



A Novel

God Only Knows

XAVIER KNIGHT

*Author of *The Things We Do for Love**

**“Knight masterfully weaves compelling characters and
suspense that keep you turning pages.”**

—VICTORIA CHRISTOPHER MURRAY

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Julia Turner, an ambitious educator in her mid-thirties, leaves a high-profile job in Chicago to return to Dayton, Ohio to serve as superintendent of Christian Light, the K-12 private school system from which she graduated two decades earlier. A single mother with an ugly divorce and a complex childhood in her rearview mirror, Julia views her mission as a chance to contribute to her hometown and conquer the demons from her past. But she never expects to confront the one sin she and her childhood friends agree to bury as teens—the accident that left Eddie Walker hospitalized and incapacitated.

Meanwhile, Detective Peter Whitlock, Eddie Walker's older brother, is still determined to find the person(s) responsible for his brother's condition. As an unrelated investigation leads to another woman who was involved in the accident, the responsible parties must decide whether they will keep their dark secrets...or tell the truth and let God decide the outcome.

Two Decades Later

For the first time she could remember in years, Cassandra Gillette felt like a woman fulfilled. Freshly showered, she sat before the laptop PC in her spacious dressing room, checking e-mail. She had another hour at least before her newly built luxury home would be overrun by her family; her husband, Marcus, had gone to pick up their twelve-year-old twins, Heather and Hillary, from a friend's birthday party out in Middletown. In addition, her seventeen-year-old son, Marcus Junior, was still seven hours away from his midnight curfew.

"There is so much to be thankful for," Cassie whispered to God, letting her words ring through the quiet of her master suite. This was not the average lazy Saturday afternoon; for the first time in nearly four months, Cassie had made love to her husband.

Their separation had gotten off to a fiery start, but as tempers cooled and nights passed, God had brought Cassie and Marcus back together. Marcus had quickly tired of Veronica, the twenty-something news anchor who had welcomed him into her condo, and Cassie's eyes had been opened. When her best girlfriend, Julia, confronted her, she finally realized how her actions in recent years had starved Marcus of the respect and affirmation that even the strongest man needed.

So it was that after several late-night telephone calls and a Starbucks "date" hidden from their children, Mr. and Mrs. Marcus Gillette had decided to get up off the mat and keep the promises they made before God seventeen years earlier, a few months after M.J.'s arrival. They had agreed to surprise the children with news of their reconciliation tonight, but with the house empty this afternoon, the couple had started a private celebration. The house was new enough that aside from the master bedroom, their frisky activity had "christened" the kitchen's marble-topped island, the leather couch in the finished basement, and the washing machine in the laundry room.

As she dashed off an e-mail to the staff at her real estate agency, sharing news of the latest deal she had closed—a \$420,000 sale, their thirtieth property sold for the quarter—Cassie nearly shuddered with delight as she recalled Marcus's smooth touch. Although she had lost thirty pounds over the past year, she was still nearly twenty pounds heavier than she'd been on their wedding day, and she had been pregnant then. Nevertheless, Cassie's Marcus knew and loved her body, in exactly the way that frank Scriptures, like those in Song of Solomon, encouraged. Like most everything else in marriage, the Gillettes' sexual relationship had experienced ups and downs, but Cassie licked her lips unintentionally as she mentally applauded her man: *When he's good, he's GOOD.*

An instant message popped up on her screen: Julia, her best friend. *I heard a rumor, she IM'd.*

Cassie smiled as she typed back: *No idea what you mean.*

Julia's IM response popped up: *They say a handsome, bulky brother tipped into your crib this afternoon.*

Cassie smiled as she typed, *Girl, I am too old to be kissin' and tellin'.*

And I'm too old to be listening to such filth, Julia typed. As a Ph.D. and superintendent of schools at their shared alma mater, Christian Light Schools, Julia let her words communicate their humor; Cassie's friend was above the use of those corny emoticons. Julia sent another missive: *You are coming to my Board of Advisors meeting Monday, right? I need help saving this school system, child.*

Cassie stuck her tongue out playfully as she entered her response: *Still not sure how I fit in with this crew. You said you're pulling together the "best and brightest" Christian Light alumni? Don't see how I count, given that the school expelled me when they realized why my belly was swollen.*

Stop it, came Julia's response. *Besides, you have what matters most to a struggling school system: Deep pockets!*

Cassie shook her head, her laughter easing any guilt she might have felt about throwing the painful memory of her expulsion — accompanied by the school principal's labeling her a "girl of loose morals" — in her friend's face. Julia alone had led a student protest in Cassie's defense at the time, marching on the school's front lawn and even calling local media in a vain attempt to embarrass the school into reversing its decision.

Cassie was typing a lighthearted response when her front doorbell rang, the chime filling the house. Changing up, she shot her friend a quick *Doorbell — call you later* before taking a second to tuck her blouse into her jeans. Padding downstairs to the foyer, she chuckled to herself. She would have to help Julia save the world later.

When she peered into her front door's peephole, Cassie's heart caught for a second at the sight of a tall, blond-haired gentleman flashing a police badge.

"*M.J.'s fine*," said the voice in Cassie's head as the badge stirred anxiety over her teen son's safety. She wasn't sure whether it was the Lord or simply her own positive coaching. For years now Cassie had combined her faith in God with affirmative self-talk meant to power her through life's stresses and adversities. In her youth, she had crumpled one time too many in the face of indifference, prejudice, sexism, and just plain evil. By the time she and Marcus walked the aisle of Tabernacle Baptist Church, where each had first truly dedicated their respective lives to Christ, Cassie had vowed to never be caught unaware again. That same spirit of resolve propped her up as she confidently unlocked and swung back her wide oak door.

As strong as she felt, Cassie's knees still flexed involuntarily when she saw M.J. standing beside the plainclothes policeman. At six foot one, her son was every inch as tall as the policeman and stood with his arms crossed, a sneer teasing the corners of his mouth. Though relieved to see he was fine, Cassie sensed an unusually defiant spirit in her boy, so she locked her gaze onto the officer instead. If her man-child had done something worthy of punishment, she wouldn't give this stranger the pleasure of witnessing the beat-down. She unlocked her screen door and, opening it, let the officer make the first move.

"Mrs. Gillette?" The man held out his right hand and respectfully shook Cassie's as he spoke in a deep, hoarse voice. "I'm Detective Whitlock with the Dayton PD. I'm really sorry to bother you, but I was hoping we could help each other this evening, ma'am."

Cassie opened her screen door all the way, one hand raised against the fading sunlight in her eyes. "Please come in," she said, focused on editing the airy lilt out of her tone. She didn't mind letting her naturally fluttery voice out when among family and friends, but now was no time for it. "Why don't we have a seat in the living room."

"Again I apologize for showing up unannounced. A neighborhood this nice, one of those draws a lot of eyebrows probably," Whitlock said, nodding toward the sleek police car parked out front. "Marcus Junior and I had an unfortunate confrontation this afternoon. The more I talk to him, I'm convinced we can handle this without a trip downtown."

Cassie nodded respectfully. *Who can argue with that?* she thought as she motioned toward the expansive living room. "May I take your suit jacket?"

"Oh, no thank you," Whitlock replied. He slowed his gait and allowed M.J. to first follow Cassie into the room. The detective stood just inside the doorway, peering at Cassie's expensive sculptures and paintings as M.J. reluctantly took a seat beside his mother. Once they were settled, Whitlock strode to the middle of the living room, his hands in the pockets of his dress slacks. "Marcus, why don't you tell your mother how we crossed paths."

M.J. stared straight ahead, his line of sight veering nowhere near Cassie and shooting over the top of Whitlock's head of wavy blond hair. "I was minding my business, Mom. Officer Whitlock here —"

"*Detective* Whitlock, son," the policeman replied, a testy edge betraying the professional, placid smile on his tanned,

leathery face. Cassie found herself admitting he was a relatively handsome man, one who even reminded her of the male cousins on the white side of her family. The policeman was probably around her own age, she figured, somewhere between thirty-five and forty.

Grimacing, M.J. continued. “The good detective here pulled me over on 75. Said he clocked me at seventy-eight in a fifty-five.”

“Oh, I see,” Cassie said, a wave of relief cleansing her tensed insides. She placed a hand on her son’s shoulder but kept her eyes on the detective. “If that’s all that’s involved, my son should certainly pay whatever fine is required by the law. You’re not doing him any favors giving him a simple talking-to.” She nearly chastised herself for fearing the worst. This was probably just a case of her superjock son—a varsity star in Chaminade-Julienne football, basketball, and track—getting special treatment for his local celebrity, a celebrity nearly as big as the fame that had first attracted her to Marcus Senior back in the day.

Holding Cassie’s smile with calm blue eyes, Whitlock reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved a manila envelope. “Asked and answered. The state trooper wrote this ticket up for your son during the traffic stop.” He walked over to the love seat and slowly extended the envelope to M.J. “I agree that Marcus needs to pay his speeding ticket, Mrs. Gillette. If that’s all that was involved, I would have never been called to the scene.”

Everything is fine. My son has done nothing illegal. Cassie fingered the gold locket around her neck but prayed she was otherwise masking the dread pulsing back into her. “Then get to the point, please, Detective.”

Whitlock paced quickly to the corner of the adjacent couch. When he plopped down, he was less than a foot away from Cassie. “You see,” he said, his elbows on his knees, his faintly yellowed teeth glinting as he seemed to smile despite himself, “I was called in because Marcus had a convicted criminal riding with him, the sort of character who can make even this fine young man look guilty by association.”

“Please tell me,” Cassie said, swiveling rapidly toward M.J., “that you weren’t riding around with *him* again.” When M.J. bunched his lips tight and shrugged, Cassie couldn’t stop herself from popping him in the shoulder. “Boy! You promised me! You promised me, M.J.!”

Whitlock had removed his cell phone from his suit jacket. His eyes focused on the phone and as he punched its buttons, he asked, “By ‘him,’ are you referring to Dante Wayne?”

“Yes,” Cassie said, her forehead so hot with rage it scared her. She wasn’t sure whether to be more upset at this white stranger lounging on her couch or her increasingly disobedient son.

Whitlock stared straight into Cassie’s eyes. “And you’re familiar with Mr. Wayne how?”

Cassie sucked her teeth angrily. “He’s my cousin’s oldest son.” Donald, Dante’s father, ran a small taxi service and was the first relative on her father’s side of the family—the black side—who had reached out to Cassie when they were both struggling teen parents trying to figure out life. Though they didn’t talk often these days, Cassie still counted Donald a personal friend, and her loyalty to him through the years had led her to foster M.J. and Dante’s friendship from the time they were toddlers. That was before she realized that Dante would adopt the morals of his mother’s family, nearly all of whom had died in their twenties or spent significant stretches in prison.

“So M.J. was straight with me, they are cousins.” Whitlock stroked his chin playfully as he observed mother and son. “Marcus insisted that was the only reason he was riding around with Dante in tow. Dante took up for him too, insisted there was no way Marcus was hip to the drugs we found in the car.” He nodded toward M.J. “Why don’t we discuss this one adult to another, ma’am. Marcus, based on your exemplary reputation in the community—as well as your parents’—I’m willing to assume you had no knowledge of your cousin’s activities. If you’ll just excuse us?”

M.J. looked between his mother and the detective, the first signs of a growing son’s protective emotions on his face as he tapped Cassie’s knee. “You okay with him, Mom?”

“Go down to your room,” Cassie said through clenched teeth, “and shut the basement door after you.” As her son rose, she punctuated her words. “Don’t even *think* about coming up until your father and I come down for you.”

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