

The Uninvited

A novel by Dianne J. Beale

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Acknowledgments

Thank you, Michael, for your continued friendship that has only grown as we have journeyed together in marriage. Thank you for your support and encouragement. I truly appreciate all you are, have been, and will continue to be. Thank you.

I also wish to thank my son, Micah, for his patience whenever my writing would interfere with his carefully set plans. Thank you for the use of your computer and for the many times you set aside a question and worked on something else until I was available. I appreciate your understanding.

Thank you also to Robin Knapp and Tabi Boyce for taking the time to not only read my manuscript, but also to submit your many suggestions. I hope my final effort will make you proud.

And many thanks to those others who took the time to read my manuscript. Knowing you made it through to the end was an encouragement in itself.

I thank Joe Sroufe for his willingness to offer suggestions to a new author and I also thank the authors who took the time to acknowledge my emails even when they were pressed for time. I appreciate that you took the time to encourage a new writer even though you were not able to read my manuscript.

Many thanks to CreateSpace, as well. Thank you for believing in new authors and for making self-publishing an affordable option.

*You smile with pomp and rigor, you talk of benevolence
and virtue; I act with benevolence and virtue and get
murdered time after time. — William Blake*

Chapter 1

The week commenced with dark clouds streaming down water as if it were being squeezed from a gigantic sponge. And throughout the week, as the sponge emptied and refilled, clouds continued to cry down on the small town of Mayhaw. Even now, though the week was at its end, a steady, humid drizzle continued to fall.

But Margaret Zeiler, in her sincere elegance, had always enjoyed the rain—especially the rhythmic sounds it shared whenever she'd been given the gift of sitting beneath a metal roof. It had served her often; the musical drum would release peace to conquer the growing turmoil that fed upon her unobserved days of rest.

As she walked across the cracking, neglected, parking lot, she greedily absorbed the falling teardrops, allowing them to infiltrate each thirsting crevice within her soul. She imagined herself as a goblet, ready to receive the combined blessings that the rain would represent.

Then she reached the door. In a matter of seconds, the rich harmony disappeared as if struck by fire, released as steam, and lost to the morning fog.

“How is it that I can work at a church and yet feel so utterly alone?” she wondered aloud. But there was not time enough to ponder. Instead, she opened the out-dated, gray, lead-lined, metal door and went inside to the echoing corridor.

Once in her office, Margaret removed her jacket, changed from her sneakers to a pair of basic black pumps, and then headed down the pasty, white hall for the weekly staff meeting. Realizing she had forgotten her notebook, she was glad she’d been trained in the art of punctuality; there were still a good ten minutes left before it would be time to start. She returned to her office, grabbed her notebook and pen, and then retraced her steps back toward the designated room.

While waiting for the others, she began to list reasons as to why she liked the rain. *The rain gives life. It reminds me of rainbows. It encourages me as a symbol of God’s faithfulness. It represents God’s mercy. It cleanses the air. It refreshes me.*

As subtle, faint music began to fill the room, the list colored to a more negative hue. *It can be monotonous. It hides the sun. It can lead to floods. It sometimes makes me tired. It’s not always convenient to carry an umbrella. It is rarely acceptable for clothes to be wet. It can bring dangerous storms.*

The music, slow and familiar, grew louder. Soon it had bathed the room. Without missing a beat, Margaret stopped writing – the pastor had arrived. It would not be long before she was joined by the others.

It was unsettling how this slight piece of information affected her. She smoothed her hands over her already neatly-placed hair and pulled at her practical, cotton blouse. Then, as if no more than a schoolgirl, she straightened in her seat, as well.

Words and music repeated softly; once again, a phrase from her childhood invaded her thoughts. She missed the variety of compositions that had once filled this church. And it was becoming more and more difficult for her to set aside these feelings. Shouldn't prayer and song – worship of God – mirror life? She couldn't shake off the feeling that maybe she'd been pulled into a mere existence of *meaningless repetition*.

Suddenly she became aware of the complete flatness of her life – a life that now imitated the unrelenting office music: eat, work; eat, work; eat, work; sleep, and repeat. It did carry a smidgen of rhythm, but mostly it seemed rather pointless.

She closed her notebook and looked up at the clock. And just as the others joined her, she let out a sigh that, unfortunately, evolved into a yawn. Thankfully, it seemed that no one had noticed. Instead, the meeting was called to order and she was asked to relate the events from the assembly of the week before.

As she began to read from her neatly organized list, she found herself carefully monitoring her speed. She felt stifled and tense – almost unnatural as she read.

"Garnet, were you even *here* last meeting?"

Startled, Margaret looked up from her notes to scan the faces of those around her. But all eyes were turned toward the man at the head of the table – the man who had impatiently interrupted her reading of the minutes. Wearily, she met his gaze. "Sir?" she questioned.

Pastor Andres Loukatos, although average in height, possessed an intimidating frame of muscles. Long, dark lashes hooded his pine-green eyes as they burned into her. His dark hair accentuated the creases of frustration that now marked his typically charming features. With an overstated sigh, he turned to the woman who sat next to her. "Trish, be a good girl and fill your friend in," he sneered.

Trish pushed a lock of her amber hair back up her cheek and stuffed it behind her ear. Her honey-brown eyes held confusion as she spoke. "I'm sorry, Pastor," she stuttered, "I wasn't here for that meeting."

Andres' eyes darkened, revealing tawny flecks. "Neither was Garnet, apparently. Her body may have been present, but that's about all, if I go by her notes. Anyone?" he queried.

Heads moved as people began shifting in their seats to avoid Trish's fate. Not one person dared to speak. "Fine group you are," he offered. "Last meeting it was decided that since Garnet forgot to mention her ambitious preparations to the rest of us, the children's performance cannot take place. Hymns might be adequate for an old

folks' home, but they're a little antiquated for an actual church service. We want our music to be fresh—sung *to* God, not *about* Him." Andres accented his speech with a mild shaking of his head.

The room filled with affirmations: *that's right; oh, yeah, we did decide that; if it's not on the calendar, then it's never a sure thing*. Margaret looked down at her notes and then over at the white eraser board that served as a calendar. What was she going to tell the children? They'd been practicing for months. "Sir," she began, but was cut off.

"You know the rules, Garnet. Must you always try to undermine God's plans?"

"I just thought," Margaret trailed off, pleading for the help of a youthful figure that sat to Andres' right.

But Anthony disregarded her attempt to involve him and instead pushed forward to another topic of discussion. "Are we still planning to sell those town homes that the church owns?"

The meeting went on without her. Defeated, she closed her notebook and sat silently until it was time for her to prepare the coffee and doughnuts. Then she got up and quietly slipped out the door.

Once in the café, she busied herself with this menial task. She'd not been aware that she'd been singing until a soft, kind voice broke in. It was Paco, the church janitor. He had offered to help carry the trays. Margaret thanked him, but declined.

As soon as she was back in the meeting, a hush fell over the room. She awkwardly surmised that she had been the newest topic of discussion. A quick prayer was said, and the meeting ended.

It had never previously occurred to her, but they rarely opened the meetings with prayer. The prayer was more often an after-thought that solidified the pastor's wishes. She decided to grab a sugared jelly doughnut and leave the oppressive room.

"Hey, can we talk?" It was Anthony.

"What are we doing now if we're not talking?" she sulked.

Anthony ignored her tone and ushered her into her tea-scented, nearby office. Once she had set down her notebook and doughnut, he handed her a strangely masculine envelope that smelled of musk – it reminded her of Andres.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Just read it, okay? You know I express things better in writing."

Actually, she knew no such thing. As was demonstrated in the meeting, there was little regard for the written language. The staff members were mighty advocates of body language and eye contact. Too often she had heard how easily any form of literature could be misunderstood. She had dared to joke about it, once, before she knew better: she had challenged Andres by saying that she guessed she

might as well go and burn her Bible then... after all, she wouldn't want to risk misunderstanding God.

Reluctantly, Margaret remembered Anthony. "You want me to read it now? With you standing here?"

"Yes. That's the idea."

"Why can't you just tell me what it says?" she argued. "This seems a bit odd, with you here and all."

Anthony sounded like a raspy snake when he responded. "Just stop fussing and submit for once!"

"Oh, are we married, then? Did you marry by proxy and not tell me?"

"Always ready with an answer. Never ready to listen."

Margaret's voice became almost a whisper. "Is that what *you* think? Do you even know *how* to think? Or are those Andres' words?"

"Just read the letter, *Margaret*," he commanded. "I'm going now. Andres and I have an appointment for lunch." Then he was gone.

Pulling her Bible down from a shelf, she sat down at her desk, moved the doughnut to the side, and began to work on Sunday's lesson for the children. As she read in Psalms, she finally stopped to open the envelope. She read the letter, jotted down a note to herself, stuck the letter into her Bible, tossed the envelope, and then returned the Bible to the shelf. "Coward," she mumbled, softly, almost under her breath. "I suppose this means you'll soon be spawning a church of

your own." Then she rose to finish out her day in the children's building.

Chapter 2

As Margaret pushed open the door to head outside, she realized she'd have to change her planned route. Rain was now hitting the ground so forcefully that it was forming miniature fountains that came and went as if they were timed geysers. Closing the door, she turned back toward her office to grab an umbrella.

Once there, she noticed her sneakers and jacket and decided to put these on, as well. She would walk as far as she could through the building and then make a run for it. Although she had been promised a covered walkway years ago, the collected money had long since been spent. Most of it had gone to obtaining Andres.

Once in the café, Margaret had to face what she had hoped to avoid – people. Immediately she was approached by Trish.

“Oh, are you going to eat here today?” she asked.

Margaret wanted to inquire if it *looked* like she planned to stay. Here she was: standing in a jacket, wearing sneakers, and carrying an umbrella. Yet this was the question that Trish chose to ask?

Instead of unleashing her sarcasm, she did her best not to show her agitation since she realized her mood actually had little to do with Trish. Lifting the hand that carried the umbrella, she revealed a small brown sack to show she was also toting her lunch. "No. I can't, really. Sorry. Since I'm not coming in tomorrow, I'll need to get as much done today as I can. For Sunday, you know?" She gave Trish an encouraging smile.

Trish paled. "Oh, no, I knew I forgot something. I'm not sure I'll be able to make tomorrow's brunch. I'll have to check. And I know I can't make it for..." She paused to look around and then lowered her voice. "...for the party." She added these last three words in not much more than a whisper, as if the event was secret. Then she told Margaret to wish Mitch the very best and to party hard enough for all of them.

This last statement reminded her of last week's staff meeting. They had all enthusiastically refused her invitation, adding that she and Mitch should enjoy themselves anyway and toast their beers for them. Margaret found herself puzzling over Trish's last statement. "Aren't you going to at least call him?" she posed.

Trish seemed embarrassed and unsure of herself. "Oh, yeah, of course I will. Um, never mind then. Sorry."

As Trish walked away, Margaret couldn't help but question what her brother saw in that woman. She did have

a classic, porcelain doll-like beauty, but she seemed so unaware and helpless.

Opening her umbrella, she then braved the outside gale. The wind had picked up and already she could feel that her lunch was soaked.

When she made it inside the children's building, she removed her sneakers so that her socks could dry out. Then she hung up her jacket and set down her open umbrella. Depositing her book bag and lunch onto the nearby counter, she headed for the one place where she knew she would not be disturbed—a small, windowless, one-room bathroom with a changing table riveted to the wall where the mirror should have been.

Once inside, Margaret moved to the corner farthest from the toilet and dropped to her knees. Tears streamed down her face as she pleaded with God, emptying herself just as the clouds had done the entire week. She cried, agonized, and often just fell silent, allowing her tears to speak.

She remembered when Andres was voted in as the new head pastor. The congregation had been thrown into confusion at the loss of her parents. They had requested that Mitch take their Dad's place.

Thankfully, Mr. Bradley was still alive then. He recognized the need for Mitch, and her, to remain sheep and be nurtured. He had been a close confidant of their Dad, so the church was all too happy to accept his offer to fill in until

a new pastor could be found. Besides, he was willing to do it for free.

Mrs. Bradley was one of the sweetest souls that Margaret had ever known. When she passed away a year later, it was as if a part of Mr. Bradley died with her. He aged rapidly after her death.

It didn't help that Janet Townsend was pushing to have her nephew, Jack, appointed as the new head pastor. He had spoken a few times, but the congregation felt he would better fill the position of associate pastor, since he was so very young. And the church had never had an associate pastor – they'd never seen a need for one. Truth be told, they also feared that a pastor, too young, would become "prideful and unteachable."

And then there was Marion Meadows-Jackson. She had worn Mr. Bradley down.

Mrs. Bradley had organized a yearly Live Nativity Scene that Ms. Meadows-Jackson felt should be replaced by something more "meaningful and contemporary." Margaret and Mitch had fought to have the manger scene one last year. They had hoped to usher out this tradition in remembrance of Mrs. Bradley. They wanted to honor the Bradley family – to express their gratitude and love for them.

But Ms. Meadows-Jackson had just remarried, and her husband was not only a strong presence at the church, but also in the treasury. So, at the meeting of decision, she had

fumed an ungrateful tirade and managed to pull Janet Townsend onto her side. Janet, indignant that she couldn't guarantee her nephew a pastorate upon graduation, did all she could to then sabotage Mitch and Margaret.

But the one comment that had worked like a poison dart to Mr. Bradley's already ailing heart was from Ms. Marion Meadows-Jackson: "People," she had insisted, "the idea of a live manger scene has long since been dreaded. Each year, we bring a smelly donkey into our church, along with someone's overzealous, diapered baby, and a herd of rambunctious kids. Yet we continued with this tradition because *Louise Bradley* insisted. Let's bury Louise's love-child with her. Okay? If y'all choose to do this, you'll do it on your own. My husband's annual, ever-generous gift will not be available this year."

Mrs. Bradley had requested that her husband continue the nativity scene for just one last time. She had made a promise to each kid who had participated and wanted to be sure that the church would honor her words. Each child had wanted to be either Mary or Joseph, and Louise had only two children left who had not had their turns.

But the elders lacked the funds, and Mr. Bradley and the Zeilers were still pooling their resources to pay for the recent funerals. So Mr. Bradley's health had taken a turn for the worse and Mrs. Townsend's nephew was hired on as the new pastor, after all. Things went downhill from there.

The church split. Hard feelings forced division. Margaret and Mitch were drowning in grief; first they had lost their parents, and then the Bradleys (who had served as surrogate grandparents since they were not able to have children of their own).

And somewhere along the line, Andres Loukatos was voted in as head pastor, the nephew was demoted to music minister (and later replaced), and the congregational democracy was handed over to the church staff. The idea sounded good at the time—it seemed to imply a reinstatement of unity.

But, with Andres, it soon became a dictatorship. He fired old staff, forcing them to sign papers of resignation and any board or staff member who dared to voice an opinion (or challenge his interpretations of the Scripture) also suddenly resigned. And now Mitch had chosen to change employers, reducing his status to that of harmless member, as well.

However, Margaret could not let go. This was where she had accepted Jesus as her Lord. And this was her *parent's* church. And right now, it was all she had. It gave her the strength to go forward. She needed to hold onto even the slightest hope that she could resuscitate her parents' dream. She just couldn't let it die with them. So Margaret stayed, in spite of the many sacrifices.

Finally, she stood to wash her face with cold water at the sink. Then she dried with the rough, brown, unattractive

towels that only the children and their parents were expected to use.

Returning to where she had left her lunch, she tossed the soggy mess into the trash and began to work toward creating the atmosphere that she had envisioned for the lesson on Sunday. Soon she had lost track of time; it was dark when she finally decided to call it a day.