



BORDERS

*of the*

HEART

CHRIS FABRY

THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *Dogwood*

# PRAISE FOR CHRIS FABRY

## *Not in the Heart*

“A story of hope, redemption, and sacrifice. . . It’s hard to imagine inspirational fiction done better than this.”

WORLD MAGAZINE

“Christy Award–winning Fabry has written a nail-biter with plenty of twists and turns to keep readers riveted. Fans of Jerry B. Jenkins and Jodi Picoult might want to try this title.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“A fine piece of storytelling. . . Down to its final pages, *Not in the Heart* is a gripping read. While the mystery at its core is compelling, it’s Wiley’s inner conflict that’s truly engrossing.”

CROSSWALK.COM

“This absorbing novel should further boost Fabry’s reputation as one of the most talented authors in Christian fiction.”

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“*Not in the Heart* is the best book I have read in a long time. The plot is unique and creative . . . [and] manages to keep the reader hanging until the last page.”

READERVIEWS.COM

## *Almost Heaven*

“[A] mesmerizing tale . . . [*Almost Heaven*] will surprise readers in the best possible way; plot twists unfold and unexpected character transformations occur throughout this tender story.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Fabry has a true gift for prose, and [*Almost Heaven*] is amazing. . . . You’ll most definitely want to move this to the top of your ‘to buy’ list.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, 4½-STAR TOP PICK REVIEW

“Fabry is a talented writer with a lilting flow to his words.”

CROSSWALK.COM

### *June Bug*

“[*June Bug*] is a stunning success, and readers will find themselves responding with enthusiastic inner applause.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“An involving novel with enough plot twists and dramatic tension to keep readers turning the pages.”

BOOKLIST

“I haven’t read anything so riveting and unforgettable since *Redeeming Love* by Francine Rivers. Fabry has penned a remarkable love story, one that’s filled with sacrifice, hope, and forgiveness!”

NOVEL REVIEWS

“Precise details of places and experiences immediately set you in the story, and the complex, likable characters give *June Bug* the enduring quality of a classic.”

TITLETRAKK.COM

### *Dogwood*

“Once the story starts cooking, [*Dogwood*] is difficult to put down, what with Fabry’s surprising plot resolution and themes of forgiveness, sacrificial love, and suffering.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Ultimately a story of love and forgiveness, [*Dogwood*] should appeal to a wide audience.”

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“Solidly literary fiction with deep, flawed characters and beautiful prose, *Dogwood* also contains a mystery within the story that adds tension and a deepening plot.”

NOVEL REVIEWS

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A dark silhouette of a desert landscape at the bottom of the page, featuring a saguaro cactus on the right side.

CHRIS FABRY

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1 Corinthians 6:11 in chapter 18 is taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

*Borders of the Heart* is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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NOTE: WWOOF stands for Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms or Willing Workers on Organic Farms. Volunteers, called WWOOFers, usually are not compensated but learn organic farming and are fed and housed in exchange for their work.

The setting of this novel is Tucson, Arizona, and surrounding towns. But liberties have been taken with certain locations. There is no La Pena, Arizona. The heat, however, is real.



**THURSDAY**







# 1

**JOHN DAVID JESSUP** rode out in the morning half-light, when the sun was just a salmon-colored promise on the horizon. It had been eighty-four days since the last rain, and each hoof-fall of the horse kicked up the dust of a thousand summers. He had no designs on the day or his life.

The local weather reports confirmed the constant negative drumbeat of the farm's owner, Larry Slocum. The man could find something wrong even with a June rain.

"It's just going to run off," he would say to the underside of any dark cloud.

The heat of the morning had awakened J. D. as it always did. Sweating in the stillness, lying on top of the old quilt given to him by Slocum's wife, and straining to feel any air movement from the clacking metal fan he had found in the barn, he felt beads of perspiration run past his mouth and onto the dusty

pillow. He had tried sleeping with the door open, but night critters tended to take that as an invitation.

His room was an old schoolhouse Slocum said had been built before statehood, and J. D. believed it. Cattle feed covered half the room. The other half had his bed and a nightstand and a basin he tried to keep full of water. There was no bathroom—that was a Porta-John behind the building, facing the mountains in the distance. His only roommates were the extended family of mice that skittered through the room while he tried to sleep.

There was nothing different about that morning. Nothing out of the ordinary. The springs on the bunk had creaked as he rose and pulled on jeans so stiff he could now lean them against the wall. He'd shaken out his boots, making sure nothing had crawled inside, and staggered into a world he had not known until April, two months before, give or take.

The farm sat at the edge of La Pena, a town south of Tucson and bordering the Coronado National Forest. The Slocum ranch comprised five hundred acres of the best desert money could buy. It had been in the Slocum family for generations before it passed to Larry and his wife, Nora. There was a crude history written up in a weather-worn paperback under the coffee table in the Slocum living room. Stories of ancestors who had emigrated from the old country to the East Coast, then traveled west to fight off the natives and wild animals and stake a claim. Misspelled words and run-on sentences and commas where they shouldn't be.

The story of the farm would probably make a good song if J. D. could ever write again, but he'd traded that creative work for the day-to-day plodding farming gave. A one-foot-in-front-of-the-other existence that beat the hurt down to a numbness in his soul.

Before mounting, he'd taken a sip of water from the canteen hooked to the back of his saddle. It tasted old and hot, and he spit it at a wood rat darting past the barn. Quail were out with their young, clucking and traveling single file in the muted light, like a well-oiled military expedition. Mother led the tiny babies while Father brought up the rear, and J. D. had to look away.

The family dog, Red, climbed out from under the porch of the farmhouse and ambled to a plastic water dish upside down in the dirt. J. D. emptied his canteen into the bowl and the dog lapped. He ran his hand along Red's back before filling the canteen from the spigot by the barn.

He was surprised cattle could survive in such a hostile place, though there was good grazing higher, on the back side of the farm. That a garden would grow seemed impossible, but the ground was like children, forgiving once it found water.

His aversion to the land wasn't just the heat and scorpions but the very lay of it. Born among rolling green hills that exploded with color and then balanced themselves white each year, he felt foreign in the faded brown and gray of Arizona. Instead of preparing to blossom, everything seemed prepared to die, blowing from one flat place to another, shifting in the wind where God wanted—if God even cared about this desert.

The cactus and catclaw and cholla were strange to him. As were the Gila monsters and rattlers. But what he missed most were real trees and streams that bubbled up on their own. The mountains here, all around him, made the land feel like the bottom of some dry bowl. The saguaros seemed to gesture obscenely at him as he rode past each day, a cactus flip-off.

He was a stranger here, and the thought comforted him.

Every other day he rode the fence perimeter, checking for problems and making sure the water line hadn't been punctured

by illegals. It was a popular route for both those in the drug trade and those looking for work and a better life. He'd heard stories from Slocum and his wife, the same ones again and again, just like their stories of WWOOFers like himself—a damaged lot who weren't to be trusted.

Red joined him at the first knoll and trotted before the horse as if he were leading them to cross the Jordan. He was a mongrel, long-snouted and curly-tailed, and reminded J. D. of a dog he had loved as a boy. Each sight brought another stab of memory—one of a hundred reminders of the past in this barren land.

The blue sky was cloudless and empty of everything but the contrails of passing jets. He loosened the reins and let the horse go at its own pace through the prickly pear and beavertail and ocotillo and higher to the johnsongrass. Every morning he fought exhaustion. Every night he fought sleep.

If not for the coyote, he probably would have missed her. He just as easily could have glanced away at the moment when fate or providence looked upon a man and winked.

The coyote loped across the trail, unconcerned by the yapping dog, looking back like Red was simply another meal on four legs. Confident, arrogant, the coyote sniffed the wind, then trained its eyes on the horse and rider. The animal finally acquiesced and continued to a rock outcropping, then effortlessly glided across the desert floor, seemingly borne by instinct and an unseen trail.

Just on the edge of J. D.'s vision, when the coyote was a blurry dot among the waves of heat, it stopped, then stepped backward, turning and testing the wind. It was then that J. D. noticed the lone buzzard circling, drifting on an unsteady current.

He pulled the reins, and the horse gave him a side glance before obeying and moving down the slope into the craterous terrain. The sun peeked over the Rincons behind him. The heat made him shiver, and he tugged the brim of his hat lower as if that could cool him. He had turned three shades of red on every exposed part of his skin. That was why he wore long-sleeved shirts and stiff-legged jeans.

The coyote sauntered beside a lump on the ground. Perhaps it was a cow. A patch of cactus blocked J. D.'s view from this angle, but as he rose above the wash and drew closer, he saw that the dot appeared black and too small for cattle. Perhaps a dead coyote blackened by the sun. Or a chupacabra. He had heard that discussed at the farmers' market.

And then he heard Slocum's voice, stories told of an evening by the fire pit. "*It's just another dead Mexican.*"

Slocum had discovered a body the previous winter. As he described it, his wife had gone into the house to wash dishes.

"I found one last December, just before Christmas. Sitting propped up against a tree, head down between its knees like it was sleeping. Frozen like a Popsicle."

Not a he or a she—an *it*. Less than a dead cow or dog. This seemed the prevailing attitude in La Pena. In some ways J. D. could understand how it was easier making them less than human. It kept a distance they felt comfortable with when a family staggered through looking for water. J. D. hadn't given it much thought until now. There were too many other things on his mind.

Slocum had called Border Patrol to retrieve the body and told J. D. to do the same if he came across a Mexican.

Instead of tearing into whatever flesh was before it, the

coyote eyed J. D. as he moved closer. But when Red rushed the animal, it snarled and reluctantly trotted away.

J. D. rode around the cactus patch for a better look. What he saw clenched his stomach. Long, flowing black hair spread out from a woman facedown in the dirt. Black clothing. A skirt. Scratched legs and feet caked with blood. An open-toed sandal on one foot, the other bare. Stickers deep in her calves. Who in her right mind would wear sandals and a dress in a desert crossing? Through the hair stretched an arm with a handcuff around the right wrist. No sign of the other cuff.

*Who were you?* J. D. thought. *And how did you end up here?*

The dog sniffed at the unmoving body and licked the hand. At least the animals hadn't gotten to her. J. D. detected no odor of death. Not yet, anyway. The horse shifted, rearing its head and moving back a step. And then J. D. saw movement. From the dead woman's midsection. Something brown and gray gliding along the torso.

Red barked and J. D. yelled at him to get away, his heart rate climbing. Then came the rattle as the diamondback reversed course and headed toward her feet. Red would not relent, so J. D. stepped off the horse and kicked at the cur, sending him yelping into the scrub.

The snake rose up and eyed him. J. D. hesitated. Should he care for the dog and horse or just take care of himself? They were the intruders here, and the last thing he wanted was to get snakebit.

He dug his battered cell phone from the saddlebag and flipped it open, standing between the snake and the dog. Service was spotty here, but he found two bars. He scrolled through the contacts till he came to the number Slocum had given.

As the call rang, he saw more movement. This time the hand

with the cuff flexed and dug into the dirt. Was it involuntary? A body's last flexing of muscle in the heat?

"Border Patrol," a female voice answered and gave her name.

The snake slithered along the woman's thigh, and she moved her exposed leg. Then the snake rose and J. D. dropped the phone and turned to the horse, reaching for the rifle. In a flash of memory, he and his father were near a clearing with a fifteen-point buck straight ahead. J. D. froze, just as he had then, unable to squeeze the trigger or to breathe.

He shook the indecision off, then grabbed the barrel of the rifle and rushed the snake, swinging the stock wildly as it struck, its rattle fully engaged. He finally connected, and the snake's head snapped back. He dug the toe of his boot into the underbelly and sent it a few feet into the cactus. He felt like a placekicker who had just scored from eighty yards out, but he didn't have time to celebrate.

The woman lifted her head, hair covering her face. She was too weak to pull it back. J. D. moved to block the sun.

"*Agua*," she whispered. She sounded like a girl, her voice no louder than a bird's.

He grabbed his canteen, the dog now barking with equal fervor at the woman and the snake. He started to hand her the water, then remembered the phone and flipped it closed and shoved it into his pocket. She looked too weak to lift the canteen to her lips, so he knelt to roll her over and support her head as he poured some into her mouth. Her lips were parched and swollen, and with her turned over he could see blood on her shirt or blouse or whatever it was. A lot of blood. He pulled at it to see the wound, but she recoiled.

"Are you hurt?" he said.

She had to spit out some dust and mud to get the water past



her swollen tongue. Finally she drank, all the time looking at him with huge brown eyes.

He fumbled for the Spanish word, trying to bring it back from his high school days. “¿*Duele?*” he said.

She tipped the canteen again and drank. Then she lay back and closed her eyes. He checked her pulse. It was strong. He picked her up, cradling her like an infant to his chest. She was light, but even a hundred pounds of deadweight was difficult to carry. His phone buzzed as he stumbled to the horse. How could he get her back to the ranch?

He let her feet go and held her with one arm while he fished for the phone.

“This is Border Patrol. Did you just call?” a woman said.

“Yes, ma’am, I . . . ran into some trouble. . . .”

“Who is this?”

“Sorry, ma’am, I made a mistake. Called the wrong number. My apologies.”

The woman muttered something and hung up.

The sun moved higher, spiking the temperature. It had reached 117 the day before, and with not a cloud in sight, he figured today would be no different. He thought about calling Slocum but decided against it. The man would just haul her to the nearest Border Patrol and wash his hands.

He hoisted the woman, limp as a dishrag, toward the saddle, but the horse backed away. J. D. cursed and grabbed the reins, which only made things worse, the horse circling. He let go of the reins.

“Easy,” he said calmly, a hand on the horse’s head.

His father’s voice came back to him. “*The animal senses your fear. Relax. You don’t have to control it. You only have to guide it.*”

He tried again, but he misjudged the woman’s weight and

had to pull her back. Finally he placed her in the shade of a cactus, removed the saddle, and straightened the blanket on the horse's back. Then he pushed her up with one hand on her chest and another on her backside to place her on the horse. She was a girl, a tiny thing.

He led the horse to a rock and climbed up to sit behind her, steadying her weight with one hand. He tried to go as quickly as he could without jostling her, a hand in the middle of her back. Feet dangling, her body bouncing as they climbed higher, J. D. wondered where the girl had been and where she was going and what all of this meant to him.

“Who are you?” he said.