

A photograph of a silver bicycle lying on its side on a dirt path in a lush green forest. The path is overgrown with grass and weeds. In the background, there are dense trees and a misty or cloudy sky. The overall tone is somewhat somber and mysterious.

Christina Suzann Nelson

*What
Happens
Next*

A NOVEL

What Happens Next

Books by Christina Suzann Nelson

More Than We Remember

Shaped by the Waves

The Way It Should Be

What Happens Next

What Happens Next

Christina Suzann Nelson



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
Minneapolis, Minnesota
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Nelson, Christina Suzann, author.

Title: What happens next / Christina Suzann Nelson.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2023]

Identifiers: LCCN 2022034463 | ISBN 9780764240409 (paperback) | ISBN 9780764241376 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493440689 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Christian fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3614.E44536 W48 2023 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220721

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022034463>

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Cover design by LOOK Design Studio

Cover image by Blue Collectors / Stocksy

Old bike image by Marta Locklear / Stocksy

Author is represented by Books & Such Literary Agency.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

23 24 25 26 27 28 29 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Jodie

Whose friendship has been one
of the greatest blessings
along my writing journey.

Faith

NOW

Faith Byrne's carefully laid plans took advantage of unplanned distractions and skipped town, never to be seen again. She stood outside her comfortable suburban home, one hand on the mailbox, the other holding a thick envelope from her attorney. Her line of sight did a dance around the yard as if one of her neighbors might be watching and somehow witness this moment of humiliation. Faith didn't have to open the seal to know what the package contained. Inside would be her copy of the final divorce decree. She hadn't wanted the dissolution of their vows, so she certainly didn't need to read through the corrosive words—again.

Tucking the mail under her arm, she straightened her posture and walked past the tulips just beginning to open in the early spring weather. With Easter only four days past, their appearance should have been predictable, but like those who witnessed the death of Jesus, she wasn't prepared for life to return after tragedy.

A horn honked behind her, startling Faith from her pathetic comparison between crucifixion and being dumped by Neil.

She turned to find Kendall, a friend she'd made through Neil but managed to keep in the settlement. The side door of Kendall's green minivan slid open, with Harlow and Ava piling out and lunging toward her.

"Mom, I can't believe you're okay with this. Thank you!" Ava hopped up on her toes, still not stretching quite to Faith's chin. She clutched the phone that Neil had purchased for her, even though they'd decided the girls could wait until their thirteenth birthday for that kind of responsibility. Apparently in his mind, divorce gave her a nine-month advancement in age. "This is going to be the best summer ever."

Faith kissed the top of Ava's head. "I'm sure it will be." She shifted her gaze to her fourteen-year-old. Harlow was skilled at nonverbally cluing her mother in on all things Ava, and what Faith was getting from her older daughter sparked flames in her chest.

The delight melted from Harlow's face. "Stop, Ava. He didn't ask Mom."

Ava's mouth hung open as her body stilled. "So, we're not going to Hawaii for the summer?"

Hawaii? For the summer? Faith's stomach became a jagged boulder. *Thanks a lot, Neil.* "Daddy and I are still working through a few details about your vacation. Let us talk, and I'm sure we'll get everything worked out."

Ava's eyes filled with tears.

"Don't be such a little kid," Harlow snapped.

"None of that." It would serve her husband—ex-husband—right to have an entire summer with the girls. They'd hit ages where they seemed to forget they were sisters, not mortal enemies. "Head into the house and get started on homework. I'll be there in a minute."

As they shuffled inside, their nasty whispers back and forth

met Faith's ears. She'd had such a different vision for her children, her family.

Kendall pushed the passenger door of her van open a few inches. "Hey." She patted the seat. "Take a load off."

A quick look in the back seat verified that Kendall's middle school-aged son was in a nearly hypnotic state as he poked and swayed with his video game. She couldn't blame him. Being in the van with her girls could be a bit much. Kendall's offer to bring them home each day after school so Faith could get more time to work was a sacrifice for him too. Plopping onto the seat, Faith let her ponytail drop against the headrest. She breathed out a stale sigh.

"I take it you didn't know about Hawaii." Kendall turned to face her.

"Two weeks. That's what I was told. They'd have the *wedding*, then the girls could spend some time with Neil's parents. They don't get to the mainland very often anymore, and the girls miss them. Maybe there was a miscommunication."

The gentle touch of Kendall's fingers on her arm nearly undid her. Faith let her head loll to the side. There was no mistake. Neil was being Neil, all *I'm in charge here* Enneagram eight, and not a healthy eight. Neil only knew one way—his way—and everyone was expected to move over and let him by. But Faith didn't have to bend to his wishes anymore. That was for Wendy to deal with.

"I'd love to give that man a few of my thoughts." Kendall's lips formed tight lines.

"It wouldn't do any good. He hears what he wants to hear and tosses the rest." Faith patted the package on her lap. "And he's free to do almost anything he wants. The kids are the only area he can't control, so he pulls stuff like this, getting them all excited so I'm the bad guy by saying no."

"The girls will get over it. You're the one who's steady in their lives. You've never let them down."

“They’re teenagers, or nearly. We’re in the midst of the Mom-ruins-everything stage. And don’t forget, he’s marrying an attorney. He’s reminded me a hundred times how lucky I am that I have joint custody.” She shrugged. “Listen, I don’t want to be one of those moms who talks bad about my kids’ father. He’s a good dad, and he loves the girls. I’m glad he wants them around, even as he starts his new family. None of this is their fault, and they shouldn’t be punished for our problems.”

Kendall rubbed the back of her neck. “You are a far better woman than I am.”

If her thoughts were out on display, Faith doubted anyone would see her as holy. How could he take this away from her without a discussion? Harlow and Ava were her kids too. He had no right to give them fantasy-worthy hopes for a summer full of adventures that she couldn’t dream to produce for her children. Neil knew better than anyone else that eventually she’d crack.

“Mom.” Ava hung out the front door. “I’m starving.”

Faith must have checked her Fitbit a thousand times throughout the evening while time ticked away like it was struggling through waist-high tar. After the final plate was stacked in the dishwasher and it hummed with spraying water, she went down the hall, listening at each of her girls’ bedroom doors.

Ava stomped around all evening, as if her preteen power play would get her the results she was after, while her sister had taken to her room as soon as she could get away. Both reactions were like punches to Faith’s heart. She hadn’t chosen the divorce, but there were plenty of things she’d said and done along the way that had served to hurt her kids. Touching their doors, she said a silent prayer for peace, especially for the call she was about to make to Neil.

But when she unlocked her phone, there were four missed

calls—from him. She wrinkled her brow. Once again, she'd forgotten to unmute after finishing a podcast recording session. The last few weeks had been crazy, with Faith trying so hard to get extra episodes researched and ready to air so she'd have the summer to focus on her girls.

Grabbing the stack of mail from the counter, she stepped into the garage. She dropped the envelopes on the washer and plugged in her earbuds, stuffing one in her ear so hard, she felt the air pressure push against her eardrum.

Before she could tap his name in her contacts, the phone buzzed. It was Neil. Great. He even got the prize for making the first move.

"Hello." Her voice was flat. She wouldn't scream at him, but she certainly wouldn't let him off easy either.

"About time."

"Excuse me?" Faith flung the dryer open, the hinges screaming out their abuse.

"Be careful with that machine. It will cost a fortune to fix it."

Her jaw throbbed with the tension. "I don't see how that's any of your business."

"You're right. I'm sorry."

Faith searched her mind for a smart comeback, but he'd silenced her with these words so foreign from his vocabulary.

He cleared his throat. "Listen. I wanted to call and apologize. Wendy thought we'd talked when she mentioned the summer plans to the girls."

"I was fine with two weeks. Why do you need to have them all summer? Neil, that's a long time." Loneliness seeped into her bones even now, weeks before the scheduled departure.

"It's my dad. He's not doing well. He's got cancer in his bones, Faith."

"I'm so sorry." Neil's dad was a dear man who, along with his wife, had welcomed Faith with open arms. The divorce had hurt them deeply too. She blinked back tears. "How is your mom?"

“She seems lost in all of it. Dad is refusing treatment. He just wants to spend his last days feeling the best he can and enjoying family.”

Faith leaned onto the washing machine. The last statement hit her like a missile. A year ago, she'd been part of that family. Now, she was the only one not included. She tugged towels from the dryer and began folding. “What can I do?”

There was a long hesitation, followed by Neil clearing his throat. “You can let me take the girls for the summer.”

It was her turn to pause, and she took it, folding three dish towels as she considered her response. Saying no to Neil, that was easy. She'd become a professional in that department. But his parents were a different story. When Neil moved out, it was his dad who called to see if she was okay. He'd continued to check in regularly, though the time between calls had been lengthening. Now she knew the true reason why, and it broke her heart. She pulled the last towel from the dryer. “Okay.”

“Thank you. I really owe you one.”

“Yes. You do. And I'll take that in the form of Thanksgiving and Christmas.” Her fingers began sorting through the mail without thought to what she was doing.

“Faith.”

“And I want regular communication with both girls throughout the time you're in Hawaii. This is my final and only offer.” The first sense of control she'd had in a year felt like a warm wave over her skin. Neil had taken everything away. Now, he was taking her summer too. But she had made the choice to say yes on her terms and for reasons that felt right, not because it was what he wanted.

“You've got it. My dad will really appreciate this. I do too.” The tenderness in his voice started to eat away at her anger.

She ripped open an envelope. “Give your parents my best.”

They hung up, and she leaned against the washing machine, the letter still in her hand. What was she going to do with

herself for three months on her own? How fast the time had gone from the days she would have done anything for even ten minutes alone.

Faith tugged the paper from the envelope.

Faith,

I don't know if you'll remember me. You were friends with my sister, Heather. I'm sure you recall that Heather went missing in September 1987. My family is in great need of closure for Heather's case. We need to see justice for what happened to her. While I know your podcast focuses on people who go on after tragedy to do remarkable things, I wonder if you'd consider looking into Heather's case without any of us qualifying as healed or doing remarkable things. I believe bringing attention to Heather again might be the catalyst to finding out what happened to her.

Thank you,

Brooke (Crane) James

A photograph was paperclipped to the back of the page. Three girls, one in her early teens and the other two at the final stages of girlhood, sat on a curb, ice cream cones melting in their hands. The girl in the middle was Faith.

Faith's father had been developing a neighborhood nearby prior to their next move. They'd spend the summer of 1987 with her dad's mother in the little town of Deep Valley, Oregon. Faith hadn't been back there since. Her grandmother was now in an assisted living facility an hour from the house she still owned, and before that, she'd come to visit them, rather than Faith and her mother making the trip.

Though Faith had nearly forgotten the details of that summer they'd lived with her grandmother, she hadn't misplaced the memory of Heather. They'd built a bond over those warm

months, one she thought would follow them well into adulthood, but after Faith left, she'd never heard another word from her friend. Letter after letter was sent, but not a one came back until Faith had given in to the thought that Heather didn't want to be her friend any longer. It was Faith's first true introduction to rejection.

Wouldn't her parents have told her if something happened to Heather?

2

Heather

THEN

When Mrs. Ferdon called me across the street to her house, I assumed it was to complain about my brother's new muscle car. Greg thought he was all that, and he wanted the whole neighborhood to hear him coming and going, as if they would come out of their homes and cheer like he was the grand marshal of the Fourth of July parade.

My summer was already off to a boring start. My best friend, Amy, had gone off to Japan with her sister for the entire vacation, something to do with her dad's work. That left me, on the first day of freedom, walking alone to and from the IGA for a Big Hunk and grape soda.

I folded the crinkly wrapper over my candy and stuffed the remaining half into the pocket of my Bermuda shorts, then crossed to Mrs. Ferdon's yard.

"Well, don't you have the most perfect timing?" Mrs. Ferdon waved me up onto her porch.

I didn't know about that, but my mom would be expecting me home soon. And that was the timing I didn't want to mess

with. "What can I do for you?" I figured she needed help with some kind of chore, seeing as how she was all alone since Mr. Ferdon's heart attack last fall.

"Faith."

I squinted up at her wrinkled face. Did she think I needed an extra Sunday school lesson? My fingers grazed the candy bar in my pocket, while the other hand clutched the pop can. I hoped it wasn't the gluttony talk. My mom was big on that one.

Then a girl stepped out of the house. She was taller than me, but most everyone I knew, even the kids a grade younger, had me by inches. Blond hair fell over her shoulders in waves, the kind that meant she wouldn't have an older sister after her all the time to get her look together.

My first reaction was to step back. I wasn't looking for a new friend. I still had Amy, even if she was in a different country, but then the girl smiled, and I felt like she might be okay after all.

Mrs. Ferdon put her hand on the girl's back and pushed her my way. "This is my granddaughter, Faith. She's here for the summer, and I thought the two of you could be friends."

My eyebrows did that thing that drove my mother crazy, jumping up and giving away my feelings. But I caught it quick and dropped them back into place. "Hi." I thrust out my hand. "I'm Heather. What grade are you in?"

"Going into fifth. How about you?" She looked down at the porch.

"Same here. Awesome. Do you want to hang out at my place?" I pointed down the road four houses. "It's the one with the flag in the front yard. I bet my mom will let us have popsicles."

I caught Mrs. Ferdon glancing at my pop, but it was only an hour or so past lunch. It wasn't like I was spoiling my dinner. Still, I lowered the can.

Faith's shoulders rose and fell, but I could tell she was the

kind of girl who would be a lot of fun once we got away from the grown-ups.

I grabbed her hand and ran down the street, her footsteps thumping behind me. When we reached the corner, I dropped her hand and checked for cars. "Want to go to the swimming hole?"

She shrugged again, but I was up for the challenge. "Let's go tell my mom. You can borrow one of my sister's suits." Brooke would have a cow, but Mom was all about hospitality, and Mom's word ruled.

We ran through the door and to the back of the house where our kitchen was. Mom stood at the yellow Formica counter, scooping Cool Whip on top of a bowl of Jell-O. I hoped she'd turn toward the sink so I could sneak a taste out of the tub, but I didn't get lucky.

"Hello there. Who do you have with you, Heather?" It was her way of pointing out my failure to give proper introductions.

"Mom, this is Faith." I held my open hand out toward my new friend. "Faith, this is my mom, Mrs. Crane." I swept my palm toward my mom, knowing if I didn't do this right, she'd have me start again.

Mom wiped her hands on a checkered dish towel, then held one out. "Faith, it's so nice to meet you. Do you know Heather from school?"

"No. My family is staying with my grandma for the summer. She lives just down the road."

"Of course. I should have known. Mrs. Ferdon talks about you all the time. I understand you're quite the swimmer."

Faith's face flamed as red as Michael Jackson's jacket, but I couldn't have asked for a better setup. "We want to go down to the swimming hole, and since Faith is such a great swimmer, I didn't think you'd mind."

Mom's mouth tightened into a line. She wasn't one to let me

go too far without supervision, even if my older brother and sister had done this very thing at my age. Being the youngest could really be a bummer. "If you take Brooke with you, I think that would be fine."

I caught myself just before my eyes rolled. Mom did not tolerate faces. "Okay. But what if she says no?"

"Then have her come talk with me."

That was all I needed to forgive my mother for treating me like a baby. "Come on." I motioned for Faith to follow me and ran down the hall, my mother's voice trailing behind with a command to slow down.

Bursting through the door to the room I shared with Brooke, I caught her staring at a poster of George Michael, as if he'd ever give my sister a second look.

Brooke jumped off her bed, snapping a button on her boom box. "What are you doing? Don't you have any respect?"

I shrugged. "Hey, we want to go to the swimming hole, and Mom says you need to come too. Can Faith borrow one of your suits?"

She looked over like she'd just noticed my new friend standing in the doorway. "Whatever." Brooke yanked open her top drawer and flung a swimsuit at Faith. "Why do I have to go with you?"

Another shrug.

"Greg never has to babysit you. It's not fair."

I slipped off my shorts and started changing for the water. "Maybe because he has a job . . . and a life."

"You know what? You are so immature. Ah. I just wish you'd grow up already." She turned toward the door, no doubt to whine to Mom about having to take us.

Faith still stood there, clutching the borrowed suit.

"The bathroom is right there." Brooke pointed on her way by.

By the time Faith and I entered the kitchen, our towels rolled up and tucked under our arms, Brooke had given in.

Mom pulled three popsicles out of the freezer. I eyed the red one but knew better and offered Faith her pick first. Our friendship was confirmed when she chose the purple.

Brooke ripped the plastic off her orange treat, and we went outside.

We sat down on the curb to eat our popsicles, the heat burning my backside until I inched back to the narrow strip of grass. I'd missed this, hanging out with my sister. Until a year ago, we'd hung out all the time, but then, well, she got all boy crazy and obsessed with her hair and makeup. She didn't look anything like herself or the magazine models she tried to mimic.

By the time we got to the edge of the neighborhood where the path led through cut-back brush to the water, I was so hot I could have melted. I showed Faith the tree where we tucked our towels so they wouldn't get wet and muddy. The crashing sound of bikes going over roots and bumps took our attention away from the water. Mike, Brian, and Nathan, three boys from my grade, skidded to a stop just before the short cliff over the main swimming area.

I shook my head. Boys had to make everything loud and weird. "Come on, Faith, let's go." She had her arms wrapped around her middle like she was cold, but there was no way. Then I realized she was staring at Nathan. Just what I wasn't looking for, another girl in my life who only wanted to talk about boys. I ran toward the edge and jumped into the hot summer air, then splashed down into the chill of the cold mountain water.