

THE
JAMES
MIRACLE

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Prologue

A very wise philosopher once said over hot caramel sundaes after middle school graduation: "Life's miracles happen when you least expect them." He said it wasn't the well-planned, made-for-television moments that change and define us. Instead, our destiny is determined by how we choose to weave into our lives the random, unexpected happenings on seemingly normal Thursday afternoons. "Be prepared for chance, change, and miracles," he offered with a wise wink. He preached that miracles would come in a thousand and one different packages. "And some will feel better on your soul than others," he finished with a wrinkled smile, tapping the end of my nose with his dripping over-sized dessert spoon.

Sadly, that wise man died when I was too young to fully appreciate his wisdom. It's a shame; my father was a genius.

It has been years since he left behind an arrogant, selfish son for a pain-free career well beyond the clouds. My mother told us that cancer had not beaten him. He had beaten it. Forever.

"Chins up, gang," she consoled in the back of a slick black limousine. "He could have let it run our family for thirty years, but he simply would not let that happen. That brave man kicked it right out of our lives. And now he's closer than ever. He's in our souls." Then she offered a prayer, nodded to the driver, and we watched through the tinted rear window as the caravan of head lights cut through mid-morning traffic.

Since that soggy afternoon I have learned to believe that he now enjoys an endless supply of perfect summer days when golf scores are low and mid-afternoon watermelon tastes like it was grown in heaven. And every night his favorite pillow smells just like mom.

But most importantly, I have come to fully appreciate how right dad was about chance, change, and miracles.

At any given second, somewhere in this grand old world of His, someone kneels beside a bed, or a couch, or inside a mildewed cardboard box underneath some remote highway overpass, and asks, "God, do miracles exist?"

They do. And not just on Thursday afternoons.

Chapter One

I am Sam Foster. You can call me Average.

It is a truth I cannot escape; I have been mediocre at nearly everything I have ever attempted. I have been average at athletics, academics, and even in matters of spirituality. Regardless of what my parents said, I knew the teachers and advisors were right. I was just good enough, just smart enough, and just fast enough to coast along unburdened by weighty expectations. It seems I am forever that young, pimple-faced student by which all others were measured and made exceptional by comparison. In nearly every way imaginable I have been—and fear I always will be—vanilla.

The Foster Four, as mom and dad called the kids, were raised just outside the nation's capital in northern Virginia. On their own, my parents might have been judged as unspectacular, but as a pair they worked miracles. Together we lived in a humble home the realtor had insisted was built for a mom, a dad, and two kids—max. But they decided to have four and call the challenge a "test of our mettle." It was a test all right; my brothers and I tested their homeowner's policy many times over the years. The sound of breaking glass was as common as the dinner bell.

While the others joined the marching band, played on the basketball team, or dominated the school science fair, I spent my extracurricular hours picking fights with bigger kids behind the green centerfield fence of the baseball field, just so I could hone my ability to talk my way out of them. I became famous for fights that ended with handshakes and deals, not punches. Somehow I escaped delivering or receiving a single black eye or swollen lip during those adolescent years. "The key, Sam," my father counseled, "Is finding something you're good at

and convincing someone to pay you to do it." Then his eyes would smile bright and he'd add, "Sam, you could sell sand at a desert flea market."

I committed to always work harder than those around me; my parents expected tremendous success from the youngest of the *Foster Four*. And while I seldom took the most conventional route from one point to the next; once there I could always close the deal. People would learn to count on me, they would need me, and I would deliver.

Just weeks after dad died I sat alone after school in a quiet classroom. On the inside cover of my 12th grade economics textbook I made a goal to persuade everyone I ever met that spending time to know me would be a wise investment. "I, Samuel T. Foster, will create The Sam Show," I scribbled in bad cursive. And the entire world would buy tickets.

Then came Holly.

She was the one who proved the exception to every rule I had ever established. She would see through the sheer curtains of my show from the opening act.

I would love her for it.



Holly Walker was raised by a sweet southern belle in Charleston, West Virginia. Her father had gone off to Vietnam when she was just a few years old and never returned. The Army deemed him missing-in-action, but for years Holly's mother spoke of him returning. Even long after the conflict was over, Holly's mother kept his clothes in the closet and a pair of black slippers by his side of the bed. But Holly had known by the time she was six or seven that he would never return. Nevertheless, she allowed her mother to lose herself in the fantasy of a

heroic return. While her mother's mind lived in the wet jungles of Asia, Holly became a caretaker for her younger sister. Holly was cooking simple meals and helping with homework by the third grade. By fourteen she was driving around the quiet streets on the outskirts of Charleston, juggling two paper routes and taking her mother to and from a handful of women's support groups.

In the rare moments when not playing guardian, Holly buried herself in schoolwork and read nearly every book in the small city library. "Your father's dream," her mother said during one of their last lucid conversations, "is to return from the war, put down his gun, and become a teacher." Holly made that dream her own and her dogged determination landed her the top spot in her graduating class of 195 students and a scholarship to Georgetown University in the heart of Washington, D.C.

The Thursday before classes began, she packed everything she owned into two oversized canvas bags and prepared to board a bus for the half-day trip to the nation's capital. "You can do this," she said, holding tightly to her sister, now a high school sophomore. She kissed her mother on the cheek, told her she loved her, promised to return home once a month, then wondered if she had any idea what was about to happen.

"Is your daddy on this bus?" Mother asked softly, staring at the silver Greyhound.

"No momma," Holly hugged her again. "Not on this one." Then she climbed aboard and watched from the last seat as her sister and mother walked away arm-in-arm through a thick cloud of grey and blue exhaust.

Holly cried half way to Washington. Though she was finally leaving Charleston, the tears said her mother left long ago.



I was headed to another long day on Capitol Hill as an intern with a Florida congressman. I had no interest in a career in politics or public policy, but the business degree I sought from George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, required an internship and "on the hill," as they say, was as good a place as any. The hours were long and the people just friendly enough to survive the daily grind without losing their minds. Of course I was convinced some already had. Fortunately it took just a few weeks for me to establish myself as an asset to the office, willing to say or do anything at anytime, mostly to mask my inadequacies in an environment full of academic whiz-kids.

The subway train carried me beneath the streets of D.C., and through the hum of a hundred conversations, I overheard a uniquely mesmerizing voice. "It was like a song," I gushed that night to my incredulous roommates. "Or like the way a white dove might sound, you know, if it could talk." They mocked me relentlessly for weeks.

Tracing the voice through the crowded train I found a woman of my exact height. She wore a modest, lime green shirt with what looked like smiley-faced lemons embroidered on the sleeves. Around her waist was tied a darker green rain jacket. Though she was 20 feet away, I could easily judge that her eyes were somewhere between caramel and brown sugar. Scanning the other riders I noted with great disappointment that I was not the only one who had discovered her; she had captured the rapt attention of a half dozen other men.

I tuned in just as she explained to an inquisitive tourist and her eager, map-welding husband that she was off to the Library of Congress on an all-day research mission for the professor she assisted three days a week for extra credit – and a few extra dollars. I memorized every word the woman spoke and felt myself wrapped in a comfortable sense that *change and chance*, as dad always said, had arrived.

The curious, wide-eyed tourists exited at the Smithsonian Museum stop. As the train pulled away I slipped carefully between a baby stroller and a courier singing and bobbing in reggae rhythm to his portable compact disk player. "Excuse me," I slid the staff identification card hanging from neck into my crisp shirt pocket. "Do you know where the Library of Congress is?" Everyone in Washington not wearing a fanny pack or carrying a camera knows where to find the Library of Congress. In fact, I knew it better than most; it was across the street from the office building I worked in six and sometimes seven days a week.

"Sure do, I'm headed there myself. I'll lead you all the way to the front door, but you're on your own from there." The corners of her rose-colored lips lifted her entire face. That moment remains perfectly filed in my mind's scrapbook, like a child's first Christmas memory.

We rode up the long escalator together from the subway into a sun-drenched morning. I tried to learn as much about her as possible in the five-minute walk to the large, white, non-descript building she would spend her day in. "If this is twenty questions," she quipped as we said goodbye, "You're way over the limit!"

I spent that afternoon plotting with a fellow greenie intern on how I might find her again without actually enrolling myself as a student at Georgetown, something I half-jokingly admitted to considering. Her phone number, or even last name, were not among the many tidbits of information gleaned that morning. We strategized that my best move was to hope for another *metro moment*, as he called it, tongue-in-cheek. At noon I complained of a headache and revealed in an emotional display to the congressman's chief of staff my genetic disposition to migraines. Then I left early and hovered in front of the large bank of newspaper machines at the subway entrance, stalling for over three hours as I prayed to see her embark on her homebound commute. I alternated between pretending to talk on a payphone and crouching in front of the

rusted blue boxes reading the display copy of the Post, Roll Call, and two weekly papers I'd never heard of.

"Sam?" She approached me as I scanned for the fourth or fifth time the local headlines. "Can I loan you thirty-five cents," she laughed. "Those newspapers aren't free you know."

"Holly!" I said, turning towards the sound of her voice. "Well, well, what a pleasant surprise." I stood too quickly, suffering a head-rush of near historic measure and nearly lost my balance.

"Whoa, Sam. Easy now." She put her hand on my elbow. "You gonna make it?" Her mouth and eyes smiled in near symphonic unison.

"Sure, sure, I'm fine, I guess I got up too quickly there."

"You been here long?" I pretended not to hear the question and grabbed my dad's ratty leather briefcase.

In spite of the embarrassment I suspected I was oozing glee at my scheme's sudden success. "Headed home?"

"Good guess, Sam." There it was again, the smile. "It's 5:15."

"Then your chariot awaits. I had them hold the 5:00." We rode back down the giant escalator, boarded the train and headed under the river into Virginia, speeding along the tracks in the dimly lit tunnels of the subway.

"So Sam, where are you off to this evening?" She was sitting in front of me with her head turned around and her arm fixed tightly on the back of her seat.

"Actually, I'm tied up in early dinner plans. I'm going to the finest hotdog establishment in the greater metropolitan area."

A short pause, "Hotdogs?" As her head tilted to the side, strands of her long, butter-blonde hair fell from her shoulder.

"Yes, hotdogs. I've got a date. A first date, if you must know."

"A date? At five—" she glanced at her watch, "At five thirty seven on a Thursday?"

"Yes, a date." I responded firmly. "I've met someone recently and I'd like to share the magic of a hotdog at my favorite spot. What's so wrong with that?"

"Nothing, I suppose, but what if your date does not like hotdogs?" We knew the dance was on.

"Granted, not all ladies appreciate the subtle flavor of the frank, but I sense this one is special. She has a certain... flickerivity." My straight face melted. "I am willing to bet this lovely lady digs a good dog now and again."

"Flickerivity?" She giggled and covered her mouth.

At that moment the other passengers around us disappeared into the glow of the florescent lights above. We were alone.

"Yes, flickerivity," I said with playful authority. "Look it up."

"You are too much, my subway stranger."

With no warning at all, on an otherwise uneventful day, I had found a way to make my life exceptional. Holly Elizabeth Walker would make it so.

We bounced along the tracks chatting about work, friends, and the painful fact that love had treated us unkindly in recent months. We approached my stop and as the train creaked and cawed I stood and asked very officially, "Ma'am, would you dine with me tonight?" She said I sounded like a cross between John Wayne and a British butler.

Six minutes later I was buying foot-long's at *River Dogs*, a one-man hotdog trailer tucked in a lookout area just off the Potomac River that divides Virginia from Washington. It sat in the shadow of my apartment building and took much of my disposable income through my first three years of college.

We sat on a hard, rained-stained bench for over an hour, slowly working on our hotdogs and overpriced bottles of water. I savored every minute, watching as the evening air and dimming light changed the tones of her hair.

"My heavens, what a sunset!" Holly said, looking up, her wide-eyes marveling at the rich colors of the evening sky.

"To be honest, I hadn't noticed. There is so much beauty down here...." My voice trailed and I waited for her eyes to return from the skies.

"Why Sam, you are a salesman at heart, aren't you? Well my friend, my free advice to you is to look up from time to time."

"Look up? Why look up? The world happens down here. Life happens on this bench, where we control the game, the moves. Sure, the skies, the clouds, they can be beautiful and all. But I'd hate to lose myself up there while I lost my footing down here." *Nice one, Romeo*, I thought as I gave a swift kick to my dangerous ego. *Dumb, dumb, dumb.*

"Sam, Sam, Mr. Jaded Sam." She cocked her porcelain face to the side, "I see I have some work to do here."

We exchanged telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, and finally our own last names, a forgotten detail we laughed at. I escorted her back to the subway and off she went, headed home to campus and the research project that awaited.

That was just the first of many perfect dates. There were minor league baseball games, church activities, days on the beach with friends we now shared, and a weekend trip by bus to meet her mother and sister in Charleston. Most memorable were the countless late-night sessions about politics, family, miracles and heaven.

The most important date took place sixth months later sitting on the same bench and ending with me kneeling in front of her with a modest solitaire diamond ring. She stared into the black velvet box, tears stuck in her eyes. It seemed I waited an eternity for this moment – and for an answer.

Finally she put her fingers on my chin and carefully pulled up my head. "Look up," she said as she kissed me. "Yes."



We were married on the one-year anniversary of our very first riverside date. We celebrated our honeymoon right in our own backyard, downtown Washington, D.C., staying in the nicest room we could afford at the Watergate Hotel. We had both lived in the area for years but never taken any significant time to see the city and enjoy its history. So for six days we slept late and saw the sights.

We toured the White House, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials. We acted like tourists, asking directions to buildings we stood in front of; having real tourists take our picture dipping our feet in the U.S. Capitol reflecting pool. We were only minutes from the Tyson's Corner apartment we now shared, but for all we knew we were thousands of miles from the busy lives that awaited us at honeymoon's end. Holly teased that if

we made more money we could cancel our new lease and live in that famous hotel forever. I often wish we had.

The early months of our marriage passed in a joyous blur and we settled into comfortable routines. Holly was finishing her dissertation and I was debating whether to pursue a masters of business administration or get right to work. Financial realities, most importantly the mountain of student debt we shared, made the decision an easy one.

By our sixth month anniversary I had graduated and was proving myself at a computer-networking firm. I sold myself in the interviews as the future of their sales department. It didn't take long to deliver. I was paying the bills – and then some – before my 90-day probation was over. I could sell.

Meanwhile, Holly earned her doctorate and we celebrated back on the bank of the river. We sat Indian style on a red, white, and blue blanket her mother made from a comfortable chair in the community room of her retirement home. We ate hotdogs and cheese fries, gloating in the perfection of our lives.

Two weeks later Holly accepted a full-time teaching position at the only university she had ever known. I lobbied for her to take time off, enjoy her accomplishments, spend time with her mother or visit her sister in New York. She refused. She was determined to contribute to the nest egg already established for anyone else that might come along bearing our same last name.

It turned out that someone was coming sooner than expected. By our first anniversary Holly was already eight weeks pregnant.

In April of the next year Holly was overseeing a study group that had gathered to discuss an approaching exam on 18th century British literature. "Mrs. Foster! Are you OK?" One of her students interrupted from a table in the front row.

"Sure, of course, why?" Holly answered with a grimace, clutching her podium with both hands.

"Because your skirt is leaking." Holly's water broke during a passionate speech on test preparation, priorities, and time management. She confessed later to feeling labor pains for hours but being concerned that her students were still unprepared for their first college final.

"So class," Holly said, smiling with embarrassment at their most unusual predicament. "Are you ready for the exam?"

"Are you ready to let a dozen college freshmen deliver your baby?" the witty young man answered.

"Very well then, would someone kindly call a cab?" They called an ambulance instead. Holly delivered our baby boy somewhere in traffic between campus and St. Luke's Hospital.

"I'm so sorry you missed it," Holly said from her bed in the maternity ward. I tried to hide my disappointment.

"Nonsense, you gave those young minds an education money can't buy." I sat at her side, awkwardly cradling our crying pink newborn.

"Honey, why don't you pick the name?" she said, squeezing my hand.

We named him James.