

The background of the cover is a photograph of a serene landscape at dawn. A calm body of water, likely a lake or a wide river, occupies the lower half of the frame. The water is still, reflecting the soft, golden light of the rising sun. In the distance, a line of dark, silhouetted trees stretches across the horizon. The sky is a pale, hazy yellow, with a soft glow emanating from the left side, suggesting the sun is just below the horizon. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

facing
the
dawn

A Novel

CYNTHIA
RUCHTI

“*Facing the Dawn* was an emotional roller coaster of loss, faith, hope, and redemption. The pages flew by, and I couldn’t stop reading.”

Debbie Macomber, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“Cynthia Ruchti writes with faith and heart, exploring life and love with sensitivity and an underlying sense of grace.”

Lisa Wingate, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author
of *Before We Were Yours* and *The Book of Lost Friends*

“In *Facing the Dawn*, Mara Jacobs is barely holding her family together when unthinkable tragedies hit, one after the other. With courage, wit, and a little help from her friends, Mara works to put her life back together. Author Cynthia Ruchti outdoes herself in this gripping story about the resilience of the human heart.”

Suzanne Woods Fisher, bestselling author
of *On a Summer Tide*

“I loved the power of hope and friendship in Ruchti’s *Facing the Dawn*. It inspired me to love well and live generously. And isn’t inspiration the point of good fiction?”

Rachel Hauck, *New York Times* bestselling author

“My heart cried with and for Mara in *Facing the Dawn* as she dealt with loss after loss that ripped her ‘I can handle anything’ belief to shreds. Could she let a forever friend and others of both her old and new life help her discover second chances and a new purpose?”

Lauraine Snelling, author of *Blessings to Cherish*

“*Facing the Dawn* captures the drama, heartache, grief, and spiritual conflict of a mother caught up in unexpected and devastating life events. Cynthia Ruchti skillfully reveals what the main character is thinking as she deals with the emotions connected to extreme loss and the impact it has on her children. This is a page-turner you don’t want to miss.”

Carol Kent, speaker and author of *He Holds My Hand*

“Cynthia Ruchti is a novelist I read with a pen in my hand because of all the ‘notes to self’ and ‘messages to share’ I jot in the margins. I am a better person for reading the words and message of *Facing the Dawn*.”

Pam Farrel, author of more than 50 books including
bestselling *Discovering Hope in the Psalms: A Creative Bible Study Experience* and *Men Are Like Waffles, Women Are Like Spaghetti*

Cynthia Ruchti, *Facing the Dawn*

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“Only a truly skilled novelist can achieve an exquisitely delicate balance of heart-squeezing empathy interspersed with just the right touch of humor. Cynthia Ruchti is that caliber of writer, and *Facing the Dawn* is that kind of book.”

Becky Melby, author of *Candles in the Rain*

“In *Facing the Dawn*, author Cynthia Ruchti confronts painful issues such as the loss of a spouse and other deep griefs, but undergirds the story with her trademark perspective of hope. As her fictional characters asked honest questions we all wrestle with, Ruchti’s realistic writing kept me turning the pages—and she never settled for pat answers or clichés. *Facing the Dawn* isn’t an easy read—but it is a compelling must-read.”

Beth K. Vogt, award-winning author
of the Thatcher Sisters series

“*Facing the Dawn* is a beautiful story about how hope and friendship can provide redemptive opportunities for second chances. When we tenaciously love others during their toughest of times, that kind of friendship leads the hurting and broken from darkness to light. Cynthia Ruchti’s newest novel is another golden gift hemmed in hope.”

Janet Holm McHenry, author of 24 books,
including the bestselling *PrayerWalk*
and *The Complete Guide to the Prayers of Jesus*

“Fair warning: this book takes the reader on a perilous journey from overwhelming circumstances, through devastating grief and breakdown, and into transformation and peace. Also warning: life may take us on a similar path. That is why I’m thankful that Cynthia Ruchti has offered her new novel, *Facing the Dawn*, as a treatise on how God and friendships are essential in discovering soul strength amidst the harsh realities of life. If you start this book, be sure to finish it; if you find yourself in the midst of crisis, be sure to keep hanging on to God’s promises and truth.”

Lucinda Seacrest McDowell, award-winning author
Soul Strong and *Life-Giving Choices*

“Cynthia Ruchti took me on a beautifully healing emotional and spiritual journey through grief that shines a bright light on God’s love and faithfulness, with an additional colorful spotlight on the power of graciously relentless friends. Tears and smiles for miles in this one.”

Rhonda Rhea, TV personality, award-winning
humor columnist, and author

Cynthia Ruchti, *Facing the Dawn*

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To those whose life's journey
leads them on a detour
through grief,
which is all of us.

And to the women in my life
who've become
forever-no-matter-what friends.

one

He held the paper—the indictment against her—six inches from his face, which made him look like a blank sheet with bushy hair. “Mara Jacobs?” he asked, his voice the texture of a coconut husk. “You know what your name means, don’t you?”

“I know.”

“Hobby of mine. Anthroponomastics.”

Mara shifted in the armless chair, her hands safely tucked under her thighs where they had no hope of fidgeting. Nothing could fidget under the weight of her—

“And,” he added without yet making eye contact, “etymology, of course.”

“Of course.” The principal’s office. At her age.

He lowered the sheet of paper, but his face was just as blank. “In antiquity, the meaning of the name Mara was ‘bitter.’ And in modern America, the meaning of Mara is . . . ‘bitter.’” His smile needed a crutch or cane.

“Thanks for pointing that out, Principal Slacker.”

“Schlachter. North German. Occupational name for a . . .”

Mara folded her hands in her lap, convinced her daughter’s sass may have had origins in her side of the family after all.

“Yes? I find this all fascinating,” Mara said. Truthfully, she found nothing fascinating these days. He didn’t need to know that.

Principal Schlachter—less than a year into his job and already balding in spots—curled two corners of the paper. “Occupational name for a slaughterer of animals.” He smoothed the curls and asked, “What do they call you for short? Mar?”

Mara resisted the urge to make a spitball out of her gum. He was trying to make small talk. He just wasn’t very good at it. “My mom told people Dad wanted to name me Budgie.”

Still no measurable expression.

“Or Chunkadunk. Said he wanted something unique.” But that’s not something her dad would have done.

So much for small talk.

“Well, Ms. Jacobs, the reason I asked you here is to discuss school treats.”

A warm rush started at her scalp and exited through her toenails. School treats? It could have been so much worse. Expulsion of one of her kids. Pick a kid. Any kid. Chelsea caught making out behind the bleachers again. Smoking behind the bleachers again. Pregnant behind the bleachers again.

Library fines to rival the national debt.

Dylan three credits shy of graduating in May. Which meant he wouldn’t move out. Ever.

No. The issue was school treats. That, she could handle. “What about them, Mr. Schlachter?”

“Schlachter. We’d like you not to send any.”

“Excuse me?”

“Some of the other parents feel it would be best if you . . . used your gifts . . . in some other way.”

Mara mentally apologized to every child she’d ever chided for badmouthing the principals of the world. She would have been one, maybe—a principal—if calculus hadn’t kicked her sophomore derriere, made her rethink teaching as a life goal, and redirected her toward other pursuits. Graphic design seemed

like a fair trade. Now she was twenty years post-college graduation and it had been eighteen years since she'd designed anything more rewarding than a fundraising poster or two.

"Ms. Jacobs?"

"It's Mrs., technically." She couldn't fault the community for assuming she was a single parent. Her husband Liam had last been home . . . when? And what was the anthrosomethingology of the name Liam?

"My apologies."

Mara's spine stiffened. "Are you saying I'm banned from sending treats to school?"

Mr. Schlachter tapped the "we have an issue" paper on his desk. A normal person would tap it twice for emphasis. He tapped at least six times. "Not banned, per se."

"Then what? Per se?"

"Actually, our lawyers advised—"

"You took my Rice Krispie treats to a team of lawyers?"

"Your treats weren't gluten-free."

"And . . . ?"

"You frosted them."

"Yes."

"With chocolate."

"Yum."

"And sprinkled them with—"

"Crushed peanuts. But I also labeled them with their ingredients and brought fresh fruit for those allergic to peanuts or gluten."

"Yes, but . . ."

Mara loosened her grip on her last nerve. "Please go on."

"The fruit. Mixed fruit."

"I prefer the term 'integrated.' Fruit is good for kids. They don't eat enough fruit. And when fruit looks fun, there's a greater chance they'll—"

"Spend time in the emergency room." The principle/

principal player in the room leaned back in his plush office chair and crossed his arms.

Mara leaned forward. “I’m sorry, did you say emergency room? Did I miss an apple seed or something?”

“No need to grow hostile, Ms. Jacobs.” He picked up a pen and wrote something on the paper.

Why was she arguing? Being banned from school snacks was not a death sentence. It would remove one normally uncomfortable, last-minute, stress-producing task from her to-do tome. She’d long abandoned the term to-do *list*. “Please, Mr. Schlachter, tell me what happened. How could skewers of fresh fruit be a—” Skewers. Ah. “This was for sixth graders, not pre-schoolers.”

A growling sigh from the other side of the desk told her the point she tried to make was duller than a fruit skewer.

“When sword fights erupt in the classroom, Ms. Jacobs, the age of the child makes little difference.”

“Couldn’t the teacher have slid the fruit off the skewers ahead of time if she was concerned?”

“Oh, if that were the only issue,” Mr. Schlachter replied, eyeing his smartphone as if as eager as she was to end the conversation. “There’s the matter of the pineapple.”

“Pineapple?”

“It’s clearly on the updated list of potential food allergies.”

“What list?”

He clasped his hands together and plopped them on his desk, a move uniquely suited to the sour look on his face. “The list your Jeremy took home last week, as did all the students.”

“Last week.”

“Yes.”

“And Jeremy’s birthday was two weeks earlier. I was only a week late with his birthday treat, so that was still a week before the message came home to parents.”

“Let’s just cut to the bottom line, shall we?”

Oh, could we? Yes, let's shall. Mara chose silence rather than the responses roiling through her brain. She couldn't afford any more time praying for forgiveness today. She already owed the Lord an explanation for her attitude toward Liam after he'd called last night.

Drilled another well, did ya? Made a village dance around you as if worshiping The One Who Makes Water? And yes, that's what I meant. So happy for them, Liam, and for you. Another humanitarian award in the works, I'm sure. Now, can we talk for a minute about our hot water heater? There's a puddle under it that—Losing the connection? Talk to you next week, then, Absent One.

Yes. She and God Almighty had a few things to talk about. A is for Attitude.

"The bottom line as I see it, Mr. Schleppe, is that I've been asked not to send treats for my sixth grader's birthday next year, at which time he will be a seventh grader and no longer allowed to bring birthday treats anyway."

"Well, yes."

"So this conversation really wasn't necessary, was it?"

"There's this year's Halloween, Winter Holiday, Spring Fest . . ."

Mara picked her slouch purse from the floor and stood. "Do you need me to sign anything?"

"That won't be necessary. Thank you for understanding, Ms. Jacobs."

"It's Mrs. Jacobs. Technically."



But I don't understand. Not any of it.

Mara snapped the metal tongue of her seat belt into the buckle. The car seemed to murmur, "Go ahead. Try to start me. I dare you."

It had taken three attempts when she'd left work an hour

earlier to attend to her “consultation” with the principal. Poisoning kids with pineapple. Who knew that was even possible? She’d heard of the traditional peanut, gluten, strawberry allergies. Pineapple too now? How much harder could she have tried to accommodate everyone’s needs, short of making Jeremy’s birthday treats out of water.

Ugh. That word.

She pressed her fingertips against her eyeballs. The orbs felt like grapes under her eyelids. Can someone be allergic to grapes?

It took a few moments for the world to come back into focus. Or as focused as it could these days. Would it leave a mark if she laid her forehead on the steering wheel for the rest of the afternoon? Probably. How would she explain that to her coworkers when she walked back into the cheese factory? Battered wife? Impossible. Her husband was too far away to leave visible marks.

With almost eight thousand miles between them, Liam could do little more than bruise her heart muscle.

Guilt snaked its way through her veins. How could she entertain a thought like that about a man who’d sacrificed everything to rehydrate a desperately thirsty continent? Once-parched villages lauded him and the mission—Deep Wells, Inc.—as their saviors. A steady supply of clean water was changing their landscape, their health, their daily routines, their ability for them and their children to survive. That man—her Liam—coaxed water from dust with his Deep Wells innovations.

And as his devoted wife, her response was to withhold her applause and instead gripe that he wasn’t beside her to help bear the load of their three needy children, to help fend off the glares of a fruit-phobic school principal?

Despite her protests, her forehead fell against the steering wheel with a bone-rattling clunk.

She could hear her grandmother’s voice in her ears. “Now

don't you go and take up drinkin' over this, Mara. Ain't worth the trouble." The woman had lived in the middle of Wisconsin her entire life. Where would she have picked up any kind of accent other than elongating the *o* in Wisconsin? Grandma Lou was something, all right. Mara wouldn't have dreamed of correcting her grandmother's grammar, even if the voice was only in her head.

What if she'd retaken calculus? She could have done that. Maybe aced it the next time through. Not that she had much cause to use calculus skills raising babies, or now, selling cheese curds to tourists to help cover mounting bills that all the water in Africa couldn't cover.

Liam's salary from Deep Wells, Inc., wasn't unreasonable. But the older the kids got, and the more Dylan's brushes with the law cost them, the less distance his paycheck covered. Making up for gaps had been her theme song for a long time.

The tap-tap-tap on her driver's side window jolted her upright. Through the tempered glass, Mara heard a muffled, "You okay, ma'am?"

She turned the ignition to *Accessory* and powered down the window. Safety patrol. No way. She'd been outed as a whiner by an elderly gentleman in a neon yellow vest with a fiberboard stop sign tucked in his armpit.

"Fine. I'm fine. Just, you know, praying."

"Oh," the man said, eyes wide, leaning back a little. "Carry on then."

"I . . . I will. Thanks."

He backed away with a "God bless you," as if that's how you say "Have a nice day" to someone who's caught praying right there in the school parking lot.

She muttered an amen to make it official and turned the key. Started on the first try. Mara was not going to flirt with the idea that fake prayer had anything to do with it.

If the safety patrol volunteers were on duty already, that

meant the school day was almost over. She glanced at the dashboard clock. If she hurried, she could scoot back to work, make up the hour or more she'd been gone, and still clock out and get to the house before the home visit from Dylan's new PO.

Post Office. Power On. Power Off. So many other decent uses of those two letters in combination. Since when had Mara started abbreviating Probation Officer? A random memory flitted through her mind. Her mother pulling out the big guns of intimidation. "Wait until your father gets home, young lady!" It hadn't taken much more than that to get Mara to back off from the edge of whatever minor mischief she'd pulled. Daddy hadn't been harsh. He'd been her safe place. Disappointing him was out of the question.

Even the "wait until your father gets home" parenting tool had been stolen from Mara's arsenal. What kid would take seriously a threat that couldn't be realized for another year of Liam's four-year contract with Deep Wells?

She nodded to the safety patrol as she pulled out of school property and headed toward the cheese factory, where she might just overdose on dairy samples while waiting for her shift to end.



"Mara, do you have a minute?"

She tucked the tiny dill Havarti sample into her cheek and turned toward her supervisor. "Sure, Chuck. What do you need?"

"My office?"

His office was separated from the sales area of the factory by a solid door but a very large picture window. If she was in trouble for whatever—taking off work, devouring more than the allotted employee limit for cheese samples—any of her co-workers skilled at reading lips would know about it. *Oh no. A layoff. Not now. No. Please, Lord . . .*

Huh. An actual prayer. Score one for rekindling her faith.

“Mara, I know you’ve been working long hours.”

“I don’t mind.” Well, she did, but what kind of idiot would admit that with a possible layoff in her future, perhaps her immediate future?

“But we have a problem.” Chuck sat in his Costco office chair and indicated she should sit in one of the two folding chairs. She’d have her back to the window. Lip-readers would know her “problem” but not be able to detect her response. The atmosphere held a hint of principal’s office shame. Principal’s office déjà vu all over again.

“How can I help?” she heard herself asking. Grandma Lou smacked her in the back of her head from heaven on high. *That question gonna get you spent before your days are done, Mara. Mark my words.* She’d been telling Mara that since grade school, when she’d volunteered for every single extra credit opportunity and answered yes to any other student’s need for a peer tutor.

Somehow, she’d given birth to three children without an epidural—“I don’t need it”—and with not one overachiever among them.

“Mara?”

Ab, Chuck. He expected her attention and she’d failed him. She leaned forward to make up for it, feigning extreme interest in his dilemma, which she hoped wasn’t her. His face was a study in neutrality. Great. Time for Twenty Questions? “How large is this problem? I’d ask if it was bigger than a bread box, but nobody keeps a bread box anymore, do they?”

Not even a small chuckle. Chuck-le.

“Some of us are going to have to pull double shifts until after the Harvest Fest crowd thins out.” He too leaned forward.

Nice try, Chuck. You can’t possibly include me in your “us” statement. Your sense of humor is worse than mine.

“And by ‘us,’ I mean any able-bodied—”

“No.” Where did that come from? Such a foreign word.

Maybe it was the indentation in her forehead—so frown-like, she imagined—that gave her the flash of courage. “No, I can’t add one more—”

Chuck leaned back in his far more comfortable chair than hers. “Not really giving options,” he said.

He couldn’t fire her. He needed her cheese-selling abilities now more than ever. Right? He couldn’t . . . wouldn’t . . .

Two truths about Wisconsin were undeniable. Cheese and heating bills. Mara might need to turn down the thermostat through the winter if she didn’t have cheese to demo, package, and arrange in refrigerated cases by variety, with cheese’s resultant paycheck.

“Chuck, I know we’ve been short-handed, but I have kids who are—”

“Demented. I know.”

“I was going to say ‘needy.’ But whatever.” Appointment with Dylan’s PO fast approacheth. *Delinquent* seemed so much softer a word than *demented*. What gave him the right to—

The overhead light, if not fluorescent, just as annoying, dimmed. Not enough to worry about a power outage. Just enough to throw shadows on the scene.

“Everyone has their own legitimate reason not to be happy about double shifts or overtime, Mara. A father in hospice.”

“That would be Danielle,” she said.

“Last weeks of her pregnancy.”

“Sheila.”

“Surgery to amputate three toes.”

“Larry.” Oh man. Mara intended to make a pan of lasagna for all three of the people he’d mentioned to help ease their loads. And maybe Rice Krispie treats. “You can’t expect Larry to work overtime.”

“No, of course not.”

“Are you saying I’m the least stressed of all your employees? That’s a little scary, isn’t it?”

“I know you can handle it. And it’s only temporary.”

Liam’s exact words before he’d boarded the plane for Uganda.

In that indescribable, frostbite numbness that burns like fire, she’d staggered forward, rehearsing all the biblical reasons to “stand by her man.”