Too Young for This

LAURA KRAUSE



CHRISTIAN LIGHT
PUBLICATIONS

Copyrighted material. May not be reproduced without permission from the publisher.



To Bob.

We've loved each other since we
were young. Let's grow old together.

Copyrighted material. May not be reproduced without permission from the publisher.

Contents

Chapter 1 1

Chapter 2 15

Chapter 3 29

Chapter 4 39

Chapter 5 53

Chapter 6 63

Chapter 7 77

Chapter 8 93

Chapter 9 103

Chapter 10 113

Chapter 11 125

Chapter 12 137

Chapter 13 151

Chapter 14 163

Chapter 15 177

Copyrighted material. May not be reproduced without permission from the publisher.



One

So they got married. It felt that sudden, looking back on it—barely awake from childhood, hardly making a logical plan.

Wesley did some stretches, so he could get his blood flowing and make it through a day of work. Today he did this in the bathroom of their rental house and almost cracked his head on the sink when he bent to touch his toes. Bad idea.

Standing upright, he stared at his face in the mirror. Their church required beards, so he had a brown beard that tended to curl. He kept it trimmed fairly close, or he'd look like a backwoodsman. He brushed his hair and tended his beard.

Not that he minded being married. Valley was a good, sweet wife—better than he deserved. But he hadn't been prepared for the burdens that fell on his shoulders. He'd known a man must provide for his family, of course, but that hadn't worried him at all.

Copyrighted material. May not be reproduced without permission from the publisher.

He could build a shed, saw logs, or even milk cows with any of the other men at church. He'd been ignorant, though. Life was plenty expensive, especially since they'd moved with the church outreach.

And there were other problems. Church issues, maintenance and repair issues, time and no-time issues. Some crept up on him and wore at his nerves. Others blindsided him. He'd had no idea how much he hadn't understood about life. The problem with ignorance is that you can't see it until it's leaving.

He opened the bathroom door and padded the few steps into the living room with sock feet. His work boots sat neatly next to the sofa.

Valley hummed over the sizzling skillet while she made breakfast. He could visualize her bustling around the little kitchen with its few counters and cabinets, its old farmhouse style, and its old farmhouse equipment. She didn't mind it, she said. And she truly did revel in the ancient linoleum and the gas stove that needed to be lit with a match. No, the thing she really longed for, the lack she grieved, wasn't in his power to give. She wanted a baby. Two years of marriage and no baby.

Wesley picked up his Bible from the end table, closed his eyes, and prayed the same prayer he always started the day with. But as the swirling black clouds of depression fogged his thinking, he wished for more. He needed answers to life. What had he and Valley been put on earth to do? Why were they

Copyrighted material. May not be reproduced without permission from the publisher.

married, members of a good church, descended from Christian parents? What was life about? What was Christianity about, and what did God want from him?

He closed his eyes again. "Are You there, God? I sure need to hear from You today."

"Breakfast is ready, honey!" Valley called from the kitchen. She peeped around the doorjamb. "Remember, I've got to take Sister Linda to her doctor's appointment in Center this morning. Your lunch is on the counter. I'll set your breakfast on the table, then I've got to go."

He went into the kitchen. His wife knew he was struggling, but they hadn't talked much about it yet. "Valley?" He hesitated as his doubts fought for expression. "Have you ever wondered . . . I mean . . . how do we know, really know, that we believe rightly about God? How do we know He's good?"

She set his plate on the table, slipped on her shoes, and gave him a departing kiss. "Food tastes good," she said.

"Huh?"

"It could be gross." Valley grinned at him. "Think about it." She grabbed her purse and hurried out the door.

Wesley stared after her. No wonder he'd married her. She intrigued him. When she was down because they didn't have children, she was *rock bottom*. But when she was up, she was bright, sprightly. Intelligent. And always, she made him think. He should have expected as much, marrying a born schoolteacher.

Copyrighted material. May not be reproduced without permission from the publisher.

He walked to work ten minutes later, striding between the rural East Texas highway and the tall pines toward the lumber mill owned by one of the church brothers. Valley thought God was good because He made food taste good? A grin started at the side of his mouth. She was so childlike sometimes. But it was undoubtedly true.



Justin trudged home from work under the hot Mississippi sun. August felt like blazes, even after five. Man! The heat almost made him sick. He raked his fingers through his hair, then wiped his sweaty hands on his factory uniform shirt.

He pulled out his phone to call his wife. "Hey, Deanne. It's gonna take me fifteen minutes to walk home in this heat. Could you pick me up?"

Deanne's voice was slow, fuzzy. "I don't know . . . I don't think so . . ."

Justin swore. "You're high again, aren't you? I thought you wanted to get off that stuff, Deanne! C'mon, babe, we can't have kids like you want until you drop the habit."

Deanne mumbled something about forgetting—maybe tomorrow. He disconnected the call with a jab. No use talking when she was stoned out of her mind. While he waited at the crosswalk of a busy intersection, he saw a low-riding orange pickup truck turn onto the thoroughfare. Anger boiled up

Copyrighted material. May not be reproduced without permission from the publisher.

inside him. It was Zeus, his wife's dealer. Probably just leaving their shack of a house.

The orange truck honked, and Zeus shot out an arm in an obscene gesture as he passed. Justin returned the sign. It was stupid of him to make an enemy out of a drug dealer, but that creep was ruining his life! He didn't just provide the dope, he pushed it. If one of his clients stopped ordering, he would "happen by" with a cheap deal or a free high. So obliging.

Justin scowled and jogged through the crossing when the signal changed. He didn't know how to help Deanne—he was still a teenager. What would he know? They had no money to move away from Zeus's beat. His dad couldn't help; he didn't have any money either—or any home, for that matter. Last time Justin had seen him, he'd been staying at a shelter. And Deanne would rather live on the street than go to her family for anything. He was fresh out of hope.

Where was God in all of this? Justin could barely remember his mom, but she had told him about Jesus, that Jesus loved him. Was it true? If he could only find someone to tell him how to find God, someone safe to trust! Then he scoffed at himself. Like that could happen in this gang-ridden neighborhood. Right there on the street near his house, Justin felt the tears rising. He sure could use some hope.

Copyrighted material. May not be reproduced without permission from the publisher.

Valley listened to dear Sister Linda talk about her pre-marriage days as a nurse as they drove toward home. Her doctor visits seemed to bring that phase of her life into clear focus.

"I used to visit elderly people in their homes. Now look at me! I'm older than some of the people I used to care for!" Linda laughed as she tried to settle her hair neatly under her veil. "Is my hair still in place? Lying on an exam table makes it feel like it's falling down."

"You look normal to me," Valley assured her. "How many years did you work as a nurse?"

The trip passed quickly as they chatted. When she got back into her car after helping Linda into her house, however, Valley's thoughts immediately returned to Wesley. She hoped he would make it through this time of questioning.

They'd gotten married young. He'd been twenty-one, and she had been twenty. How could they have known how draining life could be? After all, they were Christians from Christian homes. Wesley's parents had come into the Mennonite faith before he was born, and her family had a Plain heritage as long as her arm. They must have assumed that they had life by the horns.

They had encountered the usual small rubs of marriage. Wesley could get irritated, and she could get emotional and even controlling. When she'd called her mom to whine, her mother had needed to set her straight. Embarrassing.

But her real trial had been the monthly rise and fall of hope. Valley longed for children of her own. Probably she'd made life

Copyrighted material. May not be reproduced without permission from the publisher.

hard on Wesley whenever her own dream of motherhood got smashed. It had sent her into the same kind of questioning that Wesley was facing now. How many times had she cried out to God, wondering if He even heard her?

It had been a painful process, just to come to the realization that she still believed in God. More than almost anything, she wanted Wesley to believe too. But he had to go through that process for himself. That's why she hadn't wanted to answer his questioning with a sermonette. Faith didn't happen from being told what to believe.

Valley unlocked the front door and let herself into the house. It was quiet and a little warm, since they usually turned the air up when they left the house. "Well now," she spoke aloud as she adjusted the cool air on the mini-split, "we are such babies in the faith. Haven't we grown at all since we first became Christians?"

Valley grabbed the Bible on the end table and sat on the couch, her feet tucked under her. She was starting to read through the Scriptures again, not just to complete a program this time, but to find out what God really had to say about Himself and His dealings with mankind. It was shocking to realize that she had believed all the doctrines of the church simply because she had been taught them. It was high time to discover them from God's Word for herself. She and Wesley should have figured all of this out before they even thought about getting married. But they'd had no idea how immature

Copyrighted material. May not be reproduced without permission from the publisher.

they were. Valley turned to the Bible reading chart she was using and started reading.



That evening Wesley walked down the forested back road hand in hand with his wife. The setting sun gleamed in splinters through pine needles and hackberry leaves. If they stopped and listened, they would hear rabbits and squirrels in the dense underbrush. True, they would hear the muffled sounds of traffic from the highway as well, but it seemed far off.

"Do you really doubt God then?" Valley prompted, after he'd left a long pause.

"I don't know. I can talk myself into believing in Him—there is evidence enough—but couldn't I talk myself into pantheism too? Or Buddhism? I want the truth, not just cultural faith. And I *am not* just chafing at the church standard. I want to know who God is and what He wants from me." He felt the roughness of tears tightening his throat, and he swallowed hard.

Valley threw her arms around him. "That's what I love about you! I would be so destitute if I thought I was searching for God, and you didn't understand what I was bothered about."

Wesley smoothed her hair and wiped his eyes. It was a comfort, knowing Valley didn't despise him. Like a breath of hope, he realized that God had known they both needed a spiritual awakening and would help each other in their search.

Copyrighted material. May not be reproduced without permission from the publisher.

They turned to continue their walk. His work boots left deep prints in the dirt road; beside them, her footprints showed small and light. "I talked with Brother Albert today," Wesley said. "He was up at the mill."

"Yes?"

"I think we need some help, and he's someone I respect. We could talk with our parents, I suppose, but they're so far away. They'll worry. Albert's here, and we can discuss this face-to-face. I told him I'd like for us to talk with him and his wife, so he said they'd plan to have us over for supper soon. I expect she'll call you tonight or tomorrow. I'm ready for some answers. I know you are too."



They sat in Albert and Anna Kauffman's living room two days later. After eating supper together, Wesley felt somewhat relaxed, but it still wracked his nerves to address his doubts with other people. He wadded his handkerchief in his fist, then spread it on his knee. Then he mindlessly wadded it up again.

"Let's start with prayer," Albert suggested from his armchair. They all sat more upright and bowed their heads while he prayed. Then he turned to Wesley. "Wesley, why don't you express your reasons for asking for counsel, then Valerie can give her thoughts."

Copyrighted material. May not be reproduced without permission from the publisher.