



The
SURFACE
of
WATER

A NOVEL

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He was, wasn't he?

The question assaulted Trish Card again as she hurried up Calvary's wide staircase. The megachurch lifted around her like the dome of sky. She hadn't known. Her nerves tingled. Someone was staring. Her looks. Again. She had stopped reacting whenever a startled gaze snagged her face. One such glance was dragging like a net over her now. She raked her light hair forward. Her hair eclipsed enough. It didn't matter.

It did.

Her head bowed as if her prayers had begun. Had they ever stopped? God had said he loved orphans. Maybe that explained the small, unexplainable flashes of light that sometimes dazed her. Then again, wasn't that what today, Sunday, was about—and next Friday? How would she wait an entire week for the interview—here?

She grasped the banister. It was cool and hard and as self-important as ancient granite. She shook her head. How else could she explain it, but the wild holy, the mystery? To be in final consideration to assist *the* famous Pastor Matthew Goodman. Did it mean she would get the job? Might it mean—what?

The steps wore a cloak of carpeting that muted footfall. People everywhere. The men in designer suits and haircuts cradled their wool coats. The March wind still clawed. And their skin. All so white, like hers. The wives in tight dresses or pantsuits were, again like her, too thin to have real bodies, no soft curve of hip or buttock. María would chide them, urging on them another *tamal*.

One short-haired woman was holding court near the top step. Trish dropped her hand off the banister to circle wide. Too late. The

woman inventoried her face before scanning her cheap clothes and shoes. The queen's gaze tightened; her perfect brows tipped downward with the inevitable surprise. Well, she'd never play their game.

The staircase transitioned to a second foyer where five sets of French doors directed flow. After a greeter foisted a bulletin into her hand, Trish drifted to the leftmost doorway beyond where the balcony swooped downward; she clutched the railing and moved along the wall onto a peninsula that narrowed into two theater-style seats. The seats hung over the stage, curbed by a wooden rail. A bird's-eye view. A blackbird's?

She sank into the shadows. The press of thousands had nearly sprung her, but she had to see him, and here in the shadows, she could. The seat was comfortable, although the wooden armrests were high.

The stage circled below like a half pie, its rounded edge touching the first of three steps to the sanctuary floor. Almost directly beneath her swayed musicians while a drummer sat apart. Crowds of leafy plants hid what needed hiding, and on the far side was a clear podium waiting. Like her.

Murmurs hummed over plunks of music. Ten thousand gathered week after week. He was that powerful? Strange. His internet sermons hadn't interested her. Pastor Matthew Goodman seemed to know little about things that mattered.

Unlike Father Martinez, who stood in the tiny church on Conklin beneath the carved sign of Micah 6:8 . . . *and what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with—*

"Can I sit here?" The boy startled her. His finger jabbed toward the next seat, his dark eyes bright.

"For sure!" She lifted her purse. Andrés at eight? She imagined María's son. The dark lashes, yeah, but this version had food. He glanced up at her once, his feet swinging. Behind him, an older woman nodded.

Lights lowered as a spotlight cinched the musicians. Her heart thudded while the service clicked through singing, announcements,

singing. Trish hunched forward, her elbows digging into her knees. When would he arrive? The musicians lowered their instruments. Now? Her pulse increased. She sat forward, her nails pricking her palms.

In the wall beyond the podium, a small door opened. A hand blanched beneath the spotlight. A cuff. A sleeve. A shoulder. Matthew Goodman emerged whole. Her breathing paused. His light hair shone. She couldn't see his face, and she needed to. Trish pressed forward. Her seat was too far away.

He approached the podium while his face snapped onto the enormous screens. Over the actual man hung his large image: the side-parted hair, the light brows, the cheekbones. His white teeth gleamed. His lashes seemed too dark. Makeup? It was TV. His eye contact was calculated, timed. He was a man who appeared for all the world like a high-priced performer.

“Friends—”

Her breathing started hard. What made him sure about that? The pounding in her ears increased.

“We have gathered together once more—”

On the screen, his lips continued to move though she couldn't hear. The drumming was too loud. She melded to her seat, her arms akimbo, but the chair held her forward, imprisoned. His sharp cheekbones. Her fingers opened and lifted to her face. Weren't those cheekbones her cheekbones? His light hair, hers? Trish strained against the unused word, but it broke through.

Dad?

Goodman resisted opening the car door and thought again of Living Waters, the empty shore too far away. He leaned over his steering wheel and smelled leather. Beyond the BMW hood was the green sign proclaiming, *Reserved Parking for Pastor Goodman*. A sparrow's small token had changed his name to *Goo-man*.

He grimaced. Who could he tell? No one. Half his staff would rush to erase it. Too bad. It was, well, funny.

At lunch he had planned away summer. He should be grateful. He straightened. *The Goo-man life*. Few had it. Besides, today he had time for tennis after he approved the new hire. He would keep the interview short. Keene had told him what he needed about the new girl. A lawyer would know. The indoor court was reserved. No reason to dawdle.

However, first . . . duty.

His fingers closed around his suit coat, and in one motion, Goodman pushed himself out while pulling it on, his momentum building, carrying him over sidewalk to welcome mat to staff door, where he entered Calvary Community Church. The foyer stretched high above him, giving him a sense of the Cascades around Rainier. Butterscotch paint warmed the space, and his feet tapped a purposeful beat on the cement floor.

The receptionist's office? Empty. Dorothy, gone. He reached into his pocket for the tiny pill and swallowed before vaulting forward to push the elevator button. The doors swished open. A megachurch with a glass elevator. Who would have believed this? Not Father.

The elevator lifted him over the foyer's book corner, where a four-color banner hung featuring his headshot. His hair was perfectly trimmed, its rebellious wave tamed, and the deepening lines over his cheekbones erased.

Upstairs, Goodman hurried to his suite's private door. Inside, black-framed glossies dotted the wall over the leather couch. He crossed the

Oriental rug, his fingers gliding over the smooth polish of his mahogany desk. What a gift, the desk. Although when he slid between it and the back wall, pressure clamped over him.

He swiveled into his chair and buzzed. “Afternoon, Sarah. How was lunch? Are we ready?”

“Yes, Pastor Goodman,” Sarah said, “we’ll be right in.”

Goodman planted his feet and faced the adjoining door. The handle turned, the door opened, the room inhaled new air.

Dark-haired Sarah entered first, pregnancy thickening her waist, and behind her followed a blond. A pretty young woman. No. Beautiful. The interviewee strode into his office, tall, slender, pert-breasted. Goodman stood. No smile moved her lips; her eye contact was unwavering. Her poise, the seriousness of it, surprised him. Few around him were calm.

Her features were molded in a curving, symmetrical way: the cheeks, the deep-set gray eyes, the rounded forehead. Her skin shone like a new pearl, muted, and pink-white. Her hair waved well below her shoulders, nearly hiding a long and slender neck.

Too bad her suit appeared cheap and her purse—vinyl? At this level, image mattered. He shifted a brow at Sarah.

“Pastor Goodman, may I introduce you to Patrisha Card?”

“Patrisha, good to meet you.” He shook a warm hand. Her gaze remained unwavering. “You’ve come highly recommended.”

“Thank you.” An alto voice carried the words.

“Why don’t you have a seat there? Sarah, would you join us?”

Sarah wrestled into the second chair while the new girl sat quickly, bending forward to release her purse. She settled back, holding a spiral notebook. It wasn’t her ring finger wearing a gold band, but its neighbor. Not married? It could cost her the position, but then again, maybe not. He was fifty-five now. The rules should change; the church shouldn’t treat him like a hormonal teen all his life.

Leather creaked beneath him. His back curved into his chair, his ankle resting on his knee. “So,” he began, “you’re from Chicago?”

“I am.” Stillness emanated from her. Her hands clasped loosely over the notebook while Sarah fiddled with her hair.

“Travel much?”

“Only here.” She tapped her temple. “I love reading.”

“Wonderful,” Goodman said. “This habit does much for our spiritual growth. What do you read?”

“Everything.”

“Which explains your writing.” He reached for his readers. “Your application essay was well written, especially your confession of faith, though I’d like to hear more.”

“Sure.” Her first smile appeared and brought with it a dimple. “It was in 1988, nearly twenty years ago now. I was seven. My neighbor, Mrs. Hape, took me downtown to an enormous building. Mom had to work, so—”

Goodman pretended to flick something off his pants and glanced at the Maurice Lacroix on his wrist. He needed to know her story, but the whole saga? At this rate, he’d be late. Unclaimed courts were fair game.

“Sorry, I should get to the point.”

“Oh.” His ankle slid off his knee. “No, no, please.”

“You’re busy. Anyway, it was a revival. The preacher was your dad, the late Pastor Goodman.”

He suppressed a grimace. People always broke such news to him as if organ music should rise in the background and crest. Goodman cleared his throat. “Thank you. Go on.”

“I’ll always be grateful to him. Always. I had sensed God. Mom had taught me, but for some reason, that was the day.”

“Tell me about your background, your education.”

She seemed to measure him. “I studied . . . journalism.”

Sarah’s movement caught his eye. His lips pursed. “So, you’re a reporter?”

“A writer. I’d like to do a book—someday. Maybe.”

“It’s a wonderful experience, getting published. Well, mostly. Those rewrites can get old.” His head tilted. “So, you have a story?”

“My first job after college was as a paralegal.”

“Journalism major to a paralegal? Was that a jump?”

“There’s a connection.” The gray eyes wouldn’t blink. “Justice. I love justice. Journalism and law attract people passionate about it.”

Young people were so idealistic. “Those professions also attract many who aren’t.”

“Sure, like any profession. Police, teachers . . . pastors.”

Sarah inhaled. Her head lifted. Again, her calm stare. The girl had hit a blistering return. How often did that happen? Never. She was strong—very. Goodman smiled. “Touché. Yes, there are many who shouldn’t be pastors, I agree. However, why not journalism?”

“Starting jobs paid around eighteen thousand less than a paralegal.”

“Money pressures, then?”

Her relentless gaze faltered. Her fingers began to work the notebook edge. Was this finally a show of nerves?

“I had some responsibilities.”

“College debt?”

“No.” The voice sank.

Goodman waited. Her appearance offered a clash: beautiful face—ugly suit. That strange and forceful quiet. Interesting and irritating. Why was she slow to explain? Was it a child out of wedlock? If so, the entire hiring process could be jeopardized.

“My mom. She was ill.” Her expression flattened. “Cancer. The first time I was just a toddler. She lost her job. Insurance. There was a lot of debt—the treatments. It was just us.”

Ah, insurance. That was a relief—not a morality issue. He tossed his readers onto the desk. “I’m sorry. Insurance would be hard to replace.”

“Not hard.” Her lips tightened. “Impossible. Completely. They don’t let you. The system doesn’t care. They say they do; they don’t.”

“And your mother?”

“Dead.” She slung him one glance then, one brief glance out the tops of her eyes. But he saw something in it. Something deep. Something hot. Something angry. A crackling sensation passed through him. This young woman had fire.

“I am sorry.” Goodman waited one beat. “So, now you’re leaving your paralegal profession? Why?”

“Personal reasons.”

He shifted toward Sarah, who was staring as if lightning had struck—or should. “Sarah, you may leave now. Thank you.”

Sarah’s fixed expression vanished. “I’ll be at my desk if you need anything.” She struggled up and left the adjoining door half open.

“Now—” Goodman glanced at the résumé. “Patrisha—”

“Friends call me *Trish*.”

Friends? That rare thing? He left his chair for the window.

Thick glass silenced the boulevard below. His face lifted. A gull was riding the wind with its gray wings stretched like a full sail. Its yellow beak opened, a black mark on its bill. Goodman imagined its call, a raucous tenor, and the horizon-bordered lake with its canopy of sky and space. He smelled the breeze and felt beneath his feet the liquid movement of sand.

One swim. That’s all he wanted. To let cool waters cover him.

Well? Not this summer. An odd sensation scaled his throat. Fatigue?
Loneliness.

The gull disappeared. From the other office came the muffled clicking of Sarah’s keyboard. Goodman turned and met the gaze of Patrisha Card. The gray eyes were watchful, the face somber. The soul beyond her eyes had age.

“A ring-billed gull.”

“You know birds?” She appeared surprised. “Not everyone knows gulls—even common ones.”

“An—an old habit. You too?”

“Yeah.” Her gaze pierced him. “An old habit.”

Goodman returned to his chair. “So, Patrisha—”

“Trish.”

“Trish. I need to get to know you here to make the best decision possible. Can you please tell me why you want to leave your current job?”

Her gaze veered beyond him. “Sexual harassment. Got tired of it.”

“Oh.” He glanced away. Goodman clutched his armrest for a moment before leaning toward her. “Is there anything you want to ask me? Any questions you might have?”

Her face went soft as she inventoried his, and he noticed again the room’s close silence. Her intensity woke him like the notes of a cello, low and melancholy. She swallowed. “No.”

Goodman stood as if released. Who of late had been this . . . what? As Trish bent to gather her things, her head revealed an unevenly drawn part. Nancy Ueland could take care of the hair and the suit.

As she stood, Goodman extended his hand. Hers rested in his, its bones fragile and still. Such loss at a young age—what might that do? “I’m sorry about your mother,” he said. “My sister died years ago. Father, eleven years ago in ’95. Mother, longer. I still can’t get used to it.”

“You never do,” she said simply, staring at their hands. “Loss is dynamic. Its meaning changes year by year.”

Loss as dynamic? Her insight seared. Into his mind flashed his parents’ amber hairbrushes, an old-fashioned matching set. His mother’s existed alone on her dresser while his father’s had traveled Africa. His hand plunged into his pocket. “You have great letters of recommendation. Carl Keene, who you know is a Calvary member and our lawyer, couldn’t say enough good things about you. I’d like to invite you aboard. Can you start Tuesday? We take Mondays off. Oh, and Paul Lemont called about salary and benefits? His office supplies your phone and laptop.”

The dimple returned to the left cheek. “Thank you!”

“Patrish—Trish—I know you won’t disappoint.” Another sensation brushed over him then. Trish was looking at him from behind something he couldn’t yet see through.

Nonsense. He only needed some tennis.



Trish punched her brakes. The Lumina screeched and stopped as the jogger thumped his hand on her hood. Fright torqued his brows. She

raised her palm; he raised his finger before wheeling back onto the curb. What was she doing? She was going to kill someone! She had to stop driving—she had to think. Ahead beckoned a gas station.

She parked two spaces from a female cashier who leaned on the brick, fingers cradling a smoke. The cashier pushed a Converse-clad foot off the wall, smoke leaving her lips. The girl was young, not eighteen. Dyed black hair drained color from her face.

For a moment Trish's hands clenched the wheel, her forearms quivering. She released her hands and turned them upward. Sweat sketched their folds. She slid them against her skirt, streaking the gray polyester. How dumb. How many suits did she have? Trish rubbed the streak.

This could be too hard.

Energy had surged through her as she followed Sarah toward the office door; then it had seemed as if an hour slumped by from her first step toward the large desk that stood like an Old Testament altar.

She had stared. She needed to stare. She needed to take him in, to see him whole, to see him as he was. The mouth moved, the blue eyes blinked, the hands lifted and lowered in sync—all choreographed, the famous voice overlaid. Matthew Goodman, in a navy sport coat and an open-collared shirt, was no longer posed but 3D, moving, and alive.

She knew the moment she had the job—when that one real smile had reached his eyes. “Touché,” he had said. And for a moment the man inside the man flickered to life.

But wait, had she made any sense at all? She must have, but what had she said? She had to remember. She had to track each package of vowels and consonants her tongue delivered. She had to catalog things. No lost deliveries allowed.

This was going to be tricky.

Laughter ricocheted out of her. It rang too high; she clamped her lips together. No use having an attendant think her *loco*. She rubbed her face. *Tricky*. That was putting it mildly.

Trish closed her eyes. All she could see was Goodman—the suit, the office, the money. As if all that money was for him. As if places

like Trentwood Apartments and Parkfield weren't neighbors. No. What was she thinking? Trentwood was a universe away.

He was flashy still, a possible womanizer. He could have used his looks, although he appeared older. Even his broadcasts hadn't shown this, but he was midfifties. It was the picture's fault. Trish fished through her blazer pocket and lifted out a perfectly cut rectangle of paper. Tiny dots formed a fading picture of young Matthew Goodman, whose light hair fell into a wave below the precise side part. On the picture's upper edge remained a ghost of pencil that must have guided the scissors. Her thumb rested on the faint lead.

She began to pocket it when the cashier tossed the cigarette and turned to lower a heel against it. The unzipped hoodie disclosed a swelling abdomen. Her shoulders stooped as if her backbone hadn't hardened before life began its downward push. No ring, probably no insurance, and now a baby whose delivery would cost \$5,000 to \$10,000. Prenatal visits? Not likely. The girl might be in trouble. The attendant moved slack-kneed into the station. Trish reached for her wallet. She had only a ten; she had to start carrying more.

As her hand traveled to the car door, light caught the gold band. Her fingers straightened. The mannish band showed its wear. She flipped her hand. The band widened to hold a square tiger eye stone with its strands of brown and amber—like Andrés's beautiful irises.

What did it mean? How could she be sure? If she was wrong, a whole lot of bad could happen. And if she was right?

Another photograph etched itself in her memory. A black-and-white print of a young woman standing with her weight on her left foot, sunglasses on her head, light hair caught low in pigtails. Trish twisted the thick ring.

Was he? Maybe. If he was, she'd go after him. She would fly after him, yeah, a blackbird after a hawk.