

A woman with long, dark hair is seen from behind, wearing a white lace-trimmed dress. She is leaning on a dark stone ledge, looking out over a landscape of green hills and a river under a dark, stormy sky with rain falling. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

EVEN THE WORST STORMS CAN BE BEAUTIFUL
IF YOU LEARN HOW TO LISTEN.

Listening
TO THE
Rain

MIRIAM THOR

Listening to the Rain

Miriam Thor

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Listening to the Rain COPYRIGHT 2022 by Miriam Thor

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. Contact Information:
titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version^(R). NIV^(R). Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.TM Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations, marked KJV are taken from the King James translation, public domain. Scripture quotations marked DR, are taken from the Douay Rheims translation, public domain.

Scripture texts marked NAB are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* Copyright 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Watershed Books, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
Watershed Books praise and splash logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History
First Watershed Edition, 2022
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0379-4
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Hannah, Hannahmae, and Mrs. Nancy. Your feedback helped make the book what it is today.

What People are Saying

“I loved this book! It left me feeling hopeful and nostalgic for my family. Ally and her cousins are such amazing characters. Their bond draws you in with complete sincerity and humanity. And their experience reminds me that we all take a journey to learn new things about ourselves and the people we love.”

- Dr. Hannah Mayfield.

PROLOGUE

~March 30, 2019; 3:30 p.m.~

Beep...Beep...Beep...

A heart monitor. My grandpa's heart monitor. That and the rain pattering against the window are the only sounds I've heard in the last hour. I'm sitting in one of those hospital chairs that looks comfortable until you actually have to sit in it. There's a microbiology textbook open in my lap, and I should be studying for my test next week. I need a good grade in this class if I want to keep my GPA high enough to get into medical school and become an audiologist. Despite knowing all of that, I'm not studying. I can't.

Not here. Not now.

Instead, I'm staring at Grandpa's face and praying God will give him the strength to get through this.

Sitting in this hospital room certainly does bring back memories. This is the only hospital in our parish, so any time one of us was hurt or sick, we came here. We came for a lot of minor things like stitches and broken bones. A few of the nurses in the emergency room knew my whole family by name, and they always gave us candy when we left. Those visits weren't so bad.

But there was one visit that wasn't like that at all, that I can't think about without a twinge of pain even

now. No, I don't want to think about that.

Not here. Not now.

Less painful memories would make a better distraction anyway. Let's see. Maybe my ballet recital during freshman year...that was the beginning of something interesting.

1

— TUTUS AND TATTERS

~December 19, 2014~

Biting my lip, I looked down at my red and white costume. This really wasn't how I'd pictured myself at my first ballet recital. When I'd signed up for lessons a few months ago, I'd envisioned myself wearing a leotard with a flowing skirt, my brown hair tucked into a neat bun. But no, our instructor, Madame Clarisse, insisted that all the beginning ballerinas had to be candy canes for the Christmas recital. The bulky costume was doing nothing to help my nerves.

As I took my place in line, I pretended it wasn't embarrassing to be so much taller than the other candy canes. My classmates were all under the age of eight. Apparently, fourteen was an awkward age to begin ballet. I wished Missy would have mentioned that before I signed up.

Standing in line, my hands shook. Would ballet be *my thing*? The talent that would bring people to their feet and make them think I was exceptional? In the next hour, I would know one way or the other. I both looked forward to and dreaded the answer.

Please, Lord, I prayed. Help me do well in the recital. Please let ballet be my thing.

When the music started, I tiptoed to my assigned spot. The candy canes were arranged in a semi-circle along the back and sides of the stage. Unfortunately, as the tallest, I had to stand at the back. I'd tried to convince Madame Clarisse that I wouldn't block any of the other dancers if she placed me on the far-left or right side, but she hadn't listened.

As I spun and swayed to the first song, I saw Missy leaping along the front of the stage in her fairy costume with her auburn hair fixed in a French braid. Since Missy was an advanced student, she got to move around a lot more than I did. Despite knowing how much she deserved it, I couldn't help but feel a bit jealous.

Pushing that thought aside, I searched the audience for my family, but it was too dark to find them. The few faces I could see in the crowd appeared bored, and none of them were looking at me. It was as if I was invisible.

During the second song, one of the little candy canes next to me fell down. When I stepped out of place to help her up, I bumped one of the ornaments twirling in front of me, and she almost fell over. She caught herself and kept going as though nothing had happened. It was a minor mishap, but it really shook my confidence. If I could make a mistake as a candy cane in the back row, chances were that ballet wasn't going to be my thing.

The rest of the recital went smoothly, but by the end, I was tired, sweaty, and wondering why I had let Missy talk me into this. After I changed out of my

costume, I walked to where the audience had been sitting and found Grandpa and my cousins standing in one of the aisles near the back.

"Great job, Ally," Grandpa told me, his mouth curving in a smile beneath his gray mustache.

"You were a really good candy cane," James said.

When I raised my eyebrows, Billy nodded in confirmation.

"Thanks," I said, feeling a little better.

"You ready to go?" Billy asked. "I'm hungry."

I bit back a laugh. Billy was always hungry.

"Give me just a minute," I said. "I want to wish Missy and her mom a merry Christmas."

"Couldn't you have told her that on the bus this afternoon?" Billy asked, only half-joking.

Before I could respond, Grandpa said, "We'll go out to the car. Ally, you can join us after you find Missy."

"Thanks, Grandpa," I said and started scanning the crowd.

After a moment, I spotted Missy and took a step toward her.

"So, how did it feel to be the only candy cane over four feet tall?" someone behind me asked.

Cringing, I turned to face Jenny, my least favorite person in all of Mayville. Tonight, her perfect blonde hair was held back with a red headband.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"My little sister was the ornament you almost knocked over with your clumsy feet," she said. "Fortunately, Claire is more graceful than you, or it

could have been a disaster.”

I clenched my teeth, knowing it was true. Stepping out of line to help the little candy cane had been a mistake, one that could have been more costly than it was.

“Don’t you have anything better to do right now?” I demanded, half-expecting her to say no. Tormenting me seemed to be one of her favorite pastimes.

“You’re right, I do,” she said, starting to turn away. “I mean, if you want to make a fool of yourself by spinning around like a monkey in a tutu, who am I to stop you?”

With that parting jibe, she walked away. Biting the inside of my cheek, I blinked back my tears. Jenny had hated me since I’d attempted to show her my pet spider in second grade, and she had gone out of her way to make my life miserable ever since. Most of the time, I didn’t let her get to me anymore, but tonight, she’d touched a nerve.

Trying not to feel despondent, I glanced around the room again and caught sight of Missy and her mom walking toward the back door. Pasting a smile on my face, I hurried over to them.

“Great job in the recital, Missy,” I said. “You made a fantastic fairy.”

She grinned. “Thanks. You were a great candy cane, too. I watched you whenever I could.”

Which probably wasn’t often considering how much she’d been moving around. I decided not to point that out.

“You both did wonderful,” Ms. Cathy said.

"Thank you," I said, pretending I believed her. "Well, Grandpa's waiting for me, but I wanted to wish you both a merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you too," Missy replied.

"Yes," Ms. Cathy said. "And tell your grandpa and cousins merry Christmas as well."

"I will," I said and walked out to the car.

As usual when we were in the car together, Billy was riding shotgun, so I climbed into the backseat with James.

About halfway home, James leaned toward me. It was so dark that I could barely see his short brown hair, much less his facial expression, but I knew his gray eyes were filled with concern.

"You OK?" he whispered, so that only I could hear.

I shrugged. "I had a little run in with Jenny."

James sighed. "The candy canes really did add a lot to the show, Ally. And you were an important part of that. Don't worry about Jenny's opinion. She would have found something bad to say no matter what. She always does."

"Yeah, you're right," I said, wishing it helped.

I hadn't been as bad as Jenny claimed, but I hadn't been great either. Which meant my hopes for ballet being my thing were now in tatters. I would stick it out until the end of the year, only because Grandpa insisted that we not break our commitments, but I'd have to find something else to be my thing.

I heaved a sigh. Billy had been the best player on every sports team he'd ever joined, and James was an

awesome musician. People had cheered for them so many times I'd lost count. But despite trying band, choir, and every sport I could think of, I had yet to find something I was really good at. I hadn't had a lot of hope that ballet would be my thing, but after looking through the sports and extra-curriculars at Mayville High, it had seemed like the best option. Now, I'd have to start looking again.

"Don't look so glum, Ally," Billy said, his blond hair bouncing against his forehead as he turned to look at me. "It's Christmas break."

Not wanting to bring down my entire family's mood, I hitched a smile on my face.

"Yep," I said. "Two weeks with no school. What else could we need?"

Billy nodded like that settled the matter and turned back to face the front.

James gave me a sideways look that said he didn't buy my act for a second. A look I pointedly ignored.

"Let's listen to Christmas music," I said.

Grandpa nodded and turned on the radio.

When we got home, we had leftover spaghetti for dinner. As I ate, I surveyed the kitchen's white tile floors and countertops. Somehow, they were already getting dingy, even though it had been less than a week since I'd scrubbed them. How was that even possible? Shaking my head, I turned my attention back to my food.

When we were all finished eating, Grandpa asked, "Whose turn is it to wash the dishes?"

"Mine," Billy and I said in unison. All four of us

took turns doing the dishes, two at a time, so one could wash while the other dried.

“Good,” Grandpa said. “I’ll go ahead and take a shower.”

He stood and brought his dishes to the sink. The rest of us did the same. As James grabbed a book and headed to the porch, Billy and I played Rock Paper Scissors to see which task we would do. I won, so I dried and put away each dish after Billy washed it. We finished just as Grandpa got out of the shower.

“Good timing,” I said and grabbed my pajamas from my room before heading to take a shower.

When I finished, I found Billy in his and James’s room and told him it was his turn in the bathroom. After he showered, he’d let James know it was his turn, just as he did every night.

When we were all clean, Grandpa called us to the living room to pray. I’d been in my room reading, but I came quickly when he called. For reasons I couldn’t quite put into words, this was one of my favorite parts of the day.

Grandpa was already kneeling on the floor, so I knelt on his right. When my cousins joined us, Billy knelt across from me, and James knelt across from Grandpa. It was as close to a circle as we could make with four people, and we knelt in that exact formation every night. Grandpa prayed first, and we worked our way around the circle. Billy first, James second, me last. It worked out well. Grandpa and James tended to say long prayers, while Billy and I both said short ones. So we alternated between long and short. Once I said

amen, we told each other good night and headed to bed.

After closing the door, I surveyed my room, my favorite place in the house. The light pink walls and the patchwork quilt my grandma made helped it feel cozy, despite how worn the white furniture looked.

Since I wasn't quite ready to go to sleep, I rested on my bed and read a few more chapters of my book. Then I got up and turned off the light. Since Grandpa insisted my room stay neat, it was easy to find my way back to my bed in the dark. As I snuggled under the quilt, I decided to pray for what I wanted most but had been unwilling to say in front of my family.

Lord, please help me find my thing. Something I'm really good at, that will make people cheer just for me.

Feeling better now that I'd shared my deepest desire with the Lord, I drifted off to sleep.

2

—A NEW TEACHER AND NEW IDEA

“Rise and shine, Ally,” Grandpa said, turning on the light in my bedroom. “It’s time to get ready for school.”

With a groan, I pulled my quilt over my head, wondering how Christmas break could possibly be over already. For a few minutes, I just lay there, contemplating what would happen if I simply refused to get out of bed. Picturing Grandpa’s reaction had me on my feet and heading to the chicken coop in a matter of seconds.

After I gathered eggs, I ate breakfast and got ready as quickly as I could. Once I was dressed, I surveyed myself in the full-length mirror on the back of my bedroom door. Even though it was winter, my skin was fairly tan. And I’d left my brown hair down, so the tips just brushed my shoulders. My eyes, the spitting image of Grandpa’s green ones, stared back at me, filled with determination.

“I will find my thing,” I told my reflection. “I won’t give up, no matter what.”

Satisfied, I grabbed my backpack and headed to the living room to wait for my cousins. As I sank down on the purple, velvet couch, I couldn’t help but wish

we had cable. Or satellite. Or internet. Over break, I'd tried again to convince Grandpa that we should get some sort of technology from this millennium. He'd said it was a waste of money and that if the "bunny ear" antenna had been good enough for his children, they were good enough for us.

When my cousins were finally ready, the three of us headed to the kitchen for inspection. Grandpa looked us over carefully, just as he did every day before we left for school. I'd learned a long time ago what he was looking for. As a man who wore overalls every day, Grandpa didn't care if we looked cool or pretty. But as a former Marine drill sergeant, he cared if we looked neat.

"You all look great," he said after a moment. "I hope you have a good day."

He patted each of us on the back as we went out the door. It was a fifteen-minute walk to the end of our road, past a lot of soy beans and two houses that belonged to our only neighbors, Mr. Codwaller and Mr. Francis. We walked to the end of the road and waited for the bus. The drive to school would take thirty minutes. When the bus pulled up, I immediately went to sit with Missy.

"Hey, Ally," she said. "How was your break?"

"Pretty good," I replied. "How about you?"

"It was fine," she said, her hazel eyes downcast.

Frowning, I studied my best friend. She always had a fair complexion, but today, her skin was as white as chalk.

"You OK?" I asked.

She shrugged one shoulder. "Yeah. It's just...we're getting a new English teacher today."

Right. Now that I thought about it, Mrs. Cloverfield had mentioned she was retiring right before break. Between the recital and Christmas, I'd forgotten all about it. Clearly, Missy hadn't.

"It'll be fine," I told her.

"I'm sure you're right," Missy said, though she didn't sound sure at all.

I pursed my lips, unsure what to say. Missy's dyslexia had always made English class difficult for her, especially when other students, and even a few teachers, had given her a hard time about it. I was trying to think of a way to cheer her up when someone sat down in the seat behind us.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but you're Ally, right?"

I turned around to see Tyler Ferguson, a sophomore with curly black hair and a slight overbite. Since we went to the same church, I was pretty sure he knew my name, which meant he was just trying to make conversation. I had no problem with that.

"Yep, that's me," I said with a smile. "And you're Tyler."

He nodded. "I know we've seen each other around, but I don't think we've ever officially introduced ourselves, and I'd like to get to know you."

I tried to hide my surprise. Was this guy actually flirting with me? I'd hoped that guys would start to take an interest in me when I started high school, but this was the first time it had happened.

"Hi, Tyler," Billy said, appearing out of nowhere

and dropping into the seat next to him. "Long time, no see."

"Hi, Billy," Tyler said, obviously uncomfortable.

I narrowed my eyes at Billy, hoping he would take the hint and go away. He ignored me.

"Listen, Tyler," Billy said. "You seem like a nice enough guy, but if I see you talking to my cousin again...you'll regret it."

He held up his fist to emphasize his point, and all the blood drained from Tyler's face. Billy was the captain of the football team, and his muscles weren't just for show.

"Billy, what are you doing?" I demanded.

"Protecting you," he said, gaze still on Tyler.

"I don't need protecting," I snapped, glaring at him.

"What's going on?" James asked.

I jumped. I'd been so focused on Billy's outrageous behavior that I hadn't noticed my other cousin walk up and sit behind Billy. When I looked at him, I felt relief wash over me. James would have some sense.

"Billy's threatening to kill Tyler if he even looks at me," I told him.

"I won't kill him," Billy said. "I'll just take him to the back of the bus and beat him to a pulp."

James shook his head. "You can't do that."

I smiled smugly at Billy, who took his gaze off Tyler for the first time to frown at James.

"You want him going out with Ally?" he asked, a note of disbelief in his voice.

"Of course not," James said. "But you can't beat

him up here. You'll be suspended. Wait until you're at church or something, and then beat him to a pulp."

Billy nodded. "Good point."

He looked at Tyler with a smile that bared more teeth than usual. "Spread the word. Anyone who wants to go out with Ally has to go through me first."

I glared at my cousins, wishing I wouldn't get suspended for punching them. They ignored me and walked off together, looking quite pleased with themselves.

"Tyler," I said desperately.

"Later, Ally." He moved to a different seat without looking at me.

"They're unbelievable." I turned to face the front of the bus.

"I'm sure they have your best interest at heart," Missy said with a shrug.

"Yeah, if what's in my best interest is not having a boyfriend until I'm thirty."

"It's kind of sweet that they want to protect you," she added.

I rolled my eyes. Missy always did her best to give people the benefit of the doubt. Usually I didn't mind, but in this case, it was a bit annoying. Before I could tell her so, the bus pulled into the school parking lot, and we walked to the gym to wait. We'd barely set foot inside it when the bell rang, sending us to our homeroom class.

When Missy and I reached Mrs. Cloverfield's old classroom, we found our new teacher waiting outside the door. She was thin with black hair and looked