



LUKE'S
CRAZY
CALIFORNIA
CHRISTMAS

CINDY K.
GREEN

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Christmas

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Luke's Crazy California Christmas

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Dedication

To all who read Andrea's book and asked to know more about Luke, this story is dedicated to you.

What People are Saying

Praise for Andrea and the Five Day Challenge (Book 1 in the Aubrey Christian Academy Series:

This is a well-written YA novel for the Christian young woman and provides lots of points for discussion. I very much recommend this book for young women as well as their mommas, and I'm definitely looking forward to more books in this series! Thank you, Cindy K. Green, for writing such a fantastic, wholesome book for the young women in our lives.

~T.Mock

What I enjoyed most about Andrea and the 5-Day Challenge is that she reminds me of me when I was a teen—quirky but hopeful. Andrea's life is a roller coaster, overwhelming at times—but she paves her way through challenges and doubts by leaning on her friends, her faith and a wonderful young man who sweeps into her life. With humor and heart, Cindy K Green puts us right in the middle of Andrea's world, which is a treat.

~Award winning author, Marianne Evans

I absolutely fell in love with Andrea. She reminds me so much of me at that age. I was just like her when I was in school. This book was an easy read and one that I think any young girl would love. This is a book that will be greatly loved by girls of all ages. The message it presents is very real and inspirational.

~Boundless Book Reviews

*The name of the Lord is a fortified tower; the righteous
run to it and are safe.*

~Proverbs 18:10

1

A trip back home to California. I knew I should be excited—ecstatic even—after living in North Carolina for four months. The problem was that I wasn't. Not jazzed. Not overjoyed. Not thrilled. Not even one little bit, especially with Dad violating our agreement.

I ran a hand through my hair and blew out a breath. While gripping the cellphone tighter next to my ear, I clamped down on my teeth. *Hold it together, Luke.* That would take some real work, because I was about to lose it. "Why, Dad? We already had an agreed-on date. Why are you making this change, and why all the short notice?"

"It was just convenient and..."

"Convenient for whom? Not for Mom or me."

"I agree it's a little sudden, but wait until I tell you my surprise." His enthusiasm had me worried. I started pacing the length of my bedroom. "I got you an interview appointment with admissions at UCLA for the day after you arrive before they close down for winter break."

I shook my head. He knew that's not what I wanted, but when had he ever cared what I wanted?

“That’s great.” I was pretty sure my voice lacked conviction. “But it’s still not what we agreed on last fall.”

“It’s only three days earlier. I don’t see what the big deal is. I have a friend who works for the airline who helped me change your ticket without charging a huge fee. I thought you’d be pleased.”

He thought he was working in my best interest, but I’d told him my college plans back in October, and it hadn’t seemed to faze him, which sure didn’t make me anymore interested in attending UCLA next year or being anywhere near California. Wasn’t it bad enough that he’d divorced Mom and for all intents and purposes abandoned us...except when it suited his purpose—like ruining my Christmas vacation?

“Anyway, I emailed you the airline itinerary this morning. I’m looking forward to your visit.”

It got quiet, as if he expected me to reciprocate. I’ll admit there was a part of me that missed California and my friends. I even missed Dad...sometimes. I definitely missed the weather. But I wasn’t exactly looking forward to this trip with eagerness. Not right now. But if I told him that, then he’d ask when would be a good time, and I just didn’t have an answer. I figured he didn’t want to hear “Never” or “Maybe this summer.”

“I’ll see you Monday then.”

“Yeah, see you. Bye.” I disconnected. After tossing the cellphone on my bed, I dropped into the chair in front of my desk. Well, wasn’t that another stellar exchange with my father.

I glanced at the gift-wrapping project I’d been in the middle of when Dad called. The sparkly red wrapping paper crinkled as I pulled it flat across my

desk again. I measured the box against it and began cutting. Wrapping presents wasn't my forte, but maybe it would take my mind off of that conversation.

The warmth in my face amped up, and I felt like punching the desktop, but I'd probably only make a hole in the cheap particleboard surface. This whole situation made me angrier than it should. I needed to chill out, accept this trip, and just go with it.

A visit to the batting cages might be in order this afternoon. It was a great way to grind out my frustration, smacking those balls into a fence.

"Luke..." Mom spoke just outside my door. She tapped on the wooden surface.

I scrambled with the paper and present. In my rush, I knocked one of my baseball trophies off the desk and onto the hardwood floor. "Mom...give me a second..." I replaced the trophy on the desk. Trying not to completely destroy the paper, I folded it and her present together and stuffed them inside the desk drawer.

Mom walked on inside while removing her realtor blazer. "What are you up to? How was church?"

"It was good."

"I hated missing services today. I'm hoping this is my last Sunday on duty for a while." She took a seat on the bed and gave me that thorough mom once-over examination. "What's wrong?"

"Who said anything was wrong?" I swung around in the chair so that I faced the desk and could avoid Mom's impenetrable brown eyes.

"I know that wrinkle between your eyes. Did your dad call?"

I should have known I couldn't get anything past her. It didn't work when I was a kid and sneaked

cookies before dinner, or when in middle school I crept out of the house at midnight with my friends to the park. "Yeah, he called." I turned back to her. "He changed my ticket. I leave tomorrow at 6 AM."

"Tomorrow?" Her thin brown eyebrows shot back on her forehead. "But we haven't done anything to get ready." She sprung to her feet. "We need to start a load of laundry and get the suitcases down from the attic." She took a step toward the doorway with her cellphone in her hand while clicking through to her calendar. "I'll have to see if Val can take over my appointments tomorrow morning."

"Don't worry about it, Mom. I did laundry yesterday. I'll go get the suitcases and pack and everything. I can take care of it. I bet one of my friends will even get up early and drive me to the airport."

She rotated back toward me with a tired smile and leaned against the doorframe. "I'll drive you. I want to drive you." Her smile cracked wider. "Even if I have to get up before the chickens start crowing next door."

"Oh, don't remind me!" The early-morning hours and I were not friends. And that rooster and I had become mortal enemies over the last several months. At least there was one positive in staying with Dad over Christmas break. I might actually get to sleep in.

~*~

You know how they say girls are made of "sugar and spice and everything nice"? Yeah, they're totally right. I kissed Andrea again. She smelled sweet. She tasted like sugar and cinnamon. Maybe it was just her lip gloss. Mmm, yeah, definitely cinnamon.

Andrea pressed a hand into my thick fleece jacket,

subtly breaking off the kiss. Her face was rosy with wind-blown cheeks. The late-afternoon sun glistened in her round green eyes and off the pink color of her smiling lips. This was her gentle way of tugging me back.

I hadn't intended for the kiss to grow so intense, but something just took over inside of me. I needed to be close to her and let her know how important she was to me. Words just weren't enough. Words were cheap. Words could change or be proven false. Actions were what mattered. I had to break my news to her, and knowing Andrea, she wouldn't take it well. With her superhero fascination, maybe I should just draw it out comic-book style. Then maybe she'd laugh and find a way to forgive me.

She took my hand. "Are you going to buy me a cup of coffee or what, Luke Ryan?" She smiled, and I could tell she sensed my mood. Her hand felt chilled in the cool December weather. A sudden wind whipped crunchy brown leaves in a circle at our feet as we stood beneath a tall maple tree.

"Of course, Miss Jamison." I smiled back. "That's why we're here, isn't it?" I squeezed her hand as we ambled toward the door of the Coffee Cup.

Christmas carols hummed through the speakers as we entered the coffee house. Green and red strands of garland looped through the exposed ductwork in the ceiling and drooped down the brick walls of the industrial building. In a corner near the arcade, a seven-foot-tall Christmas tree glowed with multicolored lights.

It sure is beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

I loved Christmas. I mean, who doesn't love Christmas? Decorations, presents, the birth of our Lord

and Savior. Lots to love here. But Christmastime meant that compulsory visit with Dad and traveling all the way across the country away from my new home, my new friends...away from Andrea.

A nervous flutter rumbled in my stomach as I glanced at her. Last October she'd made me work awfully hard to prove to her how much she meant to me. And now I had to leave her for over ten days. What if she forgot me? What if she realized I wasn't actually all that important to her everyday happiness? But what choice did I have? Dad wanted me in California over Christmas break. My first chance to have a possibly white Christmas, or at least experience a few flurries, and I was being commanded back to the land of sun and sand.

Being seventeen was supposed to be empowering, as if you're on the cusp of independence and adulthood, but somehow it just made me feel more powerless than ever. I hated being unable to control my own future.

After ordering, I carried mugs of coffee to a secluded table in the back.

Andrea slid one of the mugs closer to her as she took her seat. She eyed me with those pretty green eyes. Her lips twitched. She wanted to say something but she held back, waiting on me. "Luke...what is it?" she finally blurted out after another minute of silence between us.

"What's what?" I shrugged.

She smiled then breathed in a deep breath and released it. "You have something on your mind. You have all afternoon, right?"

She knew me too well. She might be busy with piano at her new performing arts school, but when I really needed her, she was there for me.

"OK, yeah. I have something on my mind." I took a sip of coffee. "I, uh, well, you know I'm going to spend Christmas with my dad."

She nodded her head and a slight frown tipped the corners of her mouth. "I know."

"And I was supposed to leave Thursday, but Dad changed my ticket. I'm leaving tomorrow." I braced myself with another sip of coffee, awaiting her response.

Andrea didn't do well with change—even a change of plans.

"Tomorrow?" Her eyebrows inched downward. "But we were supposed to have the next three days together. We had all these plans. I even cleared my piano-practice schedule. Dad didn't like it, but I told him it was important and..." She paused and pressed her lips together. "Sorry, you were saying you have to leave tomorrow." She took a casual drink from her mug.

I sat there stunned for a minute. "Andrea, are you OK? Should I be taking your temperature or something?" I teased. "Seriously, though, you're taking this incredibly calm. You've been too calm for weeks. What gives?"

"Worried I'm going to displace you, Cool Hand Luke?" She reached over and clasped my right hand.

I wasn't worried she'd displace me; I was worried she didn't care enough to be bothered by my absence. Where were those constant struggles with her crazy neuroses and melodrama now?

"Aren't you proud of me? I'm growing. Working through my prayer journal has helped tons. Every time I want to freak out, I say a prayer and remember one of the verses in the study. God is in control."

She was right. I'd been stressing over the idea of my dad being in control of my future, but that wasn't exactly accurate. God was in control, and He wanted me to respect my father, so that meant I needed to go to California and visit the colleges like Dad wanted and keep my mouth shut.

For now. But that still didn't remedy my problem when it came to Andrea.

"You're right. I'm cool." I squeezed her hand and smiled. Then I let her hand go and slid back in my seat. "You know, Southern California is great this time of year. Sunny and bright and a whole lot warmer than central NC."

"Are you trying to make me jealous?" She crossed her arms, pretending to be annoyed.

"No, I just thought it might make you think about coming to California with me."

"What?" Her head juttled back and her eyes widened.

"Yeah, it's perfect." Brilliance had suddenly come to me. It was rash and ridiculous. Everything I usually avoided. "Didn't you say you had an aunt or uncle in LA?"

"A cousin. Mom's second cousin, Georgia, but..."

"So, see if you can stay with her. Maybe you can get a later flight in a few days. Then I can show you all my favorite places. It'll be perfect."

That's when I noticed her facial expression. It wasn't full of excitement, with her eyes lit up at the possibilities, like when I offered to drive her to see her favorite pianist play in Charleston.

"Luke, I can't. First of all, Mom and Dad would never approve. Remember my parents? The overprotective ones. You have maybe confused them

with some super cool parents.”

“I know. I just thought that maybe if you were visiting family, they wouldn't mind...”

“It's not just my parents. I can't go. It's what I wanted to tell you. I'm going to be in this Christmas Eve concert in Richmond. It's a pretty big deal—a charity concert. Some big names will be there. It's a great honor to be chosen out of my entire class.”

This explained her abnormal emotional control. She didn't stutter or trip over her chair or anything. With me out of the way over break, she could focus on her concert uninterrupted.

“Sure, I get it. It's important.”

“It is important. I mean, you're important too.”

Am I?

She reached for my hand, but I shifted farther away and crossed my arms over my chest. “It's OK, Andrea. You can't come. I pretty much knew you wouldn't.”

“I can't.”

“You can't.”

“Hey, you know I'm going to miss you.” She smiled with a cute tilt to her head.

I smiled back. “Not as much as I'll miss you. So, come on, tell me about this concert.” I picked up my coffee mug and took another sip. I knew she wouldn't come, and yet I'd hoped...I'd hoped that for once I wouldn't feel second to her music once again.

~*~

“Here.” Mom handed me a wrapped package as we pulled up in front of the airline drop-off at the Raleigh-Durham airport.

“What’s this? I thought we said we’d celebrate Christmas when I got back.”

“It’s not from me. Andrea dropped it off when you were gone last night.” She leaned in as if to give me a kiss on the cheek or forehead like when I was little. Instead, she smoothed a piece of my dark hair into place. “I feel like I should tell you something important—advice or something, but you’re pretty much all grown up. Three more months and my baby will be eighteen.” Her expression turned playful as she gave me a light pat on the cheek.

“I better get going before you’re towed by airline security.” I slid closer to the door and grabbed the handle. Before opening it, I turned back to her. “I hate leaving you at Christmas.”

“I know you do, but I’ll be fine with Aunt Renee and Ray and the girls. I won’t be alone. Don’t worry about me.”

“Love you, Mom.”

“Love you too. Have a good Christmas.”

I hopped out and grabbed my bags from the trunk. I waved goodbye and headed inside to check my luggage. A biting wind shot through the entryway to the terminal just as I started to enter the automatic doors.

I did hate leaving Mom for Christmas. I knew she’d be OK with my aunt and uncle and cousins, but it wouldn’t be the same. This was supposed to be our first North Carolina Christmas. Instead, it had turned out to be her first Christmas alone. The first Christmas since my older sister, Monica, passed away after being in a coma from a car accident. The first Christmas since she and Dad divorced. I couldn’t believe what a jerk Dad was being, forcing me to come back to California

and leave Mom. No, that wasn't true. Dad was being true to form.

After checking in and making it through airline security, I took a seat near my gate. Christmas music circulated around the terminal as if we should be ready to break out into caroling groups. I've heard they do that to keep travelers calm during the stressful holiday traveling season. So far, it had done nothing to stave off my anxiety. Usually, I loved this time of year and got into the whole holiday-spirit thing, but for some reason it grated on my nerves today.

"Fa-la-la-la-la..." Talk about carolers. I nearly rubbed at my eyes to make sure the cones and rods were still working. Carolers dressed in full Victorian garb strolled down the concourse together. Yeah, the airport sure wanted to keep everyone in a holiday spirit. Downstairs, they even had a Santa, live music, and volunteers of the USO handing out cookies as part of some Christmas fundraiser.

I pulled out Andrea's package from my bag. It had been wrapped in plain brown paper. Nothing Christmassy about it. So I was thinking it wasn't a Christmas present.

My cellphone buzzed with a text message. *Yo, have fun in the sun. Ride the waves for me.* It was Dion, one of my new friends from Aubrey Christian Academy.

I'll be thinking of you in that 78-degree sunshine, I texted back.

Too cruel, man. Later.

Later was right. I wondered if I should message Andrea before boarding the plane when I'd be forced to turn off my phone. I decided against it. What would I say that hadn't already been said?

I'll miss you.

Wish you could come.

Don't forget me.

Strike the last one. That just sounded pathetic. What was wrong with me? Why had I all of a sudden become so insecure? It must have to do with going back. Back to California. Back with Dad. It was doing a number on my head.

The plane started loading after a few minutes. I took my window seat in row eleven, thankful I wasn't on the aisle. It was an overbooked flight full of screaming babies on their way to see grandma, no doubt.

I'd kept Andrea's gift out. I wasn't sure what to do with it. Sticking it back into my backpack didn't seem right, but I didn't exactly want to open it either. I don't know why. I liked Andrea...a lot. Other than Mom, there wasn't another person alive who meant more to me, but undeniable anger had crept up inside my chest. Why was I so mad? It was stupid. She was right. Her parents would never have allowed it anyway. Why couldn't I get over this?

Maybe because she'd made it too easy for me. Did I actually want her to be upset? Again, I had to wonder what was wrong with me.

I stared out the window. Frost covered a portion of my view down to the tarmac. Pine trees stood off in the distance. A few minutes later, we were taxiing down the runway in a bumpy takeoff and were gaining altitude. I tightened my grasp on Andrea's package. Holding it somehow made me feel closer to her, even if the plane had now moved high above the clouds and we were soaring farther and farther away from her with every breath.

2

"I think you're in my seat." I glanced at my ticket and then back to the person in my window seat. I'd made it to Chicago, and now I had to change planes. Next stop, LAX. Except for the usurper in my seat.

She pulled earbuds out of ears that had many studs. "What?"

"This is my seat."

She shook her short, spiky blonde hair. "No, I don't think so." She replaced the earbuds, closed her eyes, and continued to ignore me standing there.

I slipped into the aisle since other people were trying to get past me and to their own seats. I tapped her shoulder. Her eyelids, which had been outlined in dark eyeliner, popped back open.

"Yes?" She sounded bored by my intrusion to her solitude.

"I really think you are in my seat." I smiled and held my ticket out to her.

She gave a quick glance at the paper, but I could tell she had no intention of actually reading it.

"Fine!" She huffed and stood, grabbing a tan over-the-shoulder canvas bag that had sketches in permanent marker drawn all over it. Her eyes opened wide and she gave another huff.

I guess that was her way of saying *excuse me*.

Once the aisle cleared, I stepped backward and let