

Chapter 2

The sky was overcast. It had been threatening rain, but none had fallen. Leila parked in the school lot, walked by the track, and skirted the soccer field before coming to the baseball diamond.

She spotted Earl on the bench with the team. It appeared that the game was about to begin. Other than Filstein the surveillance officer, with whom she exchanged nods, she did not immediately recognize anyone among the seventy or so in the bleachers. Then she saw Al Cypher. She thought he would have been on duty at the detention center. He tipped his hat and smiled. She nodded slightly and looked away.

Leila picked out a space near the middle aisle about halfway up, next to a couple with two children. She guessed they were the parents of one of the players. Between them sat a girl of about twelve. The man held a little girl on his lap.

“Excuse me; are you saving these seats for anyone?”

“You’re welcome to sit here,” replies the woman. “I don’t remember seeing you before. My name’s Harrietta. Do you come to these games often?”

“Mine’s Leila. This is my first time.”

“Leila. ... Leila. Your name is somehow familiar. This is my daughter Holly, and my daughter Hannah is there with my husband, Harold.”

Harold knows who she is. He leans forward, looking past Holly and Harrietta. “I don’t think we’ve actually met. I’m Harold Foster. Earl has told me about you.”

“I believe, sir, I owe you and your wife a huge thank-you for making your airplane available to Earl and me last night. It was the most fun I’ve ever had.”

“You’re Earl’s friend?” exclaims Harrietta. “I’m so glad to meet you! We were just now talking with Earl—just before you got here. He was telling us you gave him a flying lesson!”

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“That man surprises me sometimes with his sense of humor.”

“It’s pilot humor,” explains Harold. “He meant you surprised him with your performance.”

“I surprised myself! They were elementary maneuvers of course. Oh—did you see the sunset last night?”

“Where were we, Harold? Did you notice the sunset?”

“That would have been about 6:30. We got to church at 6:15, so we missed it.”

“Do you, by any chance, go to Adam Murphy’s church?” Leila asks her new friends.

“We certainly do,” replies Harrietta.

“I’m to be baptized by Pastor Murphy this afternoon.”

“Oh, that’s absolutely wonderful! Will it be at Earl’s beach?”

“Yes.”

“That’s awesome! Will Earl be there?”

“I think so.”

“We’ve been praying a long time for Earl.”

“I’ve been praying for him too, but only since Thursday night when God finally got my attention—thanks to Earl.”

“Oh, really? You mean ... the Lord used Earl?”

“He used a donkey once, so it’s possible,” puts in Harold.

“It was as unlikely as that,” continues Leila. “Earl took the piece that Pastor Murphy submitted for the religion column and made it better. Did you see it?”

“Yes, I read it,” admits Harold. “You’re right: it made a much bolder appeal than usual—and well written. I was going to mention it to Adam but forgot. So Earl wrote that?—the rascal! But I think he would have told me if he’d given in and gotten saved. He must have done it to honor his friend. That would be just like him.”

Play ball!

“Is there someone special on the team?”

“It’s our son, Homer,” replies Harrietta. “He’s our pitcher.”

Pitching for the home team is Homer Foster, number 11. And leading the batting order for the Hornets today is midfielder, number 58, Isabella Young.

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“He’s a fine-looking young man.”

“Thank you.”

Foster checks his sign, stretches. Here’s the pitch—over the plate! Strike one!

“Please excuse my ignorance: I’m afraid I’ve been cloistered away from the more important things in our community. Is Earl’s team all boys?”

Here’s the o-and-one pitch—a swing and a miss!—a sinker dropping over the plate. Strike two.

“It’s a boys’ team now. Earl’s the manager. They’ve won all but one game this year.”

“I’ve forgotten where the Hornets are from. The sports page isn’t one I read much.”

*Here’s the windup, and down it comes—another sinker, and ... it’s been called a strike! **Strike three!***

“Homer struck her out! Yea Homer! ... They’re from Herne. Homer calls them the Hernettes. Isabella is a fast runner; he did a good thing keeping her off the bases.”

Left hander Sonya Stern, number 23, is up next for Herne. Sonya plays first base. She’s also the Hornets’ team captain.

Here’s the windup, the pitch—there’s a swing and a hit!—a line drive to shortstop. Miles White, number 66, has it—he dropped the ball!—picks it up, throws to first It’s wide; Jackson Moore reaches—misses. ... She’s safe!

“What a pretty girl she is. Their team appears to be all girls.”

“It’s mostly girls. They do have some boys on the team, but I don’t see any today. They don’t seem to have any extra players.”

Amelia Young is stepping up, number 57. She plays left field for the Hornets. ... Amelia is Isabella’s sister.

One out now for the Hornets with a runner on first.

“She’s a powerful hitter,” declares Harrietta.

“And our team is called?”

“We’re the Lakeside Leaders. The team used to be sponsored by the restaurant. Originally, it was called the Lakeside Lions, but animal names had to go.”

“Samson would have liked the old name.”

Foster goes into the windup; here’s the pitch—over the plate at the knees. Strike one.

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“Who’s Samson?”

“That’s what I call Earl sometimes.”

“The Lions were before his time,” Harrietta informs her.

“He had the part of Samson in the play.”

Here’s the pitch—she swings: fly ball to right field! Number 49, Oliver Hernandez, has it. No! It’s over his head! He’s running it down. ... He’s got it, throws to second—too high! Homer scoops it up, throws to third. ... Safe!

Runners now on second and third: Amelia Young at second and Sonya Stern at third.

“The play—of course: Earl’s play. We couldn’t go this week, and now—I think we’ve missed it.”

“The opening was postponed until next week, and we won’t miss it after tomorrow, I’m sure. But Earl—I’m afraid”

“I know. There’s still time,” says Harrietta.

In the cleanup position for Herne is second basewoman, number 34, Scarlet Reed.

Still only one out with two runners on.

“This isn’t the only team in town, is it?”

“It’s the only one in the Autumn League. This is the final game of the season. The winner takes the championship.”

“That young lady looks as though she could hit the ball out of the field,” Leila remarks.

“If Homer gives her a chance, she will.”

*Here’s the windup, the pitch—a swing and a hit! Line drive to first base—in the glove of Jackson Moore! Scarlet is **out**. Amelia’s on her way to third; Moore throws to Evan Carter on third; Amelia going back to second. Carter throws home. Stern turns back. Catcher Logan Thomas drops the ball! Sonya Stern is safe on third, and Amelia is back on second.*

Two outs now for the Hornets.

Next in the lineup is Herne’s pitcher, Victoria Martin.

“Victoria is Homer’s girlfriend.”

*Stern leading off. Here’s the pitch—a fast ball, a swing, and a pop fly to short field! Second baseman Mason Rodriguez has it—had it—bounced out of his glove. He picks it up and throws to first. Stern **scores** crossing home base. Nice throw to first; Martin is **out**, and the Hornets go down at the end of the first half of the*

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first inning.

The score: the Hornets one; the Leaders zero.

“Now is our chance. *Go Leaders!*” cheers Harrietta, as the team trots in to the bench while the Hornets take their positions on the field. “I’m sure their catcher is a boy, though it’s hard to tell with so much armor on. I remember him now.”

Victoria Martin, number 21, is pitching for the Hornets today.

“Isn’t it a bit ironic?” asks Leila.

“You mean because Homer’s opponent is his girlfriend?”

“I wouldn’t have thought they could be serious.”

“About each other or the game?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s confusing. ... It’s impressive that you have that announcer.”

“It’s a requirement: in case any blind people are here.”

We’re at the second half of the first inning, and Oliver

Hernandez, number 49, leads the batting order for the Leaders.

“I had intended to attend the service at your church Thursday night. That was my crisis night. Then last night I had the flying date with Earl. Perhaps tonight I’ll be able to come.”

“There isn’t any service tonight. The church is being used for a secular concert. It’s really a shame. On this night of all nights. What was your crisis?”

“It’s a bit complicated—what led up to my reading the article in the paper. ... That is too bad about the concert. I’ll never hear Pastor Murphy preach. But I suppose Earl would not have wanted to go with me.”

*Martin winds up. Here’s the pitch to Hernandez—he swings! It’s an infield grounder to second base! Scarlet Reed has it—throws to first. ... Hernandez is **out**!*

“You should have been there last night. There were twenty-four new faces—all FSA employees and their families, if you can believe it.”

“Oh? ... That’s wonderful.”

Number 24, Mason Rodriguez, is next to bat for the Leaders with one out and no one on base.

“The chief executive officer—you know: the one sitting up there in those plush offices on the top floor of the Federal

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Building? By the way, I've never been up there, but my friend Dottie told me—she got it from her brother who used to work in maintenance; he's been all over the building—she said it has structural defects.

The pitch is low. Ball one.

I don't think I'd be comfortable working there, especially up on a high floor like that. The view is spectacular though. It's all windows with rich draperies, a thick carpet, a lounge—even has a private bathroom that is out of this world."

Leila nods, letting Harrietta know she understands.

Here's the pitch—low and outside. Ball two.

Two-and-o for Hernandez.

One out for the Leaders here in the bottom of the first inning.

"Anyway, the chief executive up there sent out a message to everyone in the building about the Rapture. It was a big surprise because religious speech in the workplace is strictly forbidden."

Leila nods her agreement.

Martin is taking her time, ... gets her sign, winds up. The pitch—outside. Ball three.

"All the FSA personnel were talking about it yesterday, trying to guess what will happen when word gets out to the Free Speech Regulators. Somebody will complain, I guarantee you that. But I guess the new honcho is well liked. I don't know anything about him—really haven't heard a thing. The paper won't mention goings-on in federal agencies of course."

Here's the three-zero pitch—a swing and a hit! ... Foul ball up on the wire.

Anyway, it made a big impact on a lot of the FSA employees, and a dozen of them showed up at our church last night along with some of their spouses and children. God moves in mysterious ways, doesn't he? Excuse me; I think Harold has been trying to say something."

Here's the windup. Martin delivers—a curve ball to the outside.

Ball four! Rodriguez walks to first.

Harrietta has leaned across Holly to her husband, who is whispering in her ear:

"She is the chief executive."

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“She is? She’s the chief FSA officer? Are you serious?”

“I’m serious.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I guess it didn’t seem to be relevant at first. I’m sorry.”

Leaders’ midfielder, number 48, Asher Cypher, is up next with one runner on base.

One out so far.

“Leila, I owe you an apology. Harold just told me you’re the chief executive. I’m so sorry.”

“I am too, really.”

“What do you mean?”

“It seems—it seems I’ve wasted my life.”

Martin looking—Rodriguez leading off first base; goes back. Here’s the pitch—a swing and a hard drive between short and third! Amelia Young goes after it in left field. Rodriguez is rounding second. Young has the ball, throws to Violet Torres at third; Rodriguez sliding—safe on third! Torres throws underhand to second. Cypher going back to first; Torres throws to first, and ... Cypher is safe!

Runners now on first and third—Asher Cypher on first and Mason Rodriguez on third.

Still one out for the Leaders.

“How can you say that? Anyone would give anything to be as successful as you are. I’m flabbergasted! I feel honored to be sitting here talking to you.”

“Thank you, Harrietta. But I liked it better before you knew. Can we go back to that and pretend I’m just that stranger who came to sit by you?”

“I don’t know. I’ll try. Are you sure?”

Leaders’ shortstop, Miles White, number 66, comes to bat.

“I’m sure. Thank you.”

*Martin winds up. The pitch—a swing, a grounder to short. Number 76, Abigail Wilson, picks it up and throws to catcher Henry Baker at home base; Mason Rodriguez is **out** at home. Baker throws to second—not in time; Cypher is safe.*

Two outs with two runners on base: Miles White on first and Asher Cypher on second.

Jackson Moore, number 13, is up next. He’s first baseman for

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the Leaders.

The pitch—low and inside. Ball one.

Low and outside. Ball two.

“Could Victoria be trying to load the bases for them?” Leila asks.

The pitch—low and inside. Ball three!

“Homer is up next. I can’t believe she’s doing this,” Harrietta confirms.

The pitch—high and outside, ball four! Jackson Moore walks, and the bases are loaded with two outs.

Homer Foster bats next. ... Homer is the captain of the team as well as being the starting pitcher today.

“Harrietta, I would give anything to have a son like that. I have no children. You have chosen a better way of life than I have.”

Harrietta puts her arm around Leila. They are both teary.

*Homer swings and hits! It’s a grounder between first and second. Emma Taylor, right field, is on it. She throws to first. Asher Cypher coming home. The throw to first is on time; Homer is **out**.*

And the Leaders go down with one run at the end of the first inning.

The score: the Hornets one; the Leaders one.

Amidst the general cheering by the Leaders fans, Harrietta stands, wiping her eyes with a tissue and shouting, “Good going, Homer!” She waves, trying to get his attention, but he goes back to the bench without looking up and sits down with his back to her.

“Leila, I’m worried that Homer isn’t ready for tomorrow.”

“Is he not a believer?”

“He’s not a believer in the Rapture.”

“Perhaps something will happen to change his mind.”

“It was a wonderful thing you did, writing that letter to your employees. I think some of them are going to be baptized today. In the next life—who knows? Maybe our spiritual children are the ones that matter. My Homer has turned his back on the faith he was raised in. I’m afraid he”

Leila puts her arm around Harrietta, who is taking out another

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tissue.

Earl Clark has finished his inter-inning pep talk to the players, who are on their way out to their positions. He has turned around and is peering through the fence, surveying the fans in the bleachers. He ignores Filstein but spots Al Cypher with obvious displeasure. He acknowledges Harold and Harrietta; he waves and flashes a smile meant for Leila. Sizing up the situation, he guesses that she has been paying less attention to the game than to her conversation with Harrietta. He frowns again at Al Cypher and turns his attention back to the field, shaking his head.

We're at the top of the second inning, and next in the Hornets' batting order is shortstop Abigail Wilson, number 76. Returning to the mound for the Leaders is Homer Foster.

"Leila?"

"Yes?"

"Tell me about Thursday."

*Here's the wind-up, the pitch—Wilson swings: pop foul outside the first-base line. First baseman Jackson Moore is going for it and ... has it! **Out!***

"Oh, it's a long, complicated story. ... He hasn't been very friendly since Thursday. I think he is upset over my becoming a Christian."

Violet Torres is up next. Don't be fooled, folks. This little girl can play ball.

One out for the Hornets at the top of the second inning.

"He never held it against anyone else as far as I know."

"Then I don't know. Apparently it's not about the Rapture because he doesn't believe in it."

Here's the pitch—there's the swing. It's a fly ball to left field! Grayson Green, number 47, was playing in close; he's going after it. It's rolling, rolling almost to the fence. Violet is going for second. Green picks it up—throws toward second base ... too late. Violet Torres is safe on second!

"He is a complex man. How did you meet him?"

"I first learned about him as someone who was in violation of the regulation requiring licensing for residential maintenance work."

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“He gives so much of his time to the community. The folks he helps can’t afford to pay him for what he does for them.”

“That’s the first thing that impressed me about him. I couldn’t allow someone to be prosecuted for benevolence, so I suspended the investigation and started going to his gym in order to get to know him in person. I discovered I wasn’t the only woman who admired him.”

“I know; several go there to be near him. But I’m sure none of them can compete with you.”

“I don’t know about that. I’m terribly naive about those things.”

“So you haven’t been married before?”

“Oh, no. I had never met a man I was thrilled about. In fact, I didn’t know what it was to be in love until this week.”

“He had a wife once, didn’t he?”

“Yes. She got involved with a minister. After that experience, he vowed to remain independent of women and religion. It seemed I had become the exception—until he met Evelyn Newton.”

“She came to our church and asked to be baptized. I heard she was here for the Reorganization. Nothing about her makes any sense.”

“She’s working temporarily for the Reorganization, on loan from the State Department—against her wishes.”

“Forced? How could they do that?”

“Good looks aren’t always a blessing. For Evelyn, it has meant extreme difficulties. That’s why she has a bodyguard. Apparently, someone connected with the Reorganization wanted to use her beauty and charm to advance public relations. She was allowed to keep her staff; they always travel together—her secretary, a driver, and the bodyguard.”

“I was wondering about the limousine. Now that part makes sense. Did she come on business or to see Pastor Murphy?”

“She came because she wanted to be baptized by Pastor Murphy. It was something she had wanted to do for a long time.”

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“He made it clear that they had been friends in the past.”

“When they were in high school together in Appleton, Wisconsin, Evelyn picked a book from her father’s library—from a forbidden shelf of books on arcane spirituality—and gave it to Adam to read. It was the type of thing that confuses evil with good, and he devoured it. Later, realizing what she had done, she repented of her disobedience and prayed for Adam’s salvation. When she learned that he had become a pastor, she decided she would like to have him baptize her someday.”

“It was Thursday when she came to church. You said Thursday was a crisis day for you.”

“It was Evelyn’s doing, really. Earl was quite taken with her. He invited her out to dinner, breaking a date with me, which I’m sure she didn’t know about because she and I had met for lunch that day and become friends. Nevertheless, when I found out what he had done—that’s when I went home and learned about the Rapture.”

“Hadn’t you heard about it before then?”

“No. I hadn’t been following the news. I found I could survive two or three weeks without daily doses of disappointment. But at that moment, nothing could have been worse than my disappointment in Earl. As an escape, I checked to see what had been going on in the world. The first mention of the Rapture controversy got my attention, and I was able to get uncensored details that could be interpreted only one way.”

“No one had told you? Not even Earl?”

“He did mention it in connection with the UN Bible confiscation scheduled for Monday, but I didn’t understand what he meant. I was preoccupied with other things and didn’t follow up with questions.”

“So you became a believer in the Rapture. Then what?”

“What is left? It makes everything else almost insignificant.”

“Then did you begin reading the Bible?”

“Yes. I had a Bible that someone had given me years ago. What really happened is, a faith I had in my childhood was

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reawakened.”

“Were your parents Christians?”

“Oh, no. Not at all. It was through programs on satellite TV that I learned of Jesus. I was an only child born into a Muslim culture, and my parents, while not devout about their religion, were strongly anti-Christian. When I tried to tell my mother about our Savior, she took my computer and TV away.”

“Then did they make you study Islam?”

“My parents were quite secular. My mother had become an atheist. I was young when it happened, and I acquired a fear of religion as a result. ... I was beaten. No, I was not forced to study the religion of my country.”

“And where is that?”

“Lebanon. We lived in Beirut. I came to this country for college and did an internship with the FSA in Washington DC, after which I was hired full time.”

“Do your parents still live in Beirut?”

“They were both killed in a bombing.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For the first time I feel that I belong somewhere besides the FSA—Earl, Pastor Adam, Evelyn, and now you. I never thought I needed a family before. It has happened so suddenly.”

The score at the bottom of the second inning: the Hornets three; the Leaders one.

“What happened to the second inning? The Hornets scored two more points when I wasn’t looking.”

“You were very attentive to my story.”

Starting off for the Leaders, we have number 35, Evan Carter. Victoria Martin is back on the mound, pitching for the Hornets.

Martin stretching. Here’s the pitch—Carter swings! Strike one, a curve ball.

“It was worth it.”

Victoria is ready. The pitch—there’s a hit, a grounder to left infield. Shortstop Miles White is on it—throws to first with Carter sliding in. ... He’s safe!

Number 22 is up next, catcher Logan Thomas.

Martin winds—a fast ball. Strike! Thomas missed the inside

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*curve. Carter is stealing second. Baker throws to Martin; Martin to Scarlet Reed at second base. ... Carter is sliding in; Reed's foot is there first, and Carter is **out**!*

One strike now for Logan Thomas.

“Leila, speaking of new families, did you hear what happened at the Lakeview? On Tuesday around lunchtime, everyone there was instantly baptized in the Holy Spirit.

There's the pitch—strike two.

A new church family was born, and now they meet every evening at six for dinner and Bible study.

Victoria eying the batter. She delivers—a change-up. There's a bunt off to the left—the catcher has it, throws to Martin; she throws to first. ... Thomas is safe!

Pamela Evans was there, and they say that Clio—you know, the waitress? Well, she saw a light surrounding Pamela, and it was like an angel had appeared.

Grayson Green batting next. Number 47. Grayson anchors the bottom of the Leaders' batting lineup.

One out now for the Leaders.

Since then Clio has been on fire for the Lord. Apparently, she always loved history because she immediately delved into the Old Testament, and now she's teaching the adults while Pamela teaches the children.”

*There's the pitch—a swing and a grounder between second and first. Scarlet Reed is on it—Thomas going by on his way to second. Reed throws to first. ... Green is **out** at first!*

Two outs for the Leaders. One man on base.

We're back to the top of the lineup: Oliver Hernandez goes to bat.

“Harrietta, may I ask you a Bible question about the day after tomorrow?”

... ball one.

“Okay, but maybe you should ask Harold. ... Go ahead. I'll ask him for you.”

... ball two.

“What happens to those who are left behind?”

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