

Mila



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CHAPTER 1

A solitary figure stood on the rocky cliffs behind a seaside home, anxiously watching the low gray clouds racing across the sky. An endless expanse of ocean stretched out before him.

I've never seen swells that high, Milo thought in astonishment as he noted the crashing waves sending sea-foam high into the stiff wind.

Turning his attention away from the tumultuous sea, he wondered, *Where is Mom?*

Silhouetted against the sky was the narrow road that meandered into the hills. Milo scanned it, desperately hoping to see his mom's old blue car coming around the corner. However, the road was devoid of any vehicles, as it had been all afternoon. Milo's heart sank, just like day was sinking into the dimness of the storm.

Turning to the sea again, Milo felt infinitesimal compared with the colossal accumulation of foreboding storm clouds that he knew were spinning and churning furiously, barreling toward his small town in Newfoundland, Canada.

“A hurricane,” Milo whispered, lifting a hand to keep his straight light blond hair out of his bright blue eyes. “Mom, come home. I’m only fourteen. I don’t know what to do.” The wind whisked his apprehensive words away and flung them furiously out to sea.

Shivering in another strong gust, Milo surveyed the tiny fishing town he had lived in since he was born, nestled in the low hills above the bay. An eerie feeling washed over him. The streets were deserted except for a piece of paper tumbling in the breeze. Usually, the houses with their colorful yellow, red, mint, white, and peach exteriors dotting the gentle hills lifted Milo’s spirits, but today, without people and bicycles moving between them and with the windows boarded up, the homes felt lifeless and empty.

They are empty, Milo reminded himself.

The long dock in the harbor, typically packed with boats of all kinds, held only one small forlorn fishing vessel bobbing wildly on the water. *That boat is like me,* Milo thought. *I’m the only person left here.*

“Milo! Is that you?” a voice yelled above the wind.

Spinning around, Milo saw Pastor Hogan running toward him. Relief flooded Milo. *I thought everyone had already left town.*

“Milo! Where is your mother?” Pastor Hogan panted, looking around, his curly brown hair blowing in the wind. “Why are you still here?” The fear in Pastor Hogan’s eyes was a stark contrast to his usual lighthearted demeanor, and the typical slacks and button-down shirt he wore had been exchanged for old jeans and a faded sweatshirt.

Even though the pastor was right next to him, Milo had to

speaking loudly to be heard. “I don’t know where my mom is! On the weekends she works at a retirement home in the next town over. They called her this morning, desperate for help evacuating the last of the elderly residents. She said she would be home by ten a.m., and she told me to pack because we would leave right when she got back.”

The pastor’s eyes widened. “But it’s just past six p.m.!”

“I know,” Milo responded, a hard lump forming in his throat. “I’ve been calling and calling, but her phone goes straight to voicemail. I tried phoning the rest home, too, but no one answered.” He looked gratefully at Pastor Hogan with a small smile. “But why are *you* still here?”

The lanky middle-aged pastor put a reassuring hand on Milo’s shoulder. “Yesterday, I took my family to my uncle’s farm; it’s a couple of hours inland. But I came back because I just . . . felt unsettled. I wanted to make sure everyone in my flock was safe.”

Milo frowned. “But Mom and I are not part of your flock.”

Looking at Milo directly, his smile sorrowful, the pastor replied, “You are part of my flock in the sense that I care about you and your mother.”

“I know you do,” Milo acknowledged, looking away from Pastor Hogan’s piercing green eyes. Recently, Milo had been increasingly curious about why his mother had never been interested in religion.

“Milo, come on,” the pastor coaxed, gesturing toward Milo’s home nearby. “We need to hurry and figure out what to do.”

Pastor Hogan began to run, and Milo followed at a slow jog. He hated running, as his weight made exercise feel awkward.

Kindly, Pastor Hogan slowed down to Milo's pace and fell in next to him. "Everyone was supposed to evacuate by noon today. The police were even going around, home to home. Did they not see you?"

"I was too scared to answer the door," Milo admitted, struggling to force the words out through his burning lungs.

"It's okay," Pastor Hogan responded. "I see now why God wanted me to come back. He knows you, Milo."

Milo processed those words. *Is it true? Did God send Pastor Hogan back just for me? Is God even real?*

Once they were inside the home, Pastor Hogan shut the door. Milo was happy to be out of the wind.

"Is it okay if I say a quick prayer, Milo?"

Milo nodded uncertainly.

"God," the pastor began, "we thank You for keeping Milo safe and guiding me back to St. Alden's. We ask You to keep Your hand upon Rebecca, give us wisdom to find her, and keep us all safe through this storm. In Jesus's name, amen."

Unsure of what to say besides "amen," Milo looked back to Pastor Hogan, who was now looking out the window at the worsening storm.

"I think it's likely that your mom's car broke down or ran out of gas or something. The retirement home is thirty-five miles away. There's no cell phone reception on most of that road, and since that highway runs parallel with the coast and will bear the brunt of the storm, everyone is gone. No cars are on the roads out here to help her. I'm confident she wouldn't have willingly left you here alone with a hurricane looming. We need to go find her!"

“And then we’ll come back to get our things?”

Pastor Hogan took a deep breath. “No, Milo. You need to grab your things now, and you really only have a few minutes. Safety is of the utmost importance right now. Possessions don’t matter nearly as much as finding your mother and getting us all out of here before the storm hits. Within just a few hours, it won’t be safe here anymore. We will find your mom, then cut over inland the first chance we get.”

“Okay!” Milo said. He ran to his room and grabbed the bag he had already packed. Scurrying into the kitchen, he opened his bag and stuffed in several bags of chips, a bag of candy, and two grape sodas, his go-to snacks. *What else should I take?* he wondered. His mind was spinning, and it was hard to think. *Mom has already packed her clothes, so I can just grab her bag. But is there anything else I need to take?* Milo then thought of the chest in his mother’s room, where she kept their big family photo album.

After running into his mom’s room, Milo found a large box. He carried it to the chest and set it down. Creaking open the chest lid, Milo grabbed the photo album, as well as the big envelope that he knew held birth certificates and other important documents. The box was soon full as he added a few other family heirlooms he knew his mom loved. Hurriedly, Milo rummaged through the rest of the chest to see if anything else stuck out to him as important. He caught sight of something he had never seen before—a thick black leather book with silver-edged pages—and pulled it out. “A Bible,” he said aloud just as a photo dropped out of it. He picked up the picture and gasped. “Dad?”

Milo had seen many pictures of his dad in their family photo album, but he had never seen this one of his father as a teenager. *Why is Dad's picture in this Bible?* Since his dad had died when Milo was two years old, the boy had no memory of his father. However, Milo had always been fascinated by his dad, and he had been disappointed that his mom didn't talk about the man much. When Milo opened the Bible to stick the photo back in, colored, handwritten symbols on the pages caught his eyes: little triangles, single stars, a heart with a box around it, a leaf. "What are these?" Milo whispered.

"We need to go, Milo," Pastor Hogan called.

Feeling that he could not leave behind this Bible with his father's picture in it, and seeing that the box was full, Milo stuffed the Bible in his own bag. Spotting his mom's packed bag on her bed, he set it on top of the box of documents and memories before flinging his bag over his shoulder and picking up the box.

"I'm ready!" he announced as he flew out of his mom's room.

Milo

In an instant Milo's life is turned upside down. Everything familiar—his town, his people, and his routine—is stripped away, and Milo is faced with uncertainty. Without the comforts of his former life, Milo is thrust into a new environment where he's pushed to become a better version of himself—but is he ready for the challenge? Read along as Milo faces the unknown and comes out on the other side, with many unexpected blessings and some mysteries along the way!

