

AND IF I FALL

A novel by Robin Reardon (IAM Books, 2018)

Except from Chapter Eleven

I didn't say much on the long drive to Boise; between not having much of an idea what to expect and never having set foot in any city before, everything inside me felt like it was shaking. Reverend King made me sing through a few hymns with him, and he must have repeated what he called the "ground rules" three or four times: stay right with him; don't respond to taunts or suggestions; try not to talk at all, just listen; don't reveal disgust or repulsion; don't take anything anyone offered; and don't be afraid. "Keep in mind, Jude," he admonished me in different ways about twenty times, "these are lost souls. Satan has them in his grip, and they don't even realize it."

It was about nine thirty and fairly dark when Reverend King pulled his Jeep into the gravel parking lot of a place that must have been just outside the city limits. Neon lights flashed and music thumped, audible at all times but louder when someone opened the door. The neon sign that caught my attention had rainbow colors progressing around a form shaped like a male torso in side view, round ass on one side and erect dick on the other. I couldn't take my eyes off it, even when Reverend King placed a hand on my shoulder and we moved forward. With his other arm he hugged a Bible to his chest. "We represent Jesus," he said just loud enough for me to hear. "We're doing God's work. We're saving souls." It almost seemed like he was talking to himself. Encouraging himself.

As we approached, I found it easier to stop staring at the neon torso. Three couples were standing in separate clumps along the front of the building, the lights flashing on

them and creating odd shadows and odder color tints on faces and clothing. All three couples were kissing and groping, a sight I never expected to see with my own eyes. My breathing was shallow and odd, and my jeans felt distinctly snug at the crotch. I was riveted, not repulsed the way I had believed I would be. The way I believed I *should* be.

Inside, the noise was fierce until I got used to it. We stood there looking around, until a man who was maybe thirty approached us, his movements slinky. He wore a black-and-white checked shirt, open down his chest, tight black jeans, and black cowboy boots. He looked me up and down.

“Hi there, Reverend. Isn’t he a little young for you?” His voice, loud enough to be heard over the music, had an odd lilt to it.

I couldn’t decide whether I wanted to look at the man or watch Reverend King’s reaction. I tried to do both and nearly made myself dizzy.

“Trevor.” Reverend King’s tone was flat, unreadable. “The boy is here to learn. He’s observing tonight.”

The man’s face pursed into an odd smile, and he waved a hand in parting. “Whatever you say, Rev.”

Reverend King extended his hand to Trevor, one of his folded yellow paper pamphlets in it. Trevor threw his head back, laughed, and walked away. Into my ear, Reverend King said, “The men who’ve seen me before pretend that I’m here for the same reason they are. They’re trying to dilute the Lord’s message so it has less effect on them.”

I tried to make sense out of this, but my eyes were bouncing from man to man on the dance floor, some of their moves distinctly imitating acts of sex from that site Reverend King had bookmarked. I felt his hand on my shoulder pushing me forward again, and we made our way to the bar. Reverend King ordered a ginger ale for each of us.

The bartender, like Trevor, looked at me as he spoke to the reverend. “The kid shouldn’t be here, Reverend. You tryin’ to get me in trouble?”

“The boy’s here to learn. He needs to start reclaiming souls for God, and he needs to see how badly everyone here needs it.”

The man’s eyes flicked back to Reverend King. “All the same, I’m gonna ask you to finish your drinks and leave. All I need’s the law bouncing in here tonight, and I could get arrested for contributing to the delinquency of a minor. So could you.”

“I understand. We won’t stay long.”

As the bartender turned away, looking dubious, a dark-haired man in a shiny red shirt and a tan cowboy hat leaned on the bar beside me. He looked from me to the reverend, his smile twisting a little more with each glance. Before he could say anything, Reverend King spoke.

“My friend here and I would like to extend an invitation to you.” One of the man’s eyebrows rose. “We’d like you to come to Church with us. Tomorrow morning, or any Sunday morning. Here.”

The man’s eyes stayed on the reverend’s face as he reached out a hand to take the pamphlet. Like the one Trevor had refused, it was a copy of the yellow brochure listing

all six of those quotes I'd had to recite before my baptism, and I knew that in point-counterpoint style it provided the means to overcome this particular sin according to scripture. It also had information about our Church services and a few Bible studies.

The man unfolded the paper, glanced down at it, nodded. "All the usual," he said and folded it up again. He held it out to Reverend King, who didn't take it back. The man dropped it on the bar, where a ring of moisture from my glass of iced soda darkened a corner immediately and then spread slowly deeper into the paper. The man, his eyes still on Reverend King, asked, "What's your shirt made of?"

"Cotton." Reverend King's voice sounded victorious; they were obviously both in on something beyond me, and I didn't have a clue where the question came from.

"Your underwear?"

"What?"

"Mixed fibers, by any chance? Can't do that. According to Leviticus, you'd be ritually slaughtered. And are you having bacon with your eggs before church tomorrow?" I glanced at Reverend King, who just shook his head. "Using birth control? Masturbating? Killing your child if he curses you? How much do you think you could get selling your daughter to a slave trader in Calgary?"

"Stop!" The tone was not victorious any longer, but angry. "You are pointing to scripture that suits you. It is not only in the Old Testament that the Lord condemns homosexuality."

"Then at least"—and the man picked up the brochure again—"you must agree that all these quotes from the Old Testament must be discounted. They're either mixed in

with other sacred laws that you yourself ignore, or they refer to male prostitution, or to victorious soldiers raping the vanquished ones.” He started making strategic tears in the moist paper, eliminating the Old Testament excerpts.

I felt the reverend stiffen. His voice calm now, he said, “That cannot be proven. And there are enough other condemnations to support—”

“Can’t be proven? What *can* be proven? Nothing in your sacred texts can be proven.” The man’s voice was as calm as Reverend King’s, though they both had to raise the volume to compete with the music. “And we do know that the word *homosexual* didn’t exist until the last couple of centuries. Everyone who was alive, when the books you’re so fond of were written, believed that everyone was straight, and that some people just decided to be perverse and take part in activity that no one else understood. Homosexuality as we know it today didn’t exist. So it couldn’t be condemned *or* condoned.”

“My son, you are obviously struggling. You’ve given a lot of thought to this. Please come to us tomorrow morning and begin your journey from darkness into the light.”

The man replied as though Reverend King hadn’t spoken. “We also know that in the Middle East, at the time when these books were written, it was believed that all the essentials for a new human life were in male cum. ‘Wasting seed’ was like murder. It was—what was that word again? Oh, yes: an abomination. It didn’t matter how you wasted it. It was wasted any time you didn’t plug it into one of your wives, or one of your female slaves, or whomever you were told to use as a human oven. Judah’s son Onan

got slaughtered by God for dumping his seed on the ground rather than have mandated sex with his brother's widow. Fine bunch of people you're emulating."

"Please." Something in Reverend King's voice caught my attention, and I looked away from the man in the cowboy hat for the first time since he'd said, "All the usual." The reverend's face looked pleading at first. But then I saw something like what I thought I'd heard in his last word. I saw fear.

"Please," he repeated, "come to us tomorrow. Let us show you the way. Let us help Jesus to help you out of this sinful existence. We can show you how to read God's Word in the way that will save your soul."

The man snorted. Then he looked at me. "What's your role? Are you his prop? Or is he trying to save your soul, too?"

As if his words had sucked the air out of the world, all the voices in the room hushed. The music was still playing, but everyone's attention turned to the door, in which two burly policemen stood. They glanced around the room slowly and then swaggered toward where we were. Someone turned the music off.

One of them, while looking at me, spoke to the bartender. "Leo, ya gotta keep your patrons inside. We got another call." He jerked his chin at me and then turned to Leo. "And what's this kid doin' here?"

"Drinking soda's all I know," Leo practically growled.

My mentor put on his richest tones. "Officer, I'm Reverend King from the Grace of God Church in Newburg. My young parishioner and I came here to invite these

misguided souls to attend our service tomorrow.” He handed the officer a brochure. “I’d be honored if you would join us as well.”

The brochure disappeared into a ball of wrinkles in the man’s broad hand. He took the reverend’s arm, and the other cop took mine, and they marched us outside, gravel crunching under our feet more audibly than before, with no music to distract our ears.

“Reverend, take that boy home to his mother where he belongs. And if I see you bring him back here, you’ll find out what the expression ‘Hell to pay’ means.” He gave Reverend King a rough push toward the parked cars and turned to me. “What’s your name, son?”

I had to clear my throat. “Jude Connor.”

He handed me a pen and the wadded up brochure. “Write your home telephone number on here for me.” My hand was shaking so badly I wasn’t sure he’d be able to read what I wrote. “I know where Newburg is. I’m gonna give this fellow”—and he inclined his head toward Reverend King—“just enough time to get you home, and then I’m gonna call. I wanna speak with your parents. Got that?” He looked at the reverend. “*You* got that?”

My throat felt too dry to explain that I didn’t have any parents. We watched the cops go back into the bar, probably to finish explaining to Leo that passersby didn’t appreciate seeing men out here necking. Or maybe to get a drink, since no one in there was likely to report them. I turned back toward Reverend King, and he sighed loudly.

“They just don’t understand.” He shook his head. “This wasn’t your fault, Jude.”

I didn't know what he was talking about; *what* wasn't my fault? But I agreed when he said we'd best get on home. The plan had been for me to stay the night at the Kings' because of how late we'd probably get back, but that was out of the question now. The cop might not call, but if he did I needed to be at home.

We drove for a few minutes before I asked, "Will you come back, do you think?"

"Still lots of souls to save, Jude. Doesn't look like you'll be back with me, though. At least not until you're older."

"Have you ever saved anyone's soul from a place like this?"

"Not yet."

"Has anyone ever come to Church at all?"

He glanced at me and back at the road. "This was a test for you, too. You never know when a soul will respond to the Word. Would Jesus want us to give up, Jude?"

"No, sir."

Maybe half a mile later he said, "Jude, I want you to understand what that man at the bar was doing. It's just too easy to pick things out of the Bible and hold them up and say, 'This makes no sense.' When the book of Leviticus was written, it was delivered to people who thought their civilization needed slavery to exist. And women were considered much less important than men. We know better now. So I want you to ignore what he said. His words are like pebbles cast against bulletproof glass, and the Bible is stronger than his weak criticisms." He heaved a breath. "So it isn't productive to argue back and forth with people who cherry-pick scripture to suit themselves. Because for

each reference you quote, they'll have one they've twisted to throw back at you. Don't get caught in that trap."

I was thinking that maybe we should consider what else should be discounted, like maybe it wasn't such a sin to have sex before marriage or be gay—mutinous thoughts, to be sure, and I would never have voiced them. Instead, thinking of the missing Veronica Voelker, of the chat room banter that had frightened me, and of Gregory Hart, I asked, "What if someone in our congregation was gay?"

Just before I decided he hadn't heard me, he spoke. "During my missions, I've had several lost souls tell me that homosexuality is not a choice. Whether it's a choice when it starts or not, I can't judge for another. But what I say is that when we've seen how the power of Jesus can purify us, it is a choice to *remain* that way."

He drummed the steering wheel a few times, whether in thought or frustration I couldn't tell. Then, "Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 12, has some verses where he referred to lack of humility as a thorn that was in his flesh. He called it a messenger of Satan and said it was there specifically to harass him. Three times he asked God to remove it, and always God refused, because it was there to remind Paul that he was human, he was imperfect, and to keep him striving for purity."

One more hard WHAM on the wheel. "If someone believes he's homosexual, then perhaps that's just God's way of letting Satan plant a thorn in his flesh. And it should drive that person to God, Jude, because that thorn could drag him all the way to Hell faster than he knows what's happening. Only through Jesus and the Father can this person hope for salvation. Only through the Grace of God."

I thought the discussion was over, and I'd gone to staring out the window into the night, wondering if that thorn was in me. Then, in a voice I could barely hear over the engine drone, he said, "The homosexual who can't return to the natural ways God laid out for us must remain chaste. He may have to remain chaste for life, if that's what it takes."