

*"This story's  
heart-wrenching  
conflict had me  
glued to the page."*

FRANCINE  
RIVERS

# How the Light Gets In

JOLINA PETERSHEIM

## Advance praise for *How the Light Gets In*

“*How the Light Gets In* is infused with hope and threaded with love, a story that asks the big questions: what makes us whole, and how do we find our worth? With the provocative biblical story of Ruth as inspiration, Petersheim brings alive modern-day characters struggling with both marriage and motherhood. Sometimes we use the words *forgiveness*, *redemption*, and *love* without understanding their depths, but Petersheim digs deep to portray the cost and worth of these values. A novel both penetrating and surprising—don’t miss it!”

**PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY**, *New York Times* bestselling author of  
*The Bookshop at Water’s End*

“I love how Jolina Petersheim translates timeless truths into can’t-put-down fiction. This story’s heart-wrenching conflict had me glued to the page.”

**FRANCINE RIVERS**, *New York Times* bestselling author of  
*The Masterpiece*

“Compellingly woven by Jolina Petersheim’s capable pen, *How the Light Gets In* follows a trail of grief toward healing, leading to an impossible choice—what is best when every path will hurt someone? A mother’s love and a mother’s duty war with a woman’s need to feel loved and whole in a

story that will stay with you long after you close the final page and leave you pondering: *Which path would I take?*”

LISA WINGATE, *New York Times* bestselling author of  
*Before We Were Yours*

“Jolina Petersheim writes so vividly that you taste the morning coffee and smell the peat from the cranberry bog. More than this, you will feel the ache deep inside Ruth as she wrestles with the desire for something just out of her grasp. With surprising twists and powerful themes, this story will sink into your soul and give you hope.”

CHRIS FABRY, bestselling author of *Under a Cloudless Sky*

“Jolina Petersheim’s *How the Light Gets In* chronicles one woman’s experience with motherhood, a fractured marriage, piercing grief, and glimpses of new hope. The setting—a cranberry farm in a Wisconsin Mennonite community—was a new one for me, and I was pulled into its stark and rugged beauty. Petersheim’s gentle retelling of the story of Ruth will both stir and settle the hearts of her readers.”

LAUREN K. DENTON, bestselling author of *The Hideaway*

“An insightful and poignant modern-day retelling of the book of Ruth, *How the Light Gets In* will work its way into readers’ minds and stay there long after the last page. Jolina Petersheim draws the story of widowhood, finding family, and rewriting one’s own life story with great grace

and gentle tenderness, once again proving herself to be a standout voice in Christian fiction.”

**KRISTY WOODSON HARVEY**, bestselling author of *Slightly South of Simple*

“Jolina Petersheim’s Ruth Neufeld is a heroine I’ll never forget—for her courage and love and forgiveness. Faced with an impossible choice, Ruth’s decision makes me believe in what it means to live out our highest selves.”

**BREN MCCLAIN**, award-winning author of the Okra Pick *One Good Mama Bone*

“As Jolina Petersheim explored the heartache of loss, the covenant of marriage, and the hope of new beginnings, I was challenged to consider whether I could have been obedient to the Lord in the same difficult circumstances. The journey to the final page was both impactful and thought-provoking. Expertly written, unpredictable, and powerful!”

**BECKY WADE**, award-winning author of *Falling For You*

“Petersheim delivers another intriguing story of love and healing. Add *How the Light Gets In* to your must-read list.”

**RACHEL HAUCK**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Wedding Dress*

“A compelling story of love, loss, faith, and rediscovery—and of what truly matters when faced with life’s most difficult twists and turns.”

**TAMERA ALEXANDER**, bestselling author of *With This Pledge*

“In this creative retelling of the story of Ruth, Petersheim carried me along in her capable hands lovingly, gently, and then as if with glorious fireworks, she applied twists, turns, and surprises that would have O. Henry nodding in appreciation. What an exquisite and meaningful read for anyone who’s experienced the ups, downs, and unknowns of God’s will for our lives.”

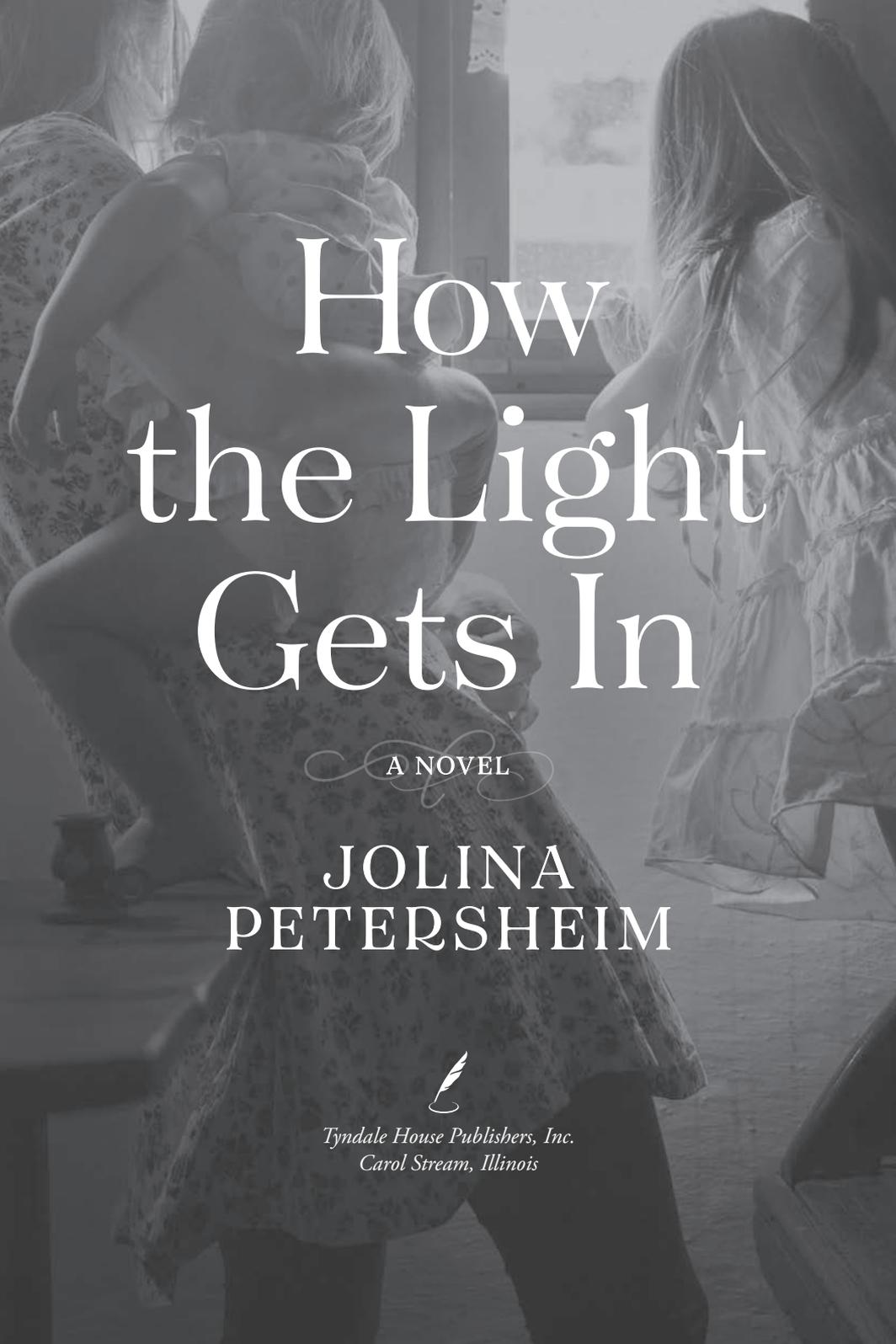
**NICOLE SEITZ**, author of *The Cagemaker* and coeditor of *Our Prince of Scribes: Writers Remember Pat Conroy*

“*How the Light Gets In* retells the biblical story of Ruth—but with contemporary complexities and twists. Characterized by insight and lovely prose, the story wrestles with shattered relationships, the reality of hard and imperfect choices, and redemption in the midst of pain.”

**JOY JORDAN-LAKE**, bestselling author of *A Tangled Mercy*

# HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN





# How the Light Gets In

A NOVEL

JOLINA  
PETERSHEIM



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*To my three daughters—Miss A, Miss M, and Miss E.  
May you always see how the light gets in.*





PART

1



## CHAPTER 1



THE CASKETS WERE CLOSED, OF COURSE. No flowers adorned them. No flowers were even in the church, but cool morning light fell through the windows, warming the hardwood floor and pews. The Physicians International staff member who had called to break the news to Ruth had promised there'd been no suffering. From this, Ruth inferred there'd not been much of her husband's body left to collect.

Later news articles confirmed the bombing the hospital had endured. Women and children had died; her husband and father-in-law were among the staff members killed. Ruth spent days afterward googling the bombing until her mother deemed she was obsessing over something that couldn't be changed. It infuriated Ruth at the time, but now she saw the wisdom of her mother's decision to turn off the Wi-Fi for ten hours each day, though the doling out of "wisdom" could have been accomplished with more tact.

Presently, seven weeks later, two-year-old Vivienne had no clue her father's cremated remains were scattered in a plain pine box at the front of the church. She had no clue he had even died. But her six-year-old sister, Sofie, was old enough to understand. When Ruth sat on the packed sand beside her and told her the news, Sofie hadn't cried, or even acted like she'd heard, but took a small piece of driftwood and threw it into the ocean, which the dog, Zeus, had run into the surf to fetch. However, since then, Sofie hadn't laughed, played, or spoken in more than toneless monosyllables, and those were all to basic questions—"Are you hungry? Thirsty? Do you need a nap?"—that Ruth had asked and to which Sofie had begrudgingly replied.

Because of this, Ruth wasn't about to let Sofie just sit there, stripping her cuticles off with her teeth while her brown eyes studied everything, as if trying to understand why her father's death so closely resembled her Irish grandpa's: everyone wearing black in a strange church where few congregants cried but most looked like they wanted to. Ruth, trying to distract her, dug into the tote she'd packed with the pretzels, cookies, and snack mixes they'd accumulated during yesterday's endless flights. She'd also packed Pull-Ups and wipes, a coloring book and crayons, and a change of clothes in case the upheaval of the past few days (not to mention weeks and months) caused toddler Vi to forget she was potty-trained.

Ruth could never have anticipated needing a diaper bag at her husband's funeral, and yet there were many things about her thirty years she could never have anticipated.

Ruth opened the zipper compartment and pulled out her

iPhone. Switching it to silent, she pressed the YouTube app so Sofie could watch *Paw Patrol*. But then she remembered: her phone was not picking up a signal. Cell phone service was spotty in this Mennonite community in Wisconsin. There was barely running water. Late last night, after the girls finally settled enough to sleep, Ruth had stood under the farmhouse's lime-encrusted showerhead, eager for another cathartic cry—the shower was the only place she felt safe enough to let herself feel—and discovered that the water came out as a lukewarm drizzle. It could never muffle her sobs, so she held them in until her chest hurt.

Ruth pressed the photos app and passed the phone to Sofie, allowing her to scroll through the pictures until the funeral wrapped up. Mabel glanced over as her granddaughter's tiny index finger expertly slid over the pictures and tapped the play button to watch the short video clips interspersed throughout. Ruth wasn't sure if her mother-in-law approved, but Ruth didn't really care if she did. Ruth did not want to bury her husband in Wisconsin. Therefore, she already resented the land and the extended family, who were so plentiful she didn't feel her single voice carried any weight. She wanted Chandler buried in Ireland, where she and her girls could visit him each day. And yet, was her parents' old stone house truly her home?

The surprisingly young bishop read from the Psalms: *“Der Herr ist meine Stärke und mein Schild; auf ihn hofft mein Herz, und mir ist geholfen.”*

The funeral service was being conducted in both German and English. Ruth suspected that the latter translation was mainly for her benefit, since she was among the few

non-Mennonites in attendance. But there was no need. The only way Ruth was going to survive the next few hours—and days, for that matter—was by blocking it all out. Otherwise, her shield of self-preservation would crack, and she doubted she could get herself back together if it did.

Ruth glanced down at her Fitbit and saw two hours had passed since she'd come into the church with her children. Her tights itched, and her eyelids felt heavy, which filled her with guilt.

How could she be fighting sleep at her husband's funeral? But she knew this fight stemmed from acute exhaustion, and from the fact there'd been few times over the past six months she'd allowed herself to sit still, because stillness meant something wasn't getting done, and focusing on getting something done kept her from having too much time to think.

And then, piercing the droning quiet, Ruth heard her dead husband's voice: an audible apparition. "Hey there, girly girls," he said. "I hope you're being good for your mama. It's a hot day—" Ruth was so stunned, she was unable to correlate that Chandler's voice was not in her head but coming from her phone. Mouth dry, she glanced at her daughter's lap. The screen framed Chandler's familiar face. Ruth reached for it, and Sofie looked up—eyes flashing—and wrenched the phone back. All the while, the simple, now otherworldly, message continued to play: "I'm looking forward to seeing you again. It won't be long now."

Ruth finally got the phone away and Sofie screamed, "*No!*" The sound reverberated off the church's whitewashed

walls, echoing just as the a cappella hymn “The City of Light” had earlier as she and her daughters filed past the caskets.

Ruth’s cheeks burned with humiliation and grief.

In the center of her lap, just as it had been in her daughter’s, was Chandler’s face: his dark beard, his dark skin, his dark eyes, so that he blended in with both the Colombian and Afghani cultures. His coloring was clearly passed down through Mabel, who looked more Native American than Mennonite, most of whom, Ruth knew, were German or Swiss.

*I miss you*, Ruth thought, and the realization surprised her as much as hearing her dead husband’s voice coming from her phone.

How could she miss a man who’d been parted from her for so long? For, yes, absence did make the heart grow fonder, but then, after a while, that shield of self-preservation grew thicker, and the heart forsook fondness for survival and all-consuming love for getting by. Ruth felt that she hadn’t truly missed her dead husband in four of their five years of marriage. And sometimes, when she’d missed Chandler the most, he’d been sitting in the same room.



SIX YEARS EARLIER

JUNE 7, 2012

*Dear Chandler,*

*I received your letter today and immediately wanted to hop on a plane and adopt Sofie myself, but my parents are adamant that I am neither mature enough*

*nor financially stable enough to consider it. Have you ever moved back in with your parents after living on your own (or at least in a dorm) for many years? It is not easy, and since I am their only child—granted, like Abraham and Sarah, when they least expected it—I find they are even more protective of me.*

*I have rebelled against this protection all my life, which is partly why, after college, I was so drawn to Children's Haven. Bogotá's crime rate alone about made my parents drop dead from fright. They jointly declared, "Ruth! Don't be so obtuse. You'll be kidnapped within a fortnight!" (And, yes, my English professor parents still use words like obtuse and fortnight.)*

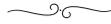
*But then, to my surprise, I found that Colombia was beautiful: the mountains' temperate coolness; the clean lines of uniformed children—the ribbons in the girls' hair, the stark-white kneesocks beneath their pleated skirts—as they crossed the sunlit courtyard to the classrooms; the sense of well-being I felt as I understood I was making a difference in orphans' lives.*

*I will never forget the day the staff took a trip to Guatavita, and how I suddenly had the impulse to purchase the red silk shawl I'd seen at one of the vendors' booths. The rest of you were loading up in the bus, but I turned and quickly cut back through the crowd with pesos jangling in the knit bag banging against my hip, and little did I know that you took off after me.*

*What a sight we must've made, as you wove through the chaos, looking so much like them, while I, obviously,*

*did not. I was purchasing the shawl from the woman with the wrinkled, apple-doll face when I looked up and saw you, standing there with your hands on your knees as you tried to catch your breath. I do apologize for taking off like that, but it was worth it, at least on my end. I have loved that red silk shawl ever since.*

*Fondly yours,  
Ruth*



Elam awoke before the sun and walked out of his house into the fields. The smell of peat from the cranberry bog rose around him. He thought about all the leaves that had fallen off the ring of silver birches and sifted down through the bog's layers of sand. The sedimentary nature reminded him of the funeral last week, and that he only had half his life left to leave his mark before he too fell like a leaf to the ground. But Elam wasn't melancholy today. In fact, he was far from it. He loved the beginning of harvest season, when his usually predictable—and, if truth be told, rather mundane—existence transformed into an adrenaline-fueled race against the clock.

The fog rolled in across the land like an opaque carpet. This subtle transition was Elam's favorite part of morning, when everything was quiet and there was nothing for him to say or do. Elam walked along the edge of the bog, checking on the ripe red fruit hidden like treasure beneath the plants. He knelt and cupped a few in his hand. Moisture from the dew beaded on his maimed finger. Cranberries, such tiny things, had taken up the better part of his thirty-nine years.

He would need to wait at least another month if he were dry harvesting it all like he had last year—walking the picker through the fields and laboriously gathering the pounds of fruit to sell to local grocery stores and markets. But Driftless Valley Farm's new contract with Ocean Spray allowed for wet harvesting. The cranberries didn't have to be perfect because they were going to be turned into juice, jelly, and sauce. In two days, Elam would pump water from the lakes and channels into the fields until the water rose a foot. His father had crafted the bogs to absorb the flood without being ruined, but each harvest Elam marveled that the delicate plants survived.

Elam and Tim were supposed to meet at the pumphouse at eight. Elam glanced at the flat band of horizon and gauged he had an hour until it was truly light. Elam walked back across the field, his prematurely silver hair brushing his shirt collar. A light shone through the kitchen windows. He moved toward it, his empty coffee mug dangling from his hand. He went up the front steps and saw Ruth sitting at the table, staring out at the predawn dark.

Elam paused, his right boot on the porch step's third riser, unsure if he should just stay outside until either Mabel awoke or it was time to meet Tim. But the kerosene light magnified the weary slant of Ruth's shoulders, as the shadows magnified the shadows beneath her eyes.

Just as Elam couldn't stay silent, even though he hated what it took for him to speak, he also could not stand outside while a family member appeared so forlorn.

Elam's heart pounded and mouth went dry as he entered

his own house. He felt so out of place, having someone else invading his privacy, and yet he told himself Ruth must feel even worse. She didn't look up. He stood at the entrance, gripping the coffee cup, and suddenly looked down at the floor, remembering how Ruth had cleaned it on her hands and knees after supper last night. Setting the mug on the buffet table, he knelt to untie his boots.

The sound of the ceramic striking the tin covering the cabinet—where Elam's dead mother, Marta, had once rolled out her pies—seemed to rouse Ruth.

“Good morning,” she said. Her voice sounded hoarse.

Elam nodded. “Good morning.”

He peeled off his boots, picked up his mug, and padded in socked feet across the kitchen. Marta was probably turning in her grave to see Ruth's huge white dog snoring beneath her table. But Ruth's six-year-old, Sofie, wouldn't enter the house unless the dog entered too and, for hours, had kept her arm wrapped around the dog's shaggy mane and glared at Elam beneath her bangs, as if challenging him to take away her living, breathing security blanket.

So he obviously had not suggested the dog should stay in the barn.

Refilling his coffee, Elam glanced at the stove and saw a plate of fried potatoes and eggs. The brown eggshells were cracked and piled beside the cast-iron skillet. The tin salt and pepper shakers were still out; some of the granules had spilled across the butcher-block countertop.

Ruth said, “Sorry. I was in the middle of cleaning up, but . . . I got a call.”

“No problem,” Elam said gently. “I . . . I’m glad you’re making yourself at home.”

“There’s enough for you, too, if you want it.”

Elam paused. “What about your girls?”

She smiled slightly. “They don’t like eggs.”

He looked back at her. There was nothing on the table except for her phone. Ruth’s head leaned forward, her wavy hair parted over her shoulders, so he could easily see the round nodules of her spine. She was too thin. “Have you eaten?” he asked.

Ruth shook her head. “You go ahead.”

It didn’t seem right, though, for Elam to sit across from such a sad person while eating the food she had prepared. He took two plates out of the cupboard and set them on the counter. He used the flipper to scoop the eggs and potatoes and set a portion on each plate. He carried the plates over to the table, and as he did, he debated on where to sit. To sit across from Ruth seemed too intimate. To sit at the far end of the table seemed too withdrawn. Most people wouldn’t think twice about where to sit, but most people were not Elam Albrecht, who overthought everything when it came to social interaction. After a moment, he chose to sit on the opposite side of the table, but one chair over so Ruth wouldn’t have to look at him with those disconcerting eyes. His foot brushed the dog. Moving his chair back, he slid one of the plates over to her.

Ruth looked up at him, as if surprised. “Thanks,” she said.

He didn’t say anything, just briefly bowed his head for grace and began shoveling in the food. He’d forgotten his

coffee on the countertop but wasn't about to retrieve it because he didn't want to repeat the awkward squeezing of his large-boned body between the table and the wall. He'd never sat on this side of the table and so had never noticed there was not much space.

The dog snored. The faucet dripped. Elam's heart pounded. He'd sat at this table his entire life but had no idea what to do with his hands. He gripped the fork. "You . . . you . . ."

Ruth glanced over, and then away in deference when she noticed Elam's face growing red as he waited for the words to come. It wasn't a stutter that affected him. Sometimes Elam thought it'd be easier if it were. That way, the person listening would know more words were on the way and could patiently wait while he got them out. But his words seemed to get hung up somewhere between his brain and his mouth. When he was a boy, Miss Romaine—the middle-aged librarian who became his clandestine piano teacher—had said his voice box was merely locked, and music would be the key to get the words out. But Elam hadn't been out to the cabin for a long time, and he'd nearly forgotten how to speak through those smooth, black-and-white keys.

"You had a call?" There. He'd said it. Effortless.

But Ruth's mouth tightened, and he feared he'd overstepped his bounds. A few seconds passed. She shook her head and said, "Yes. I had a call. My mother called." She stared down at the plate of untouched food and exhaled heavily. "She has a buyer for Greystones."

Elam finished chewing. He poised his fork over another

bite. When Ruth did not continue, he swallowed and asked, “What’s Greystones?”

“My parents named their house after the city where I grew up, Greystones, because it’s made of gray stone. Real creative, right?” She stabbed her fork in the egg. “My mom didn’t even tell me she was putting it up for sale. I should’ve known, though,” she said. “She was boxing up my father’s things soon after he died.”

“Where will your mother . . . ?”

“Live? I’m not sure. She’ll probably buy a small house in town. I know it makes sense. She’s seventy-five, and Greystones takes work. But I always thought I could go home again.”

Elam looked across at her. Sometimes he dreamed about leaving his “family home.” There were benefits to familiarity, he knew, and yet he often found he was discontent with having neither experienced life nor taken risks, as his cousin had done. He didn’t want to die in the same place he was born. “Could you and your girls move in with her?”

Ruth laughed. There was no humor in it. “My mom’s not the grandma type. My girls are too much for her. We lived with her for six months before coming here. It did not go well.”

“But you still want to move back?”

Ruth stared at her freckled hands. She twirled the loose wedding band on her finger, and the emerald reflected square prisms on the wall. “I don’t know what I’m going to do, honestly. My home is no longer in Ireland, and my home’s never been here.”

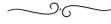
She appeared so fragile, sitting there at his table with the first light—streaming through the yellowed curtain—patterning

her face. Looking at her, Elam hated that she and her children should go through the grief he knew too well. Last Christmas, he'd sat at this same kitchen table while eating his staple supper of steak and eggs, and stared at the family picture Chandler had inserted into his annual support letter. He'd envied his first cousin for having a beautiful wife and daughters while he had almost no one. Now Chandler was dead; his wife and daughters were abandoned and nearly destitute, if it was true what Mabel had confided to him.

Elam didn't consider himself fluent in many ways, especially when it came to conveying matters of the heart, but he wished he could say more. He *yearned* for the ability to say more, such as that Chandler had loved Ruth deeply. But she must know that Elam and Chandler hadn't spoken very often in these ensuing years, and he didn't want to give her platitudes when she must've been receiving them in abundance from well-meaning people who didn't know how to handle grief. But he knew how to handle grief. Grief was best borne in silence.

Elam got up, worked his body around the table, chairs, and wall, and fetched a mug from the cupboard. The coffee-pot was still warm. He brought a mug over to Ruth and went to the kerosene-powered fridge to retrieve a small container of French vanilla half-and-half. He sniffed it to make sure it was okay. His sister, Laurie, had purchased the creamer for him some time back. Horrified by the "masculine state" of his pantry and fridge, she had hired a driver to take her to town to supply him with what she considered necessities of life. Personally, he never cared for doctored coffee. He set the cream beside Ruth and then fetched the small pottery

container of sugar with a wooden spoon. He worried he was turning into Laurie: trying to assuage life's woes with hot drinks and food. But then Ruth looked up—tears polishing her eyes—and smiled. “Thank you, Elam,” she said. “You're kind.”



JUNE 22, 2012

*Dear Ruth,*

*I am sorry for my slow reply. Children's Haven did another outreach on the mountain, where we discovered three more abandoned infants just as dehydrated and malnourished as Sofie was. Though their lungs were not as badly affected by the wood smoke and poor ventilation, I have literally been working around the clock to ensure that they are thriving. They are, I am relieved to say, and so here I sit in my scrubs, drinking quintessential Colombian coffee and writing to you. (Would my using 'quintessential' impress your professor parents? You should let them know, just in case.)*

*I can't help but smile while remembering that day in Guatavita. Janice had told me there were rumors of guerrilla activity, and I could so clearly picture you being snatched up for your pale skin and red hair. I am sure you would've been fine, in any case, and I am glad you purchased the shawl. I saw you wear it to graduation, and it was worth the risk.*

JOLINA PETERSHEIM

*As for living with parents: I haven't lived with mine since I too left for college when I was eighteen years old. After ten years, I can't imagine returning home. My parents, Chandler Senior and Mabel, are New Order Mennonite. I am not sure how familiar you are with the Anabaptist denomination, since there aren't as many communities in Ireland like there are in the States, but my parents are not the Old Order, horse-and-buggy type. They are car drivers, with electricity in their house, but my mom still wears a cape dress and prayer covering. I am the only one in my family who does not adhere to the Mennonite faith, but I do respect it.*

*My dad and I are especially close. He's been a doctor with Physicians International all my life, and he's the reason I decided to come here after medical school. I hope one day we can serve side by side. But that's down the road. For now, I can hear the teachers calling the children into the courtyard. Janice recently shared another rumor with me—which is only slightly less hazardous than guerrilla activity—and that is that we're having marshmallow and cabbage salad again with lunch. I noticed that every time this was served, you would look down at the end of the table until I had to come take your plate and eat what you couldn't. I am sure Chef José appreciated your thoughtfulness.*

*Your friend,  
Chandler*



Ruth needed to run. She'd been forced to give up running when the girls were little and it became too dangerous to be on the streets of Bogotá on her own. She remembered, though, the Saturday morning runs she used to take with her father: her rhythmic breaths mimicking the sea's inhalations; the mounting pain followed by the euphoria of pushing past her breaking point, tapping into that unseen strength, when her aching lungs and joints gave way to some primal force whose sole purpose was to send her body hurtling forward as fast as it could go.

Lately, she experienced that same primal urge to flee when she was standing still.

Ruth looked over at Sofie, asleep in the twin bed. Sweat curled her black hair, and she'd kicked the covers off, even though the drafty farmhouse had to be sixty degrees upstairs. Vi was asleep in the crib Elam had set up for them. Children could sleep anywhere.

Ruth wished she could be as oblivious of her surroundings.

She swung her feet over the side of the bed and almost stepped on Zeus, the clumsy Great Pyrenees who'd nonsensically claimed Ruth as master in the wake of her father's death. Moving around him, she went to her suitcase. Mabel had said she should make herself at home, but keeping her clothes in a suitcase was as normal to Ruth as keeping them in a drawer. She pulled on a fleece and a pair of nylon shorts over the Cuddl Duds she'd worn to bed. She found her tennis shoes and laced them up. Her hair still

in a topknot, she walked down the hall toward Mabel's room. She knocked lightly and heard a muffled grunt. She paused, unsure if this was an invitation or a subtle hint to go away. Ruth was about to turn when the door opened. Mabel stood behind it. Her thick black hair—not a strand of silver visible—hung down over her nightgown, but the middle part was firmly fixed from so many years of being trained into a bun.

Mabel modestly bunched her nightgown around her throat, though it was as revealing as a potato sack. “Everything all right?” she asked. Dreams had thickened her tongue.

“Oh, yeah,” Ruth said. “Sorry. Thought you'd be up.”

Mabel waved a hand. “No trouble. I've just been having a hard time getting to sleep.”

“I've been having a hard time too.” Ruth paused. “Would you mind if I went for a quick run? The girls should stay sleeping for another hour.”

“Sure, I don't mind at all.” But then Mabel's dark eyes—so much like Chandler's—scanned Ruth's ensemble. “Is this what you wear?”

Ruth looked down at her leggings. “It's not appropriate?”

Mabel thought. “*Jah*,” she said, finally. “But what do you want to *run* for?”

Ruth's mouth tipped. “Stress relief.”

“It's stressful for you to be here?”

Ruth looked down. “I'd be stressed anywhere.”

“I'm glad, though, that you're not alone.”

Ruth looked up, and their tired eyes held. Each woman glimpsed the woman who'd been linked to her by law and

## HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN

love, and yet for as little as they knew about the other, they might as well be strangers. “I’m glad too,” Ruth said. She didn’t bother explaining that she still felt alone, even while she was here.

## A Note from the Author

FIVE YEARS AGO, I took a walk in Wisconsin with my one-year-old daughter. It was below freezing, and the wind chill made it feel colder. I remember bundling her into the stroller so snugly she could barely move. Her brown eyes blinked at me between the pink hat and the fleece blanket I'd pulled up to her chin. The yard of my husband's uncle and aunt's white farmhouse, where we were staying, was studded with giant hardwood trees. The lavender sky was a backslash for red dairy barns, and the gravel road beneath the stroller's wheels was an icy white sheet.

Once we returned to the farmhouse, I put my daughter down for a nap and thought about a woman coming to Wisconsin after losing almost everything. That's when I knew I would write a modern retelling of *Ruth* set in a Mennonite community. What I did not know was that two years later, my husband and I would sell our home in Tennessee and move, with two little girls by then, to a home with grid-tie

solar power seven miles from that Wisconsin farm where I had the idea for *How the Light Gets In*.

A few months after we moved, my husband's uncle shared a newspaper clipping with me regarding a local cranberry farmer who only used old-fashioned equipment. Turns out, Wisconsin is the nation's leading producer of cranberries. I could picture my modern Ruth in a flooded bog, glean- ing berries, just like the biblical Ruth glean- ing barley in the fields.

I will forever cherish the season we spent in Wisconsin. Sometimes I can still hear the off-kilter squeak of the wind- mill that stood in our front yard or the sound of windows cranking open on the first warm day of spring. But by the end of our second winter, I asked my husband if we could move home to Tennessee. We had moved to Wisconsin on a two-year "try it out" plan, and I was asking to leave even before the two years were up.

My husband had poured himself into our little home- stead: remodeling the 1920s farmhouse, raising and butch- ering chickens, putting new boards on the old dairy barn, planting three hundred pine trees and long rows of raspber- ries and blueberries, sowing wildflowers, and building raised garden beds. He was living his dream in Wisconsin—the place he'd started visiting when he was a teenager and would go hunting for weeks at a time—and now I was asking him to give it up. Knowing how lonely I was for our families in Tennessee, my husband put our farm on the market, and to our great surprise, it sold two weeks later.

We moved back to Tennessee and entered the hardest

season of our marriage. My husband had dreamed of homesteading in Wisconsin, and now he had sacrificed that dream to bring me home. He never verbally expressed resentment, but the tension between us was palpable. Around Christmastime, I spoke with an older woman friend about our situation. Her advice was simple, and yet it changed everything: she told me I needed to put my husband at the forefront of my prayer life. Up until that point, frustration had prevented me from really praying for him, but now I began in earnest. Early in the morning, before the girls awoke, I would walk around our land and pray for our marriage. I prayed for the ability to understand the loss of my husband's dreams. And you know what? I began to understand his perspective. I began to appreciate what he had sacrificed to bring me home.

Over a year has passed since that difficult season, and I have never loved and respected my husband more. There's something about walking through hardship together that brings those rote marriage vows to life. Furthermore, I now know my husband can never be responsible for my happiness, for my wholeness; neither can I be responsible for his. We each have to pursue an intimate relationship with Jesus to experience true, lasting intimacy with each other, and this independent pursuit has drawn us more closely together than anything. My husband and I talked about this experience today when we were in our minivan, our now three little girls all piled in the back. He said, "When I gave my dreams and the desires of my heart to Jesus, I found that he became the dream and the desire of my heart."

Friends, my dream and the desire of my heart for this

novel is to offer hope to marriages, especially those enduring challenging times due to the stresses of life—children, jobs, health, ministry obligations, you name it. Many of the emotions Ruth deals with in this story were in some part drawn from my actual experiences. Please know that I did not write those scenes from a place of judgment, but from a place of empathy. I want you to know that there's a community out there, wanting to press your hand and murmur, "I've been there too." So, please, don't give up hope. Your love story is not over. It is just beginning.