

Too
Blessed
to
Stress

A Novel

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this community and to be the church home for so many of you. Let's eat, drink, ride some rides, and praise the Lord. It's fall, y'all! Wedged into the corner of Kyle's office, Kristin had tracked their lines against the printout in front of her. The pastor was upbeat, as usual; his wife with an appropriately performative edge of treacle to her voice that left the building as soon as she'd run through the script a few times and entirely ignored Kristin's positive feedback.

Less than an hour before the couple was due onstage—undaunted by Cassidy's moods and committed as ever to her tasks as office assistant—Kristin had checked in with the Welshes while they tested their mics, proffering church-branded Stanleys of water and fresh printouts of the itinerary. While Kyle had graciously accepted Kristin's offerings, Cassidy had rolled her eyes and batted Kristin's carefully paginated and laminated schedule away.

According to the itinerary, the worship team—composed of musicians from their late teens to their early fifties, mostly misfits who had always been too cool for church and too square for real rock bands—would play a few songs after the Welshes walked off the outdoor stage, erected just for the day. Buoyed by the melody and the crisp autumn air, kids would enjoy the rides, adults would fellowship with other churchgoers, and everyone would have some good, wholesome fun. Kristin's first big feat of coordination since joining the team at Moving Word would be a success. Cassidy Welsh might even decide to like her.

But now, Kyle was lingering on the stage after the first round of applause from the large group of onlookers. Kristin and the rest of the congregation had grown used to the pastor improvising and making jokes, just as they'd grown used to—even grown to love—his fashionable sneakers and graphic tees printed with Christian wordplay (NOT TODAY, SATAN; NO OMGS; LIVING ON A PRAYER). His tone on the occasion of the fall carnival, however, seemed oddly serious, a marked departure for the usually easygoing pastor whose

popularity was rooted not only in his sermons but also in his readiness to engage in a spontaneous dance-off with the youth group.

“We’re not just here to ring in a new season, though,” he said, putting his arm around Cassidy, who now looked surprisingly grim to attend an event with a ring toss, in spite of the work of a professional makeup artist. “As you know, human trafficking has become an increasingly urgent matter in recent years, especially with all the illegal immigration going on. My wife and I feel called to fight this with all of our God-given strength. You may remember that we’ve done a few smaller collections in the past for an anti-trafficking organization called ProtectUS.”

Kristin was familiar with ProtectUS. Shortly after starting her job, she’d been tasked with designing flyers encouraging members of the church to attend a bake sale on behalf of the nonprofit. In hopes of doing a little something extra to impress her bosses, she’d spent several hours poring over ProtectUS’s educational resources so that she could really deliver in the language on the posters. Her parents railed frequently against the evils of human trafficking as it was depicted on cable news, and they’d been more than thrilled to purchase a few dozen cinnamon rolls in the name of fighting the good fight and in taking a philosophical stand against the politicians they suspected were perpetrators. Kristin was twenty-two years old, but it was like the Girl Scouts all over again, her capacity to make an impact distilled however temporarily into handily packaged bundles of sweets.

Kyle continued. “After a lot of prayer, Cassidy and I have decided to rally the power of our growing congregation to lift up this organization even more. Between now and Christmas, we will be mounting an epic fundraiser for ProtectUS to show what happens when people of faith come together for a meaningful cause! Are y’all ready to hear about our fundraising goal?”

The gathered crowd of Moving Word members and their guests applauded tentatively, then grew louder as Kyle leaned

forward with a hand cupped over one ear. Shifting from grim to girlish fast enough to give Kristin whiplash, Cassidy threw her arms out toward the audience, her flouncy white blouse lifting to reveal a strip of toned abdomen. As the one responsible for managing the scheduling of sessions with Cassidy's personal Pilates instructor—a woman named Veronica who traveled to the pastor's home to conduct private classes on a Reformer machine she'd gifted them—Kristin knew how many hours had gone into that sliver of perfect physique. Many hours. Countless hours, probably.

"Over the next few weeks, our church family will be raising—
are you sure you're ready for this?"

Kyle stirred up the air around him with the hand not holding the microphone. There were more cheers from the crowd, the kind of excitement that pulsed in the air like humidity that would inspire hairstyle-related hemming and hawing among the women in the group. As usual, Kyle's hair was holding perfectly under the pressure of his congregation and the friends and family they'd invited to enjoy the day.

"With God on our side, we're going to raise five hundred thousand dollars!" he bellowed.

Kristin resisted the instinct to cover her ears as the loudest cacophony yet rose up from the carnival-goers, entirely drowning out the tinkling melodies of the rented rides.

"We can't think of a better way to celebrate the start of this very special fundraiser than with a big party like this one," Cassidy added into her own microphone, beaming cherubically at her husband. In spite of the woman's resemblance to a Christmas angel in that moment, Kristin would hate to be in caroling distance of her should the newly announced goal not be met. "And we're going to celebrate the end of it with another one! The week before Christmas, Moving Word will be hosting its first major gala event, where we'll announce our fundraising total—which I'm sure will be the

full five hundred thousand dollars, if not more—and praise the Lord for this opportunity to spread the Word during the season of Jesus's birthday. We're calling it the Gala for Goodness."

Kyle bobbed his head beside her like one of the sports figurines Kristin's dad kept on the dashboard of his car. "You'll find more details in your inboxes and in the Moving Word app as soon as things get wrapped up today, but you can get started by giving at the stations around the perimeter of the parking lot."

Kristin craned her neck to see the stations Kyle was referring to. Who had set those up? And when?

"Every cent counts, but don't get me wrong—we'll gladly take the big bucks!" Kyle paused for laughter—and got it. "Gala tickets will go on sale later this week, too, and we promise the event will be worth the price tag. But that's enough yakking from me. Let's ride some rides and eat some cotton candy and do some good!"

The worship team's band began playing so suddenly that it made Kristin jump. Kyle clapped his hands not quite on beat. The band had started too early! Or were they too late? Regardless of how right or wrong their timing was, the music—this song featuring bongo drums and maracas—was exciting the crowd even further. Between the spontaneous jam session, the Welshes' passionate praise hands onstage, and the news of another big party, everyone's energy had ratcheted up a few notches. More folks had abandoned the rides and the food trucks to congregate in the mass of people, a mass that had started jumping up and down to the beat of the drums. Others were streaming out to the giving stations, reaching into their purses and pockets for cash to shove into the Plexiglas boxes that had, as far as Kristin could tell, appeared there like manna from heaven.

The Gala for Goodness would be a lot of work for Kristin. Like, a *lot* of work.

More work than she'd known to expect when she'd accepted the gig at Moving Word—and more work than she felt qualified to do. The position had seemed fairly simple in the job description Kristin's mom had passed along right before graduation. She could manage schedules and coordinate meetings and play point person for church events, but she'd never been to a gala. She'd barely been to a fraternity party. Where, exactly, was the line between a gala and a party? What would it take to impress Cassidy at an event that obviously mattered so much to her? A sizable chunk of the work ahead of her, she worried, was in figuring out the answers to those questions.

But it would be a lot of work on behalf of something meaningful, she reasoned. A lot of work in support of a good cause, which was what made her still feel called to church. And a lot of work that would, hopefully, make her even more invaluable to the Welshes and the rest of the church. Left with only herself as an opponent after a lifetime of competing with others in the pool, Kristin wondered if there might be a raise or a promotion waiting for her should the fundraiser and the gala run successfully—and less than a year after she'd joined the team. The glimmer of those possibilities was enough to take the edge off the infinitely long to-do lists already writing themselves in her head.

* * *

The hard work would begin at the office, so Kristin did her best to enjoy the fair's festivities. The funnel cake stand was the last place she would have expected to run into Camryn Lee Cady—and yet, there she was, waiting to gossip as soon as Kristin stepped back from the folding table where shakers of powdered sugar had been set up alongside squeeze bottles of chocolate and caramel sauces, visibly melting in the Carolina heat. "Hey," she chirped, grabbing Kristin by the shoulder with a prettily manicured hand and

guiding her to a nearby picnic table. As always, Cam looked perfect and perky, dressed for the evening in a pair of jeans and a floral top with puffy straps that draped artfully off her delicate shoulders. Kristin was relieved to find that she'd managed to sit down without spilling any of the toppings from her dessert on herself. Her chambray button-down and white shorts weren't anywhere near as fashionable as Camryn's outfit, but she'd prefer not to ruin them—or to draw unnecessary attention to herself with a mess. "Did you know anything about the gala?" Camryn asked. Her hushed tone seemed silly given that they were in open air and nowhere near any obvious eavesdroppers, to say nothing of the far from sinister nature of the subject at hand.

Kristin shook her head, dabbing the sugar off her fingers. "I didn't," she insisted. "I would have told you."

"Of course you would have," Cam said, nodding and staring into the distance. "That's why you're our insider." She winked, a move Kristin was familiar with just as much from real life as from Cam's videos.

"Right," Kristin agreed. She eyed her rapidly cooling funnel cake, mindful of staying focused on what Camryn had to say despite her hunger. Cam had, after all, trusted Kristin to join her personal pet project, the Moral Mavens Mainframe. Mavens legend had it that Camryn had come up with the name for the group's leadership team during an otherwise lackluster IT training for her day job when a joke about the company's computer systems had piqued her interest.

"Well, I haven't seen anyone else yet, which is weird since Savannah and Trishy both said they would be here," Cam said, looking around. "Anyway, I know the focus of the gala is ProtectUS—and it totally should be—but we should also talk to Cassidy about how we can get the Mavens involved. I know we're not *officially* affiliated with the church or anything, but everyone knows how valuable we can be."

"Alright," Kristin agreed. "Let me know how I can—"

“I definitely will,” Cam said. “Can I have a bite of this?” She pointed at Kristin’s funnel cake.

Unsure of what else to do, Kristin nodded, guiding the paper plate toward Cam.

“Wait, actually, do you mind if I just take the whole thing with me?” Camryn asked. “This is going to be so messy to carry around. I can pay you back for it later. I just have so many ideas to talk to people about. The gala’s going to need a theme!” She gazed wistfully out at the parking lot, now lit by the soft colored bulbs of the rides and snack stands under the darkening sky.

Kristin smiled. “Take it,” she said. “I’ll get another one.”

“You’re the best,” Cam replied, leaning forward to kiss Kristin on the cheek, where Kristin could feel the sticky ghost of lip gloss.

Cam was off and running into the crowd before Kristin could say goodbye, a yellow crossbody purse dancing off her shoulder as she went. The line for funnel cakes was longer now, but Kristin joined anyway. Even if her big night out of the house amounted to a work-mandated carnival, she should enjoy it. She should get the second funnel cake. She should pat herself on the back for the first evening in a long time spent on something besides indulging her mother’s true crime documentary obsession. She was out! She was on the verge of helping people do big things with one of the coolest churches in town.

She also really wanted a bite of that funnel cake.

The only thing that would taste nearly as good as the single bite she’d had of her last helping would be her success with the Mavens.



Toll, who, as head of the small but mighty marketing team for 12th Pine, was her boss and, in theory, equally invested in the company's success. Thanks to its fresh fare and smart, splashy direct-to-customer marketing—which Cam freely took full credit for—the farm-to-table fast casual restaurant had grown to five locations in the Charlotte metro area over the last few years.

Margo chewed on the long pinkie fingernail of one hand as she paged through the recipe development team's proposal with the other. The glossy pages were intended as a preliminary pitch of late winter offerings and were studded with high-resolution photos of potential new dishes as they'd been assembled in the drafty test kitchen downtown. Margo and Cam were sharing a table in 12th Pine's flagship location, a converted brewery in Dilworth.

"Those guys can be so temperamental," Margo replied, flicking her eyes up at Cam as she took a sip of kombucha from a hammered copper mug. She was referring to the recipe developers, a group of sour men with silver beards and full sleeves of tattoos under their aprons who did not appreciate feedback about how well—or not—their food would play to the social media savvy crowd who patronized 12th Pine.

"Could we talk them down to something at least a little more current? Carrots are boring, but still better than zoodles. Sweet potato or butternut squash, maybe? Good for the season? Or beets! Beets are still cool. Great color."

"And beets are current?" Margo asked.

Cam nodded. "Compared to zoodles? Absolutely," she said. She would have bet her next paycheck on it, but she was happy not to. "They're this decade's kale, but more photogenic. Better for the girlies with sensitive tummies, too."

Margo nodded slowly, still staring down at the pages resting on the reclaimed wood table in front of her. Her red hair was piled on top of her head in its usual messy bun, her V-neck accessorized with

a seersucker blazer and a set of layered gold necklaces that Cam—who loved love—knew she'd received as a gift from her girlfriend in celebration of a recent anniversary. “Beets. Maybe,” she said. “I need to think about it. Give me the weekend before I push back.”

If Camryn were in charge, she would commit to courses of action much faster. She would also overhaul the chain's aesthetic, abandoning its industrial chic look in favor of neutral interiors, but that was neither here nor there. Cam loved Margo's creative vision, but she didn't have a lot of patience with her manager's indecisiveness. They'd planned to meet in Dilworth to have a late lunch and finalize their feedback on the proposed menu so it could be passed along to the test kitchen team with plenty of time for changes to be made. If the new items could be styled to look good on social media and had plenty of healthy ingredients—enough, even, to balance out a teeny white wine or Chick-fil-A habit—12th Pine's existing customer base would be ready to indulge. The restaurant was trying to maintain its aggressive growth track, a feat that would be a whole lot more feasible with a marketing team that felt empowered to comment on whether or not they'd actually be able to market its product to the target demographic.

Camryn knew her way around kind conversation, even if the subject at hand was contentious. Just that summer, she'd single-handedly spearheaded a campaign at her apartment complex that had resulted in the installation of brand-new air conditioners in every unit. Was the management company excited about making that investment when the talks began? No. Had they even *technically* agreed to meet with her? No. But Cam had gone in there with statistics about heat stroke and a smile and worked it all out. Margo would have sweated her way through a miserable North Carolina August to avoid the discussion.

“Let me give it some thought. How's your lunch?” Margo nodded her chin in the direction of Cam's meal, an earthenware bowl

overflowing with quinoa, chickpeas, kale, sweet potatoes, and a few other superfoods.

“It’s good.” Cam nodded, pushing the contents of the bowl around with her fork. Frequent free lunches were a perk of her job at 12th Pine. Manifesting gratitude for this fact—despite her misgivings about potential theological issues with manifestation—she resigned herself to a rain check for her crusade against zucchini noodles, at least until Monday. “Not as good as the grain bowl I had last time, but good. What kind of squash do we think this is? I was thinking maybe acorn but—”

“Camryn? Camryn Lee Cady?”

The voice came from behind Cam, who watched as Margo lost a chunk of salt-and-peppered avocado from the toast she stopped short halfway between the plate and her mouth. Margo’s eyes were fixed on something above Cam’s head: presumably the owner of the voice, whose outburst was no longer a novelty thanks to the increased visibility of the Mavens and the pastors who’d championed them at Moving Word. Camryn turned in her chair and found herself looking up at a trio of girls somewhere in their late teens, each one in some variation of the same matching loungewear set. One girl stood slightly in front of the other two, a big gray sweatshirt tied loosely around her waist, a brown paper bag stamped with the 12th Pine logo in her hand.

“That’s me,” Cam said, smiling up at the girls. With their bright eyes and sincere expressions and eager greeting, she could tell without asking that they were Moral Mavens. No matter their age, it wasn’t hard to recognize a sister in Christ, particularly when, thanks to Instagram, that sister in Christ had a working knowledge of Cam’s life and wasn’t afraid to show it.

Anyone could call themselves one of the Moral Mavens, but there were only four women in the Mavens Mainframe: Savannah

Truman, Trishy Collins, Kristin Rae Thatcher, and, of course, Cam herself. For the last year, the Mainframe girls had been stepping up their social media game to call in a sisterhood of believers and encourage even more people to read the Word, walk in faith, invest in themselves with the purchase of tummy-flattening teas and silk eye masks, and follow God's path for them. Cam thought it was pretty powerful—and it wasn't just because she'd started it, or because she was the unofficial leader. *Leader* wasn't the right word. She'd actually made the rule that no one mention hierarchy. They were all equal.

But Cam *had* started it.

There were Mavens girls all over Charlotte. Of Camryn's forty-nine thousand Instagram followers and the fifty thousand and change following the Moral Mavens official account, a sizable number were local. She had met them all over town—shopping for dresses for friends' weddings, pulsing their tiniest arm muscles in barre class, out on dates with clean-shaven boys, buying ingredients for Christmas cookies at the Whole Foods in Sharon Square. They'd even started showing up regularly at Moving Word, mostly excited to meet Camryn and her friends, but also willing to hear a sermon, add a little—or big—something to the offering plate, and consider membership. Those were the sweetest moments for Cam, of course, but adding the Dilworth 12th Pine location to the list of Mavens meeting places was exciting, a neat blending of her worlds.

“I thought from your hair that it might be you!” the girl said, her smile so big it looked in danger of jumping right off her cheeks. “That’s probably so weird. Sorry. You just have really pretty hair.” She covered her mouth with one hand, a blush creeping out around her eyes. But Cam was pleased. She tended her blond waves every day to ensure they’d be recognizable. “But then I heard your voice, and I totally recognized it. I had to say hi. My friends and I”—here,

she gestured to the other girls—"we watch all of your videos and we read all of your posts. We've been following you since the beginning. We're obsessed. Seriously."

At this, one of the other girls nodded vigorously, her long caramel ponytail bouncing so it caught the light from the copper fixtures hanging above the bar. "Yes. We love you," she said. "We love your friends. We've told, like, everyone at school about you guys. We've probably gotten, like, at least two hundred people to follow you."

"That post you wrote about breakups at the beginning of the year helped me get through a really hard season right before prom," the third girl chimed in. "My boyfriend dumped me and then did a whole promposal a week later for this girl I'm pretty sure he'd never talked to before that. He made a whole TikTok about—"

The girl standing in front turned to look at her friend. Cam could only see one side of her highlighter-dappled profile, but she could imagine a venomous glare passing from one teenager to the other. Poor things. One day, they'd learn to lift each other up unconditionally, just like Cam and her friends and church family. It was what Cam tried to do with her followers, too, whether through sharing Scripture or offering helpful tips on the most flattering denim for every body type.

"—that's not important, though. We have to give everyone grace, right? I hope they're very happy together," the breakup survivor continued with a nervous laugh. All three of the girls were back to looking sweetly in Cam's direction. "I just really appreciate you."

"I'm glad the post helped," Camryn said. "And I appreciate you, too." She stood up from her chair and brushed off her midi skirt in case of crumbs from the grain bowl, which was now much less important to her than attending to the young Mavens. She could wrap it up and have the rest for dinner tonight, anyway. It might even stretch for another lunch. It would hardly be the first time

she'd squeezed several meals out of a single comped 12th Pine lunch. "Can I give you girls a hug?"

The teenagers nodded up and down and wrapped their arms around Cam in a group embrace. They smelled like candy and perfume, like the more expensive aisles of a drugstore where things were shuttered behind locked sliding glass doors. Cam waited until each of them had pulled away from the hug before stepping back herself.

"Do you think your friend could take a picture of us?" the first girl asked, digging through her metallic fanny pack until her hand emerged holding a phone in a monogrammed case. "People are going to freak out when they see we actually met you. We're going on a service trip to Charleston this weekend, and everyone in youth group is going to think we're making it up."

Cam turned to Margo, who had finished the remaining bites of her avocado toast since being left alone at the table. Had she already been a little rude by failing to invite her boss into the conversation? "This is Margo. We work together," Cam said to the girls, who were so busy whispering among themselves that they seemed not to hear.

The girls snapped to attention. "Do you go to Moving Word, too?" one of them asked, her bright eyes trained on Margo.

"Do you help out with the Mavens?" another added, leaning forward so slightly it was almost imperceptible.

"I don't," Margo said through a tight smile. "But I can still take your picture."

The girls—who had momentarily looked disappointed at Margo's admission—nodded enthusiastically and fell quickly into a practiced pose, likely honed at church camps and semiformal. Cam silently mouthed her apologies to Margo, who shrugged.

Still wearing a tense smile, Margo stood up, straightened her blazer, waved clumsily to the teenagers, and reached out to grab

the phone from them. Cam motioned for the girls to huddle in closer and stepped into the middle of their formation, wrapping her arms around their shoulders and striking her go-to expression for photos, eyes bright, one side of her mouth pulled up in a grin that would display her dimples at their best. She knew from experience that the lighting at this particular 12th Pine location wasn't ideal for her, but the teens would know to edit the image before posting so they all looked beautiful. Margo held up the phone for a few moments, obviously snapping enough photos so they would have options.

"Thank you so much!" the second girl said. Her friends were already busy scrolling through the images on the phone Margo had returned to them, their heads pressed together over its tiny screen.

"We knew you worked for 12th Pine, but we did *not* think we'd ever see you here," the third girl told Cam breathily. "We come here all the time, though. It's basically our favorite place. Our bodies are a temple and all that! Do you come here a lot?"

"Well, I appreciate all of your support—for the restaurant and the Mavens. And I love to hear that you're stewarding your health," Cam replied. She gave the girl's shoulder a squeeze that she hoped communicated a big sisterly sort of care for the teen's recent heartbreak. "Be sure to tag me in that picture!" she added. "I'll share it."

"You will?"

"Obviously! Have fun in Charleston! And you girls should totally buy tickets to the big party we're having at Moving Word before Christmas." Would teenagers even be welcome at the gala? Cam actually wasn't sure—but she'd bring it up with the Welshes. It was good for the church to have more youth involved. "It's going to be *so* special—and for such an amazing cause. There's info at the link in my bio with all my discount codes, but you can DM me, too."

The girls squealed and thanked Cam repeatedly as they shuffled out of the restaurant. Their muffled, high-pitched chatter continued

until they were out the door. Cam watched them pile into a minivan idling near the curb and returned to her chair. They looked like kids whose parents could afford the minimum \$150 ticket price for the Gala for Goodness—if not for their teens, then for themselves. The girls were sweet. They would figure it out.

“Do you think they’ll tag me as the photographer? Did I understand the assignment? One of these days, I’m not going to be able to take you anywhere,” Margo teased, tapping her mug up and down against the tabletop.

Camryn shrugged. She didn’t want to be presumptuous and agree with Margo, but to disagree would be dishonest, to bear false witness. “The whole thing has taken on a life of its own, I guess.” If only it had been that easy. There had been so much strategy, so much time, so much love involved in cultivating the Mavens community.

“Your church must be pretty happy about it,” Margo added.

“I haven’t talked to them about it much.” She had, though, and she knew they *were* happy about the additional PR her efforts were getting for their already impressive endeavors. Still, she didn’t want to brag in front of Margo. *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up*—James 4:10. Cam’s boss wouldn’t understand the reference to Scripture, anyway.

“Well, it seems like that place is taking over town,” Margo said in a way that made Camryn unsure if she was being sincere. Jokes aside, Camryn was proud.

“We’re actually doing a big fundraiser for an anti-human-trafficking organization,” Cam said. “Let me know if you want to donate. Or you could come to the party the week before Christmas! It should be a lot of fun.”

“Okay. Not my number one cause, but great.” Margo picked up the papers she’d been referring to earlier. “Anyway, let’s get back to the zoodle issue. Maybe we can get this sorted out today so I’m

not stressing about vegetables all weekend. What were you saying about sweet potatoes?"

* * *

Her meeting with Margo finished and the remains of the grain bowl wrapped up in a biodegradable container, Camryn stepped out of 12th Pine and began the walk to the corner where she'd parked. It was practically the weekend, the weather was gorgeous, and everything was moving in the right direction at work, online, and at church. There was room for growth in some aspects of her personal life, but that was no reason to be ungrateful on an otherwise beautiful day. She slid her Prada sunglasses over her eyes to protect them from the afternoon sun. The glasses had been a splurge, but they were worth it. One couldn't be too careful with their eyes or with crow's feet.

"Hey!" The voice wasn't familiar and could have been directed at anyone. Cam kept walking toward her car, searching her bag for her keys.

"Hey!" the voice called again, louder and colder this time.

Camryn turned to face whoever was calling out to her, further shading her face with her hand. A forty-something woman dressed in linen capris and a short-sleeved button-down printed with vertical pastel stripes appeared to be following her down the sidewalk, arms crossed over her chest and foam flip-flops slapping angrily against the cement.

"Can I help you?" Camryn asked.

"Yes," the woman huffed, coming to a stop a few feet away from Cam. She wore waxy pearl drop earrings and shiny lip gloss a shade or two too peach for her complexion. "You can help me by backing off what you're saying to my girls online."

"I'm sorry. What?"

“You’re one of those who’s been posting about church and prayer on Instagram and Facebook and whatever else, right?”

Cam nodded, her hand clammy around the strap of her purse. She could feel what was coming because the woman’s tone wasn’t altogether unfamiliar, though it was rare to experience it offline. While having this encounter in broad daylight felt incredibly invasive, perhaps it could offer an opportunity to create the sort of connection that felt so impossible to forge with angry commenters on social media. Face-to-face, at least, she knew she could make a better impression, calling on all of her charms and kindness as she plastered a smile on her face that keyboard warriors could never experience in-person.

“I get what y’all are trying to do,” the woman said, her mouth settling into a firmer line, “but I’d appreciate it if you redirected your efforts. They’re already so attached to their phones that I can’t get them to pay attention in real church as it is.”

Cam held her purse closer to her body. “I hear what you’re saying,” she said. “But we really are just trying to meet the girls where they are. And we think we can provide—”

“Look, you’re a pretty girl,” the woman said, leaning forward. “There’s no question about that. You’re all pretty girls. But this whole mission you’ve got going on is a little flashy. I can’t have my kids growing up thinking vamping online is the most Christlike thing they can aspire to.” She leaned in further, the smell of spearmint gum icy cold in Camryn’s face. “Quit whoring yourself out in God’s name and let us lead our own children to the Lord.”

With that, she brushed past Cam, leaving no space for resolution or mutual understanding. Whoever this woman was, she was likely teaching her daughters far more about judgment—not to mention tacky footwear—than she was teaching them about God. This was exactly why the Mavens mattered.

And was it so wrong to be pretty?

* * *

When Camryn Lee Cady felt moved to share her heart, there was no time to waste.

Within ten minutes of arriving home from her meeting with Margo, Cam applied another layer of sheer Charlotte Tilbury gloss, misted a halo of hairspray around her head, refreshed her mascara, reenergized the soft waves around her face, and clipped her phone into the tabletop tripod her boyfriend had given her as a birthday gift a few months before. As always, she situated herself in the makeshift studio she'd put together when she moved into the apartment: seated on her bright yellow couch; legs crossed primly in front of her; her posture perky and perfect in front of the longest wall in the living room, which she'd personally wallpapered with a tasteful pattern of muted mauve bursts. Propped up on the entertainment center in front of the television, her phone in the tripod had the perfect shot. Thanks to the research she'd done on the apartment's precise orientation relative to the sun prior to signing the lease, even the natural lighting was of the highest possible quality. Since she put in so much work, she welcomed compliments about the way her videos looked—as well as the way she looked in them. The kind words were blessings she was glad to accept.

Camryn stretched her neck, fanned her hair out around her shoulders, and reached sneakily under a spangled throw pillow to tap the remote that would trigger her phone to start recording the video, which she'd preset to dispatch live to her Instagram followers. Her feed had experienced a 5 percent boost in traffic the week before, likely because of a giveaway she'd run in collaboration with Shepherd Lovely, the boutique publisher behind a line of bespoke Bibles and devotionals so beautiful they might be considered home decor. It was the first time Cam had worked with Shepherd Lovely,

but with the engagement she'd seen on her posts, she was confident it wouldn't be the last.

When Camryn could see the red icon blinking at the top of the screen, indicating that the video was in progress, she paused for a few beats, smiling at her phone and her community. *One, two, three*, she counted to herself.

"Hi, y'all," she said. "I'm popping on here because something is on my heart, and I had to share it. When something sits heavy, God calls us to bring it into the light."

Camryn pictured her followers—first dozens of them, then hundreds, then thousands—tapping their way into her live video, pausing whatever they were doing to listen to what she had to say. Some only followed her because she was cute and wore cool clothes, but that could change. As long as they were listening. Plus, there would be more viewers later, people who couldn't watch live because of their work schedules and social plans, but who would still be sure to tune in. Her message would have eternal life on her feed.

She took a deep breath and went on. "This afternoon, I found myself face-to-face with a sister in Christ who does not approve of what I'm doing here," she said. "She accused me of distracting her daughters from the Lord. It was hurtful. For a minute, it even had me questioning if anything that I've built with you is worthwhile.

"I've heard plenty about the dangers of social media and how it can steal our attention from the most important thing in our lives." Cam extended one arm toward the sky, pointing a manicured finger up at the ceiling, which was, unfortunately, still covered in grimy gray popcorn that the property management company refused to address. "And while I think we could all use a good conviction every now and again, I must disagree with what this woman had to say. Respectfully, of course."

Cam paused meaningfully. From her spot on the couch, she couldn't see the small number in the top corner of her phone

indicating how many eyes were tuning in. She also couldn't see the comments popping up in tiny text at the bottom of the screen. Insurance would probably cover an update to her contact lens prescription, and she was in dire need of one. At that very moment, important testimonies and prayer requests were coming through. She had to be able to read them without straining her eyes or straying from her seat. No matter how much prayerful thought and planning it required, everything needed to look effortless.

"I'm not saying that I use this platform perfectly," Cam continued. "But every day, I wake up and try to use my voice for good, to reflect the love of God to all of y'all, whether or not you believe the same way I do. Without social media, I don't think I ever would have felt bold enough to share about my heart for the church and for Jesus. It's thanks to social media that I've connected with all of you about my relationship with the Lord. It's so, so much fun."

Cam continued speaking to her followers. "And I'm not saying social media is all good. I don't have to tell you about the way it's led people astray! But social media can also help us connect with one another. It's been such a blessing to see a beautiful community building here on my page and on the Mavens feed. I'm humbled by this sisterhood, and I know we have more hearts to change. Why would anyone give that up just because this kind of fellowship is a little untraditional? People thought Jesus was radical in his time, too."

Camryn shrugged, lifting her shoulders so high that they tapped against her hoop earrings and made them swing back and forth. She loved the way it felt when the words flowing from her mouth were coming faster than she could track the thoughts in her brain. No wonder Kyle and Cassidy loved to preach.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't want any of you letting the judgments of others keep you from expressing your faith wherever you see fit. At Moving Word, we talk about being

unshakeable and bold in our beliefs—and that inspires us here. Where are all of my Moral Mavens at?" Camryn squealed the last line, wiggling around on the couch and shaking her head from side to side. The Mavens loved her couch dancing. They'd told her so and shared videos of themselves doing the same thing.

Even across the width of the room, Cam could see an explosion of tiny heart icons burst from the bottom of her phone screen. People liked what she had to say. Many of them *loved* what she had to say. Even the nonbelievers among them—and Camryn knew from the considerable time she'd spent in her comments that there were many of those—appreciated her connection with God, whether or not they could precisely identify it as such. They saw her joy and wondered where it came from. They admired her positivity and the way she invited followers into it.

It had been a year and a half since she'd started posting with the #MoralMavens hashtag, and just about eleven months since she'd decided to channel the momentum she'd gained into a full-blown social media ministry. In that time, she'd highlighted Moving Word and recruited the others to help her run things, since there could be no impression that the ministry was all about her. It definitely wasn't! As a team, they were committed to sharing their love of God through Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube—and any other platform that might come their way. It was Camryn's calling to make it happen, no matter how strangers chose to twist their words or misrepresent their methods. She had her church's support and a determination that could only be God-given.

Cam grabbed for the remote in its hiding spot under the throw pillow and pressed the button to end the livestream, keeping her smile intact until it was clear she was no longer broadcasting. She took a deep breath, swept her hair into a ponytail with the scrunchie she kept in a convenient compartment under the coffee table, and stood up to grab her phone from its tripod. There was the matter

of the comments to attend to before she could get on with the rest of her night.

you melt my heart!

cam, keep being you. beautiful inside and out.

AMEN, sister. Don't let the enemy keep you from sharing your testimony!!!!!!

u r a bright shining star and a warrior for the lord.
MORAL MAVENS 4EVER.

Where did you get your lip gloss? Gorgeous, girl!

LOL to all of this. Come on, gf. Stop with the bullshit.

Even with plenty of positive comments to review, there was nothing like a public knock on her faith to keep Cam humble and remind her to take a break from her screen. She set the phone down. People really could be so hateful.

Whatever.

How heartbreaking for them.

The thousands of women who proudly called themselves Moral Mavens—who stuck stickers with the pastel MM logo to their laptop cases and posted TikToks about the Bible studies they were working through together—were kind and encouraging. They were striving to be the women God had created them to be. They were already coming together to celebrate Kyle and Cassidy's plans and to support ProtectUS. They would keep rising above the world's judgments about them. Matthew 5:14–16: *You are the light*

of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Cam and her friends and the girls who followed them would remain a town built on a hill—a hill with a stunning view and year-round sun.