from her mug of hot cocoa. "I can't believe you go home tomorrow."

"I know. The week has flown by." Maria turned toward the front window. "I can't believe those boys are out in this weather throwing a baseball."

Katie laughed. "James has missed it so much. He can't quite practice yet, but he's glad to at least throw and catch."

"He's doing so well." Maria stepped away from the window and took a seat in the recliner close by.

"So is Aaron." Katie met Maria's gaze. "Really. He's doing amazing, considering."

"Guess that's the benefit of youth. Still, the therapist said we'll never know when the memory or fear will invade."

"When it does, you'll handle it. You've done everything right." Katie took another warming sip.

"Who'd know?" Maria asked. "I still can't believe someone tried to snatch him right out of the ballfield parking lot." She shook her head. "Who's that brazen?"

"I shouldn't have, but I did some research on child abductions." She shifted her gaze to the front yard. "It's not super common, but almost every video I saw

was in broad daylight and in public. One kid was throwing a bag in the family's trashcan at the end of their driveway." Which gave credence to Maria's previous statement about not letting Aaron do so by himself anymore. Though, Katie knew, fear could bring appropriate caution or overreaction.

"No," Maria exclaimed.

Katie nodded. "The kid screamed, and the guy took off."

"I wish we didn't have to teach our kids to defend themselves."

"Protect themselves," Katie corrected. "We teach them to be careful and make smart decisions in many ways. It'd be great if we didn't have to for things like this, but evil exists everywhere."

"Never thought it'd be in our little town," Maria said.

"Don't forget, though," Katie added. "God is with us. He promises never to leave or forsake us. We know that doesn't mean that nothing bad will happen or we'll always be healthy and safe, but it does mean that we can trust Him and ask for His protection."

"How does that work? Things go horribly wrong, but we can trust God to protect us? Those seem oxymoronical."

"It's hard to explain." Katie sought the right words. "But I've walked the truth of those two things going together with my friend, Jessica, who lost her daughter. And with James. I don't understand why God let those things happen, but I know that He's brought good out of them."