

THE  
IMPOSSIBLE

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# THE IMPOSSIBLE

THE MIRACULOUS STORY OF A  
MOTHER'S FAITH AND HER  
CHILD'S RESURRECTION

BY JOYCE SMITH

WITH GINGER KOLBABA



New York Nashville

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First Edition: November 2017

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

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ISBNs: 978-1-4789-7695-0 (hardcover), 978-1-4789-2253-7 (audiobook, downloadable), 978-1-4789-2260-5 (audiobook, CD), 978-1-4789-7694-3 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

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## CHAPTER 1

# A Bad Feeling

*Sunday, January 18, 2015*

The air hung thick with tension. Usually Living Word Christian Middle School's gymnasium echoed with a cacophony of yells and cheers of students and siblings, parents shouting out advice, refs blowing whistles, and coaches screaming directions throughout a basketball game. But this game was quiet. No one was shouting or cheering. We heard only the sounds of the players talking with one another, the bounce of the ball hitting the wooden floor, and the screech of the players' shoes as they maneuvered around the hoops. Our Eagles eighth-grade A team were deadlock-tied with the Duchesne Pioneers. We just couldn't get enough ahead. So far this season our team hadn't been doing well, so we had to get a win under our belt. But Duchesne's team didn't seem to want to let us win! For every point our team made, the Pioneers tied it. Eleven, eleven. Fifteen, fifteen. Twenty-two, twenty-two.

My eyes stayed glued to the black-haired, handsome, olive-skinned young man wearing the black, teal, and white uniform, with the number 4 displayed across his back. As the point guard and shooting guard, my son John called the plays, controlled the tempo of the game, and talked to the ref if one of the players had an issue. He was also the leading scorer for the team.

Not bad for a kid standing tall at five feet four inches. To say I was proud of him would be the understatement of the year. I thought he hung the moon. Actually, I didn't think that; I knew it. But that wasn't to say I overlooked his quirks. And one of those—his penchant for arguing with his coach over plays the coach called and then rolling his eyes in disgust—had gotten him benched the game before.

While I was glad he was back playing in this game, I knew John was still stinging from the previous game's tension. But he stayed focused. His competitive streak was in full gear as he cut in and out, maneuvered, and ran around the floor with a vengeance. Basketball was his life. From the time he was three he had a basketball in his hands. All of his games were do-or-die for him.

Finally the game was nearing its end—and still the teams were tied. My husband, Brian, and I were exhausted from the game's tension, so I could only imagine what John and his teammates felt. The scoreboard read thirty-three to thirty-three, while the clock showed forty seconds left in the fourth quarter. All of a sudden, from out of nowhere, John captured the ball and ran down the court, dribbling toward the hoop. He pulled out a breakaway layup and shot. The ball soared through the air and landed with a swish.

Thirty-five to thirty-three.

Brian and I were on our feet, along with the other fifty to sixty people in the stands, erupting with the loudest cheers. Our Eagles were going to pull this off!

The clock ticked down while the Pioneers struggled to land a tying score, until finally the horn blew loudly, announcing the end of the game. Christian Middle School had won. And my son had made the winning basket.

The whole team jumped on one another—hugging and shouting and laughing. They'd worked so hard for this win; now it was time to celebrate. And they had Monday off school for the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday to do just that.

Brian and I walked down off the bleachers. We knew it would take time for the boys to settle enough to head back to the locker room and get changed be-

fore they were ready to leave, so we patiently waited off to the side. But John and two friends and teammates, Josh Rieger and Josh Sander, beelined straight toward us.

I groaned inwardly, knowing what they wanted. All weekend long, John had talked to me about wanting to go to Josh Rieger's house to spend the night after the game. And all weekend long I'd downplayed it, because I didn't want him to go. I couldn't explain why; I just had a weird feeling about it.

I didn't get ominous feelings often, but when I did, I'd learned to listen to them because they always meant something bad was going to happen. One time in particular, when one of my older sons, Tom, was a freshman in high school, his football coach showed up at our front door and asked if Tom could join the team on a camping trip. Something about this coach did not sit right with me. He seemed nice enough, but I couldn't shake the uneasiness I felt about the situation, so I said no. Several months later the coach was arrested for molesting boys.

"Please, Mrs. Smith! Please can John go? Let him spend the night. *Pleeeeeease!*" The two Joshes had ganged up on Brian and me. They knew Brian was a pushover, so they had to lay it on thick to Mama.

"Can I, Mom? . . . Can I?"

Everything within me wanted to shout no, to encircle his sweaty body in my arms and whisk him home to safety—from what, I didn't know. But I looked into my sweet boy's big, beautiful, dark eyes filled with excitement. How could I say no to him? They'd just won the game. They were good kids. He'd spent the night at Josh Rieger's house plenty of times. Josh's family were good people, and his parents, Kurt and Cindy, were responsible and attentive. I liked them and trusted them with John. And John loved going over there.

*I'm sure I'm just being overly protective*, I decided. I looked at these fourteen-year-old boys who stood in front of me, so eager to extend their celebration and have a little fun down time. *Joyce, you cannot be a stick in the mud. You can't be that mom.*

"Mom?" John needed an answer.

I sighed and nodded, against my better judgment, knowing I couldn't deny that kid something so simple, and sure I was overreacting to the uneasiness I felt. "Okay. You can go."

The boys all shouted their relief. "Ah, thanks, Mrs. Smith. This is great! We're going to have—"

"Just make sure you're safe. And don't do anything stupid." *Ha*, I thought. *They're fourteen. They're boys. Of course they're going to do something stupid. Just as long as it's not dangerous stupid...*

"Thanks, Mom! Thanks, Dad!"

"Make sure you stay in touch," I told him, as Brian and I gathered our coats to leave.

"I will. See you!" He turned and ran back to his team, still celebrating with their coach.

True to his word, John texted me later that night to let me know they were having fun hanging out with Josh Rieger's family, eating pizza rolls, drinking soda, and playing *Call of Duty*. No big deal.

I smiled and felt relieved. They were good boys. I didn't know why my spirit had been so troubled about John spending the night over there. *Nothing to worry about*, I reminded myself.

What John *failed* to mention to me was that earlier that evening, the boys had gotten bored and wandered two blocks away to Lake Ste. Louise, a small lake in the Riegers' neighborhood that they liked to visit. They saw that the lake was iced over, so they got the harebrained idea to walk out onto the ice, squat down, take a photo of themselves, and then post it on Instagram. The boys were dressed lightly. No coats. John wore shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt. Yes, it was unseasonably warm for January in the St. Louis area, but still... shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt? Had I known about his attire—or, more important, about his ice capade adventure—I would have driven straight over and hauled him home. But I didn't know. Parents so rarely know everything fourteen-year-olds do, unfortunately.

So that night, after we texted that we loved him, Brian and I went to bed

blissfully unaware of anything other than John eating pizza and playing video games.

*Monday, January 19, 2015*

The next morning passed uneventfully. Brian headed to his job as a corporate media event specialist at Boeing, since the Martin Luther King holiday wasn't an official day off for his company. I fed and petted our dog, Cuddles, talked to my sister, Janice, and then grabbed some breakfast, along with my Bible, and sat in the kitchen to spend some quiet time with God.

I glanced at my phone's clock. It was almost twenty after eleven. Josh Rieger's mom, Cindy, and I were scheduled to do the "child exchange" sometime in the afternoon, so I still had some time before I picked John up. Cindy had said she'd call when they were on their way. Usually I'd meet Cindy and the kids at a mall or someplace in the middle between our houses, since we lived in St. Charles, Missouri, and they lived almost twenty minutes away in Lake St. Louis, about forty miles outside of St. Louis. Meeting in the middle allowed us to do the handoff without either of us having to drive the whole way.

Once I picked up John, I figured he'd want to go to the local recreational center to shoot some hoops and work out, since that was his routine on his days off from school. I wasn't sure if he'd want to go straight there or stop off at the house first, so I decided to check in with him. The phone's clock told me it was now 11:23 a.m. so I needed to figure out what we were doing. I texted him. "Hey, are we still doing the rec plex or are you coming here first and what time?"

John answered right away, "Text Cindy, idk" **which** I knew, was short for "I don't know."

*What does Cindy have to do with John going to the rec center or coming home?* I wondered. "No," I texted back, "I am asking you what you want to do about the rec plex. yes or no?"

“Idc.” I don’t care. “Is Dad going?”

I smiled. John and his dad loved hanging out together. They played sports together, went to the recreation center together. They even had a long-standing Saturday-morning-breakfast guy time at the local Waffle House, which they’d kept since John was eight years old.

“No, he is at work right now. He won’t be home till later. He might go then. Don’t know.”

“Okay,” he wrote back. That was it, nothing else. I sighed, feeling frustrated. I didn’t know what he was saying okay to, and I didn’t have an answer about whether we were going to the rec center or coming home. “That kid will be the death of me,” I griped to myself. “I’m just going to call him.”

At 11:26 a.m. I dialed my son’s number, determined to get an answer to my question.

He picked up right away. “Hey.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” I told him. “Do you want to go to the rec plex or not? If you do, I can have Cindy drop you off there and I’ll pick you up later.”

“Um, yeah, that sounds good,” he said. He sounded cheerful, as if the day had been a good one for him so far.

“Okay, then, I’ll see you there. Love you.”

With that issue now handled and our game plan set, I turned my attention back to my phone, but this time for a different—more calming!—reason. I opened the Facebook app and found Mark Callaway’s page. Mark was my older sons’ former youth pastor at a church our family attended years ago, when we lived in Indianapolis. We considered him and his wife, Leslie, to be dear friends. Mark posted daily devotional writings on Facebook, and I tried to read them every morning. His writing always seemed to connect with exactly what I needed for that day.

What do you do when you are in a crisis, whether self-made or caused by other’s actions. We can sit & fume, thinking of how we

were cheated or what a failure we are . . . & that will do NOTHING (except put off dealing with it). David wrote, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me,” yet hardly a breath later he said that GOD is enthroned [in the praises of HIS people] (Psalm 22). Later Scripture says to “thank God in all things.” Worry/discouragement is a natural first response, but it is what we do next that matters. Do we stay there or do we move forward? By moving forward from a big problem to our BIG GOD begins bringing perspective and moves us past an emotional myopia. Then taking it further by thanking God for the challenge begins the process of conquering. When we see God as BIGGER and begin to thank God for the challenge, we are accepting the challenge as something we and GOD can handle. . . . That we will know more of GOD coming out of this than we did going in.

At that moment the phone rang. It was 11:51 a.m. and it was Cindy.

John’s day had started well. The country was celebrating Martin Luther King Jr.’s life and civil rights accomplishments on the holiday named after him. But for John and his two friends, it was simply a fun and welcomed day off of school. They arose late in the morning and decided that since the ice on Lake Ste. Louise had proven thick enough the previous night when they had taken their photo, they, along with Josh’s older sister, Jamie, would trek back down and check it out. The lure of a frozen lake—something that rarely happens in our area—was just too much to pass up.

The sun shone brightly on the ice, covering it with a look of pure glass. The day was unseasonably warm, promising to make it up to fifty degrees. A perfect day for the middle of January and a welcome reprieve from a cold snap that had been in the low twenties.

Dressed only in tank shirts and shorts, the boys first picked up some rocks at the shoreline and dropped them on the ice to see how strong it was. Satisfied that

it was still solid enough to handle them again this day, they headed out, each step leading them farther offshore, while Jamie chose to play it safe and stay on land. They laughed and slid and enjoyed their ability to “walk on water.”

The community of Lake St. Louis, Missouri, is home to two lakes in close proximity, Lake St. Louis being the larger at 650 acres. Even though its sister lake, Lake Ste. Louise, is not very large, at only seventy square acres, it still runs deep, measuring in most places between fifty and sixty feet, and with a muddy bottom covered with silt and sludge. Size doesn't seem to matter where water is concerned. Given the right conditions, a person can get into just as much trouble in a pond as they can in the ocean. John had discovered this just the previous summer when he and Josh Rieger had gone swimming out in the middle of *this same lake* and needed help when they were unable to swim back to shore.

But today John wasn't considering that warm summer day's troubles as he continued to glide over the surface. As he and his friends skidded around and jumped up and down on the ice, daring it to break, and feeling challenged to see how far toward the middle they could go, inside the Lake Ste. Louise's association club, mere yards away on the west side of the shore, manager Ron Wilson glanced through his office window, saw what the boys were doing, and came outside to confront them.

“Hey!” he yelled. “You kids need to get off the ice. It's too dangerous out there. Get off the ice!”

They acknowledged his warning, but they didn't seem to be in any great hurry to comply, so Ron returned to his office. In the meantime, I'd begun texting with John. When I called him to strategize on going to the rec plex, unbeknownst to me he was standing about fifty feet from shore.

A trait that all four of my sons share is that they constantly walk or pace when they're talking. Get them long enough on the phone, and they could probably make it to California on foot! So at 11:26 that morning, as I was talking to John and seated firmly on solid ground, he was pacing, mindlessly moving toward thin ice.

*The Impossible*

Within moments of hanging up the phone with me, ominous cracking noises thundered across the lake. The ice broke beneath his feet and the water devoured my son. Josh Sander dropped to his hands and knees, but as he was grabbing John's hand, the ice fell away beneath him. Josh Rieger, who was farther away, immediately ran over to help his friends. Lying on his stomach, he tried to pull John out but still fell in himself. The boys splashed frantically, desperately trying to escape the dark and cold water's grasp.

At 11:33 a.m. once again Ron Wilson glanced through his office window, but this time it was to witness the ice tear open and swallow the boys. Immediately he called 911, which in turn notified the Lake St. Louis police department.

"Call 911!" John yelled to Jamie Rieger. "I don't want to die!"