



summer
Snow

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Summer Snow

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For Mom

Because Janice is entirely a work of fiction.
You are everything she is not and more.



Many heartfelt thanks . . .

To Todd Diakow for reasons too numerous to list. Again, this book exists only because of your hand in it.

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As always, to my boys. Aaron, you are my better half. I adore you to the moon and back. Isaac, your stories are far better than mine; I could listen to them forever. Judah, you are quite possibly the sweetest, happiest baby ever born. You all fill my life with joy.

Lord, I am Yours. Make me an offering.



A white card with the text "Part 1" written in a cursive font. The card is hanging from a grey string with a small wooden clothespin. The background is plain white.

Part 1



humility

IT'S NOT THAT I ever had delusions of grandeur, or even that I think I am better than anyone else, but there is something about donning a tag that says, "Please be patient; I'm a trainee" and asking, "Would you like paper or plastic?" that is uniquely, even brutally, humbling. Paired with a blue canvas apron cinched tight across my expanding waist, the plastic name tag screamed from my chest and made me frighteningly conspicuous at a time in my life when I longed for anonymity like parched earth wants for rain.

Cover me, I thought the first time I dressed in the awful ensemble. Standing alone in my room in front of a mirror too honest to

disguise the profound hideousness of it, I felt more exposed than if I had been wearing a skirt that barely covered my floral-print panties. “Oh, God, if You love me at all,” I breathed, “cover me.”

He didn’t answer. But I thought that maybe He was listening—Grandma promised me He was—and I held on to that hope, fledgling though it was. I couldn’t claim to understand Him, but I felt a deep and growing need to try, even if He deigned to ignore my current plea for rescue.

“You look cute,” Grandma commented diplomatically when I sulked into the kitchen moments later. But by the glint of a smile in her eye I knew that *cute* was a euphemism for *ridiculous*. “Just don’t tuck your shirt in, Julia. It won’t . . . you know . . . look too . . .” She fluffed her fingers around her midsection, and flour poofed from her hands in small clouds like smoke from somewhere up a magician’s sleeve. She cautiously, encouragingly, raised an eyebrow at me.

I looked down to see the petite crescent curve of my belly pressing against the knotted apron strings. Startled by what I saw, I sucked in impulsively. It disappeared—the growing evidence of *her* disappeared, a flat shadow beneath a fold of cerulean. “That’s the best I can do,” I said dolefully. “We have to tuck our shirts in. It’s part of the dress code. And—” I reached into the front pocket of the apron and produced a thin, mustard yellow tie—“we have to wear this.”

Grandma almost burst out laughing but only allowed herself a restrained little chuckle. “You know, I see those kids in Value Foods every week, but I never really noticed the uniform. Is that a clip-on?”

I nodded bleakly and snapped the clip at her, alligator-style, before affixing it to my starched collar.

“It’s crooked, honey.” She wiped her fingertips on a towel and left the bread dough that she had been kneading to circle around the worn oak table and face me. She tugged at the obscene bit of fabric, pulling it this way and that before tucking it under the top of my apron and stepping back. “There.” The word sounded almost portentous to me—definitive.

“I’m going to be late,” I croaked, clearing my throat self-consciously. “Don’t wait up for me. I’m helping out with a restock tonight. They’re going to train me how to record inventory. . . .”

Grandma pursed her lips and spread her arms in understanding. I walked heavily into her embrace. “I’m proud of you,” she murmured into my hair. “It’s really not that bad, is it?”

I didn’t want to be melodramatic, but I couldn’t drown the sick feeling that was rising past my chest and into my throat, where it sat threateningly at the back of my tongue. *They’ll see me*, I thought. *They’ll judge me*. But I said, “You’re right; it’s not so bad. It’s just that all the high school kids work there. I’ll be the oldest person besides the manager. . . .”

“You only graduated last year,” Grandma reminded, trying to cheer me up. “You’ll probably even know some of the employees!”

Great, I thought.

But she was doing her best to be helpful, and I managed a wry smile because at the very least she hadn’t said, “You’ll have so much in common with them!” The disappearing smoothness beneath the straight line of my apron guaranteed that I would have *nothing* in common with my coworkers.

“Well,” I said, pressing my palms together and trying to force a little enthusiasm into my voice, “I’d better go or I’ll be late.”

“Wouldn’t want that your first day on the job!” Grandma followed me into the mudroom and gave my back a little pat when my coat was zipped up and my hand was on the door. “It’s going to be just fine.”

“I know,” I replied without blinking.

She watched from the door as I drove away, but the sun was already a memory on the horizon—a thin ribbon of purple, little more than a bruise left by the imprint of orange—and I’m sure all she saw of my departure was taillights. It was better that way. I hated the thought of her seeing how I strangled the steering wheel.

Value Foods was far from the worst place in town to work. There was the packing plant, the egg plant, the paint factory, and a wide assortment of hog farms, cattle farms, dairy farms, and goat farms where my skin could absorb a variety of rancid smells that would stay with me even after multiple showers with lye soap and industrial-strength hand cleaners. The grocery store was tame compared to the rest of the job market in Mason, and in truth, I was lucky to get the job. I needed something full-time, with benefits, and as much as I hated to admit it, I was thankful that Mr. Durst, the manager, lived just over the South Dakota border and wouldn’t mind that my pregnancy would progress before the entire town like a neatly drawn life cycle in a full-color science textbook. What was my personal scandal to him? In fact, when I warily mentioned in my job interview that I was three months pregnant, Mr. Durst had looked at me as if to say, *So what?* He did ask, “Will it interfere with your ability to perform your job?”

I assured him I would be able to scan boxes of cereal and bag oranges well into my third trimester if not up to the day I delivered.

He grunted and handed me a uniform from out of a stack on the desk behind him.

“Do you want to know my size?” I wondered out loud, holding the standard-issue pants, shirt, and apron gingerly.

“Small, medium, large, extra large” was his only comment, and indeed, when I located the tag inside the shirt, it read *medium*. For a while at least.

“Start with that,” Mr. Durst instructed. “We’ll get you more later.”

Training was an evening job since, for most people in our conservative little town, the hours after suppertime were reserved for baths and play and television, not grocery shopping. When I drove into the parking lot at seven o’clock, it boasted only a dozen cars or so, and though I was tempted to pull close to the door and save myself the trek through below-freezing temperatures, I dutifully drove way to the back of the lot, where the employees were supposed to park. I yanked my hood over my head and stuffed my hands into my pockets, running the whole way across the empty parking lot with my apron flapping against my knees.

The store was overly bright, and someone had turned the elevator music a tad too loud. A little grocery cart corral at the front of the first aisle was stacked with carts, and only one checkout lane was open. The cashier, someone I didn’t recognize, was sitting on the counter right beside the red-eyed scanner and blowing a fluorescent green bubble so big I was afraid it would pop and get stuck in her eyebrows. She sucked it in when she saw me and gave a bored wave, beckoning me over with a flick of her wrist.

“You’re Julie, right?” she asked.

Though there was no hint of unfriendliness in her voice, I cringed when she called me Julie.

“Julia,” I corrected, trying to sound upbeat.

She just stared. “Okay, whatever. You’re late, by the way.”

I twisted my watch on my arm and consulted the face again though I had already checked it twice since driving up. “It’s a minute to seven,” I argued.

“Clark—he’s the assistant manager—insists that we be at least ten minutes early for every shift. Better if it’s fifteen minutes; he’ll forgive you if it’s five. But you’re late.”

“Nobody told me that,” I said and regretted how whiny it came out.

She shrugged. “He’s waiting for you in the back room.”

“Thank you.” I started off past the registers.

It was a small thing, the thank-you, but it must have endeared me to her the tiniest bit, because as I was walking away, she offered, “Never sit on the counter.” She drummed her fingers on the laminate surface beside her thighs as if to illustrate her point. “But if you’re going to, make sure that Clark is in the back room. He’ll kill you if he catches you.”

I smiled and made a mental note of the name on her tag. “Alicia.” And below that: “2 years of faithful service.”

The back room of Value Foods was little more than an extended storeroom. The walls were cold, concrete blocks and the shelving was stark and unattractive, the ugly sister of the sleeker, more appealing units that graced the aisles of the store and made things like Ho Hos look appetizing. There was a dingy bathroom near the loading dock and a sprawling metal table that served as a break room at the far

end of the elongated hall. Both locations were barely illuminated by naked lightbulbs that fought valiantly to dispel the dismal shadows but lost miserably. When I'd used the bathroom after my interview, I considered telling someone about the one burned-out bulb above the sink. But standing over the corroded fixtures and browning drain, I acquiesced. Crummy lighting actually improved the overall impression of the entire back room.

Thankfully, I knew I wouldn't find Clark amid the boxes and gloom. Opposite the break area at the far end of the passage was a duo of glass-fronted offices. The one on the left—the office with two actual windows to the outside world—was Mr. Durst's. I had been told the other office belonged to the assistant manager, Clark Henstock.

The light was on in his office, and he was looking at me through the glass.

I walked briskly toward him, trying to hold a capable expression that was both professional and eager yet not at all forced. Though no reflective surface played back my features and told me so, my face felt like it was locked in a grimace. I licked my lips, tried again, and finally abandoned the feeble attempt at confidence. The door to Clark's office was open, and I stepped up to the threshold, stopping in the doorframe to say, "I'm Julia DeSmit. You must be—"

"Clark Henstock," he said, clipping off each separate syllable with militaristic accuracy.

I almost said, "I know," but I managed to hold my tongue and was grateful for it when he tossed a pen at me. It came out of nowhere, and my hand shot up almost of its own accord. Against all odds, and for only the second or third time in my life, I made

the perfect catch. The Bic thumped satisfyingly in my palm, and a grin unpredictably, and embarrassingly, sprang to my lips. “Caught it,” I laughed and immediately felt like an idiot. Wagging the pen lamely, I shrugged one shoulder as if to shake it off and dropped my arm to my side.

Clark assessed me for a moment before stating coolly, “I need you to sign a few papers.” He turned to the table against the glass wall overlooking the storeroom and arranged three documents in a perfectly straight row. “Here, here, and here,” he said, pointing, when I stepped up to the table.

I signed my name three times. Each signature looked different from the last because I had to lean closer into Clark to reach the far papers and my body couldn’t help avoiding his as if we were repelled magnetically. Although I half expected him to comment on it, he merely swept up the documents when I was finished and sank into his cushy chair. Swiveling toward a paper-laden desk, he shoved my papers into an open file and dropped it in a box by his feet. Then he looked at his watch and said without turning to me, “It’s 7:04. You’re late for work. Next time make sure you arrive on time.”

It was impossible not to cringe, but I forced myself to bite my tongue and stay put, awaiting further commands. Clark remained with his back to me, and I determined to be as quiet and enduring as the sweetest of saints. Clasping my hands in front of me, I studied the back of his head while I practiced patience.

His hair was dark brown and noticeably thinning. On a man with a deeper skin tone, Clark’s hair loss might not have been so pronounced. But Clark was white in a way that prevented any speculation of diversity in his family tree, and the chalkiness of his scalp

peeking through sad little patches of scraggly hair was unnecessarily unattractive. Not that Clark was ugly. He was just trying a little too hard to maintain the coif of his youth when he was obviously pushing forty.

Shave it off, I thought. Embrace your age.

Almost as if I had spoken aloud, he whipped around to face me. “What are you still doing here?”

I managed to mumble, “Waiting for instructions.”

Clark’s sigh was a barely concealed groan. “Take a little initiative, Miss DeSmit. Be a problem solver. I’m not here to babysit.” And he spun back to his computer.

I melted out of the office and wandered to the break area, where I shed my coat and hung it over a folding metal chair. It was suddenly very cold without my winter parka, and I wrapped my arms around myself, hurrying out of the storeroom lest Clark turn to see me dawdling and fire me on the spot. Deciding my best course of action would be to find Alicia and ask her what to do, I cut through the aisles and nearly collided with a boy who was almost a full head shorter than me.

“Oops!” He laughed a little too heartily. His yellow tie was crooked at his throat, and his stiff apron was stained with what looked like darkening blood from the meat counter. The thought nauseated me. “Sorry!” the boy exclaimed, wiping his hands on his apron and extending one to me. “I’m Graham. You must be the new girl.”

“Julia,” I muttered, taking his hand though it was almost painful to do so. His fingers were warm and soft.

“Nice to meet you, Julia. You’ll like it here. It’s a good job!”

While he looked too young to be working anywhere and his

enthusiasm was overkill, it was hard not to smile back when he was grinning in my face. “Glad to hear it,” I commented vaguely, hoping that a response wouldn’t encourage him too much.

“Alicia is the shift manager,” Graham explained as if he intended to take me under his wing.

I rolled my eyes at the thought of yet another person on the ladder of managerial staff at Value Foods.

“No, no, she’s nice,” he hurried to clarify, misunderstanding my expression. I started to explain myself but he went on. “Denise can be a bear, but Alicia lets us leave early for our breaks sometimes.”

I gave him a little nod and took a small step back to disengage myself from his unsolicited conversation. “I’ll keep that in mind,” I said, slowly backing away.

But Graham followed. “Hey, I’ll walk you to the front. It’s almost my break time anyway, and I can introduce you to people as we go.”

“Graham, I—”

“Oh, it’s okay, really. I don’t mind at all.” And though he could just barely peek over my shoulder, he took my elbow and steered me down the aisle as if he were some elderly benefactor and I a little girl.

I tried not to sigh as I allowed myself to be led through the store. Though Graham would release me long enough to let me shake the outstretched hands of my coworkers, as we continued to the check-outs he would manage to take up his paternal position again. There was nothing malicious or inappropriate in his gesture, and because he elicited genuine warmth in everyone we met, I did everything I could to be friendly and fine with whatever social particulars made

him comfortable. I couldn't escape the feeling that much of my life from now on would be molding myself to fit snugly against other people's ideas and ideals. It was safer there where I could blend in, where I could be smooth and seamless and hidden—predictably contrite for my situation and newly flawless in my efforts at virtue. It made my head ache with inadequacy.

Value Foods wasn't an enormous store, but by the time we passed nine aisles and started through the produce section to the front, I had met half a dozen employees. All of them teenagers. None of them particularly enthused to see me. I was just the new girl—and an old one at that.

I peeked at my watch when we got to the front and waited patiently while Alicia finished with a customer. An older man wearing what looked to be a brand-new overcoat paid for his bottle of wine with a crisp twenty-dollar bill while Alicia grinned at him as if he were the single most interesting person she had ever met. She waved and watched him walk away, and he was halfway through the first automatic door when she finally turned to focus her attention on Graham and me. The easy turn of her lips sunk immediately, and she clicked her tongue as if to chastise us. "It's quarter after seven."

"I know." I didn't offer any more because I was already becoming well aware of how things were done at Value Foods. Arrive on time, do your job, and stay out of Clark's way. I was about to add Alicia's name beside Clark's when the sternness left her face and she shrugged.

"Whatever." She pointed to a mop bucket waiting in the sectioned-off lane beside hers. "We mop the store every few days

on a rotating schedule. You're new, so you get the honors tonight. Produce section and freezer aisle. Just remember to put up the Wet Floor signs. We don't want a lawsuit." Alicia craned her neck for a moment and scanned the store. Seeing that the coast was clear, she hopped back onto the counter and squeezed a little dab of hand sanitizer into her palm, working it in as if it were a luxurious cream. "And, Graham," she added, looking up, "you only have ten minutes left on your break."

"Yup," he said cheerfully and waved exuberantly at us as he started away. "Have a good time, Julia! It was nice to meet you!"

I gave him a halfhearted flick of my fingers and unhooked the plastic chain to grab the mop bucket. "Is he always that happy?" I asked Alicia.

"Twenty-four seven," she confirmed. "He's fourteen, you know. I don't remember being that cheerful when I was fourteen. But hey, Graham is fun to work with even if he's a bit . . . um—" she rolled her eyes as she fumbled for the right word—"enthusiastic."

Although I felt silly the moment the question was out of my mouth, I couldn't stop myself from asking, "Do you like it here?"

Alicia snorted. "Of course not. I'd way rather win the lottery or grow a money tree in my backyard. But it's a job." She sucked in her gum and it made a loud pop. "And working with Michael is better than a hole in the head."

"Michael?"

"You'll see." Alicia smiled.

It occurred to me that I should banter, keep up this little conversation and make a friend. But the apron strings were cutting into my waist and my head was already beginning to throb from

the fluorescent lights and the music that must have been standard-issue in the eighties for every doctor's office, elevator, and store in the country. Maybe an instrumental version of Michael Bolton or, heaven help us, Chicago. All I could think was *I have to listen to this for four hours?*

"Start at the back and work your way up to the front," Alicia instructed. She watched me push the mop bucket out into the aisle. "You know how to work that thing, don't you?" Her hand pulled an imaginary lever. "Just put the mop head in that slot and pull—"

"Yes, thank you." I quickly nodded, though I had never used a mop before in my life.

"Okay. Have fun." Alicia returned to rubbing her fingers.

I began to back slowly down the aisle past the fruits and vegetables and bins of nuts. The bucket was heavier than it looked, and I was so focused on maneuvering it that when the mister started over the lettuces, I jumped out of my skin and knocked a grapefruit from a mountain of Ruby Reds. It plopped right into my bucket and splashed dingy water on my shoes. Had I a foul mouth, the moment was ripe for a string of curses that may have been deemed warranted by most people. But I bit my lip instead and rolled up my sleeve to fish the grapefruit out. It was slick with brown water and probably bruised, and because I didn't want anyone to buy it, I stuck it in my apron pocket intending to pay for it later. I almost laughed in surrender when I saw the caricature of pregnant roundness protruding from my belly.

Mopping wasn't as bad as I first imagined it would be, and the monotonous motion actually felt more like a workout than a menial task. Sweep to the left, sweep to the right, swish in the bucket,

squeeze. I wouldn't go so far as to say I enjoyed it, but the solitariness of such drudgery was a definite bonus. None of the other employees approached me even once. With my hand on the grip of an oversize mop and the smell of dusty water at my feet, I had a few stolen moments to ponder the what-ifs of my life. What if Dad were still alive? What if things were different between Thomas and me? What if I had stayed in college? What if I had never met Parker and gotten pregnant? The list could go on forever—past recent mistakes and on to long-ago losses—and though I wanted to indulge in a little self-pity, I didn't because Grandma expected more of me these days. I pushed those thoughts out of my mind and, with a self-deprecating smile, mopped with all the heart of a born grocery store employee.

The store itself was dead, and the occasional customers who did brave the abandoned aisles walked quickly and clutched bulging coats around them as if this was the last place they wanted to be. Often they carried just a single item—a loaf of bread, a gallon of milk. At least two people besides the man in the overcoat stopped to peruse the wine section.

When she walked past me, I only looked up because her footsteps were so heavy. Her back was toward me, and she was wearing a jean coat with faux fur at the wrists and collar. Long, dirty blonde hair hung in a ponytail, and though I couldn't see her face, there was something about her that seemed too old for such youthful hair. She glanced over her shoulder and I dropped my head, not wanting it to seem like I had been staring at her. I heard her leave then, and because the sad slant of her back tugged at something deep inside me, I watched her walk toward Alicia.

I had made it almost to the end of the aisle, and I could see and hear everything that went on between the two of them. The woman laid a half gallon of milk, a bag of pretzels, and two carefully chosen Braeburn apples on the counter. Alicia barely looked at her and didn't even bother to smile, much less flatter her the way she had wooed the man with the wine. For her part, the woman kept her head down and her hands in her pockets as if she was almost apologetic about her presence in the store.

"Four dollars and three cents," Alicia said when the last item had been scanned. She turned to put the groceries in a plastic bag while the woman dug in her pockets.

She produced four crinkled one-dollar bills and spread them out self-consciously in front of her. Passing them to Alicia, her hands returned to her pockets to find the change. She probed and poked, and though I was supposed to be looking at the floor, I could see her fingers thrusting at the fabric and coming up empty.

"Do you have a take-a-penny jar?" the woman asked quietly.

Alicia stared at her. "No."

My hands went to my own pockets, but the pants were brand-new and the only thing I found was lint.

"How much was it again?" Her voice was so soft I could barely make out the words.

"Four dollars and three cents," Alicia repeated matter-of-factly.

The woman dug a bit more, and I wanted to yell at Alicia, "Just let her have it. I'll pay you later!" But instead I put my hand on the mop and looked down. I didn't want the weary woman to think that anyone was witnessing her shame.

I didn't realize I was holding my breath until I heard the woman

say, “I guess I’ll have to leave one of the apples.” When I exhaled, I felt them both look up. Fortunately I was half turned away from them, and the splat of my mop on the floor disguised the tail end of my wheeze.

“Whatever,” Alicia intoned.

Buttons were pushed and cash register tape whirred and within moments the woman was gone.

“Sheesh,” Alicia said, catching my eye. “Seriously, it was like three cents. Can you believe some people?”

“No, I can’t,” I said, but she didn’t catch the arrows in my look.

I finished the floor with an almost vicious energy, but by the time the front doors were locked and we were ready to start restocking shelves, I had all but forgotten about the woman. Though she nibbled at the corners of my mind, it was easier not to focus on her. And even downright soothing to allow myself the thought that at least one person had it far worse than me.

discussion questions

1. At the end of *After the Leaves Fall*, Julia's faith in God seemed to be maturing. Where is she at the beginning of this story? Has your faith journey ever mimicked hers?
2. Nellie warns Julia about the danger of holding on to a bitter root on p. 126. Have you ever been in a situation like Julia's where you needed to forgive someone? What effect did it have on your life?
3. Why do you think Janice behaves the way she does throughout the novel? What is motivating her? Is it the same need that is motivating Julia?
4. On p. 231, Nellie says to Julia: "You're not nearly as lost as you sometimes think you are." Do you think that's true? What did Nellie mean by that?
5. Nellie tells Julia on p. 234 that seeds planted among thorns don't necessarily *die* but are *choked*. What are some of the "thorns" in your life that threaten to choke out God's grace?
6. On p. 293, Julia calls Janice and herself a "group of Simons." What does she mean by that? What does she mean when she observes that they are "not enough, not enough, not enough"?
7. Why do you think Julia was finally able to forgive Janice?
8. How has Julia changed by the end of this story? What was the biggest catalyst for that change?
9. Do you think Julia makes the right decision regarding her future at the end of the story? Why or why not?
10. What was your favorite metaphor, line, or scene from the story? Why?

About the Author

NICOLE BAART was born and raised in a small town in Iowa. After lifeguarding, waitressing, working in a retail store, and even being a ranch hand on a dairy farm, she changed her major four times in college before finally settling on degrees in English, Spanish, English as a second language, and secondary education. She taught and developed curriculum in three different school districts over the course of seven years.

Teaching and living in Vancouver, British Columbia, cultivated a deep love in Nicole for both education and the culturally inexplicable use of the word *eh*. She became a Canadian citizen for the sole purpose of earning the right to use the quirky utterance.

Nicole wrote and published her first complete novel, *After the Leaves Fall*, while taking a break from teaching to be a full-time mom. *Summer Snow* is the sequel. She is also the author of hundreds of poems, dozens of short stories, a handful of articles, and various unfinished novels.

The mother of two young sons and the wife of a pastor, Nicole writes when she can: in bed, in the shower, as she is making supper, and occasionally sitting down at her computer. As the adoptive mother of an Ethiopian-born son, she is passionate about global issues and works to promote awareness of topics such as world hunger, poverty, AIDS, and the plight of widows and orphans. Nicole and her family live in Iowa.

