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He instinctively looked at her ring finger.

Empty.

"I'm Junior," he said with an even bigger smile, holding out his hand. If she wasn't taken, he'd see to that soon enough.

"Casey," she said as she shook his hand. He was looking at her like she imagined a wolf would look at his prey. She tilted her head. "Are you here to interview for the young adult ministry too?"

Junior simply laughed at that. "Actually I'm the leader of the high school ministry. So you're here for the interview?"

"Yeah," she said, shifting her feet. He was still holding her hand.

"Well, I sincerely hope you get the job," Junior told her, that big smile still on his face. "*Sincerely.*"

"Thanks."

After a few more seconds, Junior finally released her hand. She stepped past him and resumed her walk towards the Pastor's office.

Junior watched her walk away. She couldn't be more than five feet tall, but the presence of her had hit him like a line backer straight in the gut. Oh yes, he truly hoped she got the job.

It was about time things got a little more exciting around the First Baptist Church of South Florida.

He grinned.

Youth of Christ

the novel

Written by
Stephanie Rodnez

CEE BOOKS

A division of Christ Effect Entertainment, LLC

This book is dedicated to every teenager
working to make their dreams come true.

You inspire me more than you know.

Prologue

Pastor James sat with his head hanging in his hands, staring miserably at the resignation letter he'd just received from Tori Jackson. The letter was almost an exact replica of the others, claiming the young adult ministry at the First Baptist Church of South Florida contained the laziest group of teenagers in all of Broward county, and Tori was through dealing with them.

Pastor James sat back in his chair, sighing as he placed the letter on top of his desk. As a follower of Jesus Christ, he knew the church needed to offer ministries for every age group. But these teenagers were really testing his patience. The process of hiring a new youth leader cost the church two months of his time and countless dollars of the precious church budget, and this would be the *fourth* time he had to do it in less than 12 months.

He was tempted to give up on the ministry all

together by disbanding the group and forcing them to join the adult Bible study ministry. But that would be a mistake. The 18-22 year old age segment was where most churches lost members, and Pastor James was committed to preventing that from happening.

Even if it meant he would spend the rest of his life hiring youth leaders.

He barely looked up when he heard the knock on his door. He knew it was Junior coming to check on him.

"How's it looking?"

Junior was his oldest son and leader of the high school ministry.

"Oh she's gone for good," Pastor James answered, gesturing for Junior to take a seat. "They didn't even bother showing up for field trips."

"That doesn't surprise me," Junior said, taking a seat. "But you have to hand it to her. She lasted longer than the others."

"Yeah, a whole two weeks longer," Pastor James said while rolling his eyes. "What is it with this group, Junior? How is it that the ten laziest teenagers in all of South Florida happened to be part of this one ministry at the exact same time?"

"I can't answer that," Junior said with a shrug. "But I can suggest you wait them out before hiring a new ministry leader. A lot of my high school students are graduating and will probably join the young adults ministry next August, and I know they'll be easier to handle."

"So you think I should wait a whole year to hire another leader? What happens to the ministry in the mean time?"

"Why does that have to concern you?" Junior asked. "These teenagers don't tithe; they don't participate in church activities. They barely even say hello to anyone. What's the harm if they find another church to take up space in?"

Pastor James simply stared at his son a few

moments, contemplating his words. Logically, he knew it made sense to stop investing church money into a ministry that seemed allergic to acting like a ministry. But God wouldn't approve of a church closing their doors to an entire generation. And neither would the young adult's parents.

"No, I'm going to hire someone else," Pastor James told his son. "But this time I'm going to warn him about these guys."

"And when do I get the high school ministry coordinator that I've been asking you to hire?"

"When the new ministry leader gets tired of this group, I'll send him to be your coordinator," Pastor James said with a nod. "That way the time we spend training him will be money well spent."

"Sounds like a plan," Junior said with a grin. "But whoever takes this job in the mean time has got to be really stupid or really crazy."

"Let's hope they're just committed," Pastor James said, and got on his computer to start looking for a new youth leader.

Chapter One

Casey Middleton walked briskly down the long church hallway, checking her watch every five paces. She was early for her interview with Pastor James, but the nerves were still killing her. It would be her *first* job interview since graduating from the elite Florida Christian Academy of Youth Leadership just weeks before, and she was down right terrified.

Which is why she kept obsessively checking her watch. She didn't want to be late *or* early. She wanted to present herself as a mature, well rounded youth leader who could handle a ministry all by herself.

Who are you kidding? Casey asked herself. *You're a 25 year old blonde with no experience. How could you even show up for this interview?*

Casey took a deep breath and squeezed her eyes shut as she continued to walk forward, trying to block out

the negative thoughts. She could do this. She *would* do this, because God asked her to.

Casey gasped when she bumped into something hard. Her eyes flew open, and then she gasped again.

Because there stood the most amazing pair of sea blue eyes she'd ever seen, and they were gazing at her.

He was tall, at least 6'3, with a pair of legs built to run marathons. He was lean and muscular, with choppy brown hair that fell in waves just above his ears. But those eyes, so blue, so bright...

Her eyes instinctively shifted to his ring finger.

Empty.

"I'm... sorry," Casey managed, suddenly nervous for a different set of reasons. He was still holding onto her, still holding her steady. Why hadn't she noticed how close they were before?

"That's okay," he said with a smile, his voice easy and deep. "I've never seen a woman walk with her eyes closed before."

"Yeah, that was stupid of me," Casey said, her heart fluttering like a flock of wedding doves. "Um... I think I'm steady now."

He smiled and released her, but didn't back away. She may have been steady, but *he* sure wasn't. And it was the first time a woman had done that to him at first glance.

She wasn't an obvious beauty, but had one of those understated faces that radiated elegance. She had short blonde hair cut just above her neck, chestnut brown eyes, and a pair of lips that just *begged* to be kissed.

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Casey sat in front of Pastor James, her leg nervously bouncing up and down as he studied her resume with painstaking care. She gulped as she watched his eyes fall on her work history. Would he care that her only experience with teenagers was limited to her practical work in seminary school? Would he care that she'd never actually been paid to do anything ministry related? And what about her age? Casey barely looked older than an 18 year old teenager. Would he want someone who looked like they could demand respect?

Pastor James finally looked at her and smiled. "So I see you've spent your life in church. It's refreshing to see a

young person who starts out in church, and wants to stay in church.”

“Yeah, I’ve always loved what ministry can do for a person and the reason why...” Casey abruptly cut herself off, trying to gain control of her nerves. She didn’t want to sound like a rambler.

“The reason why...?” Pastor James prompted.

Casey nodded, took a deep breath, and smiled. “This is what God made me for. My teachers said I have to start as a coordinator and work my way up to leadership, but I’ve never agreed with them. When God gives you a talent for ministry, you should do it as soon as the opportunity arises.”

“Even if it’s the day after graduation,” Pastor James said with a grin.

“Even the day after,” Casey said, relaxing. He didn’t seem put off by her appearance at all.

Pastor James once again studied Casey’s resume. He admired her enthusiasm for ministry, and knew she would be a perfect fit with the church members. The academy she’d attended was known for its remarkable leadership training, and her age made her relatable to the teenagers. But there was one major problem; one major, crucial issue that kept Pastor James from hiring her to lead the young adult ministry.

Those teenagers ran off good ministers like rabid wolves chased a meek little lamb.

“Look Casey, I’m going to be honest with you,” Pastor James said. “You’ve got a great resume, a great education, and you present yourself very well.”

Casey almost burst into relieved tears, but she maintained her composure. The Academy had taught her that a good minister *always* maintained their composure.

“Thank you very much,” Casey said calmly. “It would be an honor to serve the young adult ministry here.”

"Yeah, about that," Pastor James said hesitantly. "Now that I've gotten a chance to speak with you, I know you're capable of growing a youth ministry big enough to take over this city."

A slow smile spread across Casey's face. He was going to hire her. She was going to make a living doing what God wanted her to do. Everything was going to be okay.

Pastor James took a deep breath. "However..."

Casey's smile vanished. *However* was *never* good.

"I don't want to put you in charge of the young adult ministry because they're not really a ministry," Pastor James said bluntly. "They're just a handful of teenagers waiting for August so they can join their friends in college."

Casey tilted her head, confusion seeping through her false shield of composure. "Your church doesn't have a young adult ministry?"

"Oh we do," Pastor James clarified. "They just don't *act* like one. They've got this uncanny ability to take the best intentioned teachers and run them off in a couple of months. With that being said, I'd like to hire you to work with our high school ministry. I know those students will support everything you do for them. So when can you start?"

Casey blinked, unable to process Pastor James' words. A young adult ministry that didn't act like a ministry? Surely that wasn't the teenagers fault. All of Casey's training said that a lazy ministry resulted from a lazy ministry *leader*. And *she* was no lazy leader.

"Pastor James, I'm applying to work with the young adult ministry."

"I know," Pastor James said with an understanding smile. "But you're better off working with the high school ministry. Trust me on this one."

Annoyance flickered over Casey's face. "No, I'd be better off working with the young adult ministry. Trust *me* on this one."

Pastor James studied her, tilting his head. "Casey, I don't mean to be difficult here. You've got the potential to be a great leader of a great ministry. That won't happen with the young adults. I really think you should--"

"With all due respect, I'm offended you think the young adults don't deserve a qualified teacher," Casey blurted out, her heart pounding. She knew her reaction would probably cost her the job, but she didn't care. She wasn't going to work for a church that didn't value its young adults.

"God called me to work with young adult Christians. If you don't want to hire me to do that job, that's fine. I'll just keep searching until I find someone who does," Casey concluded, her voice trembling.

Pastor James looked at Casey's resume. His instinct told him to hire her, even if it meant temporarily throwing her to the beasts.

"I'll make you a deal," Pastor James finally said. "Work with the young adult ministry for the summer, and then if you want out, don't go to another church, okay? Promise me you'll give our high school ministry a shot."

Casey studied the ground, trying to keep her breath even. "I'm not going to want out, Pastor James."

"I hope you prove me wrong, Casey. Welcome to our church. You can start teaching tonight."

"Thank you," she said quietly. She should feel excited, but instead she felt discouraged. If a *Pastor* didn't think the young adults were worth a good leader, then what did the young adults think about themselves?

Casey took a deep breath. She couldn't wait to meet the students that night. They had to be quite a spectacle.



19 year old Nikky Robinson sleepily stretched her arms as she let out a huge yawn. When her fingers touched

the edge of the couch, she assumed she'd fallen asleep in the living room again. Finals were exhausting, making it too difficult to walk to her bedroom after a late night study session.

She heard movement in the kitchen, and knew it was probably her father making coffee. She yawned again.

"Daddy, could you pour me a cup? I'm exhausted," she said, her eyes still closed.

"If I'm your daddy, what we did last night is illegal," an unfamiliar voice replied.

Nikky's eyes flew open. This *wasn't* her home, and that *wasn't* her father in the kitchen. She bit her lip as she struggled to remember the previous evening without panicking.

She'd gone home with the guy she'd met last night at Club Hollywood. The guy who'd been loaded with cash, and had supplied Nikky and her best friend Lily with drink after drink.

Buy what was his name? *Kenneth*, she finally remembered. His name was Kenneth. And he was currently making scrambled eggs.

"Good morning, sunshine," Kenneth said as she groggily sat up.

Nikky used the pillow to shield her eyes from the painfully bright sunlight streaming through the window. Her hangover was *enormous*. "What time is it?"

"A little after two," he answered. He grinned as he swept his eyes over her disheveled hair. "You're no sleeping beauty, are you?"

"Shut up!" Nikky said with a laugh, throwing the pillow at him. "I forgot where I was."

"I noticed," he said, bringing her a cup of coffee. "I hope that doesn't mean last night was forgettable."

Nikky shook her head, trying to ignore the pounding headache behind her eyes. "I drank *so much*," she muttered. "What was I *thinking*?"

"That you wanted to have a good time," Kenneth said, patting down her hair. "And I was happy to oblige. You're a knock out."

Nikky continued to massage her temples, slightly annoyed at Kenneth's only observation of their time together. She had creamy gold skin, thick black hair, and bright hazel green eyes that seemed to make boys do whatever she asked. She appreciated what her beauty did for her, especially when it meant free drinks at a club. But sometimes she wished a cute guy would be interested in her personality, not just her looks.

Unfortunately, the guys who supplied free drinks were only interested in her looks.

"Thanks," Nikky said. "Now how about those eggs?"

"Coming right up," he said, and moved to complete the order.

Nikky sighed as she slowly untangled the previous night. It wasn't about having a good time. She'd gotten drunk to forget the dinner with her mother just hours before, where her mother once again blew off steam about the divorce.

The *divorce*.

Nikky sighed again. She lay back down as she took a cigarette from her purse and lit it. The habit was disgusting, and she hated sucking the toxic chemicals into her lungs. But the familiar routine calmed her, despite the bitter taste it left behind. She took a few drags before closing her eyes to think about the separation of her parents, Sarah and Timothy Robinson.

Lately, the divorce seemed to consume her thoughts. Thank God the semester was finally over. Nikky had barely made it through her freshman year with a C average. She just couldn't seem to focus after her parents started the divorce proceedings.

Going out and getting drunk every night didn't help either, Nikky thought as she quickly disposed of the bitter cigarette. But she smiled at the life she now had.

Nikky joined the Sensations dance team at her school back in February, after learning of her parents impending divorce. The girls on the team were wonderful, and introduced her to a world so different from her own, Nikky still didn't quite in. The Sensations had one focus: party hard, and get successful men to pay for every single inch of it.

Nikky was trying to jump on the band wagon, but her background made it difficult to do it conscious free. She'd grown up an active member of the First Baptist Church of South Florida, and was considered the token "good girl" of the church.

But after the divorce started, Nikky realized being a good girl got in the way of her happiness. So she'd joined the dance team, and finally felt like she'd gotten her happy back.

No one at the church knew about her nightly exploits, especially those that led to one night stands with rich young men. To them, she was still the perfect little Christian. But at school, she was the girl no one thought she could be.

Including my mother, Nikky thought smugly, grinning as she lit another cigarette. The woman went berserk when Nikky stopped attending church, and threatened to stop payment on Nikky's tuition the next time she missed a service. So Nikky played along and kept up the good girl image, attending every Sunday morning service and Wednesday night Bible study. She was counting the days until college graduation, when she could finally live her life any way she pleased.

After taking just two puffs, Nikky stubbed out the nasty cigarette. She sighed as she realized it was almost time

for yet another meaningless Bible study lesson. But afterwards...

She smiled as she thought of Lily, her best friend since joining the dance team. The girl always knew a good party on South Beach, and the right person to sneak them in. Nikky looked forward to attending one of those parties tonight, and hoped she met a Kenneth who wanted to know her for her.

"Do you have anything a little stronger than this?" Nikky asked her current Kenneth, holding up the cup of coffee.

"Don't you have to go to church in a couple of hours?"

"I do," Nikky replied with a suggestive grin. "In a couple of hours."

He grinned right back.



"And the weight of your sin shall condemn you to hell, where all sinners will fall into the hands of an angry God," 19 year old Brenden Washington read from his latest sermon, citing his idol Jonathan Edwards, his favorite preacher of all time.

"Wow that's terrible," Kevin Washington said from behind him. "They're never going to let you into seminary."

Brenden glared at his annoying little brother, who was currently decked out in clothing that belonged in the closet of a convicted gang member. He and Brenden shared the same dark brown skin, the same curly black hair, and the same bright brown eyes. But that's where the similarities ended.

While Brenden tried his best to look like an aspiring pastor, sporting a crisp white collared shirt and starched black slacks, Kevin tried his best to emulate a thug off the street corner. The 15 year old was even trying to get his ears

pierced, which Brenden found repulsive.

What self respectable man pierced his ears?

“What do you know?” Brenden asked, turning his nose up. “Since you haven’t been to church in *decades*, you wouldn’t recognize a good sermon if it bit you on your ignorant ears.”

“You mean *pierced* ignorant ears,” Kevin said triumphantly. “Mom gave me the money this morning. And I may not go to church, but every school you’ve applied to turned you down, so I must be right about your sermons. They’re terrible.”

“What’s terrible is that I’m arguing with someone who’s obviously no match for my intelligence,” Brenden told him. “Now please exit my room before I *shove* you out.”

“Whatever,” Kevin said, making a point to roll his eyes before he left.

Moments later, Kevin blasted his stereo, and the roaring sound of hip hop music- *devil’s* music according to Brenden- filled the house. Brenden sighed as he realized he couldn’t work with *that* music thudding through his ears.

Or maybe he should try writing a sermon about the abominable hip hop music?

Brenden hated to admit it, but Kevin’s words hit close to home. Maybe his latest sermon *was* terrible, and he should trash it and start fresh.

Brenden wandered for the millionth time if he was wasting his life trying to be a pastor. During his senior year of high school, Brenden discovered the sermons of Jonathan Edwards in his literature class. It was then that he became serious about Christianity, and Brenden wanted nothing more than to follow in his idol’s footsteps.

He spent the rest of the school year applying to the best seminaries in the country, but by graduation, it’d become painfully clear that none of those schools wanted him.

So he’d kept applying over the summer, and well

into the fall. Now it was summer again, and Brenden still couldn't get into seminary. The struggle absolutely baffled him. He spent *hours* working on his sermons, and read the Bible more than any teenager he knew. He never missed a church service or Bible study lesson, and even preached his sermons out loud to perfect his craft.

But the school's kept saying no.

And he was starting to feel discouraged.

Brenden was stuck at home with a brother he had nothing in common with, and a mother who was never there. He attended a church with a respectable senior Pastor, but a young adult ministry in shambles. The leadership never lasted more than a few months, and the students were the biggest sinners he'd ever met.

Brenden wanted to leave the group and attend the adult Bible study ministry, but he stayed with the young adults for one particular reason.

The incredible Nikky Robinson.

Brendan grinned, thinking of his crush since he'd started attending the First Baptist Church of South Florida. Nikky had a wonderful reputation, was on time to every Bible study and church service, and always arrived in a stunningly conservative outfit.

He was in love.

And if he could just get into seminary school, Brendan would be a pastor, and Nikky Robinson would be his adoring wife.

Brenden knew Nikky wouldn't date him unless he was on track to becoming a church pastor. She only entertained men of substantial moral character, and Brenden couldn't think of anything more moral than a seminary student.

"Keep trying," Brenden told himself. To accomplish his goals, he must keep trying. So he took a deep breath, grabbed his pen, and began working on a new sermon for his latest seminary application.

†

“Come on, Sam, I know you want to haze me,” the pretty little blonde purred as she ran her finger slowly up his arm. “Don’t you haze all the new girls?”

Sam Raston couldn’t help but laugh. She’d obviously heard of his reputation, and he didn’t mind at all. He was standing in the back room of Club Mistress, where he’d worked for the past two years. The pretty blonde was one of his latest hires, and he loved that her face hovered just inches from his own.

It was no secret that Sam “fraternized” with the dancers at Club Mistress, and his boss Nancy didn’t mind as long as he fraternized with her as well.

As the new hire continued to fawn over him, Sam couldn’t believe his luck. He lived an amazing life in South Florida, and he loved every second of it.

He’d been 19 when he’d left his home in Georgia and headed to Miami to become a rap star. With his curly blonde hair, dark green eyes, and dimples on both his cheeks, Sam’s good looks and southern charm made him an easy fit on South Beach.

But good looks wouldn’t take him far in the music industry. He needed to work hard *and* know the right people to get anywhere, so Sam did his research and got a job at South Beach’s hot spot for successful music producers: Club Mistress.

He’d been forced to work his way up at the club, but two years later, Sam was senior manager and running Club Mistress with ease.

Everything was going smoothly for him. He had a great condo on South Beach, leased an amazing sports car, and with regular invitations to the hottest parties on South Beach, he lived the life of a star as he steadily worked on completing his first rap album.

That is, until two months ago, Sam thought. The day when everything changed.

A local rapper named Steve Em sent Sam an invitation to an event he was hosting on South Beach. When Sam arrived, he realized that Steve Em was a Christian rapper, and it was a Christian revival. By the end of the 90 minute service, Sam had given his heart to Jesus Christ.

At first, the decision made no difference in Sam's every day life. But as the weeks passed by, Sam felt the Holy Spirit slowly changing him. First, he lost his desire to use recreational drugs. Then, he no longer wanted to drink. After a while, Sam felt South Beach wasn't the best place for a new Christian to live, so he gave up his condo and moved north to Fort Lauderdale.

He'd kept his job at Club Mistress- he couldn't make that kind of money anywhere else- but he still felt the Holy Spirit tugging on him.

So one Sunday morning, Sam drove aimlessly through his neighborhood until he saw the First Baptist Church of South Florida. He walked into the service, and after hearing Pastor James' inspirational sermon, he joined the church.

He attended the young adult ministry a few weeks later. The group was small, and definitely uninviting, but Sam stuck around for one particular reason.

Anna Rodriguez.

The most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

Sam wanted to spend time with her, but Anna seemed hostile towards any man who wasn't named Jesus.

So he kept waiting for his chance.

In the meantime, there was a beautiful new recruit at Club Mistress who wanted to "fit in," and Sam *always* enjoyed accommodating a beautiful woman.

He smiled at the new girl, and moved in to make her feel welcome.

Life was amazing.



“Lean to your left,” the photographer called as Anna Rodriguez posed topless in front of the camera. She was at her fourth photo shoot that week, and the money would definitely help pay her past due rent.

But she was getting tired of showing her body for a paycheck.

What kind of Christian are you? Anna thought, shame running through her as she struck yet another pose. She was almost six feet tall, weighed 120 pounds, and with her long curly hair and big brown eyes, was considered the epitome of Hispanic bomb shells in South Florida modeling.

But she never found the guts to tell the photographers that she wouldn’t pose topless.

A year earlier, Anna posed conscious free for the kind of money she made now. But all of that changed when her mother kicked her out for dropping out of school.

Anna was left homeless and penniless, and the only place she could turn was the church she’d attended at the age of 15. Back then, she’d been the “harlot” of the youth group, but when she’d shown up broke and homeless four years later, the First Baptist Church of South Florida welcomed her with open arms. Their only conditions were that she pay rent when she could, and that she join a church ministry.

The second part was easy enough. The students in the young adult ministry weren’t exactly welcoming, but as long as she kept her mouth shut and her head down, she fit right in. Bible study was the one place Anna felt she wasn’t disappointing God, and she couldn’t get enough of that feeling.

Which was why she now hated photographers asking her to pose topless.

Anna wasn't particularly religious, but she knew that God and *only* God had saved her from the harsh streets of Miami, and she wanted to do everything she could to thank Him for it.

And you're doing a horrible job, Anna thought as she continued to pose. She wondered when she would stop taking these jobs and start pursuing what God wanted for her, like a clothing line proclaiming the name of Jesus.

Anna's goal was to launch a fashion line for modern church woman called "Glorious," and she worked on developing it every chance she got. She'd even found a competition that awarded \$20,000 to the best business plan created by a female entrepreneur, which was enough money to get her clothing line up and running.

But Anna didn't have the confidence to enter the competition yet. Just months earlier, she'd been homeless and sleeping at a bus shelter. Now she was booking jobs regularly, and was even saving money to get a real apartment. She didn't want to rock the boat by spending a hundred dollars to enter a competition that she probably had no chance of winning.

But you can't keep doing this, Anna thought as the photo shoot wrapped. *You can't keep showing your body.*

Anna couldn't wait to get to Bible study that night. She needed to wash the shame off of her and feel God's love.

"You did a great job, Anna," the photographer said. "I'll definitely book you again."

"Thanks," Anna managed before she turned to flee the set.

She couldn't wait to get to church.



"How'd the interview go?"

"Why are you so interested?" Pastor James asked his son, amused. "Just a few days ago you told me not to bother

hiring someone for the young adult ministry."

"I've changed my mind," Junior said with a grin as he thought of Casey. "So how'd it go?"

"She's starting this afternoon," Pastor James said. He narrowed his eyes as the grin on Junior's face grew wider. He knew that look.

"Junior," Pastor James warned.

"What?" Junior asked, throwing his hands up in innocence. "I'm just excited to have my high school coordinator, that's all."

"She seems committed to running the young adult ministry," Pastor James said. "But I'm hoping she'll be your coordinator by the end of the month."

"I give it a week," Junior said with a wink. He stood and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To do my duty as a member of the church council. I'm going to welcome her to the church."

"Junior," Pastor James warned again. "It's her *first* day. Give her a few minutes before you propose."

Junior simply waved goodbye to his father, and disappeared around the corner. Pastor James chuckled. He would never admit it out loud, but he hoped Casey was *exactly* what his son was looking for. Junior had lived successfully as a bachelor for years, and it was about time for him to be taken off the market.

Pastor James smiled mischievously. Maybe he'd get a new high school coordinator *and* a couple of grandchildren out of the new hire.

A man could only hope.



Casey paced back and forth in her office, breathing in and out of a brown paper bag. He'd actually hired her. Pastor James actually hired *her*. And she was standing in her

new office. *An office for her.*

He'd made a mistake. Casey was positive Pastor James made a *huge* mistake, and in just a few hours, when she was teaching Bible study to the young adult ministry, Pastor James would see how unqualified she was and fire her on the spot.

Or maybe the young adults would do it themselves. Maybe there would be a mutiny against Pastor James for hiring an incompetent teacher with barely enough experience to teach four year olds.

You're going to fail, you cannot do this, Casey told herself as she continued to pace. *How could you apply for this job? What were you thinking?*

"What *was* I thinking?" Casey asked as she continued to pace. "This was a mistake. This was all a big mistake. I'll just go downstairs and explain to Pastor James that-

"Am I interrupting?"

Casey froze as. She slowly turned around, and froze again.

It had to be sinful for a man to look *that* good.

"No," Casey squealed in a higher pitch than she'd intended. "What are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to-"

He was cut off by the shrill ring of Casey's cell phone.

Casey darted across the office to her bag. Amused, Junior watched her fumble through what could only be described as luggage in search of the cell phone.

She answered it a few moments later, breathless. "Hello?! Yes! I got the job! I kind of feel..."

Casey paused, looked at Junior, and lowered her voice. "I'll have to call you later, okay? Love you too. Bye."

Junior stuck his hands awkwardly in his pockets as Casey calmly put the phone away, and stood to face him.

"Sorry about that," she apologized. "What were you saying?"

"You could have talked to your boyfriend if you wanted, I didn't mean to interrupt."

"That wasn't my boyfriend," Casey said, gracing him with another high pitched nervous laugh. What was *wrong* with her?

"Oh, my mistake," Junior said, smiling. "I figured he must be coming by pretty soon to see your new digs."

"That'd be impossible since I don't *have* a boyfriend," Casey said with hesitation, not sure if she should be volunteering that information. "Does *your* girlfriend come by your office a lot?"

"I don't have a girlfriend," he said, looking at her intently.

She quickly shifted her gaze away, silently cursing the red flush she felt creeping up her neck. He was making her nervous. *Again*.

"So, can I help you with something?" Casey asked, pretending to survey the office wallpaper.

"I just wanted to introduce myself," Junior said. "My Dad said he'd hired you, so I wanted to officially welcome you to our church."

"Your dad?"

"Pastor James," he told her. "I'm his son."

"Ahhh," Casey said, nodding. That explained why he felt so comfortable in her office.

Temporary office, Casey thought to herself. *You're going to quit, remember?*

"You can't quit," Junior said. "You just got here."

Casey looked at him then, tilting her head. "How do you know I was going to quit?"

"You were having a nice conversation with yourself when I came in, remember?"

"Oh," Casey said, now flushing with embarrassment. "That was nothing. I freak out sometimes, but I usually snap out of it in a couple of minutes."

"I'm glad to hear that," Junior said. "Because I

would hate for you to go without us getting to know each other."

"I feel the same way, strictly in a ministry sense, of course," Casey said, biting her lip. Was this flirting? Was she actually flirting with a guy she'd just met?

"Right, all for the ministry," Junior replied.

They gazed at each other a few moments.

"So good to meet you then," Casey said, turning away and heading towards her desk. If she stared at Junior any longer, she was afraid she would do something mortifyingly inappropriate.

Like jump into his arms and cling to him like a wild monkey.

"You too," Junior said, clearing his throat. "If there's anything I can help you with, please don't hesitate to ask. I'm also on the church council here, so I can probably answer a lot of your questions."

"I do have a ton of questions about the way things work," Casey said, mindlessly arranging items across her new desk. "Maybe we should have lunch?"

She couldn't believe she'd just said that. Did she just ask him on a date?

"I'd like that," Junior said, not bothering to hide his satisfied grin. "How about tomorrow?"

"Sounds good," Casey said in another high pitched voice. "Why don't you write down your number so I can give you a call?"

What was she *doing*? She'd *never* asked a guy for his number before.

"Okay, here's my card," Junior said, placing it down on her desk. "Maybe you should give me your information too?"

Casey smiled at him. "You afraid I won't call?"

"Not really," Junior said with a shrug. "I know where you work, remember?"

Casey giggled.

"I'll see you tomorrow then," Junior said with an appreciative grin.

"I'm looking forward to it," she replied. Had she actually just *giggled*?

Junior headed to the door, but hesitated. He didn't want to leave yet. He looked at her.

"You sure there's nothing else I can help you with?"

"Actually, I don't even know where the young adult classroom is. Maybe you could show it to me?"

"Oh, I don't have the key," Junior said with genuine disappointment. "But I'm sure I can track one down. I'll be right back."

"Thanks," Casey said, not bothering to hide *her* satisfied grin. He seemed so eager to spend more time with her.

Junior risked another glance, and then left the office.

Her office.

Because there was no way she was quitting now. Junior was *way* too cute.

Casey sat down behind her desk, and started praising God for everything He'd just given her.



A few hours later, Casey stood outside the door of the young adult classroom, alone. For some reason, *no one* on the church staff had a key to the young adult classroom. At the end of a two hour search, Pastor James called a lock smith to simply change the locks. Once he'd finished, Casey received her new key, and she could finally have her first look at the classroom.

Just half an hour before her first Bible study was set to begin.

She pulled open the door, stepped inside, and switched on the lights. And gasped.

The room was a mess.

There were several couches and chairs scattered sporadically throughout the room, all with dingy holes and stains on them. The carpet was a dirty brown color that looked decades old, and the chalkboard looked no younger. There were a few Bibles lying around that were held together by scotch tape.

And the walls- oh the walls were terrible. Casey actually had to turn away from the vomit green color that seemed to vomit all over her senses. The paint was peeling away, chipping on almost every corner. But the color was *putrid*.

"This is *not* going to work," was all Casey could say without screaming. She pulled out her notebook and started a list of what needed to be changed.

"It makes sense why they don't act like a ministry," she muttered as she made the list. "These poor teenagers are too busy trying to forget the visual horror they experience every time they walk in here."

After she finished her list, she set out to find the supplies needed to teach her first lesson. Ten minutes later, after rummaging through the room, Casey sat on one of the dirty couches, discouraged.

The room didn't even have chalk.

"At least we have Bibles," Casey said, reaching for the Bible next to her.

She picked it up.

It tore in half.

She sighed.

She made another note on her "Room fix it" list, then checked her watch. There were only ten minutes left before Bible study.

"Okay Lord," Casey said, bowing her head and closing her eyes in prayer. "Thank You *so much* for giving me the opportunity to do this for Your name. I'm scared Lord, and there's no way I can do this on my own. But

through You, *all* things are possible. Help me to do this for Your glory Lord, I dedicate this night to You. In Jesus' name I pray, A-men."

Casey took a deep breath, checked her watch again, and felt her heart leap into her throat.

This was really about to happen.

She was really in charge of a youth ministry.

She hoped she didn't really screw it up.

Acknowledgements

To Jesus Christ for letting me be His kid. He's the best part of my life, and everything I do, I do for Him. You are the light of my life, Lord, and I love You so very much. I pray this book makes you proud.

To my wonderful and supportive husband, Daniel. He's my best friend, my support system, my everything. You're a gift from heaven, and I'm grateful to be your wife.

To my family: Mom, Dad, Duchesse, Elizabeth, Jennifer, and Chris, all who believe in the dream just as much as I do. Thank you for helping me through the tears, laughing with me through the joy, and praying with me through the unknown. I love you more than I can ever tell you. And Solange, you're the best mommy in the world.

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To all of my friends who patiently listen to me talk about every story idea God puts in my head, I seriously love you for that.

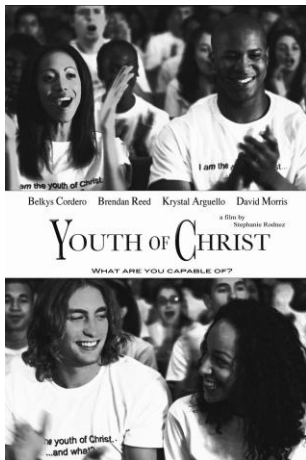
To my favorite movie producers, Xavier and Melanie, no matter where we end up, *The*, *Th*, and *Ree* (the Three) will live strong forever.

And finally, *thank you* to every teenager and young adult who has dreamed big and gone after the impossible. You inspire me to do the same.

Thank you.

Youth of Christ

The Movie



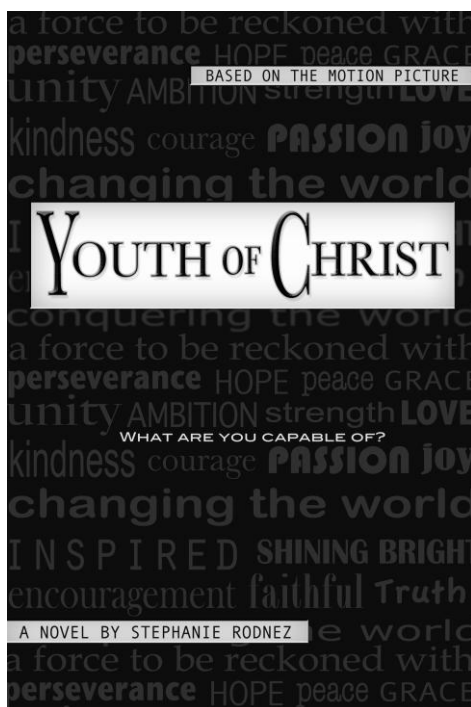
About the film

Youth of Christ follows the story of a youth group with a reputation for mediocrity as they struggle to plan and execute a youth revival at their church. The film begins when Casey, a 25 year old fresh out of seminary school, is hired as the new leader of the Young Adult Ministry.

Known as a lazy bunch of teenagers, this ministry's activities are limited to church movie nights and game nights. Once Casey is hired, the ministry is challenged to step out of their comfort zone and do something BIG for Jesus Christ. Will the youth group prove they are capable of doing the extraordinary? Or will they crumble under the pressure and prove the naysayers right?

Available on www.CEEChrist.com

Youth of Christ *Book Club*



Stephanie Rodnez, author of *Youth of Christ*, is traveling to a church near you to speak with youth groups about the novel!

Email info@CEEChrist.com for more details.

About Stephanie Rodnez



Born and raised in South Florida, Stephanie Rodnez has been a follower of Jesus Christ since she was 8 years old. At the age of 15, Stephanie heard the Holy Spirit tell her that her calling was to make Christian films for young adults. She went on to study film production at the University of Miami, and founded Christ Effect Entertainment one month before her college graduation.

Two years later, Stephanie received her Masters of Business Administration from Nova Southeastern University, and is now working to fulfill God's calling for her life.

Rodnez produced her company's first film, *The Christ Effect*, while she was a student at UM. Her latest film, *Youth of Christ*, was produced in South Florida from 2010-2011. Check out her blog about being a Christian filmmaker at www.Godlywoodgirl.wordpress.com

Contact Stephanie by emailing srodnez@CEEChrist.com

Youth of Christ *Scholarship Contest*



Christ Effect Entertainment is awarding a **\$500.00 *Back to School* scholarship!** Write a 500 word essay about your favorite character in *Youth of Christ*-the Novel, and tell us how that character's story empowers you to live out your faith! Open to all 13-24 year old students!

Complete submission guidelines available on
www.CEEChrist.com.

Email info@CEEChrist.com for more details