

Just As I Am

a novel

by Virginia Smith

Chapter 1

I've always said the Lord had to drag me kicking and screaming to His altar, but once I got there I pitched a tent, unrolled my sleeping bag, and made myself at home. Anyone less patient than the Almighty would have zipped up that sleeping bag, sewn the top shut, and tossed me into the dumpster in the back parking lot.

I'm here to tell you: not all of God's children are as patient He is.

I'm grateful to the Lord for a lot of things, and right up there near the top of the list is Pastor Paul Rawlings of the Salliesburg Independent Christian Church. When I made my way down the aisle to the beat of "Just As I Am Without One Plea," Brother Damon nearly choked on his gum when he caught sight of the rhinestone in my left nostril. I swear his eyes popped out of their sockets a good half-inch when he

saw the stud midway between my chin and my lower lip. But Pastor Paul never even blinked, and the great big grin on his face didn't fade. He stuck his hands out, and before I knew it, he had both my arms in a bone-crushing grip. He grinned so wide, double dimples creased his cheeks, and I got a detailed view of his back molars. I was almost afraid he was going to hug me. Being hugged by young, good-looking men is great, but not in front of a whole roomful of staring church people. I leaned back, alarmed, but couldn't shake his grip without jerking away, and I didn't think it would look right to twist out of the preacher's clutch at the front of the church. But he didn't hug me. Just stood there grinning and squeezing my arms so hard I swore I'd be able to lift his fingerprints from the bruises by suppertime.

Pastor Paul could have welcomed me into the kingdom with a nod and a friendly handshake, but that wasn't his way. And it's a good thing, too. If he had displayed even a hint of the disapproval I could feel radiating from Brother Damon, I would have been gone in a heartbeat. I would have turned on my heel and marched straight back down that aisle.

After he finished crushing the bones in my arms, he turned me around and made me face the congregation. He had his hands on my shoulders, grinning ear to ear like he was presenting the homecoming queen to the senior class. Shock registered on every face turned my way. Salliesburg Independent Christian Church didn't see people with purple hair on a regular basis, even if they were just a half-hour's drive from the big city of Lexington, Kentucky.

"This," said Pastor Paul, "is Mayla Strong. She's Angela Strong's daughter, the one we've been praying for."

I saw a few nods, a few expressions that looked like, "Ah, *that* explains it!" and even a few sympathetic glances thrown toward my mama. Seated in the middle of the second pew, she wore the floral print dress that I always said made

her look like a couch cushion. At that moment, a robin could've built a nest in her gaping mouth without having to duck to get in.

Pastor Paul turned me back to face him. "Mayla, I'm glad you've finally decided to give your life to the Lord. I know you've thought about this for a long time, and we're all rejoicing along with the angels in heaven."

Actually, I hadn't thought about it for a long time. In fact, I felt a little dazed to find myself up there in front of all those church people, ready to say the words my mama had been trying to get me to say for five years. I really hadn't planned to do this. I thought I'd follow Mama to church, sit in the back and catch a quick nap, then go up and say something to her afterward to prove that I really had been there. Mostly it was to get

her off my back. But Pastor Paul's voice wasn't easy to sleep through. He liked to use it to its fullest potential, and that man had lungs like speaker cabinets. A few of his words had seeped into my brain and started it thinking. Then they'd all started to sing that song, "Just As I Am," and before I knew it my feet were moving and they were taking me with them.

"Yes, sir," I said, not wanting to go into the whole thing right then.

Pastor Paul beamed again. "Well, we're going to take care of your eternal soul right now, Mayla. And we have the baptismal all ready, too. When the Lord moves, here at Salliesburg Independent Christian Church we like to be prepared to move with Him. Do you want to go ahead and do the baptism now, or wait for another day?"

I felt the weight of all those eyes. Wait for another day? Since I had come this far, I might as well go all the way. "Uh, let's do it. Sounds good."

The preacher's smile widened farther than I would have thought possible. "That's fine. Angela, you want to come up here and help Mayla get ready?"

Mama didn't need prodding. Before he stopped talking, she was side stepping over the ladies in her pew. In the aisle, she gave a single tug at the skirt of her dress and then jogged— I swear she jogged—up to the front where I stood beside the preacher. I was wondering what he meant by "get ready" when she grabbed me by the arm and pulled me toward a door behind the piano.

"Where are we going, Mama?"

"To get you into a baptism robe," she whispered, pulling me through the door. Once on the other side, she turned and gave me a breath-stopping hug.

"I'm so proud of you, baby!"

I followed her up a little staircase to a room behind the choir loft. In the corner stood a coat rack with several white robes hanging on it. Mama pulled one off a hanger and held it up to me.

"This will do." She looked at my blouse, deep creases between her eyebrows. "A shame you don't have something else to wear. Those tiger stripes will show through soon as it's wet."

"Wet?" A little stab of alarm knifed me in the stomach. "How's it going to get wet?"

The creases got even deeper as Mama gave me an odd look. "It's going to get wet when you go under the water."

"Go under?" My voice squeaked, and she shushed me.

"I've explained it to you before," she whispered. "It's a symbol of your fresh

new life in Christ Jesus. You'll make the Confession of Faith, and then Pastor Paul will dunk you under. You go in the water as a vile and disgusting sinner, and you come out a clean and pure child of God."

It was coming back to me. She *had* told me something like that, but I had tuned her out, of course. She became a Christian five years ago, back when I was seventeen. Having my mother suddenly get all religious was one of the most embarrassing things I'd ever experienced.

"Listen here," I whispered, "this skirt is leather and cost me a hundred and twenty-six bucks. I'm not dunking it in any water."

Mama gave my skirt a disbelieving stare. "A hundred and twenty-six bucks for *that*? There ain't enough leather in that skirt to get me a pair of shoes out of!"

I crossed my arms over my chest and put on my most stubborn glare. Mama looked at me for a minute and then sighed.

"Oh, all right. Slip the skirt off. The congregation can only see you from the waist up anyway. And the robe will hide your underwear from Pastor Pa—oh, *Lord have mercy*, Mayla, where in the world did you get those?"

I had dropped the skirt to my ankles, and she stood staring with wide eyes at my cute little hot pink panties. Heat flooded my face. I really hadn't thought I'd be prancing around the church showing them off. But it was pretty obvious that when the white robe got wet, there wouldn't be much hidden beneath it.

"Here," she said, reaching up under her skirt and pulling off her own half-slip, "you'd better wear this under the robe. Pastor Paul is a man of the cloth, but he *is* a man, after all."

Suited up, I turned for Mama's inspection. She'd gone all teary again and sniffed mightily as she looked me up and down.

"Just like an angel," she said in a choked voice.

I couldn't quite imagine an angel in pink panties and purple hair, but I refrained from making that particular comment, since it was a touching moment and all.

Mama opened a door, not the same one we came in, and on the other side I saw the baptismal pool. It looked like a big, deep bathtub, or maybe a small swimming pool. Steps led down into it, and on the other side more steps led up to another door. Pastor Paul stood in the other doorway already, in a white robe of his own. He had taken off his jacket and tie but still wore his white shirt beneath the robe. He stepped down into the water, then smiled and held out his hand to me.

The water felt warm. The robe billowed up as I stepped in, and I hurriedly pushed it down so I wouldn't show anything unladylike to the preacher. He met me in the middle, a matter of a step for each of us, and he put his arm around my shoulders. When he turned me to face outward I saw that we stood up behind the altar in the sanctuary in a little window-type opening, with the whole congregation looking on.

"Mayla Strong," Pastor Paul said in a booming voice, "the sacrament of baptism is a holy one, an outward symbol of the inward change that happens when you accept Jesus Christ into your life. Have you come here of your own free will?"

I fought the urge to look back at Mama, but I could feel her eyes on me

from the robe room.

“Yeah, I have,” I replied. That was true. No one forced me. There was, of course, about five years worth of begging and crying behind my decision to be here, but no one had twisted my arm.

“And are you prepared to commit your life to Christ, to die and be born again as a new creation of His, to let Him lead you wherever He will and never turn your back on Him?”

Die? I knew that couldn’t possibly mean what I thought it meant, but I had certainly never had someone ask me if I was ready to die before. I must have looked a bit shocked, because Pastor Paul’s eyes widened and his grip on my shoulder tightened.

“When I say die,” he whispered, “it’s symbolic. Your old self, your sinful self, dies. We call it ‘dying to sin.’ Then Jesus gives you a brand new life, one where your sins are forgiven so you can live with Him forever in heaven.”

I glanced toward the congregation. They were real quiet out there. Some people leaned forward in their pews, trying to catch what we were saying.

“As long as this dying you’re talking about doesn’t involve you holding me under this water until I stop breathing,” I ventured cautiously, “then I suppose that’d be okay.”

The preacher was quiet for a long time. He looked at me like he was trying to see behind my eyeballs, and I got a little antsy under his stare. The people in the congregation shifted in their seats, and a few of them started whispering to one another.

“What?” I finally said, my voice low so no one could hear. “Is something wrong?”

He sighed. “I’m just trying to figure out if you really know what you’re doing here. Much as I’d love to baptize you right now, I just can’t do that if you don’t really know what you’re signing up for.”

That made sense, and I appreciated his honesty. I heard Mama gasp behind me, though, and I figured she might faint dead away if she really got me this far only to have the preacher kick me out of the water.

“Well,” I said, trying to put the words together into some sort of sense before they came out of my mouth, “to be honest, I didn’t have any idea that I’d be doing this today. But when you were preaching awhile ago I heard you say something that sort of . . . went inside me, if you know what I mean.”

I paused, and Pastor Paul nodded encouragingly.

“You were talking about that guy who had been killing Christians and trying to stomp out the church from the face of the earth when Jesus appeared to him in a bright light. And Jesus said to him, ‘Why are you hurting me?’ And, well, when you said those words, I felt like you were saying them to me.”

I stopped for a minute. For some reason I felt like something had lodged in my throat, and I could feel tears coming.

“I mean,” I went on in a rush, “I haven’t killed anybody or anything like that. But I sure haven’t been too nice to church people, my mama included. And then you said Jesus loved that guy, just like He loves us all. And I figured if Jesus could love some guy who went around killing His friends, maybe He really does love me, too. And if He does, then I really am hurting Him, because it hurts to

love someone who doesn't love you back."

I heard Mama give a huge sniff behind me.

"If you want to love Jesus," Pastor Paul said, "then there's only one way to do that. You have to turn your life over to Him. You have to let Him be your Lord. That means He's the boss of your life from now on. Can you do that?"

I thought about that. This felt like a real big question, and I didn't want to give a quick answer.

"Does that mean He's going to make me stop running around with my friends?"

Pastor Paul pursed his lips, considering, before he answered.

"I can't tell you what He's going to make you do," he said honestly. "Only that when He changes you, the changes come from the inside out. He might change you so much that you won't want to run around with the same people anymore. Or He might one day use you get through to them, too."

I almost laughed at the thought of Tattoo Lou accepting Jesus, but only for a second. Because in the next second I remembered Lou writhing on the floor, crashing from a bad drug trip and crying over his little sister who had been killed in a gang fight a few years back. I realized that maybe Tattoo Lou needed to know about this love as much as I did.

"Okay," I said, nodding to Pastor Paul. "I understand. I'm ready to let Him be my boss."

"Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?"

I had heard that before. "Yes, I do."

"Do you believe that He died on the cross and then rose from the dead and won the power to save you from your sins?"

"Yes, I believe that." Mama had been spouting this stuff at me for a long time. I guess some of it had sunk in.

"And do you accept Jesus as *your* personal Lord and Savior?"

Here was the big moment. I paused, and I admit it was a little bit for effect. I could almost hear Mama's sweat dripping on the floor in the robe room behind me.

"Yes, I do accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior."

"Then let's pray. Repeat what I say, but say it to the Lord."

He bowed his head and closed his eyes. I sneaked a quick peek into the congregation, and most of them had bowed their heads, too. Closing my eyes, I tried to picture myself talking to God. His face wasn't clear, but I figured that didn't matter. He

knew I was talking to Him.

"Dear Lord, I confess that I'm a sinner."

The preacher's voice sounded reverent when he prayed, and I tried to make mine sound the same.

"Dear Lord, I confess that I'm a sinner." Wouldn't my friends be shocked to hear me say that?

"And I know I can never be good enough to deserve the eternal life You died to give me."

The lump returned to my throat, and I had to swallow a few times before I

could repeat that one. “I can never be good enough to deserve the life You died to give me.”

Pastor Paul’s hand gave my shoulder a gentle squeeze. “So I give You my life, Lord. I ask You to come into my heart and make me into the person You want me to be.”

My eyes were shut, but that didn’t stop a tear from slipping between my lids and sliding down my cheek as I spoke. “Jesus, I give You my life. Come into my heart and make me into the person You want me to be.”

Pastor Paul’s voice boomed, “Amen!” I opened my eyes to see him grinning down at me. “Mayla Strong, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

He cupped my hand in his, and then he placed both our hands over my nose and mouth. I pinched my nose shut, because I never have been too good at going underwater. His other hand slid down to the middle of my back, and then he gently pushed me backward. I tensed for a moment, but then leaned back on his arm and the next thing I knew I was under the water, face-up.

A second later, Pastor Paul stood me up again. I came up dripping, of course, but I barely noticed. It was strange, but I had this feeling inside, a warm sort of feeling. It’s hard to describe, but I felt . . . clean. Like I’d been scrubbed with a bristle brush, then rinsed and wrapped in a warm, fluffy towel and hugged tight. Only it was an inside sort of clean. I knew, right then, that I was different. Changed. And life would never be the same again.



I said that I’m grateful to the Lord for Pastor Paul. But someone else who’s high on my list is my mama. Some people think it’s strange that a grown woman still uses the name Mama, but that’s only people who don’t come from the South. Kentucky is part of the South, though some folks argue about that. It’s not Scarlett O’Hara’s South, but in many ways the society in Kentucky is just as southern as Atlanta’s, especially in the small towns. Salliesburg is about as small as they come and still get to have a post office.

Mama fit in that town like a rich bachelor fits in a red sports car. She worked at the Bundle-O-Savings grocery store as a checker, and just about everyone in town came through there at least once a week. Mama never met a stranger, and anyone who went through her checkout aisle didn’t walk away without knowing everything there was to know about her and me and everyone else she knew. Not that she gossiped, really; she spoke so openly about her own life that she made it impossible to be offended. She never told people’s secrets, as long as she knew they were supposed to be kept secret. But if someone found out they were going to have a baby or were getting ready to put their house on the market, Mama could be counted on to spread the news. I guessed people just didn’t tell Mama anything they didn’t want announced to all of Salliesburg. Of course, I didn’t have that option.

Anyway, when I was growing up, before Mama found the Lord and

claimed her place in His kingdom, she tried just about everything out there in the way of religion. For a while, she believed in reincarnation. She was convinced she had been a Chinese man in her last life and some sort of Egyptian priestess in the one before. Another time, she was into witchcraft. Nobody knew anything about Wiccans back then, but there were books to teach you how to cast spells and things like that. I have a vivid memory of Mama sitting at the kitchen table, staring for hours at a deep-green juice glass that stubbornly refused to levitate.

I remember another time, when I was eleven, after Daddy died. I got out of bed late at night to find that Mama wasn't in the house. I had a few moments of pure panic, racing from room to room, so scared I couldn't force any sound out of my mouth, even a sob. I found her outside, lying in the front yard just staring up at the stars in the sky. I stood in the doorway until my heart stopped pounding and then joined her. I can still feel the grass, cold and slightly damp through my thin cotton nightgown. Mama didn't look at me, but after a while she said,

“There are people out there.”

I considered that for a moment.

“What kind of people?”

“Aliens,” Mama answered without hesitation. “People from other planets. They live on worlds like ours, with grass and trees and water, and they're doing their best to find us, just like we're trying to find them.”

I remember those stars and an overwhelming awe that different kinds of people might live out there among them. I didn't wonder why Mama thought things like that, and I never questioned whether or not other people thought the same things. She was my mama, and her word was enough for me.

When I think about it now, I realize how much Mama and I were alike in our searching days. We were both looking for something to lift us out of the mundane routines of life, to show us the meaning beyond just living and breathing and getting dressed in the morning. Mama had one up on me; she somehow seemed to know that her questions wanted a spiritual answer. I figured, as usual, that I could do it my own way.

My own way included decorating my body in a manner sure to draw attention. I started out by piercing my ears, of course, and had four holes on each side plus the cartilage on one. Then, when I turned twenty-one, I celebrated by piercing my nostril, and I liked that so much that the next year I got a labret stud too, a silver ball centered a half-inch below my mouth.

If I'm honest with myself—and I make it a policy to try to be honest with myself, if no one else—facial piercing was my way of thumbing my nose at people once I had their eyes fixed on me. I don't know why other people pierce their bodies; I only know why I did it. I enjoyed the way people looked at me, even when those looks were somewhat horrified or disgusted. If they glared or said rude things to me, I felt satisfied somehow, like they were only acting as I had known they would all along. The funny thing is, I didn't much care *what* they thought of me, as long as they thought of me. It was, like, “Hey, I'm here and I make a difference. I'll have an impact, even if it's only to make you swear you'll never pierce your nose.”

Back to being grateful for Mama. Because Mama spent a big chunk of time trying to find something to give her life meaning, she always had a lot of tolerance for those still trying to figure it out. That was never clearer to me than the day of my baptism into the kingdom of heaven.

She took me home and called every one of her friends to spread the good news, and to invite them over for a big celebration dinner that evening. I heard her on the phone, telling the story over and over of how I was baptized in pink “hooker” panties and a tiger-print blouse. Even I had a hard time with being compared to a hooker, but she ignored my protests. After the third call, I gave up trying to stop her. It does no good to get embarrassed about anything in Salliesburg. Everybody knows everything about everyone anyway, and I’ve been the subject of the town gossip line more times than I care to count. After she’d made the last call, she turned to me and gave me That Look.

I had come to recognize That Look over the years. It preceded a statement that Mama knew was going to cause a ruckus. Her lips got tight, not frowning but not smiling either, and her deep brown eyes opened just a little wider than normal. The crease at the very top of her nose between her unplucked eyebrows deepened. I could always judge Mama’s mood by how deep that crease got. Her nostrils sort of flared as she took a deep breath, and her chin jutted out.

“Now that you’re a Christian,” she said, speaking in a precise tone, “it’s time to think about takin’ that jewelry out of your face and maybe dyin’ your hair back to its normal color.”

I wasn’t surprised. The nostril ring hadn’t seemed to bother her much, but when I came home with the labret stud, her eyes had popped a bit. We’d had several “discussions” about it, which mostly ended with me saying, “Because I want it, and that’s that!” This time I surprised myself. Instead of getting defensive, I felt genuinely concerned. This Christianity stuff was new to me, and I didn’t want to do anything wrong so soon.

“You don’t think Christians wear labret studs?”

“I do not,” she replied with a firm shake of her head.

“But you wear jewelry.”

Now you’ll think I was being argumentative. I wasn’t. I truly did not see the difference. Jewelry is jewelry, after all. True, I display mine more prominently than she does, but it’s still jewelry.

“It’s not the same,” Mama said.

“And you dye your hair.”

Mama’s hand went to pat her auburn curls, which didn’t move under the ton of hairspray she used every morning to cement them into place. “Only to color the gray, you know that.”

I snorted. “Your hair was brown before it turned gray. That’s not your normal color.”

“That is entirely different,” she insisted. “Auburn is a normal hair color. Purple is not.”

“First of all,” I told her, “my hair is not purple. It’s Egyptian Plum. And second, old Mrs. McCoy has blue hair, and her sister Mrs. Watson has pink hair.”

“Those are rinses they use to brighten up their dull gray. Besides, they’re in their eighties. They can have any color hair they want.”

“So can I.”

“Mayla, what will people think? You want people to know you’re a Christian, don’t you? People won’t know you’re a Christian if you look like you just robbed the 7-Eleven.”

I was still thinking about that when the doorbell chimed, and the first of our guests arrived.

By four o’clock, Mama’s little house had filled to bursting with fellow children of God wanting to welcome me into the kingdom with a plate of fried chicken or a Jell-O salad. Mama had put a cheery sunflower-covered tablecloth on the dining room table, and in no time at all the surface was covered with casseroles and salads and trays of sandwiches and carrot sticks with dip.

The old ladies in support hose and sturdy shoes claimed the living room. There must have been a dozen or so in there, enthroned on Mama’s old davenport and straightbacked chairs, with white foam plates balanced carefully on their knees and napkins properly covering their laps as they forked delicate amounts of potato salad and baked beans into their mouths. Mrs. McCoy and Mrs. Watson sat side by side, squashed into a big armchair near the window. Mrs. McCoy wore a wide-brimmed straw hat covered with pink and blue flowers. As I watched, she turned her head to speak to an old

lady I didn’t know, and when she did, the brim of her hat hit her sister squarely in the nose. It so startled Mrs. Watson that she jumped, and the cube of red Jell-O on her fork went flying into the air and landed right in the middle of the flowers on her sister’s hat. Mrs. Watson stared at it for a moment, dumbfounded. She raised her fork in the air as if prepared to go after it, and then changed her mind. Her eye caught mine, and she grinned and shrugged. I left the room, chuckling.

The men had taken themselves and their food outside to the covered porch, where they could sit around and watch the trees grow in silence without having to worry about responding to their wives’ constant, “Isn’t that right, dear?” They could not have asked for a nicer day to sit outside. Mid-May in Kentucky is beautiful when it’s not raining, and that day the sky was clear. It wasn’t hot enough for the humidity to be oppressive, and yet the sun shone overhead in a bright blue sky, and the icy chill of the hard winter just past seemed a far distant thing. Jonquils had bloomed all over Mama’s yard, and the sunlight made their yellow blossoms glow like little spots of fire in the green grass.

“How is everyone doing out here?” I asked, stepping through the screen door.

“Oh, hmmm,” muttered someone from the vicinity of the porch swing.

Two men had the swing, two more sat in chairs on either side of the swing, and about a half-dozen more were on a circle of metal folding chairs out under the big oak tree in the front yard. Most were old, but I saw a few unlucky middle-aged men who had been dragged along to the celebration by their wives on this gorgeous day. Either that or they came for the food, which they all socked away as fast as they could shovel it in.

“Can I get anybody anything?” I asked. “Something to drink, maybe?”

No one answered, but a couple of them shook their heads. I stood there a minute, staring out at the group under the tree. Older men often didn't know how to react to a young person like me. It's as if facial jewelry startles them so that they forget there's a person behind it. I thought about what Mama had said earlier. Would people refuse to accept me as a Christian because of my labret stud or my nostril ring? If I couldn't get them to talk to me, I supposed I'd never have a chance to find out.

I had never tried much to talk to anyone who didn't approach me first. Before that morning, if I asked a question and got no response, I probably would have turned and left. But now I wanted to see something. I wanted to see if I could get one of them to talk to me like I was a normal person, nose ring or not.

The man standing closest to me was Mr. Grierson, the owner of the Salliesburg Hardware Store. I had known Mr. Grierson casually since Mama and I moved to town four years ago, when I had gone into his store in a panicked search for a toilet plunger. Mr. Grierson sat on Mama's porch rocker, holding a plate piled high with food beneath his chin, a paper napkin shoved down in the neck of his plaid cotton shirt. As he scooped an impressive amount of coleslaw onto his fork and shoved it in his mouth, I asked, with the perfect timing of waitresses everywhere, "So, Mr. Grierson, how long have you been a Christian?"

He stopped chewing, as if his jaw had been flash-frozen, the empty fork poised in midair an inch from his lips. The look he turned upon me held a hint of alarm.

"Huh?" he said around the coleslaw.

"I mean, were you baptized as a kid, or after you grew up?"

His left eyelid began a nervous twitch as he gave a few quick chews and swallowed with a gulp. "Uh, a kid."

I smiled, hoping it would put him at ease. "Oh, you're lucky then. You grew up knowing how to act and all. I'm going to have to start now, and you know what they say: It's much easier to learn something the right way than to unlearn the wrong way before you finally get it right."

"Hmmm."

He nodded, his eyes casting wildly around as if looking for the cavalry to come riding into view.

His rescue came. From the swing, old Mr. Colvin, deaf as a broom handle and with a face like an old potato, waved his plastic fork in my direction, clutching a chicken leg in his other hand.

"Wanna know when I was baptized?" he asked, his voice loud despite his fragile appearance. I wondered if he needed to change the batteries in his hearing aid.

"Yes, sir," I shouted back at him, turning my attention from poor Mr. Grierson.

"Nineteen thirty-eight it was. I was twenty-five years old, an' it was right down there in the Kentucky River." He shook his fork at me for emphasis. "None of this nonsense about chlorine, or testin' the water then. We went right on down to the river, dirt an' fish an' all, an' we took care of business just like the Lord back in Bible times."

“That must have been exciting.”

“Pshaw!” he scoffed, his bushy gray eyebrows dropping right down onto his eyelids, “Exciting, nothing! It was dad-blamed cold, that’s what it was!”

With that he shoved the half-gnawed chicken leg between his wrinkled lips and turned away. Thus dismissed, I headed for the house.

As I reached for the screen door, I caught sight of a man standing off to one side of the porch, away from the others. I had never seen him before. Though not as old as Mr. Colvin, this man had at least a decade or two on the rest of the guys hanging around outside. Judging by his wrinkled skin and sparse, gray hair, I guessed his age at somewhere around seventy-five. A tall man with shoulders slightly stooped beneath dingy red suspenders, he leaned against the side of the house, an empty plate resting between the wooden porch rails in front of him. His gaze locked on to mine for a second. I saw his eyes lift to my hair, then drop to my labret stud before he turned away with tight lips, shaking his head slowly.

I got that reaction a lot. Shrugging off a wave of irritation, I went inside.

The kitchen was full of middle-aged women fussing around with pitchers and ice and lemonade mix.

“Mayla, darling,” crooned Olivia Elswick, a lady from Mama’s Tuesday night ladies’ group, “we’re so pleased for you.”

She patted me on the shoulder, and I smiled at her while I filled a little paper cup with ice from a bag in the freezer.

“Now then, when are you going to take those things out of your face?”

My smile froze, and I turned toward her. From across the room I locked eyes with Mama, who gave a little warning shake of her head.

“Oh, I can’t do that,” I told Mrs. Elswick matter-of-factly, “or the holes will close up. You have no idea what I went through to have them done.”

Her lips were outlined with brick-red lip liner, and between the lines her lipstick had dulled so that they looked like the outlines in a coloring book for kindergarten kids.

“Surely as a Christian you won’t be wearing them anymore.” She smiled, as if speaking to a child, and actually patted my arm. “I mean, it’s just not something a Christian does.”

“Oh?” I resisted the temptation to wipe my arm with my napkin. “And why not?”

“Well . . .” She looked flustered. “Because it just isn’t. It’s not *normal*, you know.”

The other conversations in the room stopped as everyone waited to hear how I would respond. Mama seemed frozen at the other end of the kitchen, a warning not to say anything embarrassing written all over her face.

“That depends on where you are,” I answered. “At some bars I know in Lexington, you’d be the one who didn’t look normal, not me.”

“Ah.” Her smile became condescending. “But I wouldn’t go to those bars. And neither should you, now that you’re a Christian.”

This was the first evidence I’d had that a change had taken place in me. Just a few hours before, I would have gotten angry if anyone had told me I *shouldn’t* do something. I knew that’s what Mama thought was happening right

now, that I was getting mad as a hornet and ready to lay into Mrs. Elswick. Instead I filled my cup with lemonade from a jar with a little spigot and took a gulp before I spoke again.

“I guess I’ll have to be looking for a new job then, huh, Mrs. Elswick? I mean, I work in a restaurant with a bar. I serve drinks to people. Surely Christians shouldn’t be seen in restaurants where they have liquor, should they?”

“Now,” she began, her finger pointing at me, “I never said—”

“No,” I interrupted with a smile, “you didn’t. Because I’ve seen you in my restaurant, haven’t I, Mrs. Elswick? I’ve even served you wine, haven’t I?”

A few chuckles sounded around the room while Mrs. Elswick’s face took on a shade of red that clashed terribly with her pink blouse. She opened her mouth to say something, and judging by her expression it would not have been nice. Mama stopped her. She crossed the room and put her arm around my shoulders, giving me a squeeze.

“You know, Olivia, Mayla and I had this very same conversation just this afternoon. And I’ve been thinking about it.” She smiled. “The Lord Himself welcomed tax collectors and prostitutes into His fellowship. The Good Book doesn’t say He made them change their clothes first, or take a bath or anything. It just said He loved them. And I know He loves Mayla just as she is, pierced lip, nostril, and all. I reckon that jewelry and that hair went under the water this morning along with the rest of her. So we don’t know, maybe the Lord has plans for those things, just like He has plans for Mayla.”

Mama squeezed me around the shoulders again, and she smiled at me. Sometimes when my mama smiles, it’s like the Lord Himself is peeking out of her eyes.