



White As Snow

by Jason Salamun

**“...though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow...”**

Isaiah 1:18

Chapter 1

A Storefront Window

It's a mild December morning when eight-year-old Charis Lawler, and her mother, Mrs. Lawler, are shopping together downtown. As they walk from shop to shop, Charis is struck by a particular white wedding dress in a bridal store window.

"Mommy, Mommy, look at that pretty dress," Charis says, "It's glowing." Mrs. Lawler, seeing Charis is enamored by the wedding dresses asks, "Which one?" Charis points, "That dress right there. The one that's as white as snow!"

Mrs. Lawler spots a 50% off sign in the window. Never one to shy away from a good sale, she decides to take Charis into the shop to look at the bridal gowns. They walk in and Charis' can't hide her delight as she is surrounded by a wonderland of wedding dresses.

The bridal shop owner approaches Mrs. Lawler and asks if she can help them with anything.

Mrs. Lawler says that they'd like to look at the wedding dress in the window. The owner brings it over to them and Charis can't help but touch the sleek silk texture and the ruffled hemline.

Mrs. Lawler leans down to Charis and asks, "How about I buy this dress for you today?"

Charis' eyes light up, "Really?"

Mrs. Lawler replies, "Yes. Really. Now, the dress is too big for you now but when you grow up we can make some adjustments and it will fit you like a glove."

Charis is overjoyed.

Mrs. Lawler adds, "But we have to make a deal Charis." "Okay Mommy." Mrs. Lawler continues, "You have to promise me to be good. It's very important because naughty girls don't get to wear white wedding dresses. Only good girls do. Will you promise to grow up to be a good girl?" Charis nods enthusiastically, "Yep. I'll be a good girl."

With their agreement in place, they stroll over to the cash register to pay for the dress. The bridal shop owner smiles at Charis and says, "This dress is a little big for you, don't you think?"

"My mommy says if I'm a good girl I get to wear it when I grow up."

The owner smiles politely, finishes the transaction, and says, "Well, you'll look lovely dear." Charis grins and waves goodbye as her and Mrs. Lawler exit the store.

Chapter 2

A Dapper Young Man

Years go by and Charis discovers that trying to live up to the good girl agreement hasn't been easy. Especially in her strict, religious family. Charis is the only child of Reverend and Mrs. Lawler. Their expectations for her are high and their patience for imperfection is low. Each time Charis misbehaves, her mother reminds her that naughty girls can't wear white wedding dresses. Eventually, this weight becomes too great a burden for Charis to carry and she learns to tune her parents out.

Now eighteen and graduated from high school, Charis goes to work for a used car dealership owned by a dapper, young hot shot named Evan Roberts. His love for cars and aptitude for business collided into a wildly successful company. Evan was notorious for three things: his vintage car collection, his exploits with the ladies, and for holding anything-goes weekend pool parties for his employees and friends. His house has even been dubbed *Evan's Heaven*.

After several months of working as Evan's assistant, Charis is wooed by his charm and she falls for him hook, line, and sinker.

Evan treated Charis like a princess and for the first time in her life she felt free to be herself. On her nineteenth birthday, Evan took her away on an extended weekend to South Beach. Between the romance on the beach and shopping sprees in the boutiques, Evan stole her heart. Charis was in love and was quite sure he was the one.

Several weeks later, everything changed.

After triple-checking the results, Charis discovers that she has a souvenir from her ocean getaway with Evan—a pregnancy. After taking some time to process the idea of being a mom, she makes her way to Evan's house to break the news that he's going to be a dad. As she drives, she flirts with the thought that he will be ecstatic and maybe even ask her to marry him.

Charis drives up and immediately sees Evan is not alone. He's having one of his infamous pool parties. She approaches the pool and finds him making out with a bikini clad brunette. Evan looks up to see Charis' heartbreak on her face. He approaches her to explain himself when she interrupts him. "Don't. I just came here to tell you that I'm pregnant, you're the father, and we're done." In tears, she storms back to her car leaving him stunned as he returns to his party.

Chapter 3

Running Mascara

Charis is feeling nauseous as she dreads going home to share the news with her parents. She's already got a broken heart and isn't sure she can handle their scorn on top of it all.

She arrives at home and spots both of her parents vehicles in the driveway. "Here goes nothing" she thinks as she walks through the front door. She sees her father parked in his recliner and her mother getting dinner ready in the kitchen.

Mrs. Lawler hears Charis walk in, "You're just in time Charis, I just finished dinner. Why don't you have seat?" Charis replies, "Smells good Mom." Her dad walks in and sits at the table, "So how was your day Charis?" Not able to keep up pretenses, "Actually, I have some news. Mom, you might want to sit down."

Silence fills the air as she informs them that she is expecting. Their eyes are heavy with disappointment.

Mr. Lawler breaks the silence and asks if Evan and her will get married. Before Charis can answer, Mrs. Lawler interrupts with a snide comment about how Charis definitely can't wear white to her wedding now. Through running mascara, Charis tells them she's sorry for everything and that she is no longer with Evan. They tell her she and the baby can stay with them if she cleans up her act. She agrees.

As Charis' baby grows, so does her confusion. Looking for direction, she decides to attend a service at her dad's church. When she enters the church building, she gets a few disapproving glances from some ladies and a little gawking from some men. Clearly, the news has been spreading here. As Rev. Lawler begins preaching his sermon, he indirectly takes aim at Charis as he begins a tirade about fornication. He begins listing examples of sexual sin declaring, "If you're having sex outside of marriage, you're a fornicator." He then glances in Charis' direction and declares, "That includes teenage, unwed mothers." Mrs. Lawler gives an approving nod as Charis' heart drops. Rev. Lawler continues his list, "If you're a rapist, you're a fornicator..."

All of the stares of shame and condemnation are too much for her to handle. In tears, she gets up and leaves the church in the middle of the service. She gets in her car and her emotions overwhelm her. After a few minutes, she looks at her herself in the rearview mirror and thinks maybe everyone's right, maybe she is nothing more than a whore.

Chapter 4

A Chance Encounter?

To clear her head, Charis drives to her special thinking spot- her old elementary school. She steps out of the car and notices the empty playground is being renovated. She walks through and is relieved to see her old favorite swing set is still there. She walks over, sits on the swing, and gently pushes off of her foot to begin a slight swing.

She begins running scenarios in her mind:
"I've got to get out of mom and dad's house. Maybe I should just move away and go to college. But wait. How can I go to college and take care of this baby at the same time? Maybe I should just go back to Evan and hope he marries me. I can put up with his late nights and girls on the side. I don't know..."

As she's looking down at the bark on the ground, she hears some footsteps approaching her. A man comes up, sees she's crying and lost in thought, and asks her if she's okay.

Resisting the urge to tell an obvious lie, she looks up, sighs and says, "honestly, no."

"Are you hurt? Do you need to go a hospital or anything?" The mans asks.

"No, I'm cool. Thanks though."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just dealing with some stuff."

"Okay then." He reaches out his hand, "Well, my name's Leo."

She shakes his hand, "I'm Charis."

"Nice to meet you Charis." He points, "I'm just finishing up some work on this playground."

"Oh, I'll get out of your way..."

"No, no. You're fine." He assures her, "I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I used to go to this school when I was a kid and sometimes I come back to clear my head."

"Let me guess. That was your favorite swing?"

She grabs the chain, "Yep, it was."

"Do you mind if I snag that swing next to you?" He asks.

She nods her head approvingly.

"I know you're not supposed to ask this of a lady, but, um, are you expecting?" Leo asks uncomfortably.

She chuckles through her tears and runny nose. "No, I just ate a big lunch." (sniff)

He apologizes, "Oh, my bad. I thought it was a little baby bump."

"Just joshing." She replies, "Actually, I'm about over three months along now."

Relieved he smiles. "Ah, a sense of humor."

She returns a slight grin.

Leo senses her discomfort. "So...Since you used to go to school here, maybe I can get your opinion on something."

"Sure."

"I'm trying to get this playground finished before school's back in session next month. Do you think I should keep these old metal swings?"

Charis asks, "Oh, you're building a new playground?"

"Kind of. It's sort of been my summer project."

She responds, "Oh! So you're the school handyman?"

"Not really. I'm actually a second-year teacher here." Leo reveals.

"And you're building playground sets?"

"Well, I grew up helping my dad and acquired the tinker gene." Leo explains, "He was a craftsman. He made everything from chairs, to tables, to killer forts for me and my brothers. And like him, I like to work on projects from time to time. When I saw the playground at the school was falling apart, I sought permission to spend the summer making improvements. I think the kids are gonna love it."

He asks again, "So about this swing set?"

"You know, I have lots of memories here so I might be biased. But here's my honest opinion: There's really nothing wrong with these swings. The set is sturdy and still looks pretty good. If it were up to me, I'd paint it a similar shade to the rest of the equipment and leave it be."

"Huh? You know, that's not a bad idea Charis."

"Thank you."

Leo goes on, "You know, when I first saw this playground, I thought, 'Wow, someone spent a lot of time laying out this space. It really is a one-of-a-kind play area. With just a little bit of fixing up and freshening up, I think this playground could sparkle again.' In fact, my goal isn't to demolish the playground but to restore it to what it once was."

Fearing he's just bored her to death, he looks over at her and says, "So keeping this set actually fits in nicely with my plan. You're a pretty smart gal Charis."

She smirks and chuckles sarcastically.

"What's so funny?" Leo asks.

"If I was so smart," "she says, "then why did I get myself into this mess?"

"What mess?"

Pointing to her belly, "This one."

"Do you really think that baby is a mess?"

Charis sighs, "No, just the situation. I'm just so confused right now, that's all." She looks away, "Why am I telling you all this?"

He jokes, "Well, you listened to me ramble on about restoring a playground, so it's the least I could do."

"Do you mind if I ask how old you are Charis?"

Charis: "Nineteen...going on like thirty-nine."

"Okay, well I'm twenty-four, so take this for what it's worth. Maybe something beautiful can come out of whatever situation you're in. Things might suck right now but perhaps there's more going on then you can see right now. Maybe there's a design."

Charis perks up, "Okay, I see what's going on here. You're religious aren't you? You should know that I grew up in the home a preacher and have heard it all before."

Leo says, "Frankly, I can't stand religion."

Charis stops her slight swing with her foot, "Then why are you being so nice to me? It's weird. Either you're religious or you're some sort of sick pervert. People just don't spend their weekends and summers restoring playgrounds for kids. Especially guys."

Leo admits, "You're right."

"About what?" Charis asks, "That you're religious, a pervert, or both?"

Leo responds, "You're right about guys. We can be real a-holes, I know. But honest to God, I'm not a perv and I'm certainly not religious. I'm just a dude."

Charis says, "I'm sorry. It's just...I actually went to my dad's church this morning. I don't know why. For answers or something I guess. Anyways, as I walked through the doors, all I got were judgmental glances from a herd of church ladies and gawking stares from middle-aged men. It just made me nauseous."

Leo nods, "I don't blame you for being upset."

Charis interrupts, "That's not even the worst part. My parents led the charge. My [air quotes] father got up in the pulpit and went on and on about fornication."

Leo jokes, "Ooh, he dropped an f-bomb huh?"

Charis chuckles then continues, "He then proceeds to list examples of fornicators. And do you know what he chose to top the list?"

Leo shakes his no but his eyes show he knows.

"Yep. Teenage, unwed mothers. And he's looking right at me as he says it. Meanwhile, I see my mother's head nodding in approval. Right then I stood up and walked out only to hear that the next item on his list..." She chokes up then blurts out, "...WAS RAPISTS. I MADE THE LIST AHEAD OF RAPISTS OF ALL THINGS."

Leo is stunned, "Charis. I don't know what to say. I am so sorry. I can't believe that!"

"The thing is, I know I screwed up." Charis confesses, "I know I can't wear white to my wedding. I have a growing belly that reminds me every day. I just thought he was the one."

The father?" Leo asks.

"Yeah, his name is Evan. He owns the car company I used to work for. About a year ago we began dating and I thought he was Mr. Wonderful. He was charming, he spoiled me, he was fun. And when I found out I was pregnant I went to his house to tell him and found him with another girl. I've come to learn that I was just one of his many girlfriends. I guess I was so blind that couldn't see that he was really a player. A boy in a man's body."

Leo asks, "So what did he say when you told him you were pregnant?"

"The bastard didn't say anything. Then again, I didn't give him much of a chance to. I just told him I was pregnant, he was the father, and that we were through. Then I left as quickly as I could. As I drove away, I saw him go back to his pool party and his bimbo. That was the last time I talked to him."

"Do you think he'll want to be a dad to the baby?"

"I don't know. All I know is I'm having this baby and will try my best to be a good mom."



Charis looks at her watch and gets off the swing.

"Listen, I gotta get going. I have to be at the coffee shop in 20 minutes. I don't want to lose my job on top of everything else."

Leo stands up, "Okay. Well, hey, it was really nice to meet you Charis. I enjoyed our chat."

Charis: "Yeah, Sorry to dump on you like that. You just caught me at the right time. But I do appreciate you listening to me."

"Have fun with what you're doing here Leo."

He says, "I want to thank *you*."

Charis asks, "For what?"

Leo explains, "For the advice on this swing set. You helped me nail down the rest of my plan for the playground. I'll make sure this swing set is still around for you whenever you need it."

He begins walking with her to her car, "Maybe I'll see you around?"

"Maybe?" Charis arrives at her car, "See ya."

Leo smiles and gives a little wave as he watches her drive away. He then gets to work on the playground.

A couple of weeks pass since Charis' encounter with Leo, but she can't forget him. In the middle of her mess his attentive ear was the only hint of compassion she has experienced.

She slowly drives by the elementary school to *happen to be in the neighborhood*. Leo was not there but his fingerprints were all over the playground. It looked familiar yet brand new. Just the way he planned it.

She strolls around the area looking at his handiwork before making her way to her swing. "He left the swing," she thinks. Charis sits and rocks herself back and forth into a full swing feeling the wind in her face.

As she swings, she notices something on the ground. The shading in the bark resembled a smiley face. No doubt a thoughtful touch from a gentleman. She smiled back, doubting it was intended for her, yet hoping that it was. She continues her swing.

Chapter 5

The Woo

The next morning, Charis is at work at the coffee shop. She's grinding some beans for a fresh brew when the door opens and she prepares herself to help the customer. She looks over the espresso machine to greet the customer and to her surprise, it's Evan.

"Hey Charis. It's been a while."

"What are you doing here Evan?" she says directly.

"I've been doing some thinking, and, well, would you be interested in talking after you get off work? Maybe grab a bite to eat? My treat."

Charis hesitates, "I don't know..."

Evan interrupts, "Listen, just a bite to eat. That's all I'm asking. I have something important I want to ask you. What time do you get off work?"

Charis thinks for a moment. "Okay. I get off at four o'clock but want to go home and get changed. How about we meet at five-thirty at IHOP?"

Evan smiles, "Okay, it's a date."

Charis gives him a piercing look and says, "It's not a date, it's a talk. Now what can I get for you?"

"I'll keep it simple. "Skinny almond latte. Extra foam."

Charis says, "That'll be \$4.57 and she'll have your order ready at the next counter."

"Great. See you tonight Charis."

Later that Day

Charis arrives at IHOP a few minutes early and grabs a booth. She waits around ten minutes and she sees Evan pull up in a yellow H2 Hummer through the window. "Looks like he's got a new toy." She thinks as she watches him walk to the door with cell phone in hand. He finds her at the booth and closes the cell phone and goes in for a kiss on the cheek but gets a hesitant hug instead.

"I haven't been in this place in years." Evan says as he takes a quick glance at the menu. "So how are you feeling? How's the baby? How far along are you now, like a few months?"

Charis replies, "Actually, I'm almost five months along and so far everything is fine. I can't fit into some of my clothes now but that goes with the territory. I mostly feel like a cow."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better you don't look like a cow. You still look good for being preggers."

Waitress approaches and they both order their drinks and meal. As she leaves Evan speaks up.

"Charis, I just wanted to apologize for how things went down. I had been drinking and I just wasn't ready for the bomb you dropped on me that's all. I've been thinking about it and I'd like us to give this, us, a shot. After all, we are going to be parents. Might as well make it right in God's eyes?"

"I don't think getting married is the answer Evan..."

Evan interrupts, "Well, no, not yet. But maybe you can move in. I can take care of you and the baby. You could be comfortable. You shouldn't have to be working in a coffee shop on your feet all day. I have a big house, we can get rid of that beater of a car you drive and get you a mini-van or whatever it is that moms drive around in these days. I can provide you with a happy life."

She fires back, "What makes you think I'm not happy where I work and with what I drive huh? What makes you think you know anything about me?"

"C'mon Charis. You're telling me you'd rather work for minimum wage, live with your parents, and drive our baby around in that piece? No, as the father, I won't allow it. Let me take care of you guys. I think this baby could really help me change into a better person."

Charis asks, "And what about the girls and house parties?"

He answers, "Hey, I'm going to be a dad now. It's time I got my priorities straight."

Evan's cell phone rings. He glances to see who's calling. "Just a minute, I need to get this."

"Hello.....Oh dude. I totally forgot about that. I'm at IHOP with Charis but I should be able to get there in about 20 minutes.... Alright bro. Save me a seat....Yeah, a Sam Adams....Thanks....Later."

"Sorry, that was Gil. A bunch of us are getting together to watch some preseason football tonight at Hooters."

He wraps up the conversation, "Listen, I'm gonna jet and meet up with the guys. Think about my offer. I want to take care of you guys. There's no reason why you have to be alone. Here's fifty bucks. That should take care of the meal. Give me a call, okay babe?"

He leans in to kiss her on the cheek, this time, she lets him.

Chapter 6

Garage Sale Tragedy

Charis goes home, sits on the couch, flips through TV channels, and thinks about what Evan said. Her mom walks in and asks how her talk with Evan went.

"It was interesting, that's for sure." Charis says.

"Well, what did he say?" replies Mrs. Lawler.

"Evan wants me to move in with him so he can take care of us. He wants me to quit my job,, buy me a mini-van, and maybe even get married at some point."

Mrs. Lawler chews on the idea, "Well, at least if you did move in people wouldn't talk so much about our pregnant teenage daughter who lives at home. Your father's reputation has really taken a hit because of this mess you've gotten yourself into."

Charis is fed up. "You know what mother? I'm getting so sick of your comments. It seems like you can't let a

conversation go by without reminding me how big of a screw-up I am. I KNOW! I KNOW I'VE MESSED UP! I have this baby inside me that reminds everyday. You're words are a weight that I just can't carry it any more. Just be my mom, that's all I want."

"First of all, you do not talk to me like that in my house. Do you understand me? I'm your mother. It's my job to help make you into a good woman and clearly, you're not. Just look at you! After all your dad and I have done for you. Maybe you should marry Evan so he can make an honest woman of you."

"Do you really want me to marry Evan? Fine! Maybe I will. Go get the wedding dress out your closet while I pack my suitcase, and I'll go to Evan's tonight!"

Mrs. Lawler retorts firmly, "That wedding dress has been gone for some time now."

Charis is in disbelief. "What? What happened to it?"

"Do you remember our agreement? I told you only good girls wear white wedding dresses. After you got pregnant I knew you couldn't wear it now. So we sold it at the garage sale to pay for your doctor bills."

Fighting back tears, Charis grabs her purse and keys and says, "You know what that dress meant to me."

Mrs. Lawler shouts as she walks out the door: "This is for your own good Charis. You need to learn a lesson!"

Chapter 7

When Paths Cross

It's almost dusk as Charis drives to the playground. She sits on a swing to cool off from her clash with her mother. At this point, she can't see herself living at home any longer. She thinks, "At least Evan doesn't judge me. And he has a good point. How am I going to support myself and the baby?" Her thoughts are interrupted by the familiar sound of footsteps. She looks up and there's Leo walking over from his bike.

Leo, with a big grin on his face, "Hey Charis!"

"Hey Leo, what's up?"

"I was on a bike ride and saw someone sitting on the swing. I was hoping, I mean, I thought it was you."

Charis says, "Yep. It's me again. Hey, I really like what you've done with the playground and thanks for leaving the swings the way they are. It's perfect."

"Well thank you for your input. You helped me hammer down the direction I wanted to go. I think the kids are going to dig it." Leo then asks, "So is everything alright? Am I interrupting some good thinking time?"

Charis answers, "Oh, I'm just thinking about my crazy life. Just trying to figure out my next steps. The only problem is I'm not sure what direction to begin stepping into."

Leo sees the sun's about to set. "You know, it's going to get dark pretty soon. What do you say we grab a beverage or something at the diner down the street?"

"Hmmm. I don't know. What if you're some kind of serial killer or something?"

"That's a good point." he says, "But I'd think you'd feel safer talking in public than here in the dark. I tell you what. One way or the other, I'm going to ride my bike down there and get a slice of pie. If you want to join me, that would be great. If not, I understand."

Charis agrees, "They better have a chocolate pie." He assures her they do.

They both begin walking to her car. "I like the smiley face you made in the bark. I thought it was a clever touch. The kids are going to love it."

Leo says, "Thank you. It'll be gone by the first day of school. The kids will never notice it. Truth be told, I did it for you."

He hops on his bike and says, "See you at the diner...Last one there's a rotten egg." He begins pumping the pedals. She gets in her car.

Charis starts her car, grabs some chapstick and smiles as she puts in on. "I can't believe he did that for me." She says to herself. "I can't believe I'm about to have pie with this guy." She drives and meets him at the diner.

They sit and order a whole silk chocolate pie. After some chit chat, Leo asks a question:

"So what was your dream when you were a little girl?"

"Like what I wanted to be when I grew up?"

"Yeah."

Charis answers, "Lots of things. As a kid, I wanted to take care of animals. Maybe be a veterinarian. When I was fourteen, we went to SeaWorld and I got to pet the dolphins. It was the coolest thing ever and I thought it would be cool to be a marine biologist."

"What about you? Did you always want to be a teacher/playground fixer-upper guy?"

"Not exactly. I didn't figure out I was going to be a teacher until my sophomore year in college. Truth be told, I wanted to be a baseball player. I was a pitcher and I wasn't too bad either. But I injured my rotator cuff in high school and lost a lot of velocity off my fastball. I was just never the same after that. But I love being a teacher."

Charis smiles as she takes a bite of pie and Leo asks another question.

"So do you have any favorite childhood memories?"

Charis finishes her chewing her bite, "Funny you should ask. I was just thinking about it earlier. When I was a little girl my mother and I were walking downtown and went by a bridal store. Through the window, I saw the most beautiful wedding dress. I remember telling my mom it was glowing and as white as snow. We went into the store and she actually bought that dress for me. She said she could make any adjustments that were needed when I grew up but she knew how much it would mean to me. As we were leaving the store she told me that white wedding dresses were for good girls and that bad girls don't get wear white. So she made me promise to be a good girl...and I did."

Looking a bit puzzled he says, "Wow, that's interesting. So you got a wedding dress as a little girl? What, did your parents think you lived in biblical times?"

Charis continues, "Well, it *was* a great memory and one of the nicer things my mom ever did for me. But she ended up using that dress over my head whenever I misbehaved. She would remind me that naughty girls don't wear white wedding dresses. I got to the point where I didn't even want the damn dress."

She pauses for a moment then continues.

"I found out earlier this evening that after I got pregnant she sold that dress at a garage sale of all things. She said there's no way I could still wear white. That dress went from being my favorite childhood memory to becoming one of my worst adult moments. Maybe she's right. Perhaps I'm just damaged goods now."

Leo pipes up, "Can I be straight up with you?"

Charis nods yes.

"That's one of the cruelest things I've ever heard of."

"Leo, you just don't know my parents. They're ultra-religious. I think I told you before that my dad's a minister and my mom plays the part of the minister's wife very well. I've put them through a lot with this whole pregnancy. My mom and I fought about it tonight and she told me about the shame I've brought to the family. She's probably right but I'm just sick of being around her remarks all the time. I think I need to get out of that house."

Leo asks, "Where are you thinking about going?"

Charis awkwardly responds, "Well, my ex, who's the father, wants me and the baby to move in his house. He wants me to quit my job and take care of us. So I'm thinking about getting back together with him...for the baby."

Leo's confused, "This is the same guy you said was a player?"

"Yeah. He says his player days are over now." Charis answers as if trying to convince herself.

"It's none of my business, but let me ask you a question. Do you think he loves you?"

"I don't know. It's hard to tell. I think he might."

Leo cuts to the chase and asks, "Do you love him?"

"I did...or at least I thought I did. But after what he's done to me, I just don't trust him. I'm just so confused about it."

Charis tries to change the subject. "We've almost eaten this entire pie. Ho-ly Cow!"

"You got a little chocolate right there on the side of your mouth. Here, let me get that for you." Leo reaches over with his napkin.

They have a moment before Charis breaks the silence.

"Can I ask YOU a question?"

"Shoot."

"Why are you so interested? I mean, surely you have someplace better to be and someone better to be with? Why are you sitting in a diner listening to my sob story?"

Leo asks, "Do you want the honest truth?"

Charis responds, "Is there any other kind?"

"Well, I've never met anyone like you. You're authentic. You don't hide what you're thinking and feeling and I think that's pretty cool. Despite all that you're going through, you have this personality and dry sense of humor that just shines through. It makes me wonder how you really are when all the crap's not hitting the fan in your life."

"Thanks" she says, "So what's your deal? Do you have a girlfriend? Are you gay? What's the story?"

"First of all, that's the first time I've ever been asked if I'm gay, so thanks I guess." He smiles. "The story is that I'm not seeing anyone. I was in a serious relationship back in college but it didn't work out. We just didn't see eye to eye on much. And ever since

I haven't really found anyone worth dating. Most of the girls I meet are either fake or teachers and I don't date people I work with. Really, I'd rather just wait until there's a girl I'm interested in, you know?"

"So what kind of girl are you interested in?" she asks.

Leo nervously laughs. "Um, well, a chick who's genuine, caring, attractive, smart. Not necessarily in that order. Someone who will love me for me and someone I can love for who they are. I believe God's got the right person for me."

Charis digs, "God, huh? I thought you said you weren't religious?"

Leo declares, "I'm not. I can't stand religion. I believe the grace is better than religion."

Charis says, "Aren't they the same thing?"

Leo starts, "Religion says, 'It's about what you do' but grace says 'it's about what's been done for you.' Religion says, 'climb this ladder to get to God' while the grace says, 'God climbed down the ladder to save us.' Religion says, 'there are good and bad people. Grace says, 'there are no perfect people, only a perfect Savior. We simply love him back.' Religion's about a bunch of have-to's and don't-do's but grace is about get-to's and love-to's. I could go on. Needless to say, I'm not big on religion but I am big on grace."

Charis soaks it in. "I never heard it said like that before. I'm grew up with a bunch of have-to's and don't-do's. I wasn't even allowed to read Harry Potter books growing up. I did it anyway though and I got caught and was grounded for a month. My parents thought I would end up a witch or something worse."

Leo takes that bait, "What's that?"

"A democrat." she answered. Leo nearly spews his drink.

"Were you allowed to watch movies?" he asks.

"Oh yeah," she replied. "My dad was totally into superhero movies and took me all the time."

"Don't tell him, but I think Superman had magic powers that could rival that of a young Mr. Potter. That's pretty evil stuff, you know. Plus, you know he had to be using his x-ray vision on Lois Lane."

They share a laugh and Charis adds, "I'm sure my parents blame this [points to belly] on Harry Potter."

The laughter dies down and Charis speaks up, "Leo, this was really great. Thank you for the pie and talk. You're a really fun guy."

"No, thank you." says Leo. "I had a blast. You're quite fun yourself. Wanna hang out again sometime?"

"Leo, you're a great guy, but I don't think you want to get tangled up in my mess. I'm pregnant. I have an offer from the father to move in with him. My parents are burning my Harry Potter books (joke to break the tension). Besides, didn't you say you'd go out with a girl you're really into? You don't want to miss the right one by hanging out with me."

"Charis, if you're closing the door because you're not into me or you're into someone else, that's cool. I can live with that. But do me a favor, don't close the door because you think you're somehow damaged goods. That's a bunch of crock. The truth is, you are the most remarkable woman I've ever met. You have so much going for you. Yes, you're pregnant, but you know what? Who's says that's a bad thing? This child is a blessing. Your life is ahead of you. A full, wonderful, crazy, dangerous, kind of life. And I think we may have something here. Do you believe it was an accident that our paths crossed?"

Charis replies, "I don't know what I believe. All I know is I can't bring you into this. You deserve better."

Leo declares, "I think you deserve better too. Just promise me, you won't settle, okay? You matter to someone. Remember that."

He writes down his cell phone and email address and gives it to her. She takes it and says, "Okay. I should go. Thank you again." They hug and she leaves.

Chapter 8

You're Way Too Safe

A few days later, Charis arrives at Evans house. She rings the doorbell and Evan answers. "Charis? What are you doing here?" She answers, "I thought we could talk about your proposal?"

Evan steps outside to her and closes the door behind him. "Sure, so what are you thinking?"

She tells him, "I think I'll take you up on your offer for a new car. You're right, I need a more reliable car for the baby and me." Evan answers, "Consider it done. So when are you planning on moving in?"

She announces, "Actually, I don't think I will." Evan's bewildered, "What? Why not?"

"C'mon Evan. Let's be honest, you're not ready to settle down. In fact, I bet you've got a girl in the house right now, that's why you stepped outside instead of inviting me in. Am I right?"

Evan explains, "Okay. But I want to be with you. The other girls aren't having my baby. You are."

Charis looks him in the eye, "Evan...Did it ever occur to you that I might not want to be with you? Besides, you're not my type. You're way too safe for me." Evan's insulted. "Too safe? What does that hell does that mean?"

Charis goes on, "You promise me security. You promise me comfort. You promise me stuff. Those things are safe. But you can't promise me love. Love is risky. Love is dangerous. But maybe it's worth it. And Evan, it's the one thing you can't provide me."

Evan's feeling dejected, "Where do we go from here?"

Charis has thought this through. "I'm moving out of my parents house and you're paying for it. Consider it child support. Also, I'm not interested in getting back together. I thought I should tell you face to face."

Evan takes a deep breath, "You know I'm not going to stop trying to change your mind, right? I don't take no for an answer very well."

"I figured as much." she says, "Should I call you later this week about getting that car?" Evan nods, "Just come by the store and we'll hook you up."

A hug goodbye and she drives away. She dials her cell phone to make a call that will change everything.

Chapter 9

Meet at the Swings

Charis leaves a voicemail. "Hey, it's me, Charis. I've been thinking and if you're still interested, I'd love to hang out sometime. So, yeah, give me call, or don't, whatever, now I'm rambling, ok bye." She hangs up the phone.

A couple of minutes later, her phone rings. She looks at the caller ID and sees it's Leo. She answers, "Hello?"

"Hey Charis, it's Leo. Did you just try to call me?"

"Hey Leo. Yeah I did. I've been doing something thinking and, well, do you want to hang out some time."

"Absolutely." he says, "What are you doing right now?" She answers, "Not much, just driving home."

"It's looking like a beautiful day. Wanna meet at the swings and figure things out from there?" Leo suggests.



"I was hoping you'd say that." she says, "See you there."

"Last one there's a rotten egg." he then adds, "That was cheesy, wasn't it?"

Charis giggles, "Yes it was but you better hurry up because I'm almost there and you're going to be the rotten egg."

Charis closes her phone as she stops at a red light. She thinks to herself, "This is dangerous. I'm not sure I can handle another heartbreak. But, if it's the real thing, it's worth it."

She looks in her rearview mirror and sees her mascara starting to run. But this time, she smiles back, and makes her way to meet him at the swings.

Chapter 10

“Are You Sure?”

Several months have passed and winter has found its way to November. Charis and Leo are downtown for a little brunch. He’s finishing up another story about one of his students. Charis loves those stories.

Leo turns the topic to baby names. “You’ve only got a couple of weeks until the baby arrives, have you made up your mind about a name?”

Charis responds, “Almost. I have narrowed the finalists by boy and girls names in my baby name book. It’s in my purse, you want to hear them?”

Leo lights up, “Absolutely? What do you got so far?”

Charis pulls out the book from her purse. “Before we look at the baby names, you should know that I looked up the meaning of your name.” Knowing where this is heading, Leo says, “Oh no.”

“Here it is” Charis begins, “Leo, of Latin origin, meaning lion. So since your last name is King, that would make you the…”

Leo finishes her thought, “Yes, the Lion King.”

Charis laughs: “Would you rather I call you Mufasa?”

“You know, you’re the first person who put that together besides me?” Leo chuckles, “I love you.”

She smiles back as if to say, “I love you too.”

Leo pipes up, “Do you know what your name means?” She thinks to herself and says, “You know what? I don’t. I didn’t even think about looking that up.”

“You should.” Leo knowingly tells her.

Charis turns to find her name in the book and reads, “Charis, of Greek origin, meaning grace.”

Charis looks up at him, “How ironic.” Leo says, “What’s that?” She responds, “My name means grace. The very thing I’ve been needing.” Leo takes a drink of coffee and says, “Huh, something tells me that wasn’t an accident.” Charis nods her head.

Leo has a suggestion, “What do you say we walk around a bit?” She hesitates, “I don’t know about that Leo, it’s snowing outside.”

Leo tries to convince her, "Come on, just around the block. Remember, the doctor said it was good for you to be walking."

Charis caves, "You sure are stubborn."

They get their things together and pay for their meal. They leave the restaurant holding each other's hands and slowly begin walking. Leo stops in front of a bridal store and says, "Hey, isn't this the shop your mom bought that wedding dress from when you were a little girl?"

Charis replies, "Yep, it sure is. I haven't been here since I was a kid." Leo tugs her hand, "Let's go inside and check it out."

"You seriously want to go in a store full of wedding dresses? You're a peculiar man." As he walks in with her he says, "I'm just curious."

They enter the store and look around at all the dresses. Leo smiles over at the owner of the place with a slight nod unbeknownst to Charis.

Leo asks, "So do any of these dresses look like the one you used to have." Charis points, "That one over there near the cash register. The one that's as white as snow."

They walk over to it and Charis gazes at it.

Leo gives the owner a look and right on cue she leaves them alone. He then turns to Charis, reaches in his pocket, and gets on one knee.

Charis is stunned, "What are you doing?"

With the ring in hand Leo says, "Charis, I love you. I never thought in a million years that I would find someone like you. I know I can't promise you everything you ever wanted, but I can promise you this: love. To love you no matter what. To love you with my life. To love you and this baby with all that's in me. Would you let me love you for the rest of our lives by being my wife? Charis, will you marry me?"

Charis chokes up, "Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure about anything Charis"

"Yes!" she replies.

Leo puts the ring on her finger then they embrace through tears.

"I have one more thing for you." Leo says.

He calls back, "Ma'am, do you have it ready?" The owner comes out and brings up the dress.

Overjoyed, Charis says, "Oh Leo! I can't believe this. It's beautiful."

"I hope you don't mind, but I went and visited with your parents." says Leo. "It's a little old school, but I wanted to request their permission to ask for your hand. After they both gave me the green light, I had a chat with your mom and convinced her to help me locate your dress. She agreed and we were able to track down the dress."

Charis says, "I'm speechless right now."

"I wanted you to have the perfect wedding dress. White as snow, just like you always wanted." He looks over at the owner, "She said she can make any adjustments that need to be made to the dress."

Charis inquires, "This might sound silly, but did my mom say anything about it being white?"

Leo grins, "Let's just say she's learning the meaning of your name too."

"I love you Leo."

"I love you too Charis."

She grabs her stomach, "Oooh..."

"Are you okay?" asks Leo.

Charis says, "I think I just had a contraction."



Conclusion

This is a simple love story yet it represents something more profound than my mere words can describe. A tale of pursuit between a Savior and his bride. The beautiful, dangerous, and central message of Jesus.

The gospel.

The gospel literally means, “the good news” yet the term has been stained by the dung of religious bigots, the lies of nutty televangelists, and the hypocrisy of everyday followers of Jesus like me.

You see, I don’t fully believe the gospel.

Don’t get me wrong, I believe in the life, crucifixion, resurrection, and reign of Jesus. That he died on the cross, in my place, for my sins. But I struggle to believe in the wonder of gospel. The truth that sets us free. The hope that keeps us going. The love that knows no bounds.

I can’t wrap my head around the fact that Christ loves me so much that he gave up his life so I might have life.

But I’m learning.

I’m learning that I can never experience how amazing grace is unless I realize how spectacular my sins are. While I’m a great sinner, the good news is, Christ is a greater Savior.

In him, we have a God who loves us enough to enter our story to rescue and redeem us from the mess we’re living in.

A God who says, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” (Isaiah 1:18).

Religion omits the “white as snow” part but not the gospel. And the gospel is so much better than religion.

Thank you for reading this story. I hope it helps you uncover the magnificent scandal that is the gospel.

Jason Salamun

Reflection Questions

What is the gospel?

How do you see the gospel represented in this story? Who does Leo represent? What about Charis?

Are there any Evan’s (idols) in your life trying to woo your heart away from Christ? If so, what are they?

In what ways has religion robbed you of the freedom found in the gospel?

How could the gospel be lived out in your life?

INFO

About Jason

Jason Salamun is big on Jesus, in love with his wife, crazy about his kids, is a hopeful writer, and passionate about people living the lives they were meant to live.

He started a new missional church in his hometown of Rapid City, South Dakota called Project Church (projectchurch.net). An authentic community of grace, truth, mission, and meaning.

As pastor, his primary roles are: Jesus follower, chief sinner, lead missionary, vision caster, bible teacher, leader developer, and cultural architect (he's not quite sure what that last role means, but it sounds cool).

Jason has more questions than answers and enjoys writing about himself in the third person. He writes regularly at his blog, thinkinginprogress.com

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