



One
IM
Perfect
Christmas

MYRA JOHNSON

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Study and Discussion Guide
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One Imperfect Christmas
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by
Myra Johnson

COMPANION STUDY GUIDE FOR GROUPS

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One Imperfect Christmas

Companion Study Guide for Reading Groups

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One Imperfect Christmas can be used by groups for in-depth study and discussion. Using lessons from the experiences of main character Natalie Pearce and others in the book, this study is designed to help readers find deeper meaning for their own lives as they explore attitudes about traditions, family relationships, and God's unlimited grace and forgiveness.

Following the book's twenty-one chapters, the guide provides for each chapter:

- • A related Scripture
- • A related devotion
- • A reading group lesson with discussion questions
- • A holiday recipe

A Brief Synopsis

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Christmas is the season of miracles, but when blame and guilt keep people apart, a miracle needs a helping hand.

Natalie Pearce loves Christmas so much she'd gladly make it a year-round celebration—until her mother suffers a massive stroke while taking down the decorations. Natalie's guilt over not being there to help her mom soon builds a wall that separates her from the rest of her family, including her husband, Daniel, and their teenage daughter.

As the next December approaches, the last thing Natalie wants to be reminded of is another Christmas season. But will her family's tenacious love and an unexpected Christmas gift from her mother help Natalie mend the broken pieces of their lives?

About the Author



Myra Johnson's roots go deep into Texas soil, but she's proud to be a new Oklahoman. Empty-nesters now, she and her husband share their home with two loveable dogs and a snobby parakeet. *One Imperfect Christmas* is her debut novel.

Myra's writing career was launched in 1985 when she sold her first short story while taking a course through the Institute of Children's Literature. She now writes full-time and is active in her church as well as local and national writers groups. Myra and her husband, Jack, have been married since 1972. The Johnsons have two married daughters and five grandchildren.

Myra Johnson writes:

One Imperfect Christmas was inspired by watching a spate of sappy Christmas movies one year and wishing I could write something with a little more heart, soul, and faith. I hope I've succeeded.

Suggestions for Group Leaders

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The study is planned for four weeks, discussing five or six chapters of *One Imperfect Christmas* each week. It can be modified easily if you want to extend it or do it more quickly. It can be used for a small group, adult or young-adult Vacation Bible School study, or Sunday school class. Each session can last from one hour to an hour and a half, depending on the amount of time you allow for discussion. Participants should read the chapters in advance to prepare for the discussion.

Be on hand early to greet members and welcome visitors. Some groups enjoy taking turns bringing snacks or a light meal. You might consider a holiday theme for your meals or perhaps do a Christmas cookie exchange. This practice can help build a close spirit in the group and help newcomers relax as the group gathers.

Open each session with prayer, asking for God's presence in the discussion. Invite group discussion all along the way, but do not try to force anyone to share. As the weeks unfold, you will likely find that members are more eager to open up as they grow more comfortable with one another. Remind participants to honor confidentiality in sharing and to respect each other's opinions.

Natalie's story is one of hope and forgiveness, and participants are encouraged to think deeply about their own family connections as they share in Natalie's journey through a Christmas season fraught with memories, regrets, love, and faith.

A Sample Session

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- Open with prayer and have casual conversation with your group, chatting as participants settle. Ask individuals to share anything significant from their lives since the group last gathered.
- Direct participants to the lesson plan, using this as an outline for the class.
- Focus on the theme/human condition that the chapters illuminate and the related scripture at the beginning of each chapter as the group starts. Ask someone to read the scripture aloud.
- Give the related devotional, contained in the lesson plan. (You might want to consider asking different class members to give the devotional story each week for variety.)
- Begin the discussion with the "To consider" overview. Lead the group in answering and discussing the study questions.
- Assign chapters to be read before the next meeting.
- End the session with prayer requests and a prayer for each person's strength through adversity, God's guidance in mending any broken relationships, and the grace to give or receive forgiveness through Christ.

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Week 1
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Reading Group Lesson Plan
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Chapters 1-5
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Topic/Theme: When life doesn't turn out as we expect.

Related Scripture: "What I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil." —Job 3:25-26 (NIV)

Related Devotion: (hope, hunger, living bread)

Faith seems a lot easier when things are going our way. But let a little adversity into our lives and we learn very quickly just how solid our faith really is. Job lost his family, his holdings, and his health. His wife's advice? "Curse God and die!" His friends lectured him and insinuated he must somehow deserve such punishment. Yet Scripture says, "In all this, Job did not sin in what he said" (Job 2:10 NIV).

There are no easy answers to suffering. Bad things happen to good people all the time. How we respond to adversity is our own choice. We can blame God for letting us down. We can blame others for not living up to our expectations. We can blame ourselves for things we've done . . . or things we've left undone.

Or we can cling to the knowledge that the God we love and trust is able to carry us through this problem, able to heal our wounds, able to forgive our mistakes. "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23 NIV).

To consider in the lesson:

Natalie Pearce, the main character in *One Imperfect Christmas*, is basically happy with her life. She's married to a loving husband, they have a vibrant adolescent daughter, and she's able to pursue her love of art while also supplementing the family finances as a freelance graphic designer.

Then tragedy strikes. Natalie's mother is felled by a massive stroke, and Natalie blames herself. If only she'd gone over to help her mother take down the Christmas decorations, perhaps help could have arrived in time. Natalie's faith is shaken. She must find a way to cope or lose her mind.

Discussion Questions:

→ **Chapter 1:** As the story opens, how would you describe Natalie's life and family relationships? Do you think her marriage is typical? Does it seem like Natalie is making excuses not to go out to the farm to help her mother? Is it ever okay to choose our own wants or needs over someone else's? How do you make such decisions?

- **Chapter 2:** Like so many women in the “sandwich generation,” Natalie struggles to balance marriage, motherhood, and caring for aging parents. How good a job is she doing at this point in the story? How does her guilt play into the situation? How is Daniel coping? Do you think he is doing all he can to support Natalie? Why or why not?
- **Chapter 3:** Can you relate to Natalie’s hesitance about attending the stroke support group with her father? Why do you think Natalie is so resistant to counseling? By the end of the chapter, Natalie has decided to take on even more work to avoid facing her guilt. How do you feel about Natalie now? If you were a friend or family member, how would you try to help her?
- **Chapter 4:** How would you describe Natalie’s state of mind at this point in the story? Does Daniel overreact to Natalie’s preoccupation with exploring therapies for her mother? What do you think is going through Lissa’s mind as she sees her parents struggling? When a family crisis strains a couple’s marriage to the breaking point, how best could you support them?
- **Chapter 5:** When you hear of a Christian suffering from depression, how do you respond? Can you relate to Natalie’s desire to avoid the small-town gossip factor? Do you find it easier to share your emotional struggles with a family member, a close friend, or with a virtual stranger? How do holidays complicate how we deal with personal problems? As Natalie recalls her mother’s sacrifice, are you more or less able to empathize with her guilt?

A taste of the holidays

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DANISH COFFEE CAKE

A longtime family favorite shared by our pastor’s wife many years ago.

Crust: Blend 1 cup flour, ½ cup butter, and 2 tablespoons water as if making a pie crust. Roll into two long strips 3 inches wide and ¼ inch thick. Place on cookie sheet.

Top layer: Mix ½ cup butter and 1 cup water, bring to a boil and add 1 teaspoon almond flavoring. Remove from heat and beat in 1 cup flour stirring by hand continually to prevent lumps. Cool slightly, then stir in 3 eggs one at a time beating well by hand. Spread over crust. Bake at 350 degrees for 55-60 minutes. Spread with powdered-sugar icing and top with nuts, candied fruit, or other toppings as desired.

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Week 2
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Reading Group Lesson Plan
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Chapters 6-11
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Topic/Theme: Traditions and family values.

Related Scripture: So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. —2 Thessalonians 2:15 (NIV)

Related Devotion:

I was devastated. After over twenty years of marriage and parenthood, my husband and I faced our first Christmas alone. One of our daughters was spending the holiday with her husband’s family, and the other had been invited home with a college friend. Without our children or even a close relative with whom to share our usual Christmas traditions, the day had lost its joy.

Traditions are crucial to our individual, family, and even our spiritual identity. Traditions are the roots that anchor us to our history, the branches that link us to the future, and the fragrant blossoms that makes our present special and meaningful. Sometimes we can’t even remember how a certain tradition began. All we know is that our lives would be sadly lacking without it.

Think about the traditions you hold most dear, and thank God for those who have enriched your life by passing along their love, their values, and their faith.

To consider in the lesson:

As the story progresses, Natalie must face several crucial issues, not the least of which is her anger toward her mother. She also can’t bear the thought of celebrating her birthday or the Christmas season as usual—not when her mother can’t participate and share in the joy.

Things only get worse when Lissa tries her own manipulation techniques to get her parents back together. Natalie and Daniel find themselves at odds over how to handle their outspoken daughter, which only compounds Natalie’s guilt.

Discussion Questions:

→ **Chapter 6:** How does it make you feel when Natalie’s brother pushes her to attend her birthday dinner even when he knows how painful it will be? How do you feel about Natalie’s response? Would you find it helpful or hurtful to continue a longstanding tradition if someone you cared deeply about could no longer participate? Was Daniel right or wrong in choosing not to attend Natalie’s birthday dinner?

- **Chapter 7:** Do you believe Natalie’s father is being honest about his emotions, or putting up a front? Can you understand why it’s so hard for Natalie to visit her mother at the nursing home? Why or why not? Describe the relationship between Daniel and Lissa. How long should you keep fighting to restore a broken relationship before giving up and moving on?

- **Chapter 8:** Do any of the Morgan family’s Christmas traditions strike a chord with you? Share some funny or poignant personal memories. How would you describe this family’s faith and how it plays into the way each one copes with tragedy? Do you believe God speaks to us through signs or circumstances? Why or why not? How do you react to Natalie’s wish that her mother die a peaceful death rather than continue in her current state?

- **Chapter 9:** Why do you think Natalie is so conflicted about reuniting with Daniel? If you have experienced having a child play one parent against the other, how did you handle it? As Natalie’s turmoil deepens, she works even harder, only to have her confidence undermined by a seemingly careless mistake. What would your first reaction be—to blame someone else, or look for the problem within yourself?

- **Chapter 10:** Do you think Daniel overreacts when he can’t find Lissa? Why do the people closest to us sometimes have the hardest time understanding us? How do Natalie’s emotional struggles skew her priorities where her family is concerned? Is Mrs. Blaylock being overly pragmatic, or is policy enforcement a necessary aspect of someone in her position? How would you describe Deannie’s role in the story thus far?

- **Chapter 11:** How would you address a child like Lissa who bends the rules to take matters into her own hands? Is Lissa reading too much into her grandmother’s response to the paint set? Have you ever made a promise in good faith only to find yourself unable to keep it? How did you handle others’ reactions? Why do you think it was so hard for Natalie to accept Miss Fellowes’s forgiveness? Have you ever experienced something you believed was divine intervention?

A taste of the holidays

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RICE KRISPIES PEANUT BUTTER COOKIES

My mother-in-law never failed to have a batch of these on hand when we came to visit for the holidays!

Mix $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup light Karo syrup in a large saucepan. Cook over medium heat until sugar dissolves. Remove from heat and add 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups peanut butter. Stir until smooth. Add 4 cups Rice Krispies, stir until well mixed. Drop by teaspoon onto wax paper.

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Week 3
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Reading Group Lesson Plan
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Chapters 12-16
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Topic: Discerning between false hope and faith in God’s unlimited possibilities.

Related Scripture: I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord. —Psalm 27:13-14 (NIV)

Related Devotional:

Everyone has hopes, large and small. Some hopes are reasonable—a successful career, a healthy newborn, recovery from illness, good weather for our vacation. Others, like winning the lottery or being crowned Miss Universe, are probably pipe dreams.

Even though Scripture tells us to pray earnestly for the things we desire, we know better than to treat God like a cosmic wishing well. God loves us and cares about what is important to us. But even more, God desires our growth and character development. Sometimes we get what we want only to discover it isn’t so satisfying after all. Sometimes our prayers (seemingly) go unanswered, but through our struggles we learn and grow and become more and more the persons God created us to be.

When things are going our way—and even when they aren’t—we can rest in the assurance that God is always on our side. Whether in joy or disappointment, let us be strong, take heart, and have full confidence in the Lord’s perfect will.

To consider in the lesson:

Though both Natalie and Daniel long to repair the damage to their marriage, the situation grows more and more hopeless. Even so, everyone around them seems determined to push them back together. When Natalie’s father makes up his mind to bring her mother home for Christmas, Natalie is certain a miracle is just around the corner—and if only her mother gets better, maybe then Natalie will have the courage to try again with Daniel.

Discussion Questions:

→ **Chapter 12:** It’s hard to stay focused at work when personal or family problems interfere. What helps you carry on through such difficulties? As Daniel’s hopes fade for restoring his marriage, what advice would you give him? Is he right in accepting some of the blame? Scripture tells us God hates divorce, but in a fallen world sometimes no other answer seems viable. How would you support a couple facing the possible end of their marriage?

- **Chapter 13:** What do you make of Natalie’s sudden nervousness about spending an evening with Daniel and Lissa? Can you relate to her ambivalence—on the one hand longing to be with Daniel, and on the other hoping to avoid more hurt? Can you recall a time when you purposely picked a fight to avoid dealing with your emotions? What do you think is behind Deannie’s involvement in Lissa’s scheme?
- **Chapter 14:** During troublesome periods of your life, have you ever found it difficult to attend worship services? Were you avoiding God, or protecting yourself from prying (if well-meaning) acquaintances? Describe the relationship between Hart and Natalie. Does Hart overstep any boundaries in trying to bring Natalie and Daniel together? For a loved one in Belinda Morgan’s condition, how would you choose between home care and institutional care?
- **Chapter 15:** Describe the relationship between Bram and Belinda. Is Bram using his head or his heart when he makes the decision to bring his wife home? What most intrigues or concerns you about the therapeutic riding program? Is Natalie allowing unrealistic hopes to influence her decisions? When—if ever—should we lay aside hopeful optimism and admit defeat?
- **Chapter 16:** Why do you think Bram withholds the truth about his reasons for bringing Natalie’s mother home? Does Natalie’s sudden decision to move back to the farm stem from love, guilt, or both? List the ways various characters have meddled and manipulated thus far. Do the desired ends justify the means?

A taste of the holidays

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CREAMY CRANBERRY SALAD

This recipe is my personal version combining two different recipes that were passed down through my husband’s family.

Chop 1 package frozen cranberries in a food processor and combine with 2 chopped apples (cored but not peeled). Stir in 1 cup sugar and store in sealed container for at least 2 hours or overnight. Drain off and discard juice. Stir in 1 pint whipped topping, ½ package miniature marshmallows, 1 cup drained crushed pineapple, and ½ cup chopped nuts. Chill for several hours before serving.

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Week 4
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Reading Group Lesson Plan
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Chapters 12-16
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Topic: What makes a Christmas “perfect”?

Related Scripture: Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. —Philippians 3:12-14 (NIV)

Devotional: Are you a perfectionist? Here are some clues: Circumstances have to be just right before you begin a project. You’re easily frustrated when things don’t go as planned. If one detail is out of alignment, you consider the whole project a failure. The perfectionist attitude can permeate any or all aspects of our lives—housework, friendships, vacations, career, even our prayer and worship.

But if we’re honest with ourselves, we have to admit that there’s no such thing as perfection this side of heaven. Our spotless house will be dusty again before the end of the day. Friends and family are only human and will eventually let us down. Does that mean we should stop striving for perfection? Only to the point that it becomes fanaticism instead of a reasonable effort to do our best. As Saint Paul wrote in the passage above, we have a high calling, a race to be run with a heavenly prize at the end.

Above all, remember that it isn’t our perfection we should be focusing on, but God’s. When we stop relying on our own abilities and trust in him, we can finally start living the life he has called us to!

To consider in the lesson:

Deannie’s true motivation for helping Lissa forces Natalie to look deeper into her own issues of forgiveness—forgiving others, forgiving ourselves. And yet she still can’t face the truth about her mother’s condition. A frightening setback requires Natalie to draw deeply on the faith that once sustained her. As understanding dawns, she is finally able to take joy and comfort in the love of her family and faith in God’s gentle miracles.

Discussion Questions:

→ **Chapter 17:** As Deannie’s motivation is revealed, how do you feel about her now? Natalie is centering her whole life on her mother’s recovery. What do you want to say to her? As Natalie begins to face her own failings, she is confronted with the truth about Deannie. Why is it so often easier to forgive others than to forgive ourselves?

- **Chapter 18:** Have you ever taken matters into your own hands when God didn't seem to be doing anything? What were the results? Under what circumstances could you justify protecting a loved one from the truth?
- **Chapter 19:** What is the significance of the devotion Natalie reads to her mother from John 14 ("In my Father's house are many rooms . . .")? Natalie insists on holding out for a Christmas miracle. Is she really trusting God at this point? Is Daniel? Can you share a time when your own strength failed and you had to lean entirely on the Lord?
- **Chapter 20:** Whom is Belinda asking Natalie to forgive? What does she mean when she tells Natalie to "learn to love"? In times of grief, why are religious platitudes so easily spoken and yet often so hard to hear? Even though Lissa tried to manipulate things, she clung to a childlike faith. What can we learn from her? What is the real miracle for Natalie on Christmas morning?
- **Chapter 21:** How do you think Natalie felt having so many friends surround her with love and support at the Christmas worship service? What do we sacrifice when we separate ourselves from the Body of Christ? Do you believe what the pastor told Lissa, that Jesus never lets us down? How have you experienced God's unconditional love and forgiveness through your family or close friends? Do you think Natalie could have achieved the same growth and inner peace had her mother not survived through Christmas? What really makes a Christmas "perfect"?

A taste of the holidays

EASY HOLIDAY CRUNCH MIX

A recipe from one of my dearest writer friends, Mary Connealy.

Melt a 2-pound bar of almond bark (either vanilla or chocolate) in the microwave for about 1 ½ minutes. Stir and repeat until completely melted. In a separate large mixing bowl, stir together 3 cups Captain Crunch Peanut Butter cereal, 3 cups miniature marshmallows, 3 cups Rice Krispies, and 3 cups mixed nuts. Add melted almond bark and stir until well mixed. Spread out on waxed paper. Let cool and break into pieces. Use your imagination to vary the recipe with other ingredients!

To dig deeper:

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According to the National Stroke Association, stroke is the third leading cause of death in America and a leading cause of adult disability. For more information, including risk factors, prevention, and support groups, visit <http://www.stroke.org/>.

The value of therapeutic horseback riding for all kinds of physical and cognitive disabilities, including stroke, is increasingly recognized. NARHA (North American Riding for the Handicapped Association) sets the standard for certification and accreditation of all affiliated riding centers. Volunteers are always needed. To learn more, visit www.narha.org. Click on “Find a Center” to locate a facility near you.

For more about the author, visit Myra’s website, www.MyraJohnson.com, or stop by her blog, <http://myra.typepad.com>. Myra is also a monthly contributor at <http://seekerville.blogspot.com> and <http://romanceyourspouse.blogspot.com>.

Additional resources:

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If you need a little help simplifying your holiday season, you may enjoy Judy Christie’s book *Hurry Less, Worry Less at Christmastime*. Using the holiday season as an entry point, Christie guides her readers to a more helpful, Christian understanding of this time of year. She offers practical tools for coping with holiday pressures but above all stresses the need for transformation from a secular perspective to a Christian one.

General Discussion Questions for One Imperfect Christmas

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- 1. Natalie Pearce is the central character in *One Imperfect Christmas*. How would you describe Natalie to a friend? What are her most notable strengths and weaknesses? In what ways do you identify with Natalie? How are you different?
- 2. Natalie's mother always made Christmas an extra-special time of year for the family. In what ways do you think such traditions helped shape Natalie's character and values? What is your favorite Christmas memory? Do you have special family traditions?
- 3. When Natalie's mother is incapacitated, Natalie blames herself. Given the circumstances, do you think she could or should have done anything differently? How would you distinguish between self-care and selfishness? Which was it for Natalie? Have you ever experienced similar guilt and wished you could change the past?
- 4. Natalie's guilt causes her to withdraw from her husband and daughter. Why do you think Natalie found it so hard to open up about what she was going through? Could her family have done more to help her face her feelings?
- 5. Daniel, Natalie's husband, struggles to balance career aspirations with his family's needs and desires. Do you think it would be unfair of him to uproot his family in order to advance his coaching career? How can a married couple determine whose needs take priority when family or career pulls them in opposite directions?
- 6. Some Christians have a difficult time admitting the reality of depression. Why do you think that is so? Whom do you find it easier to talk to during difficult times? A family member? friend? pastor? counselor? How could you encourage someone who is hurting to share the burden?
- 7. In small communities like Fawn Ridge and Putnam it's hard to be "invisible." In what ways do you think such a close-knit community helped or hindered Natalie and Daniel? Describe life in your community. How well do you know your neighbors? Could you count on them in a crisis? Could they count on you?
- 8. At times Natalie felt it would almost be better if her mother died rather than continue as an invalid. Can you identify with such feelings? Is it possible to find value in human suffering, for the sufferer as well as for those who love and care for the person? Have you known someone whose suffering helped you grow in some way?
- 9. Natalie's daughter, Lissa, refuses to accept the end of her parents' marriage. Do you think she goes too far to keep them together? How would you describe Natalie and Daniel as parents? What have they done right? How have they failed? Do parents' mistakes say anything one way or the other about how much they love their children?
- 10. Deannie, Natalie's assistant, has her own motives for interfering in Natalie's life. Why do you think she became such a willing accomplice in Lissa's plans? Do you think her Uncle Jeff is too forgiving or patient with her? Describe a time when you gave someone a second (or third or fourth) chance. Did it work out? Why or why not?
- 11. During one of her counseling sessions, Natalie finds herself calling her mother stubborn. Is she right? How would you describe Belinda Morgan? What kind of mother do you think she was? What legacy do you think she most wants to leave to her family? What legacy do you want to leave to your loved ones?
- 12. We tend to think of Christmas as a time for miracles and often create unrealistic expectations for the holiday. Why do you think that is? What was the real Christmas miracle for Natalie? What would constitute a "perfect" Christmas for you?

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See you there!