

A movie poster for 'Lifemark'. The central focus is a young man with short brown hair and green eyes, looking upwards and to the right with a hopeful expression. He is wearing a dark blue t-shirt and a grey hoodie. Behind him, a family of five is visible, looking in the same direction. The background is a soft-focus scene of a boat on water, with other people visible in the distance. The overall tone is warm and hopeful.

HOPE IS AT THE HEART
OF EVERY JOURNEY

FROM THE CREATORS OF WAR ROOM

LIFEMARK

A NOVELIZATION BY
CHRIS FABRY

BASED ON THE MOTION PICTURE BY
THE KENDRICK BROTHERS

LIFEMARK

OTHER NOVELS BY CHRIS FABRY

Overcomer

(based on the motion picture
by Alex Kendrick and Stephen Kendrick)

War Room

(based on the motion picture
by Alex Kendrick and Stephen Kendrick)

A Piece of the Moon

Under a Cloudless Sky

The Promise of Jesse Woods

Every Waking Moment

Looking into You

Dogwood

June Bug

Almost Heaven

Not in the Heart

Borders of the Heart

A Marriage Carol (with Dr. Gary Chapman)

The Song

(based on the screenplay by Richard L. Ramsey)

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Tyndale House Publishers
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Visit Tyndale online at tyndale.com.

Visit Chris Fabry's website at chrisfabry.com.

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Lifemark

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Lifemark 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 authors' imaginations.

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PART 1

CHAPTER 1



The lake sat at the end of a winding dirt road on the outskirts of Columbus, Indiana, forty miles south of Indianapolis. Water rippled muddy brown this time of year because of spring rain runoff that collected and funneled into the lake from three directions. The deepest end of the lake was best for fishing and on this late afternoon, two teenage girls sat on the rock ledge looking down at their lines in the water.

Kelly White was doing more talking than fishing, as usual. She had long blonde hair and stood barely an inch over five feet tall. She'd weigh a hundred pounds if she

jumped in the river and got weighed as soon as she climbed out. Because of her height and the way she moved, walking with the confidence of a top-level athlete, most boys in high school thought she was a gymnast or maybe a dancer. She was neither. She just liked boys and liked to walk as if they were watching every step. And the reason she'd agreed to meet her friend Melissa at the lake was not to fish but to talk about a boy she was interested in who was a year older.

Melissa Long, eighteen and a senior at Fleetwood High, stood on the rocks and cast her line about halfway across the lake. She was six inches taller than Kelly and nobody thought she was a dancer or a gymnast. In fact, most people didn't notice Melissa, or so she thought. She was the kind of girl you might miss in a yearbook, just pass her picture and keep turning pages. And her face had a quality to it that made her look different in each photo, like she was able to morph and change with whatever group was around her.

Melissa had long brown hair that curled from a recent perm she'd convinced a friend to give her—a hairdo in a box she'd bought at the drugstore on sale, buy one get one free. She couldn't afford a salon. Couldn't afford food, for that matter, which was why she was fishing. She'd saved up for the perm and it had turned out less frizzy than she'd feared. Her friend who had applied all the chemicals said she almost looked pretty.

Green eyes and an easy smile hid some of the pain beneath the layers of her life. Those who noticed her, who lingered on the picture or studied her in class, thought she was looking for something she hadn't found. And it was true—Melissa was on a search. You could see it in her eyes, though she wouldn't have been able to pinpoint exactly what she was looking for.

Her bobber settled and she watched it move on the undulating surface, the wind picking up. When Kelly reeled her line in, Melissa frowned and said, "Stop doing that every ten seconds. The goal is to catch a fish, not scare them away."

"You reeled yours in. Why can't I?"

"Just leave it in the water."

"I think something took my bait," Kelly said. She finished reeling and lifted the rod and the hook swung empty. "See. Told you. Put another minnow on for me."

Melissa shook her head. "Bait your own hook, Barbie."

"I can do it, but I don't like the smell. It never bothers you." Kelly dropped the rod and lay on a flat rock with her hands behind her head, staring at the clouds. The ones overhead were white and rounded, like vanilla ice cream in a cone. Others to the south were darker, a chocolaty-gray, and they seemed to be moving toward them.

"When you get out in the big bad world, you're going to wish you knew how to do things like this," Melissa

said, picking up Kelly's rod. She baited the hook and cast the line to the right in a good spot, knowing this wasn't for Kelly, it was for her. She needed a fish or two to take home.

"What's baiting a hook going to do for me in the big bad world? Tell me that."

"It's not about baiting your hook. It's about being able to do something on your own instead of needing others. If you can't bait your own hook, you won't last long out there."

"Is that your philosophy of life?"

"That's the truth. Period."

Kelly studied the cloud formations as Melissa felt a strike on her line. She set the hook and reeled in an eighteen-inch crappie, holding it up with a thumb through the gill.

"Look how shiny he is. Like a silver dollar."

"How do you know it's not a she?"

Melissa ignored the question and put the fish on the stringer and put it back in the water with the two others she'd caught. She grabbed another minnow from the bucket and held it tightly as she passed the hook through the eyes. It pained her to hurt the tiny fish, but the hunger inside pushed her past that. She pulled the rod back and cast the line again, the bobber hitting with a plop, and checked the other line. The bobber floated steady.

“Tell me what he said again,” Kelly said.

“Tell you what who said?”

“You know who. Lee. What did he say to Brian about me?”

“Lee’s nothing but bad news. Why are you hanging around him?”

“You need me to explain?” She sat up. “He’s cuter than Justin Timberlake, has bigger muscles, too. What’s not to like?”

“I’m telling you he’s bad news. You’re a dog chasing a car. What are you going to do when you catch him?”

“I’ll figure it out when it happens.”

“Nothing good is going to come from you chasing him.”

Kelly scoffed. “Like you’re one to talk.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means you ought to look in the mirror.”

Melissa scowled and rolled her eyes, her back to her friend. “Brian’s not like Lee. He’s one of the good ones.”

“Right. And you’re not chasing after him at all, are you? Sharon said . . .” She stopped, evidently thinking better of finishing the thought.

Melissa turned. “Sharon said what?”

“Nothing.”

Melissa put a hand on her hip. “What did she say?”

Kelly dipped her head like a second grader who had

been taught not to tattle. But Melissa saw a glint in her friend's eyes as she glanced up. She was enjoying this.

"Sharon said she saw you going into Brian's apartment. With a suitcase."

Melissa tried not to react. "So? I'm staying there for a while."

"Right. She said you two are practically married. Hanging all over each other in the hallway. Said you've moved in with him."

A glance at the bobber. "You know what it's like at my house."

"Yeah. But Sharon said you'd be staying there no matter how messed up your family is. Said you're head over heels."

Melissa kept her back turned and tried not to smile. She hated that others were talking about her, especially Sharon. What a pain. She was from the other side of the tracks, a better neighborhood—her dad was a lawyer or something. Sharon always had her nose in the air and looked down on others, but Melissa had to admit, at least to herself, that she wasn't far from the truth. Melissa was in love. She'd found the one. And it was the real thing, not some high school crush. She'd had those before. No, she and Brian had something special. Every time she heard that Whitney Houston song on the radio, she saw his face and that crooked smile of his and she sang along—"I will always love you." Well, she didn't actually

sing, she mouthed the words, but it was the same. They had found each other, him with his family problems a mirror to hers. She wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. And he felt the same about her.

Thunder sounded in the distance. Melissa reeled in her line, the bobber skipping across the water and leaving a V in its wake. She picked up Kelly's and did the same.

"Come on, tell me," Kelly said. "What did Lee say to Brian about me?"

A big sigh. "Lee likes you. Thinks you're pretty. Gorgeous."

"He said that? He called me gorgeous?"

"Not with words, more with grunts. Like a caveman. He's not a good guy, Kelly. But I can tell I'm not going to be able to talk sense into you."

Kelly rose and stretched, yawning. Her shirt rose above her pierced navel. "He thinks I'm gorgeous."

Melissa grabbed the stringer of fish from the water and dumped the bucket of minnows into the lake. "Here, take the rods. We need to get back before the rain comes."

They walked the dirt road near a cornfield with plants that peeked out of the ground as if looking for the sky. In the summer the corn would be higher than Melissa's head, and she made a mental note to come back when she could grab a few ears for supper without being seen. Who would miss a few ears of corn?

“What’s Brian going to do after graduation?” Kelly said, trudging behind. “He got that planned out?”

The question touched a nerve and made Melissa queasy. She answered a little too quickly, her voice sounding uncertain. “He’ll find a job. He’s just concentrating on finishing school first.”

A flash of lightning in the distance and then a low rumble. They picked up their pace, approaching a hackberry tree that towered above them.

“They’re closing down a section of the plant where my dad works,” Kelly said. “He might have to drive to Indianapolis . . .”

Kelly’s voice faded as her friend’s face changed. Melissa put the stringer in the grass and dropped the minnow bucket. Running to the tree, she put her hand on the trunk and leaned forward. She hadn’t had anything for lunch, so nothing came up but acid water, but her stomach clenched and she couldn’t stop the churning.

When she could finally stand, her hand still on the tree and her head spinning, she saw Kelly studying her.

“Something you ate?” Kelly said.

“Probably.”

Two hours later, as the downpour subsided, Melissa walked through the puddles along the street and into the pharmacy, shaking the water from her hair like a wet dog.

She pulled a plastic bag from under her shirt and waited by the makeup until there was no line at the cash register and put the bag before a man she didn't recognize. Then she stared at her hands and wondered if the man smelled the fish that lingered.

"What's this?"

"I want to return it."

He untied the bag and looked inside. "Got a receipt?"

She shook her head. "I just bought it a couple of weeks ago."

"If you don't have a receipt—"

"I don't want cash. I just want store credit. To exchange it for something else."

"Was there something wrong with it?"

"No. I never opened it."

Before he could respond, she hurried to an aisle in the back by the pharmacy, found what she needed, and returned to the front. A woman the age of her mother stood at the register, leafing through dollar bills, a plastic rain bonnet on her head. A greeting card sat on the counter, and the woman handed the bills to the man and turned, spotting what Melissa held in her hands before she could hide it.

The woman looked up at Melissa, pursed her lips and shook her head, and took the greeting card and the receipt and left.

“I want to exchange it for this,” Melissa said, putting the pregnancy test kit beside the unused home perm box she’d bought. “I think they’re about the same price.”

The man stared at the two items before him as if he were trying to figure out some complicated mathematical theorem. Or was it a postulate? Melissa hadn’t done well in geometry and had opted for consumer math instead of algebra. Unless some miracle happened, she wasn’t going to college. And if you weren’t going to college, who needed algebra or calculus?

The man looked up at her again and started to say something but held back. When he’d done his calculation, he said, “You’re four dollars short.”

She dug in both pockets of her cutoffs. She knew there were no bills there, just coins. She placed eighty-seven cents on the counter. “That’s all I’ve got.”

“You’re still short.”

Someone pushed a cart behind her. She looked at the cashier and could tell from his eyes she needed to fish or cut bait. She scraped the coins into her hand and grabbed the perm box, thrust it into the plastic bag, and walked out the door.

The rain came harder and sideways now, and she stood under the eave in the only dry spot on the sidewalk, in the white glow of fluorescence. She only needed three dollars and change but at the moment it felt like three million.

She could go back and ask Brian, but he'd want to know what it was for and besides, she knew he didn't have any money by the fact that he had no cigarettes left.

The door opened and a ding sounded behind her. Then someone said, "Excuse me."

Melissa turned.

"I couldn't help overhearing." A woman had her purse open, fishing for something. She pulled out a five-dollar bill and held it out. "I hope this will help you."

"You don't have to do that," Melissa said as she took the bill.

"I know. It's just something I feel the . . . well, I want you to have it. And I want you to know that He sees you."

Melissa looked behind her, then back at the woman. "Who sees me?"

She smiled and put a hand on Melissa's shoulder. Then she walked into the rain.

Melissa went back inside the store.

When Melissa came out of the bathroom, she found Brian watching wrestling on the TV he'd been given for Christmas when he was fourteen. She stood beside it, and when he didn't look at her, she turned it off.

"Hey, I was watching that!"

When he looked at her face, he stopped protesting and sat up. "What's wrong? You look like a muskrat, by the way."

“Thanks. That’s a sweet thing to say.”

“I just meant your hair. Where’d you go, anyway?”

“Drugstore.” She sat beside him and held out the pregnancy test. “I bought this.”

“Is it a thermometer?”

She handed it to him and he held it closer, studying the section where the test showed a plus sign.

“It’s a thing you pee on to tell you if you’re pregnant.”

His mouth dropped and he couldn’t take his eyes off of it. After what seemed like an ice age he said, “Why would you need to buy this?”

“Maybe if I give you a little more time, you’ll figure it out?”

He looked at her, then back at the object in his hand. “You think you might be pregnant?”

“I’ve been sick to my stomach every morning for the past week.”

“What does it say?”

“Says you’re going to be a father.”

The air seemed to leave the room for both of them.

“Whoa.”

“Is that all you can think to say?”

He looked at her again. “I didn’t . . . I mean . . . I don’t know what to say. What do you want me to say?”

She saw him all blurry now, like in one of those hall-of-mirrors rooms at the county fair. She wiped her eyes

and tried to stay in control, but her chin quivered and she couldn't stop it, and she hated that. She'd sat in the bathroom for a half hour after the test turned positive while a wave of emotion and fear swept over her. What she hadn't prepared for in all of that was the unexpected feeling that crept up on her. Something she couldn't tell Brian.

Brian put the pregnancy test on the TV tray by the couch. Both had been given to him by a friend who was going to haul them to the dump, along with a kitchen table and a broken refrigerator. Brian had taken them and had duct-taped the broken table leg and wedged it in the corner of the kitchen so it would stand.

"What are you going to do?" he said.

Melissa pulled her head back, then looked away. Her face felt hot all of a sudden and she clenched her fists. She'd had fights with Brian, but she'd never felt this way before. "What am I going to do? Is that your question?"

"Yeah, I mean, what do you want me to ask you?"

"How about, what are *we* going to do? You're part of this, you know."

"I know that." His eyes got soft and he reached out to touch her shoulder, but she moved away. The couch cushions sagged. She grabbed the edge and pulled herself up, leaning against the wall with her arms crossed.

"We're not ready, Melissa. I don't have a job. I'm behind on the rent. There's no food. I'm not going to

my mom for help and I know you don't want to go to your dad."

He was right about all of that. And there were more reasons they weren't ready and shouldn't be having a baby. But Melissa couldn't shake the feeling she'd had in the bathroom. Mixed in with all the fear and shame and feeling stupid for not being more careful and a hundred other bad thoughts was a single word that rose to the surface like a rainbow trout in her heart.

Mother.

She was going to be a mother. And there was something about that word, something about the concept, that made her feel alive. That tingle inside surprised her. On one hand, she felt like a million bricks had collapsed on top of her. She couldn't breathe. And there was nobody she could tell because she knew what they'd think, what they'd say.

At the same time—and it was the strangest thing to feel this way—she sensed there was something good growing inside her. But every time she thought of that, another brick would fall and snap her back to reality.

"What do you think we should do, then?" Brian said.

"I don't know."