

Melody
Carlson

a novel

the other side of
DARKNESS



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Author's Note

Most of my novels begin with a single question, some puzzling dilemma I need to resolve. *The Other Side of Darkness* is a perfect example. Except this story is filled with *many* questions. Questions like, What kind of person gets pulled into a pseudo-Christian cult? Does she simply wake up one morning and say, “I think I’ll join some wacky church today”? And what kind of person becomes a leader in a church that’s going sideways? Does a wolf in sheep’s clothing intentionally set out to do evil from the start? Or is he just as deceived as his followers?

Research proves that some personality types are more susceptible to spiritual fraud than others. Some people, by nature, are more gullible, more needy, more emotionally fragile. And those are the ones whom cult leaders often prey upon—good-hearted and well-meaning people who can be controlled through fear and guilt and then bullied into submission. But how can we become more aware of this vulnerability in others—in ourselves? How do we help a sister or a brother who, though set on diligently serving God, is being steadily reeled in by a spiritual charlatan?

Sometimes fiction is the most direct way to convey hard-to-tell truths. In this based-on-fact but fictional story, we will journey with Ruth Jackson, unraveling her past to find clues as to why she has been lured into a cult. We will walk with her into the dark places of fear and guilt and torment. We will see her struggle against both real and imagined demonic powers. We will begin to understand how a chemical imbalance such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) can

make a person exceptionally vulnerable to the deceptions of brainwashing. And we will witness her flawed thinking as she drags her own precious children along this perilous path, endangering both their emotional and physical lives.

As disturbing as parts of this story may seem, it is reality. It is happening today. And like other mental-health issues, OCD is not limited to any socioeconomic level, just as cult churches are not confined within any one denomination. Both are widespread. Not only that, but as biblical prophecy predicts and contemporary culture reveals, a whole generation of young people are extremely vulnerable right now, ripe for the picking for cults of all kinds. Maybe it's time to open our eyes—as well as our hearts.

For God has not given us a spirit of fear,
but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

—2 TIMOTHY 1:7, NKJV

Prologue

That's not good enough."

I scratch the mosquito bite on the back of my arm and adjust my thick-lens glasses to look up at my mom. Her eyes feel like two sharp prongs probing right into my forehead—as if she can read my thoughts. And maybe she can.

"Why not?" I say quietly, then glance away, wishing I'd kept quiet.

"Look at that carpet." Her index finger points down like an arrow at the new orange shag carpeting that goes wall to wall in our small, wood-paneled family room.

I look but see nothing other than carpet. Still, I know better than to state this as fact.

"Pull the vacuum back and forth in straight lines. Back and forth, back and forth, *like this*." She uses her hands to show me, as if I don't fully understand the concept of back and forth.

I stand with my shoulders hunched forward, staring dumbly down at the sea of orange at my feet.

"If you did it right, Ruth, I would see neat, even rows about six inches wide. Now, start in the corner by the fireplace, and do it again."

I frown and, although I know it's not only futile but stupid, say, "But it's clean, Mom. I vacuumed everything in here. The carpet is already *clean*."

The family room becomes very quiet now. With the Hoover off, I can hear the sounds of kids playing outside, enjoying their Saturday freedom like normal ten-year-olds, not that I mistake myself for normal. And then I hear the familiar hissing sound of my mother as she blows air like a jet stream through her nostrils.

“*Ruth Anne!*” She bends down and peers at me, those flaming blue eyes just inches from my own. “Are you talking back to me?”

I glance down at my faded blue Keds and mutely shake my head. I do not want to be slapped. Without looking at her, I turn the vacuum cleaner on again and drag its bulky, cavernous body over to the wall by the fireplace next to the big picture window, although I don’t look out. I don’t want to see my friends playing. Even worse, I don’t want them to see me.

As I vacuum the rug all over again, I try not to think about my older sister, Lynette, the pretty one. I try not to imagine her at her ballet lesson just now, looking sleek and lovely in her black leotard and tights, doing a graceful arabesque with one hand on the barre, glimpsing her long straight back in the gleaming mirror behind her.

“You are not made for ballet,” my mother had told me two years ago when I pleaded with her for lessons. “You’re much too stout, and your arms and legs are too short and stubby. You take after your father’s side of the family.”

And I can’t disagree with her when I examine myself in the bathroom mirror. With my dark hair and untamable curls and these muddy brown eyes, I definitely do not look like I belong in this particular family of blue-eyed, long-limbed blonds. Well, my mother isn’t a true blonde. A monthly bottle of Lady Clairol helps her out, although no one is allowed to mention this fact, *ever*, and she takes care to purchase her “contraband” in a drugstore in the neighboring

town where no one knows her. But she lets it be known that Lynette and my little brother, Jonathan, both get their silky blond locks from her side of the family—a respectable mix of English and Scandinavian.

Jonathan is four years younger than I am, but unlike me, he is *not* an accident. Plus he is a much-wanted boy, named after my father, Jonathan Francis Reynolds. Once while playing hide-and-seek at church, I was hiding behind the drapes in the fellowship room when I overheard my mother talking to a lady friend. The other woman commented on how Lynette and I look nothing alike. “Oh, Ruth wasn’t planned, you know,” my mother said in a hushed tone, causing my ears to perk up and actually listen for a change. “Good grief. My little Lynette was still in diapers, and suddenly I was pregnant again! Can you imagine? Well, I was completely devastated by the—”

Just then Jonathan raced over and threw himself around my mother’s knees, complaining that he’d been left out of the childish game.

“Now, this one”—my mother spoke with pride as she ruffled his pale hair—“he was no mistake.”

Thirty years later

It's all a mistake." I wash my hands again, perhaps for the seventeenth time in the last hour. Never mind that they are already red and chapped or that the skin on my knuckles cracks when I make a fist. "I will call Pastor Glenn first thing in the morning and tell him it's all just a stupid mistake."

But even as I speak these words aloud for no one to hear but myself, I know that's one phone call I will never make. Me stand up to a man in his position? Accuse him of error? Why, that would be like taking a stand against the Lord.

Or my mother.

I suck in a deep breath. Everything will be okay. Somehow I will make everything right again. I will pray for *three* hours tonight instead of two. That should help.

"Mommy?"

I turn to see my younger daughter standing in the hallway, her pale pink nightgown backlit by the hallway light so I can see her spindly legs trembling. "What's wrong, sweetie?"

"That dream," Sarah says in a shaky voice. "I had that dream again."

I gather her into my arms, carry her over to the sofa, and pull a woolly afghan around both of us. "Dear Jesus, please drive away the

demons. Take them from us and throw them into your fiery pit. Send your angels to protect Sarah now. Take away those evil thoughts, and replace them with your good thoughts, O Lord..." I ramble on and on, just as I've been taught, until I finally hear Sarah's even breathing and I am assured that she is asleep. I sigh. Once again I have kept the demons at bay.

This is all my fault, I think as I tuck her back into bed. I glance over to make sure Mary is still asleep in the twin bed across from her little sister. Hopefully the demonic nightmares won't attack her as well.

Satisfied that both my daughters are safe, I tiptoe down the hallway and pause by Matthew's bedroom. I shake my head as I push open his partially shut door and see his floor strewn with castoff pieces of clothing—jeans in a heap right where he took them off, dirty socks in tight little wads next to his bed. How many times must I tell him to put his things away—that cleanliness truly is next to godliness? When will he get it? I consider going in there right now and doing it myself, but that would risk waking him. And right now Matthew is going through a difficult period.

Barely eighteen and just out of high school, he threatens on a regular basis to leave home. I can't believe he'd really go through with it though. His job at the bookstore would never support him, and besides, wouldn't he be scared out there—all on his own with so much evil lurking about? If he's not careful, if he continues this careless living, the demons will come into his life and take over. And then what will I do?

I must pray harder than ever tonight. It seems the spiritual safety of my entire household is at stake. Maybe it has something to do with the full moon. Or the fact that it's autumn, with Halloween

only a few weeks away. Pastor Glenn says the demons are more active now. Especially up here in Oregon, where nighttime and darkness come quickly this time of year.

I bite my lip as I glance at the clock. Rick will be home from work in less than two hours. At first I hated his so-called promotion because of the new nighttime hours at the shipping company, but sometimes, like now, I'm thankful for his absence. And I cringe to think what he will say when he gets home and hears what I've done.

Perhaps I should keep this from him since it will only upset him. There must be some way to make up for this mistake. If it really is a mistake. Maybe it was meant to be, just a blessing in disguise that will unfold later. Whatever it is, I think I can keep this secret between the Lord and me—and, of course, Pastor Glenn.

I slowly kneel in front of the worn plaid sofa, my elbows digging into the familiar grooves in the center of the middle cushion. I bow my head and prepare myself for spiritual battle. I know I will be drained before this is over.

“What are you doing?”

I startle, surprised to find that I'm still on my knees, slumped over the sofa like a rag doll. I attempt to stand, but my legs are numb from lack of circulation, and the best I can do is to roll over in an ungraceful flop as I look up at my husband and try to read his expression. His brow is creased, but is it with anger or concern?

“I was praying. I must've fallen asleep.”

“Why don't you pray in bed?” Rick sets his Thermos lunchbox on the coffee table in front of me with a tired sigh. “Then at least you could fall asleep there.”

I just stare blankly at the blue and white insulated lunchbox. All I can think is, *That doesn't belong there.*

“Ruth!”

I look back up at him, then blink. “Huh?”

“I was talking to you.”

“I guess I’m just sleepy.”

“Or spacey.” He reaches out to help me stand.

“Yeah...” I slowly get to my feet. “Sorry.”

“I was just asking you if you made that deposit today.”

“Sure, of course...”

“I tried to use my debit card at noon, and the ATM said we had insufficient funds.”

“Oh, I didn’t make it to the bank until after three. I ended up helping out at school again and—”

“Seems like you end up helping out there every other day.” He runs his fingers through his scraggly brown hair, his sign of frustration and a reminder that he needs a haircut again.

“They were short-handed, and there’s a lot to do for the Harvest Celebration.”

“Well, then maybe they should just hire you. Better yet, just give us a discount or even a refund on the girls’ tuition. You told me one of the benefits of getting them into a Christian school, well, aside from their *spiritual welfare*,”—he shakes his head—“was that it’d make it easier for you to focus on *other* things, things like managing the house and the bills, grocery shopping. You even said you might get a part-time job, Ruth. What happened to all those high aspirations?”

“I don’t know...”

“And now you can’t even make it to the bank on time?”

“Sorry.”

“I told Leon that I’d pay him back that fifty today, and I ended up looking like a real jerk.”

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, whatever. Just give me some cash, and we’ll call it good.”

“I, uh, I didn’t get any cash back.”

“Why not?”

“I...I forgot.”

He shakes his head dismally. “But you did remember to deposit the check, right?”

I nod.

“Okay, where’s the checkbook?” He walks over to where my purse is hanging on its usual hook on the oak hall tree by the front door and begins to dig through it. “I’ll just write Leon a check.”

I can’t hide this anymore. Once Rick sees the checkbook, he’ll know what I did. It’ll all be out in the open. *God, help me.*

He extracts the checkbook and trudges toward the kitchen. I pick up his lunchbox and follow, preparing myself for this next scene.

“What the—” Rick turns, holding the opened checkbook to the spot where I wrote Pastor Glenn that check today.

“*Three hundred dollars?*” He glares at me. “For Valley Bridge Fellowship? What’s this for? We already paid up their tuition. We bought the girls their fancy-dancy uniforms and school supplies and God only knows what else. Another three hundred dollars? What in God’s name for?”

I cringe at his careless use of our Lord’s name. Rick knows better than to take it in vain. And he knows how painful it is for me to hear him talk like that.

“It was a misunderstanding. A mistake. I plan to take care of it—”

“A *mistake?*” He steps closer, holding the checkbook right

under my nose. “It looks like *your* handwriting, Ruth. How is this a mistake?”

I explain how Pastor Glenn told me he was collecting donations to get groceries and pay the electric bill for a family in need and how when I said I wanted to help, he somehow misunderstood me. “He thought I said that I wanted to cover the entire expense myself, but I didn’t understand. And when it turned out that he needed three hundred dollars and he was so blessed by our generosity, well, I just didn’t know how to explain that wasn’t what I meant and that I’d only planned to give him twenty dollars...and the next thing I knew, I was writing out a check for the full three hundred.”

“That’s insane, Ruth.”

I don’t respond.

“You gave away *our* grocery and *our* bill-paying money to help a family in need, for Pete’s sake. Now *we’re* a family in need!”

“Don’t talk like that, Rick!”

It’s too late. Now he’s swearing and slamming his lunchbox into the sink, and I slip away, going into the girls’ room, where I lie on the floor between their two beds.

Dear Lord, I am so sorry. I am so sorry. I am so sorry. I say this sentence over and over. Like a scratched vinyl record, I am stuck on these four words. But I believe that they are the right words and that repeated enough times they will make things better. All I want is for things to get better. I am so sorry.

I wake up in the darkness, my back aching from the hard floor beneath the plush pink carpeting in my daughters' bedroom. According to the alarm clock on the maple dresser between their beds, it's only 4:56. Too early to wake them, and yet I don't want to return to my own bedroom. Even if Rick is asleep, which is likely, I'm not ready to be near him yet.

I stay where I am and use this time to pray for my girls—to pray that their day will be especially blessed and that their classes will go well and, perhaps most important, that they will finally start to feel like they fit in at their new school.

It's only their fourth week, but I expected they'd have made the adjustment by now. The fact that they're still struggling fills me with guilt and doubt. Was it a mistake to make this move? Mary would've started middle school this year, and I'd heard such bad things about the flawed and ungodly curriculum taught in public schools, the horrendous peer pressure, and even an increase in drug use among preteens. Really frightening.

Thankfully, Pastor Glenn does an excellent job of keeping his congregation informed. He often preaches on the serious problems facing public education these days and how our society will pay a high price for the low morals and values being taught to the younger generation. Of course, Rick says he only espouses these “opinions”

in order to promote the church's Christian school because the school is steadily losing popularity as well as money. But I'm sure Rick is simply biased. More and more it seems that Rick is falling away from the church, falling away from the Lord. And I feel certain that Pastor Glenn, as our spiritual shepherd, only wants the best for his sheep.

But changing over to a private school hasn't been easy on the girls, and only yesterday Sarah complained about missing her old friends at Hampton Elementary. Then Mary chimed in by saying how the kids at Valley Bridge Fellowship still treat her like an outsider. "We'll never fit in there," she lamented as I drove them home. And I could see that Mary was holding back tears. Poor thing. I know it's not easy being twelve.

And it's not as if I can't relate to their misery. I always felt like a misfit as a child. Although I'm sure Mary will never go through the sort of pain I experienced. At least she gets to dress like her peers. No one can tease her about her clothes. It wasn't like that for me. For starters, even though all the other girls in my class had been wearing blue jeans to school since fourth grade, when the dress code changed, my mother would not allow us to wear jeans for anything besides chores and play.

"I want my daughters to look respectable," she had told us again and again, completely unaware that Lynette had been sneaking jeans to school since her first year in junior high, quickly changing in the bathroom before class started.

But I was never that brave. I settled for the mandatory skirts and sweaters, and if I wore pants, they were always "trousers," as Mom called them. Corduroy or twill and always neatly pressed. But besides dressing like a nerd, I always seemed to be worried about something

or other, and I know this must've kept any potential friends at bay. But I just couldn't seem to help myself.

"Why do you put your shoes in a circle like that?" Marilyn Van Horn had asked me one afternoon when she surprised me by agreeing to come home with me after school. At first I'd been extremely nervous about her visit, imagining all the things my mom could do to embarrass me. But luckily for me, Mom had taken Jonathan to Cub Scouts that afternoon, and Lynette was off at ballet, so I had the house to myself.

"Oh, I just do that for fun," I told Marilyn, not willing to admit that I felt better when the toes of my shoes were all touching, connected.

"Your room is *so* neat and clean." She eyed my comb and brush and hair barrettes, all lined up meticulously along my spotless dresser top. "Do you guys have a maid or something?"

I laughed. "No. My mom just likes us to keep things picked up." And that wasn't a lie. It's just that I took cleanliness to a whole new level. This was partially to keep Mom off my back but also for my own sense of security. I believed life was under control when my room was in perfect order.

Marilyn continued walking around my room, examining everything. She reminded me of my aunt's terrier, Fritz, as she sniffed about searching, I felt certain, for oddities or perhaps even a dead rodent somewhere. And after just a few minutes, her presence started to make me very uncomfortable, and each time she touched any of my things, I wondered why I had allowed this girl into my world. I even hinted to her that maybe she should leave.

"You're a really weird girl, Ruth Reynolds." She rearranged my brush-and-comb set, probably just to bug me.

“Gee thanks.” I tried to sound sarcastic, not wanting her to know that her words cut deeply.

“I mean, you’re pretty smart and kinda fun to hang around with at school...sometimes. But you’re not like the other kids. No offense, Ruth, but you’re kinda uptight, you know? You sort of remind me of my grandma.”

Well, I didn’t know how to respond, and I can’t remember exactly what we did after that or how long she stayed while making these unpleasant observations, but I do remember being hugely relieved when she finally told me it was time for her to go home. And I went around my room and systematically put everything she’d moved, whether intentionally or not, back in its proper place.

The next day Marilyn told some of the other girls in sixth grade about my unusually neat room and my “circle of shoes,” and naturally I became the focus of their ridicule. Oh, I’m sure there were worse things than being called “Neat Freak” or hearing “Let the Circle (of Shoes) Be Unbroken” sung mercilessly for several days. And I learned to wear my “flat face.” I imagined myself as an Etch A Sketch that had just been shaken to void it of all images. Likewise I would void my face of all emotion. It wasn’t long before my classmates added “Miss Perfect” and “Weirdo” to my ever-growing list of labels, but I just continued wearing my flat face, determined not to let them know I cared. And I told myself that I didn’t really need friends.

Throughout junior high I maintained a low profile, high grades, and probably the beginnings of an ulcer, because my stomachaches seemed to be almost constant by the time I was fourteen. By then I had accepted that I really was a freak. There seemed to be no disputing this fact. My only goal was to survive school and peers and even my family, who were also treating me as if I was some weirdo that had

been dropped off from another planet. I used my imagination to get me through these hard times, convincing myself that someday I would actually have a life worth living. Looking back, I'm not even sure how I managed to do this, but I think television helped.

My mom didn't like for us kids to watch too much television, but Lynette was a master at getting her own way. As a result, I often got lost in shows like *Mary Tyler Moore*, where I imagined myself to be as cool as Mary Richards, living on my own in a big city and having *real* friends who were fun and interesting. Or else I was part of the *Happy Days* crowd, where everyone but Fonzie wore nerdy clothes and Joanie Cunningham and I were best friends, except that she would be upset if she knew I nurtured a secret crush on her boyfriend, Chachi.

It wasn't until the end of my sophomore year in high school that I finally got fed up with my lackluster little life. Tired of the Miss Perfect label and good-girl image, I made an effort to befriend Colleen Frazer. Two things about this totally out-of-character action still amaze me today—first, that I actually mustered the nerve to speak to this new girl who smoked and cussed and dressed like a Madonna wannabe and, second, that someone like her was willing to speak to someone as mousy and insignificant as me.

But it wasn't long before Colleen was teaching me all her tricks, including smoking cigarettes, swearing like a logger, and wearing underwear as outerwear while holding your head up. Naturally, I kept my new tough-chick image top secret from my mom. By then Lynette had gotten our parents to lighten up on some of Mom's restrictive dress-code rules, but she still had to sneak some of her makeup and certain clothing items to school. I simply followed her example...and then some.

Of course, it was the eighties, and everything about fashion was big and overblown. Big hair, bulky shoulder pads, fluffy layered skirts, and more layers of makeup—and for me it was like donning a costume as I put myself together at Colleen’s house each morning before school. My exterior was something I could hide behind, allowing me to act however I liked. The only problem was, I did feel a little phony, and I was actually pretty scared a lot of the time. The idea of getting caught by my mother constantly nagged at me, keeping me from completely cutting loose and having the crazy kind of fun Colleen was capable of. Still, my new defiant image was far better than being Neat Freak or Miss Perfect.

Oh, my rebel years... I’m sure my feeble attempt at insurrection would make most people laugh. I never really learned to smoke right, not the way Colleen did, inhaling it deep into her lungs and holding it there before she slowly exhaled, but I was a pretty good faker and knew how to hold the cigarette just right. And I never really drank like she did, although I would take a few sips and pretend to be tipsy, just to fit in. And when we were at drinking parties, I always kept a tight rein on myself, constantly glancing out windows or down the road to make sure the party wasn’t about to get busted. I was paralyzed by the fear of being dragged home by a cop.

But I did get pretty good at spewing out foul language that made even me cringe at times. I’d never admit it to anyone now, but I even used God’s name in vain at times. It shames me to think of this. In fact, it’s rather hard to believe that I, Ruth Anne Jackson, strong believer and faithful church member, ever managed to look and behave like such a tough girl during those high-school years. Although I suspect that some kids, like Marilyn Van Horn, knew it was all just an act. But the truth is, I was relieved when it was over

and done with, and I would be completely humiliated if anyone at church besides Colleen, whom I've sworn to secrecy, knew anything about that old Ruth Reynolds. And I hope and pray that my children never find out.

Suddenly I notice there's a slit of pale morning light beneath the window shade, and the clock says it's almost seven. Not wanting to be caught sleeping on the floor of the girls' room when their alarm goes off, I roll over and quietly get onto my hands and knees and, feeling the stiffness in my bones, stand upright, then tiptoe out of their room and down the hall.

I take a few minutes to freshen up in the bathroom, but I'm sure anyone who looked closely would suspect that I slept on the floor last night. Dark shadows rest beneath my slightly bloodshot eyes, and my skin is pale and sallow. My brown hair is flat and dull, showing the tinges of gray that started appearing last year, and my usual stubborn curls look worn out.

I've heard people say that forty is the new thirty, but I'm thinking my forty looks more like fifty or maybe even sixty today. But the Lord doesn't want me to glory in my appearance, and the Bible says that "charm is deceitful and beauty is vain" and that the "silver-haired head is a crown of glory." So I rebuke myself for my vanity and head to the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

Today, like so many other days, it will be oatmeal. Not because we particularly like oatmeal but because I've been attempting to cut back on the food budget. Paying the girls' tuition last summer completely depleted our savings, and I've promised Rick that I'll do everything I can to make up for it. Of course, this reminds me of yesterday's "mistake," filling me with a deep sense of dread and shame.

Dear Lord, please help me fix this.

As I stir the rolled oats into the boiling water, I wonder if I could place a stop payment on the three-hundred-dollar check this morning. Oh sure, it would be embarrassing, but at least it would pacify Rick and restore peace in our house for the time being. Perhaps I could create some believable excuse, maybe even tell Pastor Glenn that the check bounced because we were overdrawn since I hadn't deposited a check on time, which is actually the truth, sort of.

Unfortunately, I suspect that Pastor Glenn would see right through me. He's gifted that way. He has this uncanny ability to discern things that are hidden deep inside of people. Especially when it comes to sinful things. I was somewhat shocked the first time I witnessed our savvy pastor giving what he calls a "word of knowledge" right in front of the entire congregation at a Wednesday night service. With just a few words, he reduced Tom Finley, a respected real-estate broker, to a blubbering child when his sin of "material lust" was exposed for all to see. But Tom thanked him and begged forgiveness, and it was really quite amazing—and moving. Although, now that I think of it, I haven't seen any of the Finleys at church recently.

A few weeks ago at a Sunday morning service, Pastor Glenn did it again. This time he rebuked Paul Hendricks for having "adultery of the heart." When Paul stood up to Pastor Glenn, telling him that he was wrong, Pastor Glenn told Paul that he also had a "spirit of deception" and that he wouldn't be welcome in our fellowship until he publicly confessed these sins and repented. Naturally, this made Rick really mad since he and Paul have been friends for years.

"Pastor Glenn is going too far!" Rick said as we drove home after church.

"What happened?" Mary asked with typical preadolescent curiosity.

“Never mind.” I tossed Rick a warning glance. “Not in front of the girls.”

“Mom?”

I’m brought back to the present as I turn to see little Sarah coming into the kitchen. Her long honey-colored hair is still messy from sleep, but she’s dressed in her navy and white uniform, although the little red tie is not properly tied, and she has on only one white kneesock. I help her with the tie and ask about the missing sock.

“I can’t find any clean ones,” she whispers, mindful of her daddy’s recent change in schedule.

“Go look in the dryer.” I turn off the burner beneath the oatmeal. I retrieve bowls from the cupboard and milk from the fridge, then look again to ensure that I really turned off the stove. I don’t want to scorch our oatmeal.

Soon the girls are dressed and fed, snarls brushed out of hair, teeth brushed, and we are heading out to the car. But once again I go back to make sure I turned off the stove.

“It’s off, Mom,” Mary hisses at me in a loud whisper. “Why do you always do that?”

“I don’t want to burn the house down while your brother and dad are sleeping in it,” I tell her as we go out to the garage.

“Do you want to burn it down when no one’s there?” She climbs into the minivan.

This makes me laugh, and then my girls are laughing, and we’re all making jokes about burning down the house. And it feels good to make light of such things. But then I feel guilty. Are our jokes offensive to the Lord? Silently I repent as I pull in front of the church. And I remember the three-hundred-dollar check and wonder how I’m going to make that right.

My girls are just getting out of the van, telling me good-bye, when someone calls my name. I spot Cynthia Leman waving at me from the parking lot.

I halfheartedly wave back, and she hurries over to the car with a look of importance. Cynthia heads up the women's ministries in our church, and as much as I try to respect her, I also cringe when I see her coming my way since it usually means one of two things. Either she wants me to help with something, or I've done something wrong. Cynthia has a gift similar to Pastor Glenn's, and she often uses it in the women's ministries. So far I've managed to avoid it personally, but the idea of being pointed out for all to see, being the subject of a public rebuke...well, it's rather frightening.

"I'm so glad I caught you," she says through my now-open window.

"Hi, Cynthia." I force a smile.

"Are you feeling okay?" She leans down and peers at me with concern.

I shrug. "I guess I didn't sleep too well. Does it show?"

She nods with a grave expression. "I want to ask you something, Ruth."

Now I feel a mixture of relief and anxiety. On one hand, I'm thankful I'm not in trouble, but at the same time I know I won't be able to say no to this woman of influence. And while some women in our church tell Cynthia no with regularity, those same women wear an invisible black check mark by their names. They are considered the less spiritual in our church. "Immature, selfish, carnal Christians...not nearly as devoted to serving as some of us." Oh, no one actually says this in so many words, but it's a well-known fact within the inner circle. I sit up straighter in my seat, adjusting my smile accordingly. After

all, it does feel good to be part of the inner circle. It's a level of spirituality I have longed for.

"What can I do for you?"

Cynthia explains Pastor Glenn's new vision for outreach, his plan for expanding our church borders, increasing membership, reaching out to the community. "We're having a meeting this morning," she says in a quieter voice as if she doesn't want anyone else to hear. "By invitation only. And Pastor Glenn asked me to be sure to invite you."

My smile is feeling more genuine. "I'd love to come."

"Good. It's at ten o'clock. And if you don't mind, could you run by the bakery and pick up some goodies? I'd do it myself, but I promised Pastor Glenn that I'd make some copies for the—"

"No problem. But I better get going. I think I'm causing a traffic jam."

She nods. "See you at ten."

As I drive away, I go back and forth, trying to decide whether to stop by the bakery now and then go home and take a shower and clean up or the reverse order. I don't know why it takes me so long to make this decision. I just can't afford not to do this right, not to do it perfectly. Finally I pray, asking the Lord to guide me.

When the traffic light toward downtown is green, I take it as a sign and head for the bakery first. But as I stand before the glass case, eyeing the various pastries, I feel confused again. Which ones should I get? How many? I should've asked Cynthia how many people will be at this special meeting. It's probably small. Maybe a dozen people? But what if there are more? I don't want to get too few pastries. Oh, why is this so hard? I see others come in, place an order, and leave. Why can't I be like that?

“Are you ready yet?” the girl with a pierced nose asks me for the third time.

The number three comes to me. So I order three dozen. Surely there won't be more people than that. And if so, maybe not everyone will want a whole pastry. I'm surprised at the total, and I realize I'll have to write a check. Another check! My face heats up as I write it out, knowing that Rick will probably question this too. But perhaps the church will reimburse me. I will be sure to ask Cynthia.

The girl hands me a stack of three large pink boxes, and as I walk to the car, I feel certain that I bought too many pastries. Good grief, what was I thinking? Perhaps I can take the leftovers to the teachers' lounge. I'm sure they'd appreciate a treat.

I put the boxes in the backseat and cover them with a blanket. I tell myself this is to keep them from sliding onto the floor, but I know it's to prevent Rick from seeing them. Although I doubt he'll be up this early.

It feels so good to finally take a shower. And, as usual, I soap up and rinse off three times. I try to limit myself to three times, especially when I'm in a hurry like today. But sometimes, if I'm not paying attention or if I feel a desperate need for cleansing, I will stay in the shower until the hot water is all used up. And even then I won't feel totally clean.

I asked my sister about this once, back when we were teens and she was complaining about how long it took me to shower. “How many times do you soap up and rinse?”

“How many *times*?” She looked at me as if I were from another planet. “What are you talking about, Ruth?”

“Oh, nothing...”

Since then I've learned to keep my personal hygiene habits to

myself. But still, I don't understand how other people can jump in and out of the shower for just a few minutes and consider themselves clean. It just doesn't make sense.

To my relief, Rick is still sleeping soundly, snoring like a chain saw, as I tiptoe into our room and into the closet to retrieve some clean clothes. I pick a nice gray skirt, white blouse, navy sweater, and my good black pumps. A respectable outfit I often wear to church, but it seems appropriate for an important meeting as well.

I don't normally use any cosmetics, not since I heard Cynthia teaching at a women's seminar a couple of years ago. She said that "according to Scripture, it's sinful to use makeup." Of course, Colleen said that was bunk. Well, not to Cynthia's face. But I'm still not so sure, and when Lynette talked me into getting a department-store makeover with her last June before a cousin's wedding, I actually caved and purchased some concealer and a few other things. I use them occasionally, like when Rick and I go out, which is very rare. I'd be tempted to put on a bit of concealer today since I'm really not looking my best, but images of sitting under bright fluorescent lights and Cynthia's intense gaze are enough to intimidate me. Better to look old and frumpy than to be considered sinful.

"Where you going, Mom?" Matthew asks when I come into the kitchen and find him making a sandwich as well as a mess. Why is it that something as simple as peanut butter and jelly can create such chaos in my kitchen?

"A meeting." I frown at the sticky countertop.

"Don't worry, I'll clean it up," he says quickly, as if reading my thoughts. "It must be a church meeting." He licks the knife.

As I put the lid back on the peanut butter jar, I look away, fearful that he'll slice his tongue in half. Why are children so careless?

“Don’t have too much fun.” He chuckles.

“Do you work today?” I reach for a paper towel and use it to wipe the greasy jar clean before I set it back in the cupboard.

“Yeah. But not until noon.” He sits at the breakfast bar and begins to devour his sandwich, jelly dripping off the edges. “And I don’t get off until closing,” he says with a full mouth.

“Did you ask your boss about Sundays?” We’ve been going round and round about how much church he’s been missing since he started this job.

Matthew just shrugs. “He said if I wanna work, I gotta stick with the schedule.”

I glance at the clock. “Well, I’d better go. Have a good day.”

He tells me good-bye, and I head out to the minivan and the camouflaged pastries. And for some reason the sight of those pink boxes partially covered with a plaid wool blanket fills me with guilt, and it reminds me of the three-hundred-dollar check and the deep, dark hole I seem to be climbing into.