

## **Story idea #1: Follow the Caretaker** (*working title*)

### **Blurb**

Three couples celebrate a milestone birthday with a visit to an ultimate Escape Room in an abandoned mansion.

There, driven by the directive that their total obedience to all instructions is required, they discover that obedience is necessary to both enjoy the game and finish well. The rules may not always make sense, or sometimes come at a cost, but following the Caretaker is the key to winning this game.

And one of them will receive a gift that fulfills a very big hole in their life.

### **Central theme**

“Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who delights greatly in His commandments (Psalm 112:1 NKJV)

“Obedience is not a burden, it’s a joy. The person who fears God always obeys.” (*p137, The Awe of God*) and “The evidence of holy fear is obedience, which entails both a right attitude and follow-through in action, no matter the circumstances.” *p139, The Awe of God.*

This story idea is my response to Week 4 of the book: Responding to God’s Word. There are five distinct aspects of trembling at God’s Word, with unconditional obedience at the heart of it.

This story idea is an articulation of that. The participants who don’t obey the Caretaker (God) in each of these ways is eliminated, showing the importance of unconditional obedience.

### **Subsequent themes**

Although we go through life together, God wants relationship with each of us individually, with obedience coming with it.

“Make no mistake, when we fear people, our motives will be affected.” *p73, The Awe of God.* Fear of God v fear of man runs through this story. Several of the participants are more terrified of what their friends think than the Caretaker.

## Story outline

Three couples in a tight group of friends celebrate their oldest member turning 40.

Jessica wants to celebrate her friend Hunter's milestone in style. As always, she just wants to impress her friends and get their approval. She finds a luxury Escape Room – a night of puzzles set in an entire mansion on the hill with the goal of escaping, but this one is promoted as being unlike every other Escape Room. That should impress her friends.

On their way to the Escape Room, Jessica overexcitedly tells husband Brad how much she wants everyone to appreciate her and her amazing idea. It should be fun to work as a group, although she is already worried about Katie and Mitchell bickering and how she will handle the tension between Hunter and Grace. Brad is pensive, reflecting on what the milestone means to him, and how his conscience has been gnawing away about his life's purpose, which should surely be more than paying the bills – which are mounting – and filling all the gaps on the church roster.

The other couples arrive, Mitchell and Katie customarily in the middle of an argument while the usual uncomfortable silence sits over Hunter and Grace. The friends ascend rickety steps up to a seemingly decrepit and falling-down mansion, at odds to Jessica's sales pitch about a classy, well-designed, almost-1930s mansion. Katie can't help but loudly complain which deflates Jessica.

They enter a sitting room that fulfills on Jessica's promise. It looks like they have been transported to the 1930s – elegant antique furniture with candles burning – a complete contrast to the decrepit façade outside. Two doors lead off to the left and right, and on a mahogany table in the middle of the room is a thick, dusty book next to a quill sitting in an inkpot. Now they're impressed and Jessica is pleased again. The friends chat while they wait and Jessica and Katie check in with their friend Grace, who seems unusually quiet. Her marriage is still stalled, and she doesn't know what to do about it, so she's decided to do nothing.

No-one arrives to welcome them, so Jessica rushes to the table and opens the book, reading aloud the first page. "Friends, the rules of the Ultimate Escape Room are to listen to the voice of The Caretaker. This is unlike other Escape Rooms. You are not completing this journey as a group to escape. Your obedience – and yours alone – will guarantee that you progress and finish well – now, and for the rest of your life. You are completing this journey as an individual to win a prize. A very valuable prize. Signed, The Caretaker". This throws a spanner into the group's evening. Grace complains – wasn't this supposed to be a fun group exercise? Instead they're pitted against each other.

As Jessica closes the book the front door slams and locks. The Ultimate Escape Room begins.

Looking around for direction, they try the doors to the left and right, which are locked, and start to hunt for clues. They find a clue which says: "This puzzle is easy to solve. Those who are most instantly obedient will progress. Signed, The Caretaker." Jessica completes the task quickly, obeying the instructions as she's supposed to, and her name appears in lights on one of the two doors. The group bickers as to what that means, with some arguing that they don't know if it's good or bad. The remainder of the group completes the task as their names appear one-by-one under Jessica's, with the exception of Grace, who can't decide what to do. She looks at the names on the door and is the last to finish. Her name is not added.

The door with names opens and the group moves through. Grace can't – it's like a forcefield is stopping her progress. She complains about it being unfair – surely they all followed the

Caretaker as a group. Hunter reminds her that it was her own obedience that would count. Instead, the second door opens revealing a brightly-lit modern lounge with the smell of coffee and pastries drifting from it. Grace enters the lounge.

The next room is a drawing room with antique lounges. The door behind them locks. In the corner is an old brass-and-bronze phonograph with a record spinning, the needle resting on it but with no sound. Two more doors are left and right. Mitchell, who is a counsellor, tells Brad he is finding that he's not honest with his patients because he is terrified of what people think about him, even his patients. And it's starting to hurt his business.

The group cracks the clue about how to get sound out of the gramophone and they hear a message in an older man's rich voice: "Share something that your friends would be shocked to learn about you. Obey this instruction – even if it hurts – only the most honest will progress." Mitchell reacts – this feels a bit more personal than he was expecting and goes against his counseling training. There is one thing he'd love to share, but it would come at too great a cost.

Mitchell starts to share but stops – this would wreck his reputation. Instead he shares something from his youth which doesn't really reveal anything about himself. Brad laughs it off as everyone knew that anyway. Hunter shares: if we're going to obey this instruction, and only the most honest will progress ... well, I resent the time I spend with my family. The rest of the group is stunned by his honesty but he has now set the benchmark. They go around the group progressively getting more honest, finishing with Katie who challenges Mitchell to be honest for once. Risking another verbal stoush, he defends himself – he's not going to tell anyone anything that might cost him his reputation. This escape room might be for the night but that information will last forever. Katie sighs, saw what happened to Grace, and whispers she wishes she was married to someone else. Four names appear on the door as it opens, not Mitchell's. The second door opens and Mitchell joins Grace in the lounge.

The remaining four friends enter a dining room split in two by a polished dining table, flanked by fabric-backed antique chairs. A chandelier hangs above it, lighting flowers and place settings for six people. Jessica checks in with Katie after her revelation, but Katie telling Jessica what she should do with her life, as if she knows everything. Brad shows compassion by standing up for her while her 'friend' seems to be attacking her, in the absence of her husband.

On the table are a series of questions where the answers aren't what they seem. Brad is respectful of the creativity of it – he can see the Caretaker is really trying to help them to not just win but enjoy the game that they are playing. The obedience required is actually a good thing and respects the Caretaker. Hunter disagrees as he studies the questions, looking for loopholes.

The answers reveal the location of their next clue, which tells them to complete their next task and obey the Caretaker even if it doesn't make sense. Katie completes the task and stands back expecting to see her name appear on the door. It doesn't. Trying again, she sees Jessica, Brad and Hunter complete the task in a way that makes no sense to her and their names appear on the door. The second door opens and Katie exits to the lounge.

The remaining three contestants enter a bedroom with velvet drapes, rich wooden nightstands and brass lamps. The king-sized bed is covered with crocheted pillows and wildflowers on the end of the bed. Jessica is devastated at how the night has gone and has even forgotten that they're celebrating Hunter's birthday. Instead, she continually goes on about how she wishes everyone would just see how much of a good idea it is and would appreciate that she's holding the group together.

They discover a puzzle is about light, and the participants cast shadows to identify the location of their next clue, which asks them to do something that helps one of their competitors win.

Hunter cannot understand what the benefit is to him. Brad smiles, he's worked out that following the person who designed the Escape Room makes the most sense and announces he would desperately love Jessica – his wife – to be the winner. Hunter and Jessica grapple with the task, before Hunter says: "This is ridiculous. The rules are just arbitrary and I know the best way to win." Jessica can't obey – she is upset that the night hasn't gone the way she wanted it to, and even if it's Hunter's birthday she deserves to win the prize – so she completes the task. Two names appear on the door: Brad and Hunter. Jessica leaves for the modern-day lounge.

The two men enter a kitchen – glass tile splashbacks and wooden cupboards, a heavy wooden butcher's block below swinging pans. Two doors as before. Hunter and Brad talk as they wait for something to happen. Brad asks his friend how he's handling the big 4-0. Hunter doesn't care about the milestone, saying you create your own future. Brad, now embarrassed, sheepishly admits to being without purpose and says he's enjoying the challenges in the Escape Room as he's realizing how it applies to his life. Hunter rants about the 'rules', wishing that he could give this Caretaker a piece of his mind.

Rummaging around the kitchen they uncover jigsaw pieces and a message appears on a chef's chalkboard – "great puzzles reveal meaning as much as detail. Place your puzzle on the stand when that meaning is revealed. Obey the Caretaker to the very end." Hunter's competitive nature kicks in and he charges ahead. When he realizes the puzzle shows an athlete crossing the finishing line, he rushes to put all the pieces in place.

Brad also grasps the meaning of the puzzle before it is completed. He obeys The Caretaker to the end - the final pieces aren't needed and he puts his incomplete puzzle on the stand. Hunter looks at Brad's incomplete puzzle and frantically finishes his. A name appears on the door: Brad's. Hunter is angry that he followed all the rest of "these stupid rules" so why shouldn't he win because he finished the task? After all, it's his birthday so he deserves to win. Brad points out to his friend that while he may have finished, he didn't obey The Caretaker to the very end. The second door opens and Hunter disappears.

Brad, alone, walks into an old study with floor rugs and bookcases that reach the ceiling. In the centre of the study, a mahogany desk with a green banker's light which hung like a vulture over a leather blotter. On the leather blotter, the folded hands of a wizened old man in a three-piece suit. The Caretaker. He tells Brad he has won, and probably more than he realizes. Brad has proven himself the winner by the fact by obeying the directions that had been given for a reason, and obeying to the end. He has finished well.

The Caretaker is retiring and giving the business, the house and the property to someone who has shown respect to the game – and to the Caretaker. Brad now has his purpose. The Caretaker shakes Brad's hand and says it's good to meet him, while giving him the keys to the house. And while Brad will be rewarded he'll always be around to talk to as he's genuinely interested in watching Brad succeed. He leaves.

The door to Brad's left opens and the others enter the study – Katie and Mitchell are back to bickering, Hunter and Grace are silent with each other again. Nothing has changed for them. But it has for Brad. He heads to Jessica and tells her about the value of the prize. His purpose.

## Story idea #1: Following the Caretaker (*working title*)

### Prologue (*first draft*)

The Caretaker carefully set the last puzzle piece in place. He stood back, stroked his salt-and-peppered chin and smiled. Pleased with his efforts, it was time to rest.

Time was always required to lay things out for people to solve, overcome hurdles or simply work together so they would all succeed. And these people would be special. He wanted them to enjoy their tasks and get as much out of their time with him as possible.

He pushed his rimless glasses up the bridge of his nose, meeting resistance from white, exploding, almost caterpillar-like eyebrows. He reached for the directions he had painstakingly scribed in a near-perfect hand and read them again. Carefully, as important directions should be read.

This task would be important, to show that the worthy winner was capable of finishing well and obeying his directions right to the very end. A slight squeal escaped his lips. If only they knew how much he enjoyed the time they would spend, and he hoped they would all make it.

He was dying to reward their obedience with the prize.

A very, very valuable prize.

## Chapter One (first draft)

Jessica curled her pyjama-clad legs underneath her on the sofa, her tablet teetering on her knees, her eyes glued to the screen. What Brad, quite annoyingly, referred to more and more as her starting position. Her fingers searched and flicked across the tablet, flicked and search, looking for perfection.

The first member of their tight friendship group was turning 40 and Hunter deserved a birthday celebration that reflected such a major milestone. This had to be perfect – she wouldn't accept anything less of herself, and neither would the other two couples they spent every other weekend with.

Jessica discarded the usual boring suspects: dinners, weekends away or some lame activity revolving around the number 40. If she was going to impress her friends, she'd have to hope Google would find something completely out-of-the-box.

Google delivered.

The web site for Ultimate Escape Rooms jumped to the top of her search results. She already knew about Escape Rooms – her teenagers had done a few and weren't overly impressed, probably because they took place in real-life and not on their screens – but the word 'Ultimate' held promise. The old man whose face adorned the video thumbnail seemed like a nice touch, and the detail in his hair and costume drew her in. She tapped play.

“Welcome to the ultimate escape room. A series of puzzles to solve and riddles to answer will fill your journey to find the answer. Over the course of the evening in my own mansion, your path will be revealed as you follow the directives of the caretaker...” Jessica punched pause, impressed. All of the other Escape Rooms seemed to be repurposed office buildings which had none of the attention to detail that this had. She scrubbed through the video to see the old man's face replaced by a montage of elegant 1930s décor – all rich timber, crocheted coverings, brass and glass.

The old man was back to wrap up the video. “Your ultimate escape room experience will challenge you all with directives that will bring out the best of us. I look forward to setting the challenges that will make that come true.”

As the old man froze, Jessica's mind was made up. She had to book this now, and then tell everyone what she'd found. The tiniest moment of hesitation flashed into her mind. How would their friends work together as a team? Mitchell and Katie's constant bickering and the usual gray cloud of indifference that hung over any room Hunter and Grace were in. But then she scrolled back to the 1930s decor. And she was won over. This would impress her friends more than anything.

Jessica glanced up at the jangling of keys opening the front door. Unless one of the kids was back to raid the pantry, Brad was home. She steeled herself to talk Brad down from the precipice of a looming milestone birthday.

Brad removed his coat in the hallway. Even though his body was bursting at the seams and fraying at the edges, he was still the man she married at heart. What was becoming unrecognizable was his spirit.

Jessica pasted a bright smile onto her lips, unknotted her eyebrows and started the conversation at the right height. “I’m guessing you got the sales bonus? How did we go?”

Brad seemed distracted, as he struggled to find the words. *Oh no. He'd missed the bonus.* And she'd already told all her friends about the new car, something she'd wanted despite the bills that kept piling up.

The words emerged from Brad as he exhaled hard. “Fine. I got the bonus.”

Jessica patted the sofa next to her. “That’s a good thing, right?”

“Yeah.” Brad answered the question and not much more as he sat. He paused as if ordering his thoughts and Jessica tightened against the unexpected. “I’ve had the best month of sales ever and got my bonus, as small a pittance as it was. If I keep my head down, it could

be the best year a sales representative has ever had, and I'll qualify for a slightly larger pittance.”

*So it was money, not a mystery person in her husband's life that she was about to meet.*

Brad continued. “I'm just wondering if there is more to life than hitting sales targets and being busy.”

Jessica smothered her sigh of relief. As Hunter had been the first in the group to sidle up to the major birthday milestone, there had been lots of good-natured ribbing about him being the old man in the close-knit group. But Brad wasn't far behind their good friend, and clearly the milestone was weighing on him as well.

Jessica needed to book this luxury Escape Room quickly – the longer she left it, the more her options were drying up. She fought the regular battle with impatience to talk through her husband's state of mind and, as usual, lost.

She reached for the iPad. At least that would be a distraction and a move back to more positive conversational territory. “I know you're probably thinking about this more because Hunter is turning 40 and you're not far behind him, but how about we celebrate instead of mourn the milestone? I was thinking about doing something really amazing. To celebrate the fact that it's such a significant milestone.” She pumped extra air and energy into her voice.

Brad simply nodded as his eyes dropped to the screen.

“So this is what I found. You know the Escape Rooms that the kids have been going to for their friends' birthdays?” Jessica jumped into sales pitch mode as she thumbed the web site into life. “Well, normally you get shut into a room with a group of friends and you have solve puzzles and riddles to get out. It takes most of the evening and it's pretty fun.”

Brad flicked around the web site in her lap. “Didn't Katie and Mitchell say they'd done one of those recently?”

Jessica all-but cursed under her breath. She'd forgotten about that. "Yes. And I got a blow by blow from Katie on how they argued the whole time."

"So why would we want to put ourselves through that for an evening?"

It was a reasonable question. Katie and Mitchell's constant bickering could become tiresome if you couldn't call time-out and take a breather. "Because this is the ultimate escape room. It's not a single room Brad, it's an entire mansion."

She handed over the iPad as Brad read snippets aloud. "More than an Escape Room ... great challenge to bring out your best ... great night's entertainment ... will challenge everything about you from problem-solving to how you view life itself ..." He handed back the iPad. "Sounds interesting."

Jessica snatched back the iPad. "It sounds more than interesting, it sounds amazing. If I book this for everybody, they're going to absolutely love my idea."

Brad perched on the edge of the sofa, as if preparing a getaway. "Jess, you know it's okay if you suggest something that people don't love? It's Hunter's birthday, maybe we should leave it for Grace to organise ..."

Jessica dismissed his criticism with a wave of her hand. "You know she never comes up with anything good. Plus, this is what I do for the group."

Brad reiterated his point. "I think you should check with Grace and Hunter first. And it's okay if other people don't absolutely love your ideas."

Jessica sunk back into the sofa, admonished, her voice now sneaking out of her sounding a lot like her 10-year-old self. "Anyway, I think it's amazing and we have to do something quickly because as you can see there—" She pointed to text at the bottom of the screen. "—it looks like they're closing so we might be among the last people to get the chance to do this Ultimate Escape Room. That makes it even more of a special idea."

Brad spoke as he exhaled hard again. “Okay. Check and see that Hunter likes it at least and if everybody else is interested, then book it.” He leaned in for a customary peck and rose with a groan, hoisting his satchel over his shoulder.

Jessica reached for her phone, already composing the text to go to her friends. She hesitated and put the phone down. “You know what I’ll just book it.”

She picked up the iPad again. Her friends would love this. They just had to.