

The
Christmas Key

Written by J.P. Kwok



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After reading or listening to the story, please watch the movie. Thank you to the creative arts team who launched the feature film - Wes Buehler who adapted the story and directed the film and Alicia Berry who served as technical production director.





CHAPTER

1

THIRTY MINUTES TO GO

The screen of her digital tablet quickly filled with bright red and green graphics of Christmas lights, cookies, trees, and presents; each one popping up in rapid succession around the girl in the center of the screen. The video host offers a brilliant smile followed by her giddy but well-presented video intro: “Don’t let 2020 rob your Christmas spirit! Today, we’re talking about 10 ways to make the best of a Covid Christmas. Number one, DIY Christmas light jars.” *Nope, not in the mood*, Maddie thought as she swiped the screen to the next video. New intro sequence with equally exciting graphics and music followed by a different host, “Watch all of your favorite Hollywood stars on this year’s online Holiday special.” Swipe. *Ahh, the funny YouTube family had a new holiday video*. “On the first day of Christmas, corona you might see, Santa masks for you and for me.” Swipe. *Uh, that’s just wrong*. Maddie said. She was about to move on to a different app when a video call popped up. She hit answer and was instantly met with a smiling face filling her entire screen.

“Hey, Maddie,” his face was so close you could see the



individual pores on his nose.

“Hey, Michael,” she said with a half-chuckle. He could always make her smile.

Michael leaned back from the camera enough for Maddie to notice he was sitting in the living room of his house. Maddie was sitting crisscross at the head of her bed, right next to the window. She turned to keep the sunlight out of the camera, revealing the opposite side of the bedroom. Her room was a typical 13-year-old girl’s room. The décor was a mix of sentimental little girl items intermingled with random additions from all the new interests she’d acquired in middle school, like a telescope and a pair of drama masks hanging on the wall.

Even with the silly face he was making, Maddie felt sure that Michael had called with an agenda. He always called when she missed the virtual group meet. *I guess it was more flattering than annoying*, she thought.

Michael dropped the silly face and assumed a more cordial appearance as he got to the point of the call, “We missed you at middle school meet up.”

“Ah yah, I forgot about it.” Maddie replied.

“Maybe next time?” Michael added with a shrug of his

shoulders and palms in the air to emphasize the question.

“Yah, actually I may not be in town.” She said, realizing she did have a reason to miss.

Michael instantly slid his hands behind his head and lowered his gaze in slight embarrassment, “That’s right. So, you guys found out you’re able to go?”

“As far as I know,” she answered.

“You’re always gone for Christmas,” Michael blurted out before thinking through how awkward it was for him to have noticed.

“Yeah, it’s a family tradition. Only this year we’re... not really... doing it right,” she emphasized the last line with a disgruntled expression.

Michael tried his best empathize, “Yeah, I get it; our Christmas is messed up this year, too.”

She knew he didn’t really understand what she meant, but she didn’t want to talk about it. At that moment, her little brother Brandon stealthily peeked around the corner of her bedroom door. Their parents had given him a camera and video editing software to keep him busy during the Safe at Home lockdown. For months, everyone in the house had served as a captive subject for his new hobby. Lately, his obsession sprouted



into a full-fledged ambition to become a famous self-made You-Tuber.

Brandon quickly ran in with the camera pointed at Maddie, practically yelling; “10 ways to annoy your family this Christmas season! Number one, film the elusive middle sister in her natural habitat.”

“Got to go, Michael!” Maddie said as she abruptly cut off the call.

“Notice the expression of anger...” Brandon rattled off as commentary for his video.

Maddie instinctively rebuffed the invasion with a fastball pitched pillow right towards Brandon’s head while she yelled, “Get out of my room!” Brandon dodged the pitch, but knew he was outgunned.

“Time to bounce,” he said as he ran for the door.

Their mom, Emma, was making her way down the hall with a suitcase when Brandon turned the corner and plowed right into her. “Brandon!” the intensity of her voice amplified by the expression on her face. “Don’t make me take that camera away. It’s becoming a problem. Have you packed? Go make sure you have everything you want to take, like chargers and toys.”

“Don’t say toys mom,” Brandon repulsed, but in a

manner that only accentuated he was still very much a boy.

Emma's eyebrows raised at the irony, but time was of the essence, so she moved things along. "Ok, your things. Put it all in the bag on your bed and take it to the living room." Brandon obediently ran off to his room, partly to escape Maddie if she were to come after him.

Emma pulled the suitcase into the living room just past her eldest daughter, who was standing in the middle of the floor watching a news report. *Doctors and health officials are concerned there may be another outbreak after the holiday season. Some government officials are considering reinstating similar travel restrictions to the ones implemented during the Thanksgiving holiday. Meanwhile, scientists say the virus will continue to mutate until a vaccine can be developed...*

"Laura, honey," Emma said as she put the handle down on the suitcase. "Turn that off." Laura responded with a worried tone, "They said that cancer survivors may be at more risk because of... something."

Emma, knowing Laura's fondness and concern for grandma, did her best to reassure her daughter. "Yes dear, that's why we're being careful. We've done everything necessary to ensure it's safe to visit. Are you finished packing?" Emma's



voice had a mix of counselor and interrogator.

“I can’t find my sweater,” Laura replied frantically.

Emma’s impatience was beginning to build, “Well, we’re leaving soon, so, go look again. And ask Maddie if she’s packed and ready to go.”

“Ooohkaaay,” Laura responded in obvious protest before she reluctantly handed over the remote and walked down the hall.

Emma turned the TV off, took her phone out of her pocket, and glanced at the time. “There’s never enough time,” she had the habit of talking to herself when stressed. “I’m surprised mom hasn’t called,” the last line invoked the remnant of tension she had with her own mother. There was no time to waste, so she proceeded to the kitchen to finish putting together the travel snacks.

“Mom!” Maddie cried out from her room. “Laura said I stole her sweater.”

Laura’s response came immediately, “No, I didn’t Maddie, I just asked why it was in your closet.”

“Uhhh!”

“Uhhh!”

Emma couldn’t tell who was who as they volleyed their

snarls back and forth. “Girls stop,” Emma said as she walked into the room. “Laura, go pack your sweater.”

“But Mom,” Laura protested.

“Go pack Laura,” Emma said insistently.

“Oooohkaaay,” Laura said under her breath as she marched out of the room.

Emma processed her three urgent goals as she walked towards Maddie’s bed: give the chronically moody middle child some necessary love and affection, get all three kids packed, and get the house ready for them to leave. She sat on the bed next to her youngest daughter and hoped for the best as she began to speak. “Maddie, I know you’re disappointed we’re not going to the cabin.”

In a single, attitude-infused motion, Maddie swung her head away from her mother and then back again before replying, “It’s more than a tradition, Mom...” The escalation was interrupted when the tablet laying in Maddie’s hands lit up with a picture and text that read “Grandma.”

Maddie answered, her disposition suddenly pleasant as she said, “Hello, Grandma.” Emma’s expression wore the shock from Maddie’s instant change in mood.

“Ohhh, Maddie. Is your mother there? I tried calling



her cell phone, but she didn't answer."

"I left my phone in the kitchen, Mom" Emma quipped as she whipped around beside Maddie to share the camera and screen.

"Emma. When are you leaving, and what time do you think you'll arrive?"

"I'm a grown woman, Mom, and we have cell phones. We can always call you if something happens."

Emma's mother responded with a gentle but insistent tone, "A mother always worries about her children when they travel. I can't help it. Now, your father... I'm sure he worried, but he always reassured me. He was my calm."

With a tinge of guilt in her voice, Emma indulged her mother. "Steve should be home any minute with the van. I hope to leave within the hour, that's if I can get these three packed and out the door."

"Help your momma, Maddie. I've not seen you all in person since February. I want you to arrive safely."

"Yes, Grandma," Maddie replied respectfully.

"Bye, dears."

"Bye, Mom."

"Bye, Grandma."

Maddie's attitude reverted back as soon as the call ended. Turning to her mom she picked up where they left off. "Why can't we go to the cabin?"

"It's like I told you, Grandma doesn't want to travel."

Maddie responded with a pre-planned suggestion, "What if we pick up grandma at her house? Then we can all go to the cabin?"

Emma exuded a mix of patience and concern. "Listen to me, Bug. Grandma doesn't want to go to the cabin for Christmas." Maddie's eyes froze in a shocked glaze as Emma continued. "She's handling grief in her own way. We need to be sensitive to what she needs."

"Grandpa would've wanted us to go," Maddie mumbled under her breath.

Emma chose not to engage her daughter any further on the matter, though she looked at her with a sympathetic gaze. Just then she caught a glimpse of what was hanging around Maddie's neck. "Maddie, you're wearing the Christmas key."

"Dad's home!" the yell came from the living room and kitchen side of the house, followed by a slamming door.





Brandon worked his camera to keep his dad framed tight in the view screen. Steve walked in a hybrid hip-hop strut around the van towards the door that led to the inside of the house. He liked hamming it up for the camera, including a running narration for Brandon's video, "The tank is full, air pressure's high, oil level's good, we're ready to ride. The van is cleaned, and ready to load." His delivery reminiscent of a reality TV host from 10 years past. "All I need now are three rock'n kids and my beautiful wife."

Steve and Brandon walked into the kitchen and found themselves faced with the smorgasbord of snacks Emma had spread out to pack for the trip. Their hands reached for a box of baked cheese crackers only to be cut off by Emma as she entered the kitchen. "Boys, have you washed your hands?" There was no sense in denying it, Emma could read them too well. All they could do was slowly shake their heads no. "Work with me here," Emma continued. "We all tested negative so that my mother's only daughter can visit her for Christmas. We have to stick to the plan, people."

“Oookaaay,” Steve and Brandon said in unison as they backed away and walked to the kitchen sink.

Emma was experiencing one of those moments where the amount of prep-time she put in was not appreciated or reciprocated by those she was trying to help. As Brandon would say, Mount St. Mom was ready to blow. Emma raised her voice loud enough for the girls to hear from their rooms. “Family meeting in the kitchen in five seconds!”

The girls knew the drill. They got up and made their way to the meeting, exchanging looks as they walked down the hall. Emma was a naturally nurturing mom. It took days like today to push her over the edge. The five seconds it took for the girls to arrive helped her to regain some composure. She decided to start again, this time with a cooler approach. “We need to be on the road in 30 minutes. Bring your stuff to the living room, so we can pack it in the van. Got it?”

No one answered. Dad immediately jumped in and led an antiphonal cadence he had created for the family when Laura was little. “Parkers have what?”

“Can do attitude.”

“Parkers say what?”

“We will help you.”



“Now step it out.” The cadence was followed by a short step routine which ended with the kids dispersing to their assigned tasks.

“How do you do that?” Emma asked in bewilderment.

“It’s a gift,” he shot back with a countenance that was either intended to be comical, gloating, or both; she could never tell.

The next 30 minutes was a blur of movements that Brandon time-lapsed with the camera. Each pattern of movements serving as a microcosm of the different personalities that made up the Parker home. Laura had everything of hers together and ready, so she helped Dad load the van. Brandon struggled over which action figures or games to put in his backpack, then mostly got in the way of his older sister. Steve loaded the van and shut off the water and lights. Emma checked off her list as things went into the van. Maddie walked around carrying her things from her room to the living room, and then from the living room to the van - all the while expertly splitting her gaze between where she was walking and what she was watching on the tablet.

Finally, they all ended up in the van and ready to pull out, until Brandon suddenly jumped out to retrieve his camera

that was setup on the mantel for the time-lapse. Everyone waited impatiently until he was back in the van, and the garage door relocked.

“Thirty minutes on the dot,” Emma said as Steve pulled out of the driveway. They were finally on the road and headed for Grandma’s.





CHAPTER 2

HALFWAY THERE IS SOMEWHERE

“This rest stop is officially halfway,” Steve declared as they all climbed back into the van, taking off their masks as they made their way to their seats.

“I’ll never get used to wearing this thing,” Laura said from the second-row passenger seat.

“Try playing soccer in them,” Brandon yelled from the back row as he fished for his headphones. “It’s like you’re dying of suffocation!”

“Don’t say that,” Maddie chided.

“Sooorryyyy,” Brandon fired back, tilting his head side to side to the rhythm of each syllable.

Emma reflexively started digging through the snack bag, “I think we’re all a little hangry. Everyone take some crackers.”

“Can I have some Cheese Crackers?” Brandon yelled from the third row, while his eyes remained fixed on the game he was playing.

“May I,” Emma impulsively replied. She had anticipated



the request and was already handing the box to the second row, “Here Maddie, pass this back to Brandon.” Maddie took the box, and without looking, tossed it over her shoulder, which was followed by a predicable “Oooowww!”

Laura gave Maddie a rare, approving nod then leaned over to share the screen of her phone. “Hey, the Christmas stream is up.”

Brandon poked his head up over their shoulders to watch, so Laura decided to use the van’s Wi-Fi to show her phone on the video screen in the center of the van ceiling for all of them to see. They watched together in relative peace, enjoying being able to see the familiar faces, until a loading error message popped up. “I just lost signal,” Laura read on her phone.

Steve inserted a fatherly reminder, “not a lot of signal in these parts.”

“Just in time,” Maddie followed with a touch of sarcasm.

“Why don’t you guys enjoy the view? Or..., wait, I have something.” Emma rummaged through her bag briefly before reappearing with a deck of cards. “You guys used to love playing cards on the way to the cabin,” she continued as she passed back the box to Maddie. Maddie, in turn, held them up to Laura as

an invitation to play, only to be met with a “not now but maybe later” response.

So, Maddie put the cards in the cup holder, and with no small amount of discontent, resolved herself to an hour or two of staring out the window.



The steady, monotonous views of rolling hills along with the droning road noise put her mind in a drowsy, limbo-like trance; the kind of half-waking dream where her mind created an imaginary video superimposed on top of the images her eyes were actually seeing, like a video editor with two different video sources playing at once. The real world faded into an opaque blur while the fantasy fought for dominance. She consciously willed herself to project the inside of the cabin in her mind's eye. Her thoughts steered themselves to a memory tied to the projection. She had recently learned that memories tend to be moored to reality, thereby holding the mind to the natural laws of physics. The deep REM sleep is what allows the mind to freely wander and escape the restrictions of space and time.



She could clearly see the cabin now. This memory was of last Christmas Eve. All three kids gathered around a large chest-shaped box with their grandpa kneeling to one side.

He had taken the key in his hand and inserted it into an old-fashioned lock at the top of the lid. His hands then grasped the lid and raised it to reveal the wrapped presents within the box. He asked them, “Why do we give gifts at Christmas?”

They all responded, “because Jesus is God’s gift to us.”

“The greatest gift anyone can ever receive,” he enthusiastically bellowed back. The memory played out in her mind as Grandpa passed them each a wrapped present. Then he leaned in closer to Maddie, extending his arm out to hand her the key. “It’s your responsibility this year, Maddie Bug. Keep it safe and bring it back. I have faith in you.”

Steve’s cell phone loudly rang through the van’s stereo, disturbing the peace and ushering in a cascading deluge of “Dad! Stop your phone,” “Geesh,” and “What in the world?”

Steve’s diplomatic side rose to the challenge with a quick, “Sorry guys, my bad.” Followed by, “Oh, I need to take this,” after looking at the screen.

Emma responded with the single word “Vacation” accompanied by a look Steve knew well. Steve labeled himself

a recovering workaholic. Emma would say the recovery was going rather slow. “Hello, Steve Parker here.”

Steve listened to the call while offering an affirming nod to Emma’s eye scolding. All noise ceased and every ear in the van focused in on Steve’s voice when they heard him say, “Ok, so your test won’t come back until tomorrow.”

Emma pantomimed, “What test?”

Steve resumed his conversation, “No. I appreciate you telling me. Sure... just text or call as soon as you know the results. Ok, yeah...see ya.”

Emma’s outburst almost beat the end of the call. “What’s going on?”

Steve drew up all the calm and diplomacy he could muster. “Well, it’s a potential, but unlikely, secondary exposure.”

Emma threw her arms up in exasperation while Steve continued, “Rodger’s oldest son tested positive... and I... happened to be around Rodger yesterday.”

“Well, we can’t go to Mom’s now,” Emma said, matter-of-factly.

Maddie was ready to jump in, but Steve had the same plan in mind. “No need to worry, we’re not that far from the cabin.



Why don't you call your mom and tell her we'll stay there tonight? We'll head to her house in morning, after Rodger gets his... negative test results."

"Your optimism is inspiring," Emma said with a satirical tone.

Steve began to say, "It's a gift," but Emma waved him off in a loving but "not now" motion. Steve's honest gift of inspiration and leadership kicked in quick as he summoned his announcer voice imitation, "Who wants to go the cabin?"

The kids erupted into a celebration with some indeterminate rounds of, "Yesss, that's awesome, Dad!" and "Woohoo!" ending with Maddie's awkward declaration, "Finally, something good." Laura picked up the deck of playing cards from the cupholder, gave Maddie a smile, and started to shuffle. Maddie nodded agreeably and called to the back row, "Brandon, we're playing cards."

He popped his head up with a resounding, "Cool!"

"Sometimes a destination is a new beginning," Emma quoted proudly.

"Halfway there is still somewhere," Laura replied. They all smiled and nodded in unspoken honor for the source of the quirky family quotes. Maddie cherished how natural it was

for the family to invoke Grandpa's memory, especially as they began the last leg of the trip to the cabin.





CHAPTER 3

DESTINATIONS ARE NEW BEGINNINGS

They turned off the main highway and onto the twisting road that led to the cabin. She looked and found the patch of the lane that was lined on one side with a grove of evergreen trees that began at the bottom of a hill and continued up and over the top creating the perception of an infinite green horizon. The innocent Maddie of years past imagined it to be a magical forest filled with talking woodland creatures. A place where good always defeated evil and your dreams could come true. The winter panorama from her side window brought out the stark contrast between the sprawl of evergreens against their lifeless deciduous counterparts. In the summer, the large oaks and maples, spread out in the open, were behemoths of billowing green that provided more than ample shade for afternoon picnics and play. Now emaciated and spindly, they reminded her of how emotionally empty she felt inside, like a jigsaw puzzle that's missing several pieces right in the center. The memories of this place were soothing to her otherwise



melancholy mood. And the perpetual vigor of these green stalwarts visually standing guard against the effects of winter was evidence that life would eventually resume. Spring would bring these deciduous giants back to life. *The evidence of things unseen*, her mind pulled up the quote like an unexpected result at the top of a google search.

The churning of gravel under the tires slowed as Steve pulled the van up the narrow hill that led to the front of the cabin.

“I call dibs on the loft,” Brandon proclaimed from the back row.

“Uhh no, it’s girl’s only.” Laura rebutted with indignation.

Maddie wasted no time on the argument. There was something more urgent on her mind. She waited impatiently for Steve to bring the van to a halt, then shot out of the driver’s side second row sliding door and sprinted towards the steps that led to the porch.

Her dad called out after her, “Maddie, you need to help us unpack.”

With an excited and conciliatory voice, she replied, “I’ll be back... I need to do something first.”

“Remember, I have to turn the water on before you...”

“I know!” she exclaimed before he could finish. She made her way around the back of the van and sprinted the short distance to the porch steps. From years of muscle memory, she reached under the third step, found the magnetic box, and with a well-rehearsed sliding motion, retrieved the removable container that held the key. Then she bolted to the landing. Her heart was racing as she used the key to unlock the door, twisted the handle and hurried into the entry hall of the cabin. The smells were as close to a time machine as one could experience. Memories from summers and winters, from as much of her thirteen years as she could remember, flooded into her mind. It had only been a year since she’d last been here, but it felt like at least five years in life experience. Seeing the cabin would have been enough to summon a tear or two if she wasn’t so focused on one specific goal. And there it was, sitting at the far end of the cabin.

If nothing had changed this year, she thought... No... that’s not right. Her inner voice corrected and restarted the thought, *If everything had remained the way it was supposed to be, that box would be filled with presents.*

It wasn’t the presents she wanted, but the person she would have handed the key to. But he had been taken away



from her, and it left a hole that continued to grow as the train wreck of 2020 plowed on throughout the year. An idea had been forming from the moment they diverted to the cabin. She wondered if something might change within her if she opened the box – maybe something cathartic and healing. But the idea sounded crazy now that she was actually here staring at the lock. She also knew that Grandma sometimes stored other items in the box throughout the year, like quilts or various yarns and sewing needles she may have needed whenever she and Grandpa made a quick trip to the cabin. A new thought sprung into her imagination. *What if... what if he knew and planned ahead?* “I am totally crazy,” she said as she took the key from around her neck and inserted it into the lock. Turning the key while involuntarily holding her breath, she opened the lid and looked inside. She let the pent-up air out in a long-exasperated sigh. The box was completely empty.

Heavy footsteps and the sounds of luggage banging against the floor erupted behind her. “Hey, thanks for your help Maddie,” Dad said in a slightly annoyed tone. She didn’t budge or make a sound. “Maddie?” Steve put down the rest of the luggage and walked over to kneel beside her, joining in as they both peered into the empty box. “Oh Maddie,” Steve said while

putting his hand on her shoulder. Dad was way more intuitive about what went on in her mind than she wanted to admit. Probably because the two of them were a lot alike.

“I don’t know what I expected, Dad,” she said before letting out another long sigh.

Steve took the key out of the lid and placed it back around her neck. “It’s a nice thought Maddie. Why don’t you hold onto this until after Christmas?” Maddie offered an agreeable nod. “Right now, I need your help putting stuff away. Are you up for it?” She nodded again, and they both turned around to face the living room.

Emma, Laura, and Brandon clunked their way through the door carrying an array of bags and suitcases. They walked into the living area and for a second, they all stood still looking around the cabin.

Laura broke the silence, “I didn’t expect to see the Christmas decorations.”

“Yeah, I guess no one came back to pack anything,” Steve observed.

“With all that’s happened this year, I didn’t even think about it. We’ll definitely need to clean before we can sleep tonight,” Emma noted.



All five of them stood silent for just a few seconds longer, taking in the room where they shared their last memories with Grandpa.

“I’m hungry,” Brandon said in a whiny voice that completely destroyed the moment.

“Yeah, ok babe,” Emma spun into action. “Laura, find something to dust with and then vacuum. Maddie, you change the sheets on the beds.”

Steve said, “I’m on the water and breaker box.”

“Brandon, help Laura,” Emma added. “We’ve got enough sandwich stuff and chips to make it through tonight. I bet Grandma still has cocoa in the cupboard. We can eat as soon as we’re done getting the cabin cleaned.”

Steve made his way down the basement steps to turn on the main power breaker and waterline. A flip of the breaker and the cabin came back to life with lights and flashing clocks on the stove and microwave. They all took the cue and went to work. Cleaning the cabin felt productive after being cooped up in the van for five hours. Maddie had the sheets and bedding changed quickly and then helped straighten up some of the decorations that had drooped over the year. Laura and Brandon dusted and wiped down everything, including the ornaments and glass

Christmas decorations. At last, the cabin was clean and filled with a pine disinfectant scent that allowed everyone to feel at ease.

After sandwiches, they all sat down around the large rustic hearth with some cocoa and marshmallows. Emma and Laura sat on the couch by the window, Maddie sat on the floor with a throw pillow, and Brandon sat in a chair next to the hearth. Dad had just started up a fire and was walking back to the chair opposite the hearth singing, “It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas...”

“It does feel nice being here with you guys,” Emma said as she tried to relax and decompress from the chaos of the day.

Laura walked over to the shelf and picked up the Christmas story book Grandpa used to read from each year. “Would you read it this year, Dad?”

“It’s not Christmas Eve,” Steve said as Laura reached out to hand him the book.

“But we won’t be here tomorrow night. And, it’s the cabin. It’s tradition,” Laura added with a vocal inflection that resembled the little girl of years past. Emma joined Laura’s efforts by giving Steve an affirming look.

“I can’t read it like Grandpa.”



“That’s ok,” Laura quickly replied with a smile.

Maddie couldn’t tell how she felt about this, except to say that she was sad that one more thing having to do with Grandpa was being written over and replaced. *Did no one else care?* she wondered.

Steve felt the weight of the responsibility as he opened the book cover. It was an illustrated picture book of the Nativity story that combined passages from the Gospel of Matthew and Luke:

This is how the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit.

“How did that work?” Maddie asked.

“Uhhhh, I don’t know. It was a miracle,” Steve replied. Maddie gave him a look that suggested she was expecting a little more information. Steve decided to table it and continue on:

Joseph was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a

dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the Child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit.”

Maddie interrupted again, “So, why did God talk to him in a dream? That seems like a bad idea. What if he didn’t remember when he woke up?”

Steve was a little perplexed. “No one ever interrupted Grandpa when he read the Christmas story.” Brandon giggled at his dad’s consternation. Steve made a know-it-all face, along with a short pause to gather his thoughts. “It doesn’t say, but there are other people in the Bible who had dreams where God talked to them, like Jacob’s Ladder. That was a dream, and he remembered. Or the other Joseph, with the dreams about the wheat and stars and the moon. Maybe it’s a different type of dream. Like, you remember the dreams that God gives you.” He delivered the last line with a rush of confidence and the hope that he had provided an insightful and satisfactory answer to the question. Maddie responded with a lack-luster expression that would best be described as skeptical intrigue. Steve counted it as a success, relished the moment for a second, then continued to read,



“And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through His prophet. “Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel, which means God with us.” Now about that time, some wisemen from the East arrived in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the newborn King of the Jews? We saw His star as it rose, and we have come to worship Him.”

“Do you think it was a comet?” Maddie asked with an authentic curiosity.

“Uhhh, what?” Steve had really hoped the questions were over.

Maddie pressed the matter, “The star, do you think it was a comet. It sounds strange that a new star would appear in one spot and only last long enough for them to travel. And I thought there were three wisemen.”

Steve felt mentally taxed but did his best to look at the story for clues. “Well, it doesn’t really say how many wisemen there were. There were three gifts though, so...” He said as he held up his hands and shrugged. “And, the star is something

that God can do. It's His universe, right? I'm sure He could arrange for a star to appear. But, great questions, Maddie. We can look these up together when we get home."

With a slight hint of dissatisfaction, she nodded in an unengaging head-bob that drifted into a gaze in the direction of the big box sitting at the far end of the room. She still heard her father's voice as he continued to read, noticing the slight performance cadence and projection he always used when he read publicly. The familiarity of the words amplified her gaze and put her into something like a trance as she laid down with the throw pillow under her head. This cabin, this room, and these words created a vortex of memories and emotions that pulled at her half-conscious mind.





CHAPTER 4

WHEN DREAMS COME TRUE

“Maddie...Maddie,” she thought she could hear someone calling her name. It sounded like a muffled voice, as if it were coming from a great distance. She closed her eyes and listened intently. Yes, she thought. It was definitely a faint voice, and it seemed to be coming from the direction of the large box at the other end of the room. Curiosity beckoned her to investigate. Maddie got up from the floor and began to cross the room towards the box. Though, oddly, the closer she drew near, the more she realized the voice was coming from the base of the stairs that led up to the loft. She made a slight turn towards the stairs, and without a second thought, began to climb. Maddie listened attentively as the sound of the voice grew stronger. She was just past the landing when it occurred to her, she should be a little skeptical or even frightened at the prospect of following the sound of a distant voice up a staircase. Though, surprisingly, something deep within her related to the voice. The voice wasn't strange or scary, but it did have an effect on her. It was as if the sound infused her with a resolve, or perhaps a call, to continue. By the



time she reached the landing she was committed to following the voice. She stood next to the door of the loft, gathered her courage and peeked her head around the bedroom doorway. There was nothing but a dark void and the voice. She slowly entered and followed in the direction of the sound. *I know this voice*, she thought. It was familiar. No, not just familiar; it was a cherished voice. A voice she hadn't heard in months, and it was reciting the nativity story, picking up from the words her father had left off.

“Grandpa,” she said as she rushed towards him.

The room changed into a workshop without her even noticing. A man stood at an old, dusty workbench steadily and deliberately working at his craft, all the while continuing to recite the words. The air was filled with the faint sounds of music, something that was connected to the man- something she had heard in his presence before.

“Grandpa, it's me! How'd you get here? I'm so glad to see you. I've missed you so much. Did you know we almost didn't come to the ca...?” Her sentence dropped off as he turned around to face her.

He was just as she remembered. The plaid shirt, the wire-framed glasses, his bald hairline, but the look in his eyes

confirmed it. It was really him. His eyes caught her in the same way they had when she was a little girl and would sneak up on him while he tinkered at his workbench. “Maddie Bug!” His voice rang out like a bell inviting her to continue her sprint toward him. He embraced her with open arms and a comforting voice. “Maddie, you’re crying.”

“I’m just so happy to see you,” she replied.

“I’m glad to see you, too, and I’d never pass up a Maddie Bug hug.”

His strong arms made her feel like everything was right again. “Grandpa, how are you here?”

“I’m worried about you, Bug,” he said while he gripped her shoulders and straightened his elbows to arm’s length. “I’m making something for you.”

“What is it?” she said with excited, anticipation.

“No shortcuts kiddo,” he replied with a jolly chuckle, “you’ll see when it’s ready.”

“Grandpa,” her voice falling so easily back into the tone she would use to talk him into something, like ice cream on the way back from a summer’s day at the pool.

“Bug, you play your Grandpa like a fiddle,” he said in good humor, but quickly became more resolute, “I have



something else to show you first.”

Instantly, the two of them were standing on a hill looking up at the stars. There was nothing particularly amazing to her about the sudden change in venue. Everything seemed perfect as long as he was there with her.

He bent down on one knee and asked, “Why do you think the stars are up there, and you’re down here?”

With some unintentional preteen snarkiness she replied, “Ahhh, because they’re stars.”

Dismissing the attitude, he prodded her again, “Come on, Bug, I’m serious. What are they doing up there?”

“Well,” she paused, with a raised brow and wrinkled forehead she confidently stated, “the bright ones are planets Grandpa, you know that. There’s Jupiter and Saturn. The stars, well they’re burning balls of hydrogen randomly scattered through space that just keep burning until...they eventually die, and go out,” her voice dropping off a little at the end.

“Hmm, I see. What about that one?” His fingers pointing to a star that wasn’t there before. It was a little larger than the other stars. She was used to looking at the stars; the telescope was a Christmas present she received last year. “There you go, Bug, God doesn’t hide anything from us that points back to

Him,” he had said back then, as she opened the wrapping paper to reveal the telescope.

She answered in a slightly distracted tone as the memory played out in her mind, “I don’t know that star, Grandpa.”

She noticed he was beginning to stand, his gaze now fixed on something else. “They seemed to have found it as well.” His voice was enthusiastic. “Let’s go see what they know.”

“Uhhh, I just want to spend time with you,” she shot back.

“This is part of what I want to show you, Maddie.”

“OK,” her voice sounding audibly disappointed by having to share his attention with something else.

“Aren’t you curious?” he said, as he took her hand and began to follow the silhouetted group from a distance.

A gentle breeze blew across them as they walked through the dormant winter grass that adorned the top of the hill. The air felt cool and pleasant, not at all what one would expect from a winter’s night. Maddie began to realize this place was unlike anywhere she’d ever known. There was a certain tranquility about it and yet it also seemed unpredictable and unreal, all of which contributed to a slight rise in anxiety. It also occurred to her that this encounter wouldn’t last. In fact, she could sense



there was something old and ancient, like an hourglass, that controlled the time in this place. She imagined every grain of sand that fell as one less moment she had with her grandpa. But she believed he was real, and because she believed, she wanted to make the most of their time together before he disappeared.

Ignoring everything around her but him, she asked; “Grandpa?”

“Yes, Maddie.”

“Grandpa... why did you have to die?” That wasn’t what she intended to ask; it just slipped out.

He stopped and knelt down again. With tender eyes he looked at her and said, “It wasn’t my choice, Maddie Bug. I wouldn’t have left your grandma, or any of you, on purpose. It’s something that happens in a world that’s not what it should be.”

Finally, she thought. His response gave her the freedom to unload how upset she’d been feeling. Looking at him with intensity, she replied, “You’re right, the world’s not what it should be. I don’t even like the world anymore. I don’t even know why it’s here, or why I’m here. Everything is just going to be taken away from us. What’s the point?”

He allowed an understanding pause. Then with gentle concern he resumed the same posture he had when he first

greeted her back at the workbench, on one knee with his hands on her shoulders at arm's length. "Maddie, you know the world has a purpose."

Not him too, why doesn't he get it? she asked herself. All the rage she had harbored throughout the year suddenly rose like a leviathan surfacing from the deep. Maddie was no longer able to hold it back, so she set her angst loose in a rapid and well-rehearsed polemical rant; "No, I don't, Grandpa. Please don't be disappointed. I just don't know if I do. Since you've been gone, this world just keeps getting worse. Sometimes, I think... I think... that.... maybe it was your faith I believed in and not my own. You made it sound like God knows, and God cares, and God has plans, and... Where are the plans, Grandpa? You don't know what's going on, do you? Maybe you never did." They both looked away from each other at the end of her speech.

Though he wasn't looking away in frustration. Something else had caught his attention.

"Maddie," he said, in a preoccupied manner, "I think they've found what they're looking for."

"What?" was all she could say or think.





All of a sudden Maddie was aware that she and Grandpa were back in the shop, in the same position as before they left. She intuitively felt that time was now quickly slipping by. She looked up at the workbench, and there was the hourglass she had feared, relentlessly sifting time. Her heart flooded with worry. *This is certainly not the time to argue*, she thought. *But what can I do to make the most our time?* She continued to ponder. *What if time is controlled by something else in this place?* Then an idea came to her. *We could reminisce about a shared memory. That might slow things down.* With a chipper tone, she set out to take control. “Grandpa, let’s talk about something else. Do you remember that time...”

He abruptly interrupted, “Maddie, we will always have our memories, but you know that’s not why I’m here. I still need to show you something.” Grandpa’s words fell flat in her ears as Maddie continued to fret over the fragile nature of their encounter.

“Grandpa, I’m scared we’re running out of time,” her voice giving away her rising anxiety.

He replied with one of those quirky proverbs he was known for quoting, though his voice contained a hint of mystery. “Yes, Bug, but we have the exact amount of time we need.” Then with an all too familiar motion, he moved his right hand towards his face, placing his thumb under his chin and curling his pointy finger just under his lower lip. She recognized it immediately as his thinking pose. “Now, I believe I left you in charge of something last year.” He dropped his right hand and motioned to her with an opened palm. “Do you have it?”

She clutched the key hung around her neck that was safely tucked between her sweater and shirt. “I already looked in the Christmas box Grandpa, there’s nothing there.”

“Oh, yes,” he replied solemnly. “Well, there’s nothing I could do about that. But a key can have more than one purpose, Maddie.”

Her shoulders and neck instinctively stretched upward in curiosity. “What do you mean?” she replied with honest confusion.

More familiar gestures formed as he began to slowly unravel his intentionally proffered cypher. “Keys are powerful. A key can unlock many things. Sure, they can open a lock.” He began to add a dramatic cadence and tone, for emphasis.



“They can also unlock potential, responsibility, memories, even faith.” Now looking at her as if peering into her very soul. “Keys reveal things we don’t want to lose. They can also hide things we don’t want to let out... things we may have hidden away from ourselves.” His expression turned from thoughtful to something more mischievous. “Besides,” he continued with a nonchalant playfulness as he started to turn towards the workbench. “Your key opens more than one box.”

“It does?” The words came out of her like lightning. The thought had never crossed her mind.

Capitalizing on her shock, he quickly turned back and added: “Oh, yes. In fact, it opens a few things.”

“What are you talking about Grandpa?”

His tone changed to include a grandfatherly authority, the kind of earthy authority that comes with wisdom and experience. “I’m saying that your key has more work to do, kiddo. I’m glad you brought it.”

He stood and turned around, this time reaching the workbench. Her eyes drifted back to the hourglass sitting just to his right. It was still sifting sand in a steady rhythm but appeared as if barely any time had passed.

Had talking about the key momentarily slowed down

time? she mused. Whatever the reason, the hourglass served as a further reminder that this place wasn't real. But oh, how she wanted it to be real. She still believed he was real. She at least hoped he was real. And if she believed, if she just had enough faith; she might find a way to see him again. She had to figure it out before time ran out. With a mix of timidity and hope, she set out to see if they could figure it out together. "Grandpa?"

"Yes, Maddie."

She had the courage to say it, she just didn't know if she wanted to hear his response. "I know this place isn't real."

"You do, do ya?" he answered somewhat playfully, though he remained focused on what he was doing.

"Yes, Grandpa," she replied modestly. "But I believe you're real." This time he gave no response, so Maddie continued, "I think our time is running out. I want us to find a way to see each other again. I need you to help me."

He paused for a second, then replied the same as before, only slower this time, "You do, do ya?" Resuming his work, he now looked to be completely focused on his craft.

"Yes, I do." She felt a little frustrated at his cavalier response. It suddenly occurred to her, the whole time they'd spent in this place, he hadn't given her a real answer to any of



her questions. *What was he up to?* She was determined to figure this out. Maybe that would be a key to finding the way back to him. She resolved to press him a little. “You are my grandfather, I know it.” This time he didn’t stop or reply. She could feel herself building with emotions: bewilderment, anger, fear. But there was something deeper emerging from within her. At first, she didn’t know how to describe it, but then it hit her. It was doubt. She called out with an urgent voice, “Grandpa?”

“You’re so close Maddie, you’re almost there,” he said as he methodically worked away.

“What does that mean?” Her voice now projecting the full force of her fear and doubt. “Grandpa, why won’t you give me a straight answer? Are you real?”

He paused again for a second. She couldn’t see what he was working on, but she watched him lean in slightly to blow the dust off and wipe something with a rag. “Because you won’t let me. You won’t let me answer you, Maddie.” His voice was calm and gentle, but the words shook her as if he had spoken them through a megaphone. He made a sudden change in his posture and voice. “Just in time,” he said as he put the rag down and placed both hands on the workbench in a gesture she knew meant he was pleased with the outcome of his work.

“I’ve been trying to tell you, Bug; I have something to show you.” He picked up what was in front of him and slowly turned around. She was relieved when she saw his eyes were still caring and full of hope. Then she saw what was in his hands. It was a box about the size of a large book. It was beautiful, with hand-carved flourishes around the sides and top of the lid. It had the crisp smell of freshly cut pine.

“I made this for you,” he said, with emphasis on the words “for you.” Her eyes were drawn to the keyhole at the top of the lid. It was the same size as the Christmas key. “You know what to do, Maddie.”

“What’s in it?” she asked.

“I think you know that, too.” He replied. “All you have to do is turn the key - the box will do the rest.”

She took the ribbon that held the key from her neck, then grasped the key and reached out slowly towards the box. Something barely perceptible changed when she inserted the key into the lock.

“Grandpa. I’m scared that if I turn this key, you’ll disappear.”

“My dear Maddie,” he said, “the part of me that’s real is the part that will always be with you; every camping trip, every



stop for ice cream, every birthday, every Christmas at the cabin. Those memories are the reflections of the love, and experiences we shared. But the reason I'm here is to remind you of a truth that can no longer be ignored.

Sheepishly she answered, "Grandpa, if you're talking about God again, I told you earlier that I don't know if God really cares about me or this world anymore. Didn't you hear me?"

"Of course, I heard you. But Maddie, the 'me' that exists in this place is actually a part of you trying to get your attention. The truth you've locked away is pushing its way back into your mind and into your heart. You can't ignore a truth that's just as much a part of you as the air in your lungs or the blood in your veins. You know that God loved the world so much that he gave His only son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life." He drew out the words, "eternal life." "That's where the real Grandpa is now; safe with the Creator of the Universe where there's no pain or sorrow."

His face took on a gentle and caring expression. "You are right about the world, Maddie. It is broken. From the beginning, God made His holiness necessary for the health of His created universe. So even little things like white lies and

jealous thoughts turn into waves of rebellion that eat away at the goodness of His creation. We all share some responsibility for the brokenness of the world.” Making intentional eye contact again and with an encouraging tone he said, “That’s why Christmas is so important.” He became even more animated, “Speaking of Christmas,” he gave a slight pause for dramatic effect, “they’re here.” He looked to his left with an expression that indicated he wanted her to follow. The end of the workshop had transformed again. As she turned to follow his gaze, she saw a stable. In the midst of the stable were a couple; the woman was holding a baby.

“The very first Christmas,” he announced in his storytelling voice. “God came down and dwelt among us. He joined us in our humanity, in our pain, our poverty, our frailty, and our loneliness,” he said as he motioned toward the babe. Then he began quoting passages from the Bible that spoke of why Jesus came into the world; “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made through Him. In Him was life and that life was the light of all mankind. For it is written, a virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, God with us, for He will take away the sins of the world.”



He briefly paused as the two of them stood by and watched as the wisemen laid their gifts before the child. Each man bowing low, as one would give homage to a king. “God hasn’t given up on the world, Maddie,” he continued. “He hasn’t given up on you, either. This little baby grew and lived a perfect life. He spoke God’s words and showed us His ways. Then He took upon Himself everyone’s sin and pain when He was willingly crucified on a cross. When you confessed with your mouth that Jesus is the Son of God and believed in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you became a part of His family, with an eternal inheritance.”

He turned towards her again, the box with the key resting in the lock held between his hands. “Faith isn’t the absence of doubt, Maddie. Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen. You leaned on me as a little girl when your spiritual legs were small and growing. The time has come to stand on the truth, and to walk alongside those who are faithful to obey the call of Jesus and all of His ways. I promise you the longer you walk in faith, the more real and tangible it becomes. God never hides anything that points back to Him.”

Maddie took it all in as she stared at Grandpa and the

box resting in his hands. She knew what was in the box was more real than him, though she thought it was unfair that she had to choose between the two. Maddie wanted to tell him something, but she was overcome with the sense of time escaping. “The hourglass,” she said while she looked over her shoulder towards the workbench. She could see they only had a few seconds left. Overwhelmed, Maddie looked back to Grandpa. He was raising the box as if to present it to her. All she could do was throw her arms around him and hug him tightly. Then Maddie steadied herself before the box as the last few grains of sand were passing through the neck of the hourglass. She placed her hand on the key, held her breath and turned until she felt a click. Suddenly, a light began to shine through the crack of the lid. The light grew brighter as the box opened and continued until the room was filled with light. She could no longer see Grandpa, but just before she was forced to shut her eyes, she clearly heard him say, “Merry Christmas, Maddie Bug.”





CHAPTER 5

GOD NEVER HIDES

It took her a few seconds to realize she was now laying down. She could sense the room was filled with light, but she didn't want to open her eyes for fear she might forget what she still vividly remembered. Of course, it was a dream. She knew that. But it was also more than a dream. There was something very real about it. Something truer than anything she'd ever known. She heard a voice calling, "Wake up." It sounded like she was in a cave and someone was calling from the outside. Again, the voice called, "Wake up, sleepyhead." She opened her eyes and was met with the view of her mom hovering over the bed.

"We had to carry you to bed last night," Emma said as she began to turn towards the door of the loft. "Come to the table, Bug, we'll be eating soon."

The mere suggestion of breakfast drew Maddie's attention to the smell of bacon and eggs that filled the air. "Where did the food come from?" she slowly asked while trying to shake off the lingering drowsiness. Then it hit her. "Oh no." It was the kind of panic she would experience when she



realized she'd lost something or left the house unlocked. Those few seconds of distraction were enough to lose everything she was trying to hold on to.

"I don't want to forget anything" she told herself. She could still see what seemed like snapshots: one of Grandpa at the workbench, one of him pointing to the sky, and one where he's holding a box. "Oh yeah," she remembered, "the key." She felt around her neck. It was still there. For some reason, she had the picture of a manger scene in her mind. "Hmm," she thought. "I wonder if I'll dream of him again?"

"Food's on the table," Emma called from the kitchen as Maddie made her way down the bottom steps from the loft.

"Coming," Maddie replied, with a chipper and more awake tone, as she made her way through the den. Emma took notice of the cheerful tone and counted it as an unforeseen blessing to the beginning of the day. Maddie turned the corner from the den to the hall that led to the kitchen, all the while searching her memory, trying to unlock any remaining remnants of the dream.

"Morning, kiddo. We've got farm eggs," Steve rang out when he saw Maddie heading towards the kitchen.

Of course, Dad cooked the eggs, she thought. That was

his thing. Her mind haplessly abandoned the dream altogether as she sat down at the table. “What time is it?” she asked.

Steve answered, “Almost 10:30. Mom went shopping first thing this morning,” he continued while taking the skillet off the stove and holding it up, as if he were on a cooking show. “It’s like, brunch.” He took on a concerned tone as he changed topics and walked towards the table. “You were really tired last night, girl. You slept hard,” he said while placing the eggs on the table.

Brandon followed Dad with a quick verbal jab, “It certainly wasn’t beauty sleep, by the looks of it.” Maddie gave him a playful, half-hearted eye roll as she took her fork and picked out some eggs. Her lack of escalation had an unusual calming effect on Brandon and the whole room.

“Good news,” mom chimed in, “We got a call last night from Rodger. His test was negative.” Steve made a comical pose that was meant to remind Emma that he had faith all along that it would be negative. Emma played it off as she continued. “I texted Grandma last night to let her know.” Emma took her phone out to read Grandma’s response. “She wrote back an LOL and some emojis of a road, clock, and a bus.” Emma shrugged. “I’m not sure what that means,” she dismissively finished before



changing to an all-business voice. “So, let’s all eat and clean up so we can get back on the road. Grandma’s house is only three and a half hours away.”

Just then, there were sounds at the door. The door opened. “Grandma!” the rapturous roar erupted from all three kids. Laura leapt up and ran from the table to meet her at the door.

“Mom, why didn’t you tell me you were on the road?” Emma chided, “What if something would’ve happened to you?”

Grandma seemed unfazed as she offered a playful response. “Well, I have a phone, dear, and I did tell you I was coming with emojis. I thought you knew how to use those.” The exasperation on Emma’s face left no visible effect on Grandma as she moved through the hall to the den.

“I was sitting at home and thought to myself, ‘Ruth, there’s no reason you can’t meet them at the cabin.’ So, I got up this morning, grabbed the presents and hit the road.”

“Presents?” Brandon yelled from across the room.

“Of course,” Grandma said with a doting expression. “But we can do Christmas presents later. Though I do have some things I want to give you kids now. If that’s alright?” she said teasingly as she reached into her large bag. All the kids joined

around her to see what treasures would soon be revealed.

“All these belonged to your grandfather,” Ruth said while bringing the first item into view. Maddie’s heart jumped at the word *grandfather*. “Brandon, this is one of your grandfather’s favorite pocketknives.” Ruth said as she handed him the small, oak colored, two-bladed knife. “He carried it with him everywhere he went. Be careful, it’s sharp.”

“Cool!” Brandon said as he received the knife with pride and respect.

She turned next to Laura. “Laura, I know how much you like history. This is an annotated photo album from some of your grandfather’s exotic world-travels. Most of these were from before we met. It has a list of proverbs he collected at the end; you’ll probably recognize some of his famous quirky phrases. It even has some foreign currency, stamps, and old movie tickets.” Laura immediately held it tight to cherish the gift.

Then she looked around to find Maddie. “Oh, Maddie.” Grandma said as if she had been waiting eagerly to announce the gift. “He was so proud of you for being such a deep thinker. I have several books of his to give you, but I thought, on Christmas Eve, you’d like to have his Bible. It was something he used every



day. The margins are filled with decades of his personal notes. I noticed a slip of paper with memory verses you guys worked on a few years ago.” Maddie received the Bible with both hands, in the gentle manner one would use while receiving a newborn baby. Starting with Laura, all three children thanked Grandma with hugs for the special gifts.

Brandon, who was too excited to stay still any longer, bolted into the kitchen yelling, “Dad, check out the cool knife!”

Laura motioned to Grandma and asked, “Are you hungry grandma? We have some extra eggs.”

“Eggs do sound good,” Grandma replied as they walked off towards the kitchen.

Maddie, now alone in the den, made her way to Grandpa’s chair and took a seat. She began to open the Bible where the bookmark had been placed. It was Psalm 19. In faded yellow highlighter, Grandpa had underlined the opening verses; “the heavens declare the glory of the Lord, the earth pores forth speech day and night.” Written in the top margin were the words; “God doesn’t hide anything that points back to Him.” The memory of the dream came back like a flash of lightning in the dark of night. Astonished, and a little stunned, Maddie laid the Bible down on her lap to take it all in. Just then,

a half sheet of paper fell from behind the cover of the Bible to the floor. It looked decades old from age and wear. Picking it up, she noticed the paper was filled with his handwriting. It had scripture verses and notes by each one. Tears began to run down Maddie's cheeks as she read from the top of the paper. "Keys to a Christ-filled life, how to follow Jesus when the world doesn't make sense." She was overcome with the emotional realization that Grandpa had made this list for himself. He always appeared to be the model of faithfulness, so it never occurred to her that he would have ever experienced doubt. But he had made the list and kept it close to reflect on. Holding the old, tattered paper she understood a little better the journey before her. Though she would always miss him, and carry his memory in her heart, she believed that she would see him again. The dream was a true gift and a reminder of who she really was. After gently closing the Bible and with a quavering voice, she barely made out the words, "Merry Christmas, Grandpa."



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

First of all, thank you for taking the time to read *The Christmas Key*. I pray it was a blessing. Now please watch the movie. You can find information about the movie at [The Christmas Key](#).

I love Christmas. It's a beautiful time of the year that's filled with joy, giving, tradition, and love. Christmas is truly a time for memories. The more Christmas seasons we experience, the more memories we have and share with loved ones. Those memories are truly seared into our hearts and stay with us for a lifetime.

Sadly, Christmas is also a time of year when we're reminded of who and what we've lost. Whether it be a family member, job, or health, each Christmas seems to bring into sharp contrast any loss that occurs in our lives from year to year. The reality of loss has been particularly ever-present throughout the year, 2020. The emotional impact of 2020 is one of the inspirations that birthed this short story and feature film. I am personally grieved that I will not be able to serve alongside the musicians and visual artists of Bellevue Baptist, in



Owensboro, Kentucky, in our live annual Wonder of Christmas event. Hopefully next Christmas season will bring about a joyful return of our passion as worship volunteers; loving God and loving people through creative live presentations of the gospel story.

The Christmas Key specifically explores the spiritual implications of loss. I chose to write on this subject from personal experience. My mother passed away in 2009 and my wife and I lost a 20-week pregnancy in early December 2010. I sought to illustrate the spiritual and mental wrestling of faith and doubt that occurs in times of tragic loss, for the purpose of illuminating the authority and peace that only God's truth can provide in the life of someone who believes and follows Jesus. Those who place their faith in Christ are bought with a price and sealed with the Holy Spirit. They are forever united to God through Christ, no matter the circumstance. Grief caused Thomas the disciple to doubt until he touched Jesus' scars. We have the blessing of seeing those scars through the eyes of faith in God's Word. We also see the physical evidence of God's character in the lives of those who truly live out obedience to His commands. God does care about our grief. Faith isn't the absence of doubting, it's the evidence of things unseen.

Lastly, on behalf of the Bellevue creative arts team, we have two hopes for *The Christmas Key* eBook, audiobook, and feature film. One is to provide an artistic worship experience for the community of believers in a difficult year of compounding loss and social distance. The other is to provide an illustration of faith for those who do not yet know the saving power of Jesus. If you're experiencing doubt or lack of faith, look to God's word and to someone who is walking with God for help. Find a pastor and church who will love you and show you the truth of Jesus Christ.

God doesn't hide anything that points back to Him.

- J.P. Kwok



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Find the following resources at [The Christmas Key](#).

Questions about God?

Feature Film

A free gift

Audiobook



