RANDALL NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF BRAVEHEART WALLACE



TOUCH



RANDALL WALLACE



Visit Tyndale online at www.tyndale.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

The Touch

Copyright © 2011 by Randall Wallace. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of doctor copyright © by ERproductions Ltd/Getty Images. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of road copyright © by D L Ennis/Getty Images. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of Sistine Chapel ceiling: *The Creation of Adam*, Buonarroti, Michelangelo/Vatican Museums and Galleries, Vatican City, Italy/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Author photo provided by Eric Charbonneau. Copyright © 2010 by Disney Enterprises, Inc. All rights reserved.

Designed by Stephen Vosloo

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wallace, Randall.

The touch / Randall Wallace.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4143-4366-2

1. Surgeons—Fiction. 2. Grief—Fiction. 3. Biomedical engineering—Fiction.

I. Title.

PS3623.A4438T68 2011

813'.6—dc22

2011020427



Printed in the United States of America

17	16	15	14	13	12	11
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

HOPE

1

WHEN MICHELANGELO FINISHED PAINTING the Sistine Chapel, neither the Pope who hired him nor the glorified artists of Rome took particular notice of the depiction in the center of the ceiling, where God, whom Michelangelo had the audacity to depict as a Being resembling a human, stretches His divine hand toward the first man, Adam, who is lolling in beautiful yet limp perfection, awaiting The Touch that will bring him Life.

The rich, the sophisticated, the high born, and the well-bred appraised the Chapel in numerous private viewings and judged it to be good work, perhaps even worthy of praise. They thought Michelangelo had displayed craft in handling the difficult curves of the ceiling and the added challenge of painting plaster while it was still drying. They critiqued individual figures throughout the fresco, but no particular section stood out in their notice.

It was not until they opened the Chapel to the hungry eyes of commoners, who would lock on those two fingertips, one Divine and one human, with Life about to leap, that anyone within the Vatican or the learned societies of Rome began to realize that The Touch was something special.

Faith Thomas and Andrew Jones were two of those commoners, among the centuries of tourists who had lifted their gazes within the Sistine Chapel to find themselves transfixed, open-mouthed, filled with wonder and joy. Faith and Jones, as she called him, were not in most ways what anybody would call typical; both in their midtwenties, they were an attractive couple, Faith with blue eyes and dark chestnut hair, and Jones tall and sandy haired, his eyes green and fierce. Among the tens of thousands of young Americans backpacking through Europe in the summer they stood out and drew as many glances as the statues and inlaid floors of the palaces they visited.

Still they were common. Both were from Appalachia, she from the coal fields of Pennsylvania and he from the Blue Ridge in Virginia. They had met in medical school. Now they were lying on their backs on the floor of the great Chapel, gazing upward, necks resting on their backpacks, each containing a battered copy of *Europe from \$85 a Day*. Faith was worried the Vatican guards were going to tell them to get up, that lying in the middle of the Sistine Chapel's floor was not allowed on tour days or on any other days either, but Jones had whispered something to one of them when they walked in, and the guards seemed to ignore them after that. Maybe because it was the last group allowed in before the Vatican tours closed for the day.

The other tourists in their group had already gazed at the ceiling; their eyes already wore the glaze that comes from trying to capture and comprehend the greatness of a work of art whose subject, as well as the technique in depicting it, were beyond understanding. "The Divine Touch" was something to ponder; every person who lifted eyes toward it knew that looking at it was a privilege. But Faith Thomas and Andrew Jones lay on their backs below it and felt the thrill of a special privilege. To lie on a floor where thousands, even millions, of feet

walked could have seemed unsanitary to their American minds, but the sanctity of the place made even the floor feel pristine.

"Is it the gift of life?" Jones wondered aloud to Faith, as his eyes, in sync with hers, drifted from the fingertips about to touch to the form of Eve depicted in God's other hand as a partner created for Adam. "Or the gift of love?"

"Both," she whispered back. "It says love and life are the same thing." Without moving her eyes for a long moment, she added, "You've got hands like that."

"Like Adam? Or like Michelangelo?" He was grinning; she knew the cocking grin without turning to look at it.

"Like the Big Guy with the white hair. Your touch brings me to Life."

In duplication of the painting he stretched his hand towards her; she extended her hand to him. But then instead of brushing fingertips, he surprised her by gripping her hand and pulling something from the coin pocket of his jeans and slipping it onto her ring finger.

It was an engagement band.

She rolled onto her side, looked at her finger, then at him. Suddenly they were kissing, and the whole room full of tourists was applauding them, and the guards were winking at Jones.

Even the painting directly above them seemed to glow brighter.

+ + +

There was no question in Faith's mind, of course, that she would remember that moment in the Sistine Chapel for the rest of her life, even if that life should last another hundred years, even if she should live long enough that she would sit drooling and could no longer remember her own name, the glow of what had just happened would nestle somewhere with her heart. As she and Jones walked hand in hand through the Vatican gates, she told him so.

He smiled, softly, and his eyes were bright with emotion, and though she had thought she could never love anyone more than she had loved him when he slipped the ring onto her finger, she loved him even more now than she had loved him ten minutes before. "You had all of this planned!" she said. "How long have you known you were going to do this?"

"Since I asked you if you wanted to backpack through Europe with me."

"I . . . I could've said no. I could've . . . I could've been too busy to come, I—"

"No, you couldn't," he broke in. "I wouldn't have let you."

She squeezed his hand and hugged her head against his shoulder as they strolled together through the warm and crowded streets, still filled with the sunlight of summer. Their hotel was two miles away, but they loved walking and would find a place to stop for dinner, a small restaurant with candles on the tables and singing from the streets outside. Faith adored the way Italians sang as naturally as they breathed.

Then another thought hit her. "Did you have that arranged? With the guard?"

"Sort of. Luca knew him."

Luca was an Italian friend they'd first met back in Virginia when he had come over from Rome to give a lecture called *Art and the Voice of God*. They had taken Luca to dinner after his lecture and the three of them had become fast friends; now Luca was waiting for them at a restaurant to surprise Faith again with a dinner to celebrate the engagement that Jones had planned. Luca would be bringing friends, none of whom Faith or Jones had ever met; but Luca promised that in an

instant they would all feel like family, they would be family. Love did that, made families where before only strangers had been.

+ + +

Four months later, in the middle of a Virginia autumn, the two of them were driving into the mountains, a postcard of The Divine Touch taped to the dashboard of Drew's old jeep. Faith was at the wheel; after days in classrooms and clinics and twenty-four-hour shifts in Emergency Rooms she was always eager to feel the sway and the bounce of the road into the Blue Ridge, jostling up through the worn-out seats and humming through the steering column into the palms of her hands. That she felt such things, was aware of them, relished in the connection they gave her to the physical world, made Andrew surrender the wheel, though he enjoyed driving, just not as much as she did. He would watch her as she drove, and he would smile and shake his head and think of how lucky he was.

They had left the University in late afternoon and had taken 29-South into Nelson County, Virginia's poorest region. The road, however, was one of the most beautiful drives in the state, rolling and winding through

farmland where houses and churches and stores selling antiques sat on ground that Thomas Jefferson had ridden past two hundred years before, on his way from Charlottesville down to Lynchburg to visit the summer house he had built there in a place called Poplar Forest. Jones loved history, so each time they drove this road he thought of Jefferson, the relentless builder, who designed Monticello and the University of Virginia and clocks and silver cups and—not coincidentally was a designer of the United States. Faith would smile patiently as Jones reflected aloud about such things; she found them mildly interesting but rather curious, for Faith was much more interested in what was now, in those houses they passed where the Christmas lights would be still up in May or in October, and in the families who lived in them. Was someone sick? Why would they not take the lights down, so that putting them up again would be special? Faith and Andrew were two different people—and life between them was richer for those differences.

They turned west just as the sun went down beyond the ridgeline and the gray fog of evening had begun to bathe the forest and rise from the road in wisps. Andrew was on his cell phone; he didn't like to talk when they were in the jeep—their time together, away from the hospital, was too rare, and it was hard to hear in the jeep, but Luca had just called him and cell reception was spotty, so he answered, though his habit when traveling into the mountains with Faith was to turn his phone off altogether.

"Yeah, we're back!" he called over the noise of the snow tires singing over the blacktop. ". . . Faith? She's great! She's been strutting around in front of all the women in Charlottesville, bragging about how she captured me!"

Faith punched his shoulder, then reached down and took his hand. He squeezed it and said loudly into the phone, "We miss you already, Luca! . . . Of course you're invited to the wedding, I'll call you as soon as we set the date! . . . Sure, I'll give her a kiss for you! And she sends her love to you!" He hung up and smiled at her. "He says I should ask you about the project you were talking with him about while we were there, on the neurological effects of music."

"Early studies are suggesting that playing classical music to kids makes their IQ scores go up. It started me thinking: if music impacts the brain—"

"Post-traumatic coma. It might help induce healing!"

"Bingo, big guy! See, I knew you weren't just another pretty face."

"Why does it work? Soothing? Stimulating? Or that people get healthier when they're exposed to beauty?" He looked from the Michelangelo postcard on the dashboard to Faith's face. She had just switched on the headlights and they threw back soft reflections onto her skin.

"It's love. Art is an expression of devotion, a tangible proof that someone cared enough to make and share beauty. It may be that we doctors accomplish more just by the physical touching of patients, by showing them concern, than with our science."

"Love heals?"

"Love heals."

"Faith is the right name for you."

She smiled at him; then her eyes flicked back to the road and filled with terror. She jerked the wheel and opened her mouth as if to scream. But there was no time even for that.

In an instant, everything changed for Andrew Jones—all that he hoped and thought, all that he believed of life.

In an instant, Faith was gone.