



DECEMBER 1

A HALLMARK MOVIE GONE ROGUE

“WHILE THEY WERE THERE, THE TIME CAME FOR THE BABY TO BE BORN, AND SHE GAVE BIRTH TO HER FIRSTBORN, A SON. SHE WRAPPED HIM IN CLOTHS AND PLACED HIM IN A MANGER, BECAUSE THERE WAS NO GUEST ROOM AVAILABLE FOR THEM.”

LUKE 2:6-7

I love a good Hallmark Christmas movie. These sappy stories lure hopeless romantics with the promise of nostalgia and a happy ending. I’m clearly aware that the plot is set to “repeat,” with a girl – usually from a big city – meeting some small-town boy in a place called something akin to Wonderland Lodge. Sparks fly, only to be interrupted by the boyfriend who wants none of the Christmas spirit. Alas! Our heroine discovers she does want to live in a one-stoplight town after all! In this idyllic setting, Christmas isn’t complete without hot chocolate and ice skating. And each movie ends the same way: our star-crossed couple kiss in the moonlight. Or in a horse-drawn sleigh. Or in the snow-laden cottage. You get the picture.

These predictable movies deliver on one thing: warm, fuzzy feelings dunked in eggnog and wrapped with a shiny, red bow. Yet real life is anything but predictable. And one year, our Christmas was a Hallmark movie gone rogue.

Festive wreaths decked every door and handcrafted poinsettia napkin holders donned my dinner table. Snow globes...nativity sets...stockings and reindeer. And the piece de resistance? The Christmas tree. Not just any tree – *a freshly cut blue spruce*, lovingly chosen at our favorite tree lot as our breath filled the crisp, December air. We decorated her branches while carols rang in the background. Our kids snapped photos of the ornaments made by tinier hands in years gone by. I climbed into bed relishing the scenes that fit nicely into my Hallmark film.

I woke to swollen eyes, a runny nose, and a burning throat. *“UGHHHHH,”* I thought to myself. *“I’m allergic to the tree. Give it a day. I’m sure my symptoms will subside.”* Three days later, I realized the inevitable: either the tree had to move, or I did. I studied every ornament and started the unthinkable: I took every single one off and laid them on the stairs.

I begged my husband to find a new home for our precious tree on the deck outside. *“At least I can see the Christmas lights through the kitchen window,”* I whimpered. I proceeded to carry the white, fake tree (fully decorated I might add), up from the basement. The tree separated into sections, ornaments crashing to the floor and the base breaking in two. I plopped down on the steps to pick up broken pieces of a glass snowflake. *“Where’s the ice-skating rink? The horse-drawn sleigh? The homemade mittens?”*

Nowhere. Just a harried mom trying to gather the remnants of a fallen-apart fake tree because she's the poster child for Allegra. At this point, I may or may not have shed a few tears. The next morning, I admired our 25-year old collection of ornaments outside, under the gazebo on the deck. I glanced into the living room and smiled at the replacement impostor, held together by super glue and ingenuity.

And that, folks, is real life. Sometimes families fight and turkeys burn, and moms are allergic to their one-of-a-kind, evergreen Christmas tree. Sometimes the best of intentions go rogue and we unwrap disappointment alongside Legos and socks. Sometimes the only predictable plot is the one that includes the unpredictable.

On my trips to Israel, I visited a little town called Bethlehem. In this humble place, a King would be born – not in a palace or filmed by Hollywood – but in an obscure cave witnessed by lowly shepherds. A young girl named Mary and her husband, Joseph, welcomed the Savior of the world surrounded by sheep and feeding troughs. Unexpected. Uninvited. Undone. Yet exactly what God intended.

SOMETIMES OUR UNDONE MOMENTS ARE GOD'S INTENDED MIRACLES.

Sometimes life goes rogue. Sometimes the kids don't want to come home for the holidays and hearts shatter like glass snowflakes. Sometimes, death steals a loved one and Christmas seems hollow. Yet, somehow, God births a miracle. He gives strength to weather adversity, and grace to bear heartache.

Because Christ came into our unpredictable mess, we have hope. I pray His love breathes new life into tender places. And I pray, dear friend, that you are not allergic to your Christmas tree.

Astounded,

Angela



DECEMBER 8

DISCOVER BEAUTY IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

“FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON; THAT WHOSOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH BUT HAVE EVERLASTING LIFE.”

JOHN 3:16

Americans will spend more than *450 billion dollars* on purchases that accompany the Christmas season. We go to great lengths to find the perfect gift: take laps around the mall, scroll through the monstrosity of Amazon, or, alas, pick up the last-minute Starbucks gift card. Some of us smother our precious cargo with Styrofoam peanuts and ship packages across the country to friends and family. Still others buy stock in double-stick tape as we patiently wrap must-have electronics and eye-shadow palettes.

We exchange cheesy white-elephant packages at office parties and deliver frosting-slathered sugar cookies to our neighbors. We donate Barbie dolls to the local toy drives, drop our change in buckets to bell ringing Santas, and offer crayon masterpieces to our kids' teachers. Gifts, gifts, and more gifts.

And then, just like that, the flurry of holiday festivities is over. You know the scene. Carefully crafted wrapping paper lies in a crumpled mound on the living room floor. That horrid orange sweater heads into the return pile while the last crumb of yummy goodness heads to our hips. We're pooped. Mom and Dad savor a much-needed break, teachers relish the peace and quiet, and office computer screens sit blank for a couple days.

I'm not sure when the concept of gift giving began but let's be honest – we all love to give and receive gifts. On a trip to the Holy Land, **my Christmas gift came early one year** in a little town called Bethlehem.

BEAUTY IS STILL FOUND IN THE MOST UNEXPECTED PLACES.

Nowhere is this truer than in the walled city of Bethlehem. Surrounded by armed guards and under Palestinian rule, I struggled to picture ancient streets where a young couple named Mary and Joseph stopped to find respite. It was here God gave the greatest gift: *grace intersected humanity.*

I found myself drawn to every word from our Christian guide. I bent low at the Door of Humility to enter the world's oldest church, The Church of the Nativity. All bow to visit the birthplace of the King of Kings. Amidst the pungent smell of burning incense and the cacophony of Greek Orthodox prayers, God met me in a deeply personal way. For the first time in way too long, I sensed the magnitude of God's divinely

orchestrated symphony. I felt a dizzying awareness that God chose to include my story in the fabric of His story, written before time began.

I felt tiny. Humbled. Overwhelmed.

God's plan was to redeem mankind by sending His Son to be born, not in the majesty of a palace, but in a dark, damp cave. *Beauty is still found in the most unexpected places.*

Bethlehem is home to a unique store with some of the most splendid Nativity sets found anywhere in the world. Living bravely behind a wall, local Christian artisans carve exquisite pieces out of olive wood. Resilient, they refuse to be diminished by brokenness. Although my budget would not allow me to take a Nativity home, I still received a gift: the indelible imprints on my heart from the unexpected beauty of Bethlehem.

What if the best present isn't found in a mall or an online behemoth? More than anything, let's give the gift of beauty. **Let's refuse to be diminished by brokenness and carve beauty into our world.**

Our neighbors. Our family. Our schools.

The lost. The hurting. The fractured.

Beauty is still found in the most unexpected places.

Grace intersects humanity when you choose a posture of availability. Let humility invite you to bow low and encounter God in a new way. And as you do, let wonder wash over you once again.

Astounded,

Angela



DECEMBER 15

GOD'S MAKEOVER MIRACLE

“LET PERSEVERANCE FINISH ITS WORK SO THAT YOU MAY BE MATURE AND COMPLETE, NOT LACKING ANYTHING.”

JAMES 1:4

It all started with my red couch; my once unique, now obnoxious couch. I might also mention that 13 years of lounging and entertaining took its toll on the value-priced sofa. After several nights of, *“My back hurts sitting on this couch...this couch gets on my nerves...I’m tired of all this red...,”* my husband consented to look for a new one.

However, the more I thought about it, it wasn’t just the couch we needed to replace. All that surrounded it begged for transformation. What began with one piece of furniture evolved into a makeover of the entire main floor. I know, I know, my husband is a saint. We trekked laps around Lowe’s and scrolled through hundreds of paint swatches. It soon became evident that my quest for a new living room sectional entailed a few hiccups.

In my naiveté, I hoped the whole downstairs floor could be painted in a week while we traveled for spring break. But, when the painter came to give an estimate, we realized the enormous amount of prep work necessary before he could even begin to paint. He sanded away color block designs. He puttied over dents. He patched over scrapes. He repaired things I hadn’t even seen until he pointed them out to me.

“I know you’re really anxious to change everything, but you don’t want me to start painting yet,” he explained. *“If I paint over these designs and stripes, you’ll see them under the fresh coat of paint. Plus, every ding and nick will show. You don’t want me to rush the process. You can’t paint over a hole.”*

His words were still hanging in the air when I felt the gentle voice of the Holy Spirit. “You can’t paint over a hole.” I began to ponder how often I wished God would speed up the process of maturity in my life. I’m impatient when I’m yearning for change. I’m too quick to ask God to slap a fresh coat of paint over an area that requires the thorough process of renovation. He knows the toll life takes on my heart, tenderly revealing the prep work I desperately need. He sees the bumps and scrapes that only His grace can fix. He observes the dings that demand the putty of a new perspective. He painstakingly smooths rough, damaged areas as I wait in His presence. He applies the fresh coat of change as I spend time His Word.

TRANSFORMATION REQUIRES RENOVATION.

My home was a complete mess during that makeover season. We covered furniture in plastic and shoved it to the center of rooms. We stripped beloved artwork from walls and prepped them for paint. With each space unfinished, I felt undone. Yet, we persevered, and eventually, the beauty of the completed process emerged. Holes were patched. In fact, you would never even know they were there. Every step of the makeover was worth it.

Perhaps you're feeling the wear and tear of life. Maybe unresolved family problems put a dent in your joy or unfulfilled dreams left a mark on the walls of your heart. If we want to experience God's makeover miracle, we can't paint over a hole. James 1:4 encourages us to let the process of perseverance finish its work, so we will be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If the process of perseverance is left undone, we are left undone. Too often, we fight the process when we don't see the promise.

Think of perseverance as the gold mined out of a trial or test. God allows our faith to be tested because He knows it is the only way to develop perseverance and character. He is more interested in our character than our comfort. Invite Him to take a close look at any area that needs His touch. When you feel tempted to ask God to hurry, allow Him, instead, to have His way. Don't give up when it seems like it's too big of a challenge. The process might take a little longer than we would like, but the miracle makeover will be worth it. Don't get discouraged when moments are messy. When our lives are in God's hands, the transformation is spectacular.

Astounded,

Angela