



# STRANGE ANIMALS

A  
NOVEL

CHAD  
KULTGEN

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# strange animals

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**chad kultgen**

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## chapter one

**“You’re an animal.** You’re here to eat and fuck. That’s it. There’s no God judging you, no heaven waiting for you, no karma, no greater meaning, no purpose to life. Nothing you do on this planet will ever matter. You’re an animal. You’re here to eat and fuck. That’s it.” This was the advice Karen Holloway gave her friend in a crowded bar.

God and religion were constructs of humanity that had long outlived their purpose of explaining the natural world to a primitive population that had no means of discovering the truth. The universe was likely infinite, and although most of its makeup was unknown, there was no evidence that anything supernatural had had any hand in its creation or continued development. Despite our advanced scientific understanding of a wide variety of things, we had not yet evolved beyond certain animal motivations. Chief among them was the need for sexual interaction. In the modern era, that need could be met without the once-unavoidable consequence of pregnancy. And even when pregnancy was the accidental outcome of that animal impulse, a woman had options. Choosing to have a child meant choosing a life of servitude and obligation to that child, over any ambitions a person might have for themselves, but there was no need to make that choice. These were things that Karen understood to be true.

“As we know, I have a slight difference of opinion on literally everything you just said. And I think it’s sad that I’ll be in heaven hanging out with all of my family and friends—except you—because you’ll be in hell, burning in a sea of liquid fire.” This was the response Tanya Campos gave Karen.

God was a very real, conscious entity, and the various religions that had existed throughout history and into the present were merely different methods by which that God spoke to different cultures. Science could explain the natural world, but religion explained the spiritual world. Evidence of God’s hand in the universe was in everything from the miracle of childbirth to the design of a snail’s shell. Human beings were the only creatures that God imbued with souls and free will, which separated them from the animal world and gave them dominion over it. As for sex, it was ideally something to be shared with a spouse, but in the modern era, as long as your partner was someone who at least loved and respected you, then it was impractical to abstain until marriage. With proper use of contraceptive methods, a woman could choose when she was ready to start a family. And while the pursuits of personal fulfillment outside of raising children were certainly worthwhile, being a mother was the most important thing a woman could do, and if that ultimately meant abandoning other individual goals, then so be it. These were things that Tanya understood to be true.

Karen said, “Okay, let’s address your retarded idea of heaven first. Then we’ll get to why you can complain about not getting laid when you’re standing in a bar full of guys who would gladly fuck you—and then when I give you advice about letting go of your hang-ups, you tell me that I’m going to burn in hell. That’s a seriously shitty best friend.”

Tanya laughed and said, “Here we go.”

“~~Yep, here we go. So you think that when you get to heaven, it’s going to be all of your family and friends, right?~~”

“Yeah, that’s the idea traditionally held by literally billions of people all over the world.”

“But no one ever thinks to mention that maybe old Uncle Jimmy who molested a couple of kids in the family might be in hell, do they? Nope, it’s always all of your friends and family. No one’s missing.”

“Maybe old Uncle Jimmy was genuinely sorry and he repented, so he gets to go to heaven, too. And maybe we all forgive old Uncle Jimmy, because once you’re in heaven you’re at peace in a way you’ve never experienced before, and you understand things much better than just a human brain is capable of.”

“Fair enough, but what about old Grandpa Johnny who killed a few dozen people in whatever war was going on in his generation, and nationalism told him that as long as he was doing it for his country, it was perfectly fine, so he never repented? Old Grampy Johnny is always right there waiting for you in heaven. Everyone gets in, no matter what, it seems like.”

“I just said *you’ll* be roasting in hell, and I’ll be sad about that.”

“Okay, asshole, then what about the people who claim to have died on the operating table and come back to life? Their immediate family are the only people they ever see in the white light. Wouldn’t your grandma also have her heavenly entourage, which would include her grandma, so on and so forth, until you have a giant group of dead people that includes every fucking person who has ever fucking lived on the entire fucking planet? You never hear that story, do you? You never hear some idiot saying, ‘I went to heaven and I saw every person who ever lived, even cavemen, because we’re all related if you go back far enough?’”

“I can’t wait for you to die, so you’ll get answers to these questions and you can stop being an asshole all the time.”

“When I die and when you die and when anyone dies, we’re not getting any answers. We’re just going to fucking rot in the ground. So live it up while you can.” Karen raised her glass and took a long swig of beer, then said, “Does this beer smell weird to you?”

Tanya sniffed her beer and said, “No.”

Karen said, “Weird. It smells metallic or something.”

Tanya said, “Maybe it’s a bad tap. I don’t smell it, though.”

Karen said, “Whatever,” and she took another sip.

Tanya laughed again. “Anyway, you were baptized. You still have a chance to avoid eternal damnation.”

“Bitch, please. You know what really kills me about you religious assholes?”

“There’s something else, besides everything you just mentioned? Your well is deep. Please enlighten me.”

“You all think we live in a religious society. But we don’t.”

“You mean America?”

“Yeah.”

“You know the stats better than I do, probably, so you have to know you’re talking bullshit now.”

“Obviously we live in a dipshit country. More people believe in angels than climate change. But I’m not talking about opinion polls. I’m talking about the nuts and bolts of our society—how things are actually run. If I went out tonight and I killed someone, and then in my trial I said, ‘Well, I believe in God just like everybody else, and I think he’s all powerful just like everybody else, and I know w

all believe that he can talk to people if he wants to. And he *did* talk to me. He told me to kill that person, so I did it. I don't know why God wanted that person to die or why he wanted me to be the one to kill that person, but I don't ask questions. When God tells me to do something, I do it. I was just following God's plan.' If I said that shit, even if the entire jury was full of evangelical idiots who speak in tongues on Sundays and really think that God talks to them every day, I'm either going straight to jail for life or getting the death penalty. Period."

"Right, because you broke the law."

"But a jury of my religious peers, who all supposedly believe it's possible for God to tell me to kill someone, should forgive me for breaking man's fallible law in order to carry out God's divine will. They should believe that I was operating under orders from above, and who are they to judge me anyway? Isn't that one of the basic tenets? Judge not lest ye be judged?"

"Yeah, but that's not how God operates."

"Bullshit. If God knows everything that's going to happen, if he has some plan that we all have to follow, then he knows about every murder before it happens and he lets it happen, even though he has the power to stop it. In fact, he sets up every murder in the first place. I mean, fuck, if you boil it down, every second of human suffering and misery was designed and carried out by God."

"You're really fired up tonight. I thought this was supposed to be a night where I get to bitch about getting dumped, and you get to cheer me up."

"I know. Sorry. I'm really bitchy lately. I'm stuck on my dissertation, and it's driving me a little nuts."

"You still haven't turned in your proposal? Jesus."

"Oh! Lord's name in vain! See you in hell."

"I'll repent."

"See, you're not as religious as you think. No one is. That's all I was saying. Another round?"

"Okay, but then I need to get back. I have to finish that paper tonight or I'm screwed."

Karen didn't mention religion or God again during the rest of the conversation with her friend. Instead she found herself thinking how strange it was that although we are all animals with roughly the same mental capacity and roughly the same access to information, both general and specific, we can come to such radically different conclusions about the nature of reality. She wondered if it would always be like this, or if at some point in the future a general knowledge base would be accepted by the whole of humanity on which every individual would base their view of existence. She hoped that would be the case, but became sad as she reflected that she wouldn't live long enough to see the future.

**"It's not even** midnight. I thought you guys were going to turn it up now that Tanya's single again. The greeting Paul Barkley gave Karen as she walked in the front door of their apartment.

God and religion were very likely constructs of humanity, but no one would ever be able to disprove or prove the existence of a God, and argument of first cause would never be solved. The universe was vast and mostly unknown. It was just as likely that it was created in the big bang as it was that the entirety of existence was the result of a computer simulation in which every human being was merely a subroutine or an algorithm producing and analyzing data for a purpose that would never be known to them and might not even exist. Sex could be a recreational activity, but it could also be something sacred shared between two people. Having children necessarily meant not being able to work as hard or as often as you'd like on personal endeavors, but the idea of being old without children, without a family, wasn't pleasant. Love was an electrochemical reaction in the brain, but

was very real and no less consuming than if it were the same intangible, magical enchantment that most people seemed to accept as an explanation. These were things that Paul understood to be true.

Karen replied, "I know. She had a paper to write or something. I think she's probably just afraid to try and find another guy because she has got to be terrible at giving head."

"How do you know that?"

"She's only had sex with three guys."

"That doesn't necessarily mean she's bad."

"Come on. Yeah, it does."

"Wait, so are you saying that the more people you've had sex with, the better you are at it?"

"Of course. How can that not be true of anything? The more you do something, the better you get."

"Then you must have been a serious fucking slut before I met you."

Karen laughed. "Fuck you."

"Hey, that was a compliment."

"You always know how to flatter a lady. How was your day?"

She sat next to him on the couch and kissed him. He said, "Long. Jobs suck. You should milk the PhD thing as long as you can. Stay in school forever."

"I'd love to. Unfortunately I don't think I can get another extension on my dissertation proposal."

"And how close are you to finishing it?"

"It's hard to say. I mean, I can tell you that I've written exactly zero percent of it, but since I don't know how long the final proposal will be, I can't really tell you how close I am to finishing."

"You're insane."

"And that's why you decided to move in with me." She kissed him on the cheek again. Paul reached up, turned her head so their lips met, and kissed her with obvious sexual intent. He said,

"Actually, *that's* why I decided to move in with you."

"Ooh, such a sexy man." Karen took off her shirt and her bra and playfully shook her breasts at her boyfriend. She took him by the hands, stood up off the couch, led him toward their bedroom and said,

"Now I want to show you why I moved in with you. We can sleep in. Tomorrow's Sunday."



**“Amen,”** was the response James Dobbs gave to his pastor’s recital of the prayer that began the Sunday service he attended habitually.

God was the creator of all things. He existed beyond space and time and knew every person’s thoughts and actions. He had a plan for everyone, and although he could dispense ultimate punishment, God loved all his children. God’s plan included every atom in existence, but the things that took place on Earth were the only ones worth concerning yourself with, because human beings were the only creatures in the entirety of God’s glorious kingdom that were blessed with free will. Although some scientific endeavors proved beneficial to society, science as a whole was part of a plot by Satan to convince humanity to accept lies as truth, to pervert the spiritual lives of human beings. Sex was an act to be shared only between a man and his wife for the purpose of procreation. Life began at conception and had to be protected at all costs. These were things that James understood to be true.

James sat alone and silent a few rows back from the pulpit in Woodstone Church. He had been raised in this town, and Woodstone was the only church he had ever attended. James grew up in the foster system and never truly knew any parent as well as he felt he knew God. Nor did he feel that any of his foster parents cared for him as much as God had throughout his life. He never had the opportunity to make any close friends, and he didn’t mind this. As a child, he spent every night praying to God to bring meaning to his life, and that habit continued. As an adult, he took enough pleasure in his relationship with God, his frequent prayer, and his attendance at church services to have what he considered to be a rich and fulfilling social life. In his mind, God had given him everything he needed.

“If you’ll turn to Jeremiah 29:11 and follow along with me: ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future,’” was how Pastor Gary Preston delivered the opening reading from the Bible.

Jesus Christ was the son of God and he died for all of humanity’s sins. Spreading the word of God was every Christian’s duty, and there was no more exalted a manner in which to spread it than his ministry. Certain people who allowed Satan’s temptation to overtake them, or who abused the free will they were given by God to engage in lives of sin, would suffer ultimate punishment in hell. But God still loved these people just as a father still loves his child, even though he must punish the child from time to time. Sex was generally something to be shared only between a husband and wife, but all people make mistakes and all people sin. As long as people truly repented, they could be washed clean of their sins in the eyes of God. The healthy amount of money his ministry brought in was simply God’s blessing for the good work he was doing, and there was no need for modesty where material wealth was concerned because it was a gift from God himself, and all of God’s gifts were to be openly celebrated. These were things that Gary understood to be true.

“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’ Now what are we hearing here? *For I know the plans I have for you*. This is God telling us what? Is he telling us that we know the plans he has for us? No. He is telling us that *he* knows the plans he has for us. He knows. Not us. And this can be one of the hardest things to accept as a Christian. You may be sitting there thinking that you know that God’s plan for you has to include a brand-new Mercedes-Benz, or it just has to include fifty-yard-line tickets to the next Super Bowl, because you want those things so bad, but guess what? What you want, no matter how bad you want it, might not be what God has in his plan for you. And it’s not just cars and Super Bowl tickets we’re talking about here. I know some of you out there right now are suffering, really suffering. Maybe you have family members who are in the hospital, and you pray so hard every day that they’ll get better, and you know God hears every word you pray to him, but your brother, your sister, your mom, your dad . . . they don’t get better. You know why? Because God has a plan for that person, too, and you don’t know what it is, and they don’t know what it is. But he does. And that’s what matters. Learning to accept that God has a plan for you, and no matter what you think you should be doing with your life, that’s secondary to what God knows you should be doing—well, that’s one of the hardest things about being a Christian.

“So let’s say you get to that point. Let’s say you’re okay with giving up all your own personal desires in order to do whatever it is that’s in God’s plan for you. The next step might even be harder. I mean, how will you know what God’s plan is? Is he just going to tell you? Well, yeah, he is just going to tell you. Isn’t that funny how sometimes God can use the simplest thing to work his miracles? But he can only do his part. He can tell you his plan, but that doesn’t mean anything if you don’t hear it. I don’t know how many times I tell my kids to take out the trash, but guess who ends up taking it out? Yours truly—because my kids, God bless ’em, might be on their Xbox or their phone, or listening to music, and they don’t hear me because they have so many distractions. It’s hard to do, but it’s a two-way street. God’s gonna talk to you, but you have to hear him.

“So how do you hear God? You listen. Sounds simple again, right? But it’s not. How many of us in here today can honestly say we’re listening for God every day, all day? None of us can. My kids have their Xbox and their music and their phone, and you might have your bills or your job or your boyfriend or girlfriend or husband or wife. We’ve all got distractions. But that’s okay. God knows that. And God knows that the best time to talk to us is when we’re really listening, when the distractions are gone and we’re just open to hear whatever it is he has to say. So the best thing we can do as Christians is listen for God’s voice as hard as we can, as often as we can.

“And once you hear God, then what? Well, then you have to do the hardest thing of all. You have to *act*. You have to actually do what God tells you to do. And I know that’s hard. It’s a lot easier just to say, ‘Well, God, I know you told me to get a job or to help my family or my community, but there’s some awfully good TV on tonight.’ Well, that won’t cut it. You ever hear that expression ‘When I see you jump, you say how high’? That’s exactly how God wants you to react to his voice when he tells you to do something. I mean, what do you think happened when Jesus heard his dad say, ‘Son, I have a blessing in store for you. I have a favor to ask of you. You might not want to do it, but it’s all part of my plan, and you just have to trust me’? You think Jesus said, ‘Dad, I’d love to help you out, but I have some TV to watch’? No, Jesus went to his disciples and he told them he was going to die for all of us, and not to worry, because even though that might sound bad, God told him it was what he was supposed to do. No matter what it is, you have to be willing and ready to act on whatever commands God gives you, to complete his plan for you. And that gets a big fat amen.”

The rest of the congregation, James Dobbs included, echoed back, “Amen.”

James spent the rest of his Sunday at home, listening for God to speak to him, just as Minister Preston had outlined in his sermon. Just like every day prior to that Sunday, God did not speak to him. James wondered what God's voice sounded like and wondered if he'd ever hear it. He assumed that God spoke to everyone at least once, and he vowed that he would be ready when the time came for him to carry out whatever command God delivered.

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## chapter three

**Karen was late** for an appointment with her PhD supervisor. She woke up on time but was too nauseous to leave her apartment. She had recently been feeling like her hangovers were getting worse and worse, and sometimes after what she considered a smaller than usual amount of alcohol. She tried to force herself to drink a glass of water but felt repulsed by the idea of her teeth possibly touching the glass, a fear that a hangover had never produced before. She hoped her supervisor would understand and not even bring up her tardiness.

She had developed a certain amount of dread concerning this appointment, due to the misgivings she seemed unable to escape where her dissertation was concerned. She had started writing two proposals over the past six months, but she had lost interest in both. She didn't want her dissertation to be the same as every other philosophy dissertation at UCLA: read by an approval committee, published in an esoteric journal, then filed away in some obscure library, where it would never be seen again. She was thinking about this as she walked across campus to her supervisor's office, hoping that her desire to do something important, something noteworthy, would garner her some more time to settle in on a subject for her dissertation.

As she walked toward Dodd Hall, Karen was stopped by a student she identified as undergraduate by his age and dress. "If you have a second, I'd like to ask you if you've accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior," was his greeting to Karen.

Based on all the strife and suffering in the world, it was clear the end times were close at hand. Although a college education was important to secure a good job and become a high-functioning member of society, being a disciple of Christ was much more important, and was clearly much more worthy of a person's time than studying the knowledge of man. In the final days of the world, there was no greater endeavor than attempting to save as many souls as possible. Sexual intercourse was to be engaged in only by a man and his wife, and if God saw fit to initiate Armageddon before he delivered every man a wife, then it shouldn't be questioned, because that would be part of his plan, and dying as a virgin would be acceptable. The fornication and experimentation with drugs and alcohol that almost all college students participated in were sins; and while they were redeemable sins, if the world ended while a person was engaging in sinful behavior, that person would be sent to hell without the opportunity to repent. And since no one had any foreknowledge about the exact moment of Armageddon, it was better to avoid such behaviors altogether. These were things that the young student understood to be true.

Karen never passed up the opportunity to engage with religious people. It gave her a certain satisfaction to express her contempt for them openly. Karen said, "Why would you want to ask me that?"

He said, "Because I care about your soul and about its salvation."

"You know the God that you pray to, that you claim loves everyone . . . He—" She paused. "You"

do think God's a man, right?"

"Well, the Bible did say God made man in his own image, so . . ."

"What do you think this male God does with his penis? Do you think he fucks with it? If so, who does he fuck? Does he pee? If so, what does he drink in order to produce urine?"

"I hadn't thought about that, but I'd guess he just doesn't use it."

"Not even to masturbate?"

"Masturbation is a sin."

"I'm fucking with you. I just wanted to make sure you thought God was a man so I could correctly identify you as the regular kind of misogynist piece of shit that usually stands out here and bothe people. So that same big-dicked God that you claim loves every person on the planet also kills every person on the planet. But before he kills most of them, he makes them suffer through some of the worst circumstances you can imagine—war, famine, disease, all kinds of bad shit. And even if you're lucky enough to be born in a place and into a class that allows you to escape the garden variety atrocities that most of the world deals with, you'll age, at least, and your body will experience pain as it slowly shuts down over the course of your life until you die alone in a hospital somewhere."

He said, "It's true, we all age and we all die, but here, in this country, we're blessed to be comfortable for most of our lives, so we have the ability to spread his word."

Karen said, "You assholes will never understand how arrogant it is to claim you're blessed, without you?"

He said, "It's not arrogant. It's actually the opposite. By admitting that everything good in your life is a blessing from God, you give him glory, and you understand that you can achieve nothing on your own, nothing without God's divine favor. It's actually a statement of ultimate humility."

Karen said, "I know you think it is, but you're wrong. Let me help you out. By saying that you're blessed in not having to worry about the problems most of the rest of the world deals with on a daily basis, you're actually saying that you truly believe God likes you more than everyone else he's making to suffer. God has blessed you with a cancer-free body. Does that mean that anyone with cancer is less blessed? God must not like them as much as he likes you, right? I mean, why would he give them cancer when they clearly don't want it and let you walk around completely healthy?"

The student stammered slightly, "It . . . it just means that I'm thankful for what I have, and I recognize I have it because God wants me to have it."

Karen said, "Exactly. Other people want what you have, too, but they don't have it, and you really honestly think that's because God wants you to have it more than he wants them to have it. You believe you're favored by a God you claim loves all his children equally. Which is fucking disgusting."

With that, Karen continued on her way to Dodd Hall as the young student called after her, "I'll pray for you."

"**I'm very much** hoping that you have a proposal for me, Ms. Holloway," was the first thing Professor David Noone said to Karen as she sat down across from him in his office.

Although no scientific evidence supported the existence of a God, there were certain undeniable spiritual human experiences that made an outright stance of militant atheism impossible. The universe was vast and magnificent in a way that almost certainly attested to a design or some conscious influence in its creation and arrangement. However, it was very likely that none of the major world religions were correct in their assumptions. It was far more likely that God and the realm of the spirit were much too complex for human beings ever to understand, and that we created art and philosophy

in an attempt to describe those elements of the human experience that hard science never could. She was an animal act, but it was also a spiritual act and one of the most beautiful acts a human being could ever perform. These were things that David understood to be true.

Karen said, "I don't."

David said, "Karen, I've given you more extensions than any student I've ever had in the program. You have to come up with something. What about your proposition from last year? I thought it was very good. I know you have a specific disdain for religion, and I really thought you were able to get past the base-level vitriol you usually rely on with any religious debate and objectively explore the sadomasochist mind-set of the true Christian. Why don't you continue where you left off with that?"

She said, "Everyone already knows that the basic Christian ideals are contradictory and psychologically harmful, and . . . I just I don't want to do something that no one cares about."

David said, "So are you saying that every other student in the program is doing something no one cares about?"

She said, "I didn't say that. You did. But, yeah, basically."

David sat back in his chair and said, "Karen, you're very bright, obviously. Everyone in the program is. But I think you're failing to understand exactly what a dissertation is supposed to be. It's not meant to change the world or revolutionize the way we think about anything. It's meant to be a document that I can read and the rest of the committee can read to show us that you have enough understanding to warrant a PhD. That's all. Once you have the PhD, once you leave here, or stay here and become a professor, that's when your real work will start. And I don't want to rain on your parade, but this is philosophy. There's not a lot of new ground to tread, even after you complete the program. You know you're still young, and you still have that drive to blaze a trail, but eventually you'll come to understand that the trails have already been blazed, and it's rewarding just to walk down them."

She said, "Are you serious?"

David said, "Very."

She said, "So do you think *you're* just walking down the paths of other people? Because the work you did on the negative costs of altruism, why it's bad to be good—that's why I came to this school—and that was a path that, to my knowledge, didn't exist before you."

David thought for a moment, the compliment having its calculated effect. He said, "You might get one chance at something that becomes meaningful to the world of philosophy. But I did that work years after my PhD candidacy."

She said, "Well, think of it this way: I want to do something important now. If I fall a little short and it doesn't revolutionize the world of philosophy, then it will still be a pretty amazing dissertation, right? Remember how you felt when you started thinking about altruism? You got that little spark and you knew you were onto something. I'm just asking you to give me a little more time to try and find that spark, and if I can't, then I promise I'll throw myself into my old proposition with reckless abandon and deliver you the best unimportant dissertation you've ever seen in your life."

David couldn't help but like Karen. She didn't remind him of himself when he was young. She reminded him of the types of girls he fell in love with when he was young. He said, "Okay. But you can't stretch this out much more. A few more weeks at the most, okay?"

Karen said, "Okay."

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## chapter four

**James Dobbs finished** eating dinner in the kitchen of his one-bedroom apartment and put on his work clothes. He had had the same job on an overnight cleaning crew at Dillard's in the West Ridge Mall since graduating high school seven years earlier. The work wasn't difficult, and James considered how he didn't have to deal with very many people to be a perk.

As he drove, James thought about a girl named Rebecca. She worked at Dillard's and sometimes stayed late enough that James would see her leaving as he was coming in to begin the night's cleaning. He had never spoken to her, but he knew her name because she sometimes forgot to take off her name tag when she was leaving for the night. James wondered if God had put Rebecca in his life to teach him something or if, perhaps, she was the girl God meant for him. James said a prayer asking God to give him a sign that night. If Rebecca was the girl that God intended for him to marry, James asked only that God give him some unmistakable signal that this was the case.

As he turned off Wanamaker Road and into the West Ridge Mall parking lot closest to Dillard's, he could see Rebecca emerging from the building. James spotted her red Toyota Camry, with its Kansas State Wildcat bumper sticker, and he parked next to it. He waited in his car for a few moments longer than necessary, then got out and made his way toward the building so that his path to the door would cross Rebecca's. He looked at her in anticipation of the sign he asked God to deliver, but Rebecca didn't return his gaze. She was talking on her phone and looking down into her purse, completely oblivious to James and everything else around her. He silently repented for his sin of pride, for asking God for something so foolish and petty.

And then Rebecca's phone, precariously perched between her ear and shoulder, fell onto the ground an inch from James's feet, cracking its screen. This, he was certain, was the sign from God that he'd prayed for. He bent down, picked up the phone, and handed it back to Rebecca. She said, "Thanks. This is the second phone I've ruined digging for my keys."

God was probably real, but it seemed that praying was a waste of time. Whichever God created Earth certainly didn't care about what happened to the planet or the people on it. The solar system was the same thing as the galaxy and the universe—they were all just different ways of describing space, which was essentially anything beyond Earth. Science was good when it made the complications of living a little easier to deal with, by creating things like the Internet and cell phones, but there was no real need to waste time and money on space exploration or smashing atoms. Sex was a natural and instinctual part of being human, and no matter what any person's sexual preference, as long as it wasn't illegal, there was no need to bring religion into it. Abortion was a viable option for any girl who wasn't ready to raise a child. It wasn't something to take lightly, just a medical procedure. There were things that Rebecca understood to be true.

With a confidence that came from knowing that God had ordained this event, James introduced himself and told Rebecca that he saw her from time to time when he was coming in to start his shift.

He told her that he'd wanted to stop and say hello, but he was too embarrassed. James went on to ask Rebecca if she'd be interested in getting dinner or seeing a movie with him on a night when she wasn't busy. James was confident that Rebecca would agree to go out with him, given that God had just given him a sign to ask her out.

Rebecca said, "Oh my god, that's seriously really sweet of you to ask, but I have a boyfriend. Sorry."

James stood in front of her, too confused to reply. She said, "Well, have a good night," and got into her car. As he walked into Dillard's and took the floor polisher out of its storage closet, he silently asked God if he had done something wrong, if he had misinterpreted the sign. He listened closely for any sound of God's voice, for any answer. All he heard was the loud hum and bristling of the brush polisher polishing the tile floor in the housewares department as he pushed the machine back and forth.

On his break, James avoided his coworkers and ate a sandwich in his car. He looked out his window at the spot on the ground where Rebecca had dropped her phone. The sign God had given him was a phone breaking. He began to understand that this sign was a negative sign. It wasn't a dove flying overhead, a beam of golden light parting the clouds, an angel trumpeting from the heavens. The phone hit the ground, and its screen shattered. It became clear to him that Rebecca was a temptation from Satan, and the sign he had prayed for, the sign that was delivered by God, wasn't meant to motivate him to ask Rebecca on a date. It was meant to warn him. God had given James a sign to stay away from her.

This is what Pastor Preston had been talking about. James assumed that God's plan was to bring Rebecca into his life, but it had become clear to James that this was incorrect. James understood that his own human desires were clouding his ability to surrender to God's plan. James finished his sandwich and thanked God for looking after him. He promised God that he would try to be more observant of his signs and more understanding of them. He promised God that he would do his best to suppress his own desires and his own thoughts about what should happen in his life so that he could more easily be used in whatever manner God intended.



**Karen's menstrual cycle** was fairly regular. It had been this way since she got her first period in junior high school. She would occasionally skip a period. It wasn't common for her to do so, but it did happen. But only one of those occasions came after she became sexually active. She was a freshman in college, and she had engaged in unprotected sex a few times with a fellow student who became her first college boyfriend.

The month after these initial unprotected sexual encounters, Karen did not get her period. When she began to suspect she was pregnant, she went to the campus health center, only to find out that she wasn't. The doctors there told her that it's not uncommon for girls entering their freshman year of college to miss a period due to the stress of such an extreme change in their lives. The doctors also said that an increased intake of alcohol and drugs can be contributing factors. Although Karen didn't admit this to the doctors, she felt that this second explanation was far more plausible in her case.

Paul had already gotten out of bed, made himself breakfast, and left for work by the time Karen woke up. She could still smell the bacon he cooked. She knew she had missed her period the month before, which she attributed to mounting stress concerning her dissertation. But she was now aware that a week had passed since her period was due again, which meant that she had missed her second period in a row. This was something she had never experienced. After checking her phone's calendar to see that she had only one afternoon class to teach, she decided to spend the morning buying a pregnancy test, just to be on the safe side.

Once inside her neighborhood CVS, she paused for a moment to really absorb the experience. This was the first time she had ever purchased a pregnancy test, and she viewed it as a strange kind of a rite of passage—something that was available to women only recently in the overall timeline of humanity. She tried to imagine what it must have been like before pregnancy tests, before women had options. Then she tried to imagine what it would be like for women in the future. She wondered if it would be better, if there would be some kind of male birth control, if there would be no social stigma associated with an abortion, or if it would be worse. She knew it was possible that the future could see a return to more restrictive laws and social norms where reproduction was concerned, where a woman's freedom was concerned. In Karen's mind it was completely plausible that the next superpower to govern the world after America could be any one of the currently existing misogynistic societies around the globe. Without any foreknowledge of what might be in store for future generations, she considered herself lucky to live in the time she did.

She made her way to the family planning aisle and realized she didn't know enough about the variety of pregnancy tests to make a quick selection. As she looked over the dozen or so possible choices and read the back of some of the boxes, Karen became aware of other CVS patrons watching her. She didn't know if this was an accurate assessment of the situation, but it felt accurate. She questioned her uneasiness in this moment, but she gave into it nonetheless, grabbing a First Respon-

test without inspecting it and walking to the front.

Paul always made some derogatory comment about automation being the downfall of society when they encountered self-checkout machines in grocery stores, but Karen was glad that CVS had an entire bank of them as she purchased her pregnancy test. But as she walked back to her car, she mentally scolded herself for feeling any shame at all about her purchase.

At home, as she sat on the toilet urinating onto the plastic stick, she knew what she would do if she was, in fact, pregnant. She would have an abortion. Both she and Paul had discussed with certainty how neither of them ever wanted children. This made the possible positive result of the pregnancy test seem more like an injury or illness that Karen would have to seek medical care to treat. In her mind it was more of a significant and horribly unpleasant inconvenience than a life-changing decision.

She pulled her pants back up and stood in the bathroom for the three minutes the box indicated were necessary for the hormones from her urine to react with the chemicals on the stick. As the final seconds of those three minutes ticked by, Karen watched two pink lines materialize in the small oval window at the end of the stick. She said, "Fuck," and flipped open her laptop to Google the nearest Planned Parenthood.

She found that the Hollywood Health Center was the closest to her. As she called to make an appointment, she soothed herself by rationalizing that the Hollywood Planned Parenthood office had probably done more abortions than any Planned Parenthood in the country, so their skill level should be high at least. She made an appointment for the following day, and then called Tanya and asked her to come over. She told Tanya that she had big news.

Karen knew that Tanya didn't share her views on abortion, and she also knew that the situation had more innate gravity than she was willing to acknowledge. "Guess what?" she said to her friend when she arrived.

Tanya said, "What?"

Karen said, "I'm preggers!"

"Wait, what?"

"I know. It sucks. I don't know what happened. There were a few days two months ago when I had the flu and I didn't take my pill, but Paul didn't come inside me for at least a week or so after that. Anyway, doesn't matter now. What's done is done."

"Holy shit. What did Paul say?"

"He doesn't really, uh, know at this point."

"Holy shit. You have to tell him."

"Stop holy shitting me and calm down. I don't have to tell him at all. I obviously have to do something, but telling him is not that something."

"That's not cool. That's his baby, too."

"It's not anybody's baby right now. It's not even a fucking baby at all. It's a little ball of snow stuck to the wall of my uterus. That's it."

"You can't be serious. You're really not going to tell him about it?"

"No, I'm not. And neither are you."

"Why wouldn't you tell him?"

Until that moment, Karen hadn't thought about why she didn't want to tell her boyfriend about the pregnancy. Practically, the situation would be resolved by the end of the following day. She didn't see the need to involve Paul. But beyond that, she realized that she was feeling a certain amount of shame, guilt, and embarrassment for having gotten pregnant in the first place. She thought about all the conversations she and Paul had about not having children, about all the times they had laughed at the

friends when they replaced their Facebook profile pictures with sonograms, about how they each hated the idea of willingly replacing themselves. This one shared view was something they took pride in and had built at least some part of their relationship around.

She felt that the pregnancy was somehow her fault, an easily preventable mistake. She knew logically this wasn't the case, but she couldn't help how she felt. On top of that, she knew that there was at least some chance that if Paul should find out about the pregnancy and the abortion that would follow, it might alter their relationship. Even though Karen knew that Paul would agree with her decision and take her to the appointment and care for her after the procedure, she felt it was better to leave him out of it. This wasn't an experience she wanted him to have to share.

Karen said, "I just don't want him to know, okay?"

Tanya said, "Obviously, I'll do whatever you want me to, but I'm telling you, you should seriously think about telling him. I know you're probably trying to downplay this in your head, but it's a bigger deal than you think."

"No, it's really not, and that's how it's going to stay."

"Okay, fine."

"And I need you to take me to Planned Parenthood tomorrow."

"What? I'm not helping you get an abortion."

"I went to church with you that one time your boyfriend dumped you on Easter."

"I can't believe you're making jokes about this."

"I'm sorry. I know this is seriously against everything you stand for and all of that shit. But I really need your help, Tanya. You're my best friend, and I called you because you're the only person I want to know about it. You're the only person I really trust. Will you help me, please?"

"Are you serious right now?"

"Yes."

Tanya took a moment, exhaled a long breath, gave Karen a hug, and then said, "You know the fucking irony here, right? As a Christian, I have to help you when you're in need and I can't pass judgment. So I'll take you. But I don't agree with this at all. At all."

"I know you don't, and that's why you're my best friend."

That night Karen ate dinner with Paul, watched television with Paul, and had sex with Paul without telling him that she was pregnant with his child. While they had sex he said, "I think your boobs are getting bigger." Karen denied it, even though she knew he was right. Her breasts had been getting tighter. She knew that after the following day, her hormones would return to their normal levels and her breasts would return to their normal size. Karen knew that this would be the closest Paul would ever come to finding out she was pregnant.

As Paul slept, Karen remained awake, building dread by imagining the procedure she'd have to endure the following day. She rubbed a hand over her stomach in small circles and thought to herself that this would very likely be the only interaction she would have with a child of her own.

**Proverbs 12:11:** *Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense.*

This was the opening line of James Dobbs’s profile on ChristianMingle.com. James had studied this specific line from the Bible since he was a child. It had always held special meaning for him. Throughout his childhood and early adulthood he had felt contempt for his peers because he felt that many of them followed worthless pursuits while he worked his metaphorical land. He felt that this proverb was the simplest and best way to describe himself, the life he led, and the future he hoped to share with a wife. The work ethic he created based on these words was something that he tried to apply to every aspect of his life.

Even though his year-long membership on ChristianMingle.com had yielded him only two dates, neither of which led to a second date, James logged in to his account every night before work and made a habit of sending at least five personal messages to women with whom the site had matched him. He felt that God would not simply place his wife in front of him. He had to show God that he was ready for her and that he was willing to work in order to get her. God had to know that he was deserving of such a blessing.

In the first six months James was active on the site, he sent a standard cut-and-paste message to every woman he felt was a good match for him. It read:

“Hello. My name is James Dobbs. I haven’t been on this site for very long, but after reading your profile it seems like we’re a pretty good match and I’d love to get to know you more. If you find my profile interesting, please message me back. —James”

The message took James several nights to craft. He was unsure of what a good first message on an Internet dating site should include. In the end, he decided that keeping it short was the best strategy. He never received any replies to this message, however, and after reading complaints on several prospective matches’ profiles that they were tired of having their inboxes filled with meaningless cut-and-paste messages from guys who clearly hadn’t taken the time to read their profiles, James abandoned his standard message strategy. He rationalized that if he was sincerely going to work the land of ChristianMingle.com, he should put in the time required to personalize each of his messages.

His first message of the night was sent to a woman with the username “ChicaDeJesus.” She was five foot three, Caucasian, twenty-five years old, had a bachelor’s degree, and worked as a nurse. She described herself as having a goofy sense of humor and loving animals, including her two cats. She claimed to be looking for a hard-working guy who would be a good provider for the family she wanted to start as soon as possible. Jim imagined himself married to ChicaDeJesus, sitting in the backyard of some house he didn’t yet have, watching their children run around after church squirting each other with water guns.

He wrote:

“Hi. I saw your profile and it seems like we have a lot of things in common. I really like comedies and it seems like you do, too. I don’t have cats but I really like them and have no allergies anything like that. Where do you nurse at?”

James felt that ending the message with an innocuous question about something he could only have learned by reading her profile increased his chances of receiving a response. He sent two similar messages to two similar profiles before he saw the small Christian Mingle instant messenger window open up in the bottom right of his screen. James was receiving an instant message from a user named “Eyesofblue.” He saw that she was five foot seven, Caucasian, twenty-eight, and had graduated from high school, though she listed no job. James had always initiated first contact with women on this site and he began to wonder if this could be the sign from God that he had been waiting for.

Eyesofblue’s message read, “What do you do for a job? You don’t have it listed.”

James explained that he worked at the mall in Topeka.

Eyesofblue replied, “Like in a store?”

James explained that he worked at the Dillard’s department store.

Eyesofblue replied, “Do you sell stuff? Like suits or something?”

James explained that he worked nights as part of the cleaning crew for that store, mainly, but sometimes they also cleaned other stores in the mall or the mall itself if the regular mall cleaning crew was unavailable, which happened a few times a year.

Eyesofblue replied, “Are you trying to save up money to move to Kansas City or something?”

James explained that he was not.

Eyesofblue replied, “Are you going to school?”

James explained that he was not.

Eyesofblue replied, “Oh. You just want to clean Dillard’s forever? Lol.”

James explained that the job paid his bills, and if the Lord had different plans for him, then James was sure the Lord would let him know.

Eyesofblue replied, “True. So what do you do when you’re not working?”

James explained that he spent his free time either in church or reading for the most part. He then asked Eyesofblue what she did in her free time.

Eyesofblue replied, “Watch TV, I guess. So are you busy this weekend?”

James explained that he was not.

Eyesofblue replied, “Maybe you should ask me out, then.”

James had never encountered a girl so forward. He wondered if God had sent her his profile and then compelled her to message him. He wondered if Eyesofblue was his soul mate. He asked her if she would like to get dinner with him.

Eyesofblue replied, “OMG! You read my mind. Lol. I’d love to.”

They exchanged phone numbers, made plans for their date, and then James logged off. As he polished the floor in Dillard’s that night, he prayed to God to help him decide what he should wear on what would be his first date in almost a year.

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## chapter seven

**Karen had instructed** Tanya to pick her up at 10:00 A.M., an hour and a half after Paul left for work. Karen assumed this buffer time would ensure that Paul wouldn't find out about her clandestine plan, preventing Tanya from having to lie about why she was at their place, if the two ran into each other. Tanya arrived on time and tried to stop herself from initiating any kind of conversation about the events at hand. She told herself she was just going to be a good friend. She told herself that she would remain neutral. She told herself this wasn't about her or what she thought should be done. But she couldn't help herself.

The drive to Planned Parenthood was silent at first. Then, about ten minutes in, Tanya said, "I know you don't want to hear this, but I have to make sure you've really thought this through. It's only been a day since you even found out. You can take some more time before you decide anything."

Karen said, "I don't need to think about it anymore. I've thought about this my entire adult life. I made the decision before I ever even got pregnant."

"I know. I know. It's just that there's no harm in waiting another week, and who knows? You might change your mind. Some kind of motherly instinct might kick in or something."

"That's why I need to do it now. If there's even the slightest possibility that some flood of motherly hormones might make me change my mind, I need to make sure I take care of this first."

"That's a really shitty thing to say."

"Why is that shitty? I think making an informed decision based on logic and reason is far better than basing it on hormonal fluctuation and emotion."

"Okay, robot. I'm obviously here for you and I'm obviously supportive of you, but, I mean, don't you think about the baby at all? That baby can't speak for itself. Don't you feel like as a human being you have even the slightest obligation to let it live?"

"Here we go. I still don't know how or why you champion that pro-life bullshit rhetoric. You know the people at the heart of the pro-life camp—not you and the regular people who just don't like abortion, but the ones who get laws passed and try to shut down Planned Parenthood—those fucking pieces of shit are the ones who started that whole line of reasoning. The baby can't defend itself, so we have an obligation to defend them. Those fucks don't give two shits about the unborn babies they're supposedly saving. All they care about is control. They have to control women, and having women with the freedom to choose what to do with their bodies is a scarier proposition to them than letting women vote. Because on some very primal level, men see it as women controlling life, controlling the future of the species, and they certainly can't have that. And somehow their bullshit has sunk into your head and stuck. I know this is just one of those things between us that will probably stay like this until we die, and I've learned to accept it, but please, for the love of your God, the one who tells you not to judge people and to be accepting and loving of everyone, can we just check this conversation today? Just today. Just let me get through this, and then you can tell me how bad it is to take the choice away

from a blob of cells all you want.”

~~They drove in silence for a minute or so. Karen felt like she might have gone a little too far in her reprimand, but she felt she had no alternative. She just wanted to get through the day with as little stress as possible.~~

Tanya eventually said, “Sorry. It’s just tough to be a good friend in a situation like this, I guess.”

Karen said, “I’m sorry, too. I know how hard it is for you to even be driving me to get this done. I’m sorry I put you in the situation in the first place. But you’re my best friend, and I wouldn’t want anyone else with me, to tell you the truth.” This confession eased the tension between the two friends for a moment.

Tanya said, “Okay, last thing, and then I’ll shut up. There’s a compromise here that you might not be thinking of.”

“What?”

“You could have the baby and give it up for adoption.”

“Are you fucking crazy? If I’m worried about hormones changing my mind if I wait a week to do this, what do you think would happen to me after nine months?”

“I don’t know. I just had to make sure you were thinking about all of your options before we get to the place.”

“You know what would actually be hilarious? If I had the kid and gave it to a gay couple. How do you think your pro-life pals would feel about that? That’s exactly what I’m talking about, by the way. They don’t give a shit about the kid—they just want to force their moral agendas on everyone else. God, if I did that and blogged about it . . . Or what if— Wait, hold a second. Pull over.”

Tanya, sensing that Karen might be changing her mind, pulled over. “What is it?”

Karen said, “Turn around. You’re right. I’m going to think about this for a few more days.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. But you’re still the only person who knows, and I want to keep it that way. Paul can’t know what’s going on.”

Tanya said, “Okay,” then made a U-turn in the middle of the street and headed back to Karen and Paul’s apartment, hoping that whatever Karen was thinking about would save the life of this child. Tanya couldn’t help but feel that God had a hand in whatever was going on.

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## chapter eight

**Eyesofblue's real name** was Beth. James had learned this and a few other general details about her through a series of text messages, and he hoped that her profile pictures were accurate. He was waiting for her outside the RowHouse, a restaurant Beth suggested after James admitted that he didn't know many nice places to eat. It was five minutes past eight o'clock. She was five minutes late. Punctuality was something James took very seriously. He checked his phone to see if Beth had sent him a text, but she had not. When he looked back up, he saw her walking toward him from the parking lot. She looked very similar to her profile pictures. The only difference was that she was slightly heavier in person. James felt it would be a sin to judge her for this, so he tried not to, and he immediately forgave her for her tardiness.

She walked up to him and said, "James?"

God was definitely real and he definitely created everything in existence. Jesus Christ was definitely his son and he definitely died for the sins of humanity. The universe and space and aliens were things that only scientists and moviemakers thought about. They had no real impact on anything that occurred on planet Earth. While on Earth, it was every good Christian's duty to lead a good and righteous life, but God wouldn't have made fun if he didn't want people to have it. Although drinking and doing drugs, and having premarital sex were sins, God wouldn't have created the ability for human beings to repent if he didn't already know that there would be a need for it. Birth control, too, was something the church might be against, but God wouldn't have created it if he didn't expect people to use it. Birth control was something that gave a woman more flexibility in finding the right person to marry and spend the rest of her life with. Using it after marriage was something to be discussed with her husband, but using it before marriage was something God clearly intended for any woman who saw the need. These were things that Beth understood to be true.

James introduced himself and held the door open for Beth as they entered the RowHouse. When James approached the front desk and asked for a table for two, he was informed by the hostess that without a reservation the wait might be an hour. Beth said, "Oh, I made a reservation just in case. Be sure to get Garner."

James felt slightly embarrassed that he hadn't known to make a reservation. He didn't dine out often, and when he did, it was rarely at a place that required reservations. He explained this to Beth, who said, "It's totally fine. I picked the place. The least I could do was call and make a reservation."

James and Beth were shown to their table, and they struck up the regular small talk that two people make on a first date. When the server came to take their drink orders, James learned that Beth had no problem with the casual consumption of alcohol, as she ordered a Manhattan. Beth learned that James didn't drink alcohol at all when he ordered an iced tea and explained to her that he had never had even a sip of anything alcoholic. He told her that he passed no judgment on anyone who chose to partake in alcoholic beverages, but he had decided a long time ago that he would never poison himself in such



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