

THE

PROMISE

of

JESSE

WOODS

FROM THE
AUTHOR OF
WAR
ROOM

CHRIS FABRY

CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

Praise for Chris Fabry

EVERY WAKING MOMENT

“Fabry crafts a character-driven tale of dignity and compassion for those who seem to have lost importance to society. This thought-provoking read challenges the prevailing cultural calculations of the value of a person’s life.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Writing in his trademark lyrical style, Fabry spins a poignant tale.”

BOOKLIST

“This is a heartbreaking but very hopeful story that left me with a satisfied sigh when I turned the last page.”

NOVEL REVIEWS

BORDERS OF THE HEART

“A thoroughly enjoyable read. . . . Chris Fabry is a masterful storyteller.”

CBA RETAILERS+RESOURCES

“In this edge-of-your-seat romantic suspense, all of the characters ring true. . . .”

BOOKLIST, STARRED REVIEW

“Ups the ante for fans of Fabry’s high-charged, emotionally driven fiction by adding a strong suspense thread.”

TITLETRAKK.COM

NOT IN THE HEART

“A story of hope, redemption, and sacrifice. . . . It’s hard to imagine inspirational fiction done better than this.”

WORLD MAGAZINE

“Christy Award–winning Fabry has written a nail-biter with plenty of twists and turns to keep readers riveted. Fans of Jerry B. Jenkins and Jodi Picoult might want to try this title.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“A fine piece of storytelling. . . . Down to its final pages, *Not in the Heart* is a gripping read. While the mystery at its core is compelling, it’s Wiley’s inner conflict that’s truly engrossing.”

CROSSWALK.COM

“This absorbing novel should further boost Fabry’s reputation as one of the most talented authors in Christian fiction.”

CBA RETAILERS+RESOURCES

ALMOST HEAVEN

“This mesmerizing tale . . . will surprise readers in the best possible way; plot twists unfold and unexpected character transformations occur throughout this tender story.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Fabry has a true gift for prose, and [*Almost Heaven*] is amazing. . . . You’ll most definitely want to move this to the top of your ‘to buy’ list.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, 4½-STAR TOP PICK REVIEW

“Fabry is a talented writer with a lilting flow to his words.”

CROSSWALK.COM

JUNE BUG

“[*June Bug*] is a stunning success, and readers will find themselves responding with enthusiastic inner applause.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“An involving novel with enough plot twists and dramatic tension to keep readers turning the pages.”

BOOKLIST

“I haven’t read anything so riveting and unforgettable since *Redeeming Love* by Francine Rivers. . . .

A remarkable love story, one that's filled with sacrifice, hope, and forgiveness!"

NOVEL REVIEWS

"Precise details of places and experiences immediately set you in the story, and the complex, likable characters give *June Bug* the enduring quality of a classic."

TITLETRAKK.COM

DOGWOOD

"[*Dogwood*] is difficult to put down, what with Fabry's surprising plot resolution and themes of forgiveness, sacrificial love, and suffering."

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

"Ultimately a story of love and forgiveness, [*Dogwood*] should appeal to a wide audience."

CBA RETAILERS+RESOURCES

"Solidly literary fiction with deep, flawed characters and beautiful prose, *Dogwood* also contains a mystery within the story that adds tension and a deepening plot."

NOVEL REVIEWS

The Promise of Jesse Woods

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The Promise of Jesse Woods

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The Promise of Jesse Woods is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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Chapter 1

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 7, 1984

The elevated train clacked outside my apartment, meandering on its predetermined path through Chicago. Beyond the tracks loomed the Cabrini-Green housing project, where Dantrelle Garrett lived. Dantrelle sat on my couch tossing a weathered baseball into my old glove, watching the final game of the NLCS between the Cubs and Padres.

“Who’s that?” Dantrelle said, pointing at a picture on my bookshelf.

“My brother and me. That was a long time ago.”

He studied the photo. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

It was the first time in the three months since I’d met

Dantrelle that he had asked anything about my background. I took it as an invitation.

“I grew up in Pittsburgh, then moved to a little town in West Virginia.”

“Where’s that?”

“A long way from Cabrini,” I said.

“Do you love you mama and daddy?”

“Sure.”

“Then how come you don’t have a picture of them?”

“I do, in an album somewhere.”

“If you love somebody, they ought to be on top of the shelf.”

I shrugged.

“How come you moved to Chicago?”

These were penetrating questions from an eight-year-old kid, but they grow up quickly in the projects. I told him about my schooling, how I had majored in theater and minored in counseling, but his eyes glazed.

“You want popcorn?” I said.

Dantrelle nodded and I pulled out my biggest pot and heated the oil. The smell of the popcorn and drizzled butter triggered a memory, but I pushed it aside and sat beside Dantrelle.

“When I was a kid, I loved the Pirates. The Pirates were my life. But we moved to this town where everybody rooted for the Reds. And the Pirates and Reds were rivals.”

“Like the Cubs and the White Sox.”

“Yeah, sort of. Except they were in the same league.”

Dantrelle shoved a handful of popcorn in his mouth

and butter dripped from his chin. I handed him a napkin and he put it on his lap.

“You think the Cubs are going to win?” he said, ignoring my story.

It had been a phenomenal year to be a Cubs fan. Every game on channel 9. Harry Caray and Steve Stone and “Jump” by Van Halen. Sutcliffe and Sandberg and Cey.

“Yeah, I think they will. No way the Padres win three in a row.”

It was disorienting to hear Don Drysdale, a lifelong Dodger, describe the game instead of Harry Caray. The Cubs had won the first two at home and lost the next two in San Diego.

In the bottom of the seventh, my phone rang and I almost let it go, thinking it might be my mother. But I picked up the cordless handset just as a ground ball rolled through Leon Durham’s legs and into right field. Dantrelle cursed. The Padres evened the score at 3–3.

“Matt?” a voice said with a familiar twang.

“Who is this?” I said.

A chuckle on the other end. “A voice from your past.”

“Dickie?” I said. Keith Moreland fired the ball to the infield, the Cubs’ curse alive. “How are you?”

“Lookin’ for a breakthrough,” he said, and his words brought back every bittersweet thing from my youth. I had lost touch with Dickie. After high school I had ripped the rearview off my life.

“You’re probably going to see a breakthrough sooner than the Cubs. You watching this game?”

“I was never into baseball.”

I closed my eyes and saw the hills and Dickie’s bike and trips to Blake’s store.

Dickie Darrel Lee Hancock was the son of a white mother and an African American father. That would have been a hardship anywhere in 1972, but it was a knapsack full of rocks on his forced march through his childhood in Dogwood. Dickie lived with his mother in a garage apartment on the outskirts of town, and it always seemed he was outside looking in. I guess that’s what drew the three of us together. We were all on the outside.

“How did you get my number?” I said.

“Called your parents, PB.”

PB. I hadn’t been called that in years and the sound of it warmed me.

“They said you don’t have much contact with the past.”

“That’s not true,” I lied.

“Took me a while to wrangle your number from them. I suspect they didn’t want me to call because of the news.”

I stood and touched Dantrelle’s shoulder. “I’ll be right back.” I stepped out of the apartment into the hall and the door closed behind me. “What news is that?”

“Jesse’s news.”

Her name, and Dickie saying it, sent a shiver through me. I’d been waiting for this. I’d had a foreboding feeling for years. “Is she all right? Did something happen?”

“She’s engaged, Matt. The wedding is Saturday.”

“This Saturday?”

“Yeah. I just heard about it or I would have tracked you down sooner. My mama told me.”

I walked down the hallway to a window that allowed a clear view of the el tracks and the specter of the housing project. From my building east was a thriving, churning city. A block west, past this Mason-Dixon Line, was another world. It reminded me of Dogwood.

“Who’s she marrying?”

“What’s that noise?” Dickie said, avoiding the question.

I paused, not hearing anything, then realized the train was passing. The open window let in not only the heavy autumn air but the clacking sound track of my life.

I told him about the train, then asked again, “So who’s the lucky guy?”

“Earl Turley.”

My stomach clenched. I couldn’t speak.

“Yeah, I can’t believe it either,” Dickie said to my silence. “I know how you felt about her.”

“Wow,” I said. “I appreciate you telling me.”

Dickie paused like there was more. “Matt, your dad is officiating.”

His words felt like a dagger. “Well, we were never on the best of terms when it came to Jesse.”

“I get that. I know how they felt about her too.”

“Are you going to the wedding?” I said.

“Wasn’t invited.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“That’s not the question, Matt. The question is, what are you going to do?”

“Do?” I said. “It’s a little late in the game to do anything. Jesse has a mind of her own.”

“Yeah, but you were the one she turned to when life got hard. Maybe it’s not too late.”

“If you’re talking romance, Jesse never felt the same as I did.”

“That’s not true.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You don’t know everything about her. I know she confided in you, but there are some things . . . Look, it’s none of my business. I thought I’d call and let you know.”

“Wait, you know something. You remember something.”

Dickie sighed. “I talked with her a couple of times. After you left for college. She told me things she regretted. Decisions she made. She made me promise to keep quiet about them. But she must’ve figured I would be the last person to tell you anything. I guess I’m breaking a promise even making this phone call.”

“Which is something Jesse would never do,” I said. Though there was one promise she was breaking by marrying Earl, and I couldn’t shake that fact. Dickie was privy to many of the secrets between Jesse and me, but not all of them.

There is magical thinking a child develops when he believes the world revolves around him. He begins to think he has power to control life’s events. I’d always blamed myself for the 1972 Pirates. If I hadn’t left Pittsburgh, things would have turned out differently. A butterfly on

the other side of the world flapping its wings. A child in a suburb praying for his team. I had grown out of that mindset by moving to Chicago and growing up, but something about the memory of Jesse and what she had done, what I had forced her to do, made me wonder if I could prevent another tragedy in her life.

Dickie broke the silence. “Do you ever think of what happened? Do you ever think of her?”

“Sometimes,” I whispered, and the words began to flow. “Sometimes I smell woodsmoke or hear crickets at night and I’m back on the hill. It’s all there, Dickie. All trapped inside like fireflies ready to rise.”

“Riverfront?”

I smiled. “Yeah. We had fun, didn’t we?”

“Remember the horse?” Dickie said.

“That was our first secret.”

“What about Daisy?”

Daisy Grace. I could see her chubby face and a fistful of daisies held behind her, and the ramshackle house on the side of a hill that hung like a mole on the face of God.

“I remember it all, Dickie.”

“Yeah, I do too.”

“Especially the parts I try to forget.”

He told me about his job and what he’d done after high school, but I couldn’t hear his story for the memories he had stirred. I thanked him for calling.

“I’ll say this, PB: I know it’s been a long time and I don’t know if you’re seeing anybody, but I think you owe it to her to go back. You owe it to yourself.”

“What about Earl?” I said. “You going to provide backup?”

“You’re a bigger man than him, Matt. You’ve always been bigger than you thought you were.”

His words stung my eyes. “Dickie, I’m sorry. I’ve never been able to tell you how sorry I am that—”

“You don’t have to apologize. We were kids. I’ve thought about calling you and patching things up a hundred times. I was wrong to hold it against you in the first place.”

“Thank you for saying that.”

When I returned to the apartment, Dantrelle looked like he’d been gut-punched. The Cubs hadn’t been to a World Series since 1945. Hadn’t won since 1908. And with Goose Gossage throwing BBs, it wouldn’t happen this year. Maybe if Jim Frey had relieved Sutcliffe, things would have turned out differently.

The old pain returned as I watched San Diego celebrate. Steve Garvey flashed his million-dollar smile and Gossage hopped around the field like a kid who had stolen candy from a general store. Bob Dernier and Jody Davis and Don Zimmer looked back in anguish. It was the end of a season and the only consolation was there would be next year.

“If they had played three in Chicago, we would have won,” I said.

“Why didn’t they?” Dantrelle said.

“Just the way it works. But the commissioner said if the Cubs had made the World Series, they’d have lost home-field advantage because they don’t have lights.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Yeah, well it was all about money. And life isn’t fair. Especially when it comes to the Cubs.”

As Dantrelle got his jacket, I took my old glove with faded words and held it to my face. The faint leather scent swirled warm, rich memories like fly balls in a summer sky. I returned the glove to a plastic bin in the apartment’s only closet. Pictures lay scattered like dry leaves among the papers and playbills. The three of us, sweaty and smiling and spitting watermelon seeds.

“Who’s that?” Dantrelle said, pointing at a Polaroid of Jesse sitting on a picnic table and holding a cat.

“A friend of mine from a long time ago.” At the bottom of the box was a ticket. Reds vs. Pirates, July 1972.

I got out the yearbook and paged through until I found her. She stared at something beyond the camera. Her hair was too long and cut uneven and shadowed her eyes. The photo was a black-and-white, but I could see the emerald blue, her eyes like an ocean. Closing my eyes, I heard her laugh and her desperate cry for help in the year I discovered my heart.

People say you can’t know love at such a young age. Maybe it wasn’t love. But it was close. The longer I stared at Jesse’s face, the more my heart broke for her and what had happened. I thought I had put all of that behind me, though. I had moved on with life, but one phone call had grabbed me by the throat.

“Can I watch some more TV while you look at this stuff?” Dantrelle said.

I apologized and put the bin back. “Dantrelle, I might have to take a trip. That would mean we couldn’t meet this week.”

His eyes looked hollow as he shrugged.

“Maybe I could ask Miss Kristin to help with your math.”

He brightened. “I like Miss Kristin. You two going to get married?”

I tried to smile and shook my head. “I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“Why not?”

“That’s a long story I’ll tell another day.”

A week earlier Kristin, a flaxen-haired beauty who attended a nearby Bible school and mentored young girls at Cabrini, had sat across the table from me at Houlihan’s to splurge on an early dinner. I could tell there was something wrong before our salads arrived. As tears came, she said she cared deeply for me but that we couldn’t go further.

“I think I just want to be friends,” she said.

“What does that mean? That I’m not good enough for you?”

She shook her head. “No, you’re a great guy. I see how much you care about the kids and how much you want things to change. But it feels like . . .”

“It feels like what?”

“Like you want to throw on a Superman cape and run to the rescue. I can’t fix what’s wrong at Cabrini. And neither can you. We can help some kids, maybe. We can make

a difference. But it feels like you're doing all of this in your own power.”

Her words stung because I could see Kristin and me together. I wondered who had gotten to her in her dorm and talked about me. Of course, whoever had pointed out the spiritual mismatch was right. She was a lot further down the road of faith. At times, it felt like I had taken an exit ramp miles earlier. So we agreed to part as friends and not let our relationship harm the work we were doing. It was all smiles and a polite hug while inside, the part of my heart that had come alive as I got to know her shattered.

I picked up the phone now and dialed her dorm. Someone answered and Kristin finally came to the phone.

“Hey, I have a favor to ask,” I said, extending the antenna. “I need to take care of some stuff at home—but Dantrelle is counting on me this week. Do you think you could meet with him? I can't be back by Tuesday.”

“Sure. I'm over there that afternoon anyway.”

I gave Dantrelle a thumbs-up. “He just smiled at that news.”

“He's with you?”

“We were watching the Cubs lose.”

“Poor Cubs. So what's up? Is someone sick at home?”

“It's complicated. Maybe I'll have the chance to explain it someday.” *If you give me another chance.*

“Well, tell Dantrelle to meet me at the ministry office.”

“Thanks for doing that, Kristin.”

I left a message with the coordinator at the counseling center, explaining as little as possible about the trip and

leaving my parents' phone number in case someone needed to reach me. Then I walked Dantrelle home and up the urine-laced concrete stairs to his apartment. His mother came to the door, wild-eyed and unkempt. She grabbed him by the shoulder without speaking to me, and Dantrelle waved as he was hustled inside and the door shut.

I took the stairs two at a time and moved away from Cabrini, thinking of Jesse and her bad decision. If she said, "I do," that was it. She would. I had to do something to change her mind and keep her from throwing her life away. I had to help her see the truth. And though I didn't want to admit it, didn't want to open the door to even the possibility, something inside told me there might still be hope for us, even after all the years and distance.

I threw some clothes in a gym bag and set my alarm. Then I lay in bed, listening to the sounds of the city, knowing I wouldn't sleep. Dickie was right. I owed it to Jesse to make one more attempt. And before she walked the aisle that felt like a plank, I owed it to myself.

Well before midnight, I hopped in the car and headed toward the expressway, then south toward Indiana and beyond to my childhood home.